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For Psychological Health & Traumatic Brain Injury

# Post-traumatic Growth

Emergence of discussion of alternative outcomes from exposure to war trauma

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# Post-traumatic Growth Defined

**Post-traumatic Growth** is the positive psychological change experienced as a result of a struggle with challenging life circumstances that represent significant challenges to the adaptive resources of the individual and/or an individual's way of understanding the world and one's their place in it.

It is an experience of improvement that for some is deeply profound.

# Post-traumatic Growth Concept History

- The general understanding that suffering and distress can potentially yield positive change is thousands of years old
- Theme was present in ancient spiritual and religious traditions, literature and philosophy
- Scholarly interest in post-traumatic growth increased in the 1990s
- Emphasis was not placed on studying healthy people in view of overwhelming evidence that individuals who face a wide variety of difficult circumstances experience significant changes in their lives - many of which are positive

# Post-traumatic Growth Today

- Term, “**post-traumatic growth**,” was coined in 1995 by Dr. Richard Tedeschi, a psychology professor at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, and co-author of the “Handbook of Post-traumatic Growth”
- While the concept is historical, according to Dr. Tedeschi, the “systematic study of this phenomenon by psychologists, social workers, counselors and scholars in other traditions of clinical practice and scientific investigation is new.”

# Post-traumatic Growth (Cont.)

- An individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma is crucial in determining the extent to which post-traumatic growth occurs
- Post-traumatic growth occurs with attempts to adapt to highly-negative sets of circumstances that often engender high levels of psychological distress and unpleasant psychological reactions
- Reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders
- Personal distress and growth often co-exist
- Growth from trauma has been conceptualized not only for individuals but also for families as systems

# Evidence and Controversies

- Research with former prisoners of war who spent up to eight years in Vietnam's infamous Hanoi Hilton prison confirms two things:
  - Most of them experienced positive growth from the experience (and a PTSD rate of only 4 percent)
  - Those who experienced the worst trauma (including repeated torture, starvation, solitary confinement and physical injury over many years) reported the most personal growth in the decades after their release
- Post-traumatic growth is an ongoing process
- While none of them expressed a desire to go through the experience again, a number have said they are stronger and better people because of it

# Post-traumatic Growth Inventory

**The Post-traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI)** is the standardized inventory most often used to measure growth that follows a traumatic life event.

- It is a 21-item self-report inventory that uses a six-point Likert scale to measure positive outcomes that result from traumatic experiences.
- In addition to an overall scale score, the PTGI comprises five factors:
  - relating to others
  - new possibilities
  - personal strength
  - spiritual change
  - appreciation for life

# Post-traumatic Growth Inventory (cont'd.)

- Because of the common variance found among these five subscales, many researchers have considered the total score on the PTGI as a single factor.
- Debate continues about whether these five subscales are best understood as distinct factors and whether a three-factor or five-factor version of the PTGI is better supported by the data.
- A recent study by Taku, Cann, Tedeschi & Calhoun (2008) provided support for the five factor PTGI.
- Further research is necessary to ascertain whether or not the factor structure will vary depending on particular characteristics of a sample or specific types of traumatic experiences.



# Controversies

There are concerns expressed regarding the utility of the Post-traumatic Growth Inventory Instrument. As highlighted by Camille B. Wortman in Post-traumatic Growth: Progress and Problems:

- It is suggested that what is called growth in many studies may not be growth at all.
- Her analysis questions *How Prevalent Is Growth* and *What Constitutes Significant Growth?*
- If people say the crisis has made them stronger, should this be accepted at face value?

# Controversies (cont'd.)

Wortman challenges the position which states that there are two factors that can facilitate post-traumatic growth:

- Cognitive Processing
- Disclosure

Wortman presents data indicating:

- Often, cognitive processing does not seem to be involved in growth.
- Those who do best following adversity frequently show little evidence of processing.
- There has been far too much optimism in assuming that others will respond to disclosures of distress with empathy and concern.

# Post-traumatic Growth vs Resilience

Resiliency is the process of adapting well in the face of:

- Adversity
- Trauma
- Tragedy
- Threats
- Significant Sources of Stress:
  - Family & relationship problems
  - Serious Health Problems
  - Workplace stress
  - Financial Stress

Studies show that the primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family.

# Post-traumatic Growth vs. Resilience (cont'd.)

Resiliency is bolstered by relationships that create:

- Love and trust
- Provide role models
- Offer encouragement and reassurance

Several additional factors are associated with resilience, including:

- The capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out
- A positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities
- Skills in communication and problem solving
- The capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses

# Post-traumatic Growth vs Resilience (cont'd.)

## In contrast to resilience:

- PTG refers to a change in people going beyond an ability to resist and not be damaged by highly stressful circumstances
- Involves a movement beyond pre-trauma levels of adaptation
- Possible that those who are highest on these dimensions of coping ability will report relatively little growth
- Primarily because these people have coping strategies that allow them to be less challenged by trauma.
- Possibly, the struggle with trauma may be crucial for post-traumatic growth

# Post-traumatic Growth vs. Resilience (cont'd.)

**Resilience** in children exists prior to exposure to trauma or a stressful life experience.

- Resilient individuals have a high level of coping after trauma.
- The following factors are associated with resilience in children:
  - Above average communication skills, cognitive abilities, and problem-solving abilities
  - Positive beliefs about self and future talents, hobbies, and/or special skills
  - Ability to self-regulate behavior
  - Able to ask for help from adults
  - Stable, nurturing parent or caretaker and extended family
  - Supportive, positive school experiences
  - Consistent family environment such as family traditions, rituals, and/or structured routines
  - Strong cultural connections and cultural identity

# Post-traumatic Growth vs. Resilience (cont'd.)

Post-traumatic Growth in children develops as a result of lessons learned from exposure to trauma or crisis (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)

Post-traumatic growth is manifested in several clearly defined behaviors and thought patterns not necessarily present prior to exposure (Turner & Cox, 2004)

# Post-traumatic Growth vs. Resilience (cont'd.)

Experiences that children and adolescents may have that are associated with post-traumatic growth include (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Ungerleider, 2003):

- Feeling more compassion and empathy for others after personal trauma or loss
- Increased psychological and emotional maturity when compared to age-related peerships
- Increased resiliency, the ability to “bounce back”
- A more complex appreciation of life when compared to age related peers
- A deeper understanding of one’s personal values, purpose, and meaning in life
- A greater value of interpersonal relations