

Tribe of
The Restored Warriors



MEETING GUIDE

Tribe of the Restored Warriors Meeting Guide

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This permission is granted to all warriors, supporters, and community members who wish to facilitate healing, growth, and connection among Veterans and First Responders, provided that the original intent and integrity of the Guiding Principles are respected and upheld.

The sections included in this freedom to duplicate are:

- Tribe of the Restored Warriors Post-Traumatic Growth Meeting
- 12 Guiding Principles of the Tribe of the Restored Warriors Veterans and First Responders PTG Groups
- Restored Warriors PTG Group Facilitators
- Restored Warriors PTG Meeting Guide
- Restored Warriors Post-Traumatic Growth Weekly Reflections

By using and sharing these materials, you agree to:

1. Preserve the meaning, intent, and format of the Guiding Principles.
2. Provide access free of charge to any participant wishing to attend.
3. Avoid altering the core language in a way that changes the spirit of the group.

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4. Ensure groups remain peer-led and volunteer-facilitated in the spirit of mutual support.

Our mission is to ensure that these resources remain free, accessible, and rooted in post-traumatic growth principles, so that any Veteran or First Responder can benefit from them, anywhere, at any time.

-Dr. Benjamin Iobst, US Army Combat Veteran, Retired Law Enforcement Officer, Author of *Restoring the Warrior: A Guide to Veteran and First Responder Wellness*

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Tribe of the Restored Warriors Meeting Guide
Tribe of the Restored Warriors Post-Traumatic Growth
Meetings

An essential element of the mission to restore warriors has evolved in the work we have done since the inception of our local wellness team. Camaraderie and purpose-focused growth have emerged as a highly effective means of helping our Veteran and First Responder populations to begin the essential mission of wellness.

The most remarkable growth we have witnessed among members of the Veteran and First Responder population comes from those who attend our weekly Post-Traumatic Growth Group. These meetings build on the teachings of Dr. Tedeschi, many of which are outlined in *Restoring the Warrior* and *Struggle Well*. These are recommended readings for anyone interested in creating a group. The groups enable shared strength, communal purpose, and an awareness that none of us are struggling alone. We believe that these groups can be effective anywhere in the country if they follow the same guiding principles that we have established for our local groups.

Creating these groups is straightforward; all of our groups began with the recommended 3-5 motivated Veterans and First Responders who shared a common mission and have since grown.

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We have named our local groups 'The Tribe of Restored Warriors' meetings, which attendees have nicknamed 'The Tribe' or 'Restored Warriors'. You are welcome to use this name, logo, and our formats, provided you are following the same mission and guiding principles as us.



12 Guiding Principles of the Tribe of the Restored Warriors

Veterans & First Responders PTG Groups

- 1. Our common purpose is to support one another in post-traumatic growth by transforming pain into meaning and purpose.**

We gather not to relive trauma but to reclaim strength and identity in the aftermath.

- 2. Our group unity depends on mutual respect, shared experience, and a commitment to healing, not hierarchy.**

Leadership may guide, but all voices are equal in the circle.

- 3. The only requirement for participation is being a current or former Veteran or First Responder seeking growth after trauma.**

All are welcome who share the mission.

- 4. Each group should remain autonomous except in matters affecting the broader PTG community or violating group safety and values.**

Groups should preserve the core format while adapting to local needs.

- 5. Our group has one primary purpose: to help Veterans and First Responders heal through connection, growth, and shared mission.**

We are not a therapy group; we are a tribe with a shared journey.

- 6. We do not endorse or oppose any outside organization, political view, or religious belief.**

Our strength lies in shared humanity, not ideology.

- 7. Our groups are peer-led and non-clinical by design. Any professional involvement should be in support of, not in**

charge of, the group's mission.

We are not patients, we are warriors walking together.

8. **Post-traumatic growth is guided by the principles of shared stories, mutual support, and honoring each person's path.**

Advice is offered only when invited. Judgment is never welcome.

9. **The group spirit is maintained by mutual accountability, adherence to group rules, and respect for the space and time of others.**

We show up, we share space, we grow together.

10. **Our anonymity creates safety; what is shared in the group stays in the group.**

Confidentiality is non-negotiable.

11. **Groups are facilitated by volunteers and hosted in donated spaces. No individual, agency, or organization owns the group. Participation is always free, and meetings may never be monetized.**

This mission is built on service, not profit, carried forward by warriors for warriors.

12. **Our mission is to carry the message of healing and post-traumatic growth to every Veteran and First Responder still suffering.**

Each of us is proof that something beautiful can rise from what was broken.

Tribe of the Restored Warriors Meeting Guide
TORW Restored Warriors PTG Group Facilitators

Group facilitators lead Post-Traumatic Growth/Tribe of the Restored Warriors Meetings. These are the meeting members who are in place to guide the meeting and keep it on track. They are not ‘in charge’ in a traditional way, as all members own the group, but they are essential to keep the meeting growth-oriented.

There are no absolute requirements for the facilitator, other than being a military member, Veteran, or current/former First Responder, and the role can rotate among the membership. We do have several recommendations for who should be facilitating the groups, which are detailed below.

- Recommendations for a Facilitator
 - Current/Former First Responder, or Military member/Veteran
 - Academic training in trauma, such as an advanced degree in psychology. OR
 - Professional certifications in trauma/mental health, such as (not a complete list).
 - MHP Certifications such as CPT, TF-CBT, TIC or
 - First Responder Certification, such as CIT, ICISF, and Struggle Well. or
 - Veteran/Military Peer Support Certifications
- OR
- Experience
 - At least 6 months of attendance at PTG Groups is recommended for any facilitator.

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TORW Restored Warriors PTG Group Meeting Guide

Duration: 60 to 90 Minutes (depending on group size)

Purpose: To provide Veterans and First Responders with a safe, supportive environment to explore Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG). Adaptations are allowed as long as the group's founding principles are respected.

Note: Groups are volunteer-led, held in donated spaces, and always free of charge. No individual or organization owns the group; it belongs to the collective.

Before the Meeting

- Set up chairs in a circle to promote connection.
- Have the weekly reflection or reading ready.
- Keep the Closing Statement and Tribe Pledge available to read.

Step 1: Welcome the Group

Facilitator Reads:

“This is a closed Veterans and First Responders Post-Traumatic Growth group. Attendance is limited to Military Veterans and First Responders, both current and former, as well as select supporters approved by the group.

The purpose of this group is to find purpose in our struggles, sharing each other's joys, perspectives, and triumphs in the aftermath of trauma. Please keep shares focused on growth, not on being stuck in trauma.

Please do not share who attends or what is discussed outside of this meeting. If you are struggling, please let us know so we can help.

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Keep up the good fight!”

Step 2: Review Group Rules

- Avoid cross-talk or giving advice unless asked.
- Share your own experiences; your story has value.
- Avoid political discussions.
- Rank and roles are left at the door.
- Harsh language is acceptable but never directed at one another.
- Do not encourage self-destructive behaviors.
- Arrive on time when possible.

Step 3: Introductions

- If no new members are present: skip.
- If new members are present:
 - Veterans/First Responders: State your name and how you served.
 - Supporters: State your name and reason for attending. (If not appropriate, kindly ask them to leave.)

Step 4: Opening Discussion

Ask: “Does anyone have a trauma related challenge they’d like to talk about today?”

- Allow space for brief check ins.
- Members share by first giving their first name, then their thoughts.

Step 5: Main Meeting Format

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Choose one type of meeting (rotate weekly, group vote, or facilitator's choice):

Option A: Weekly Reflection Meeting

1. Pick a reflection (by week of the year or random number 1–52).
2. Read it aloud.
3. Members share their reflections.
 - Each begins by stating their first name, then their thoughts.
4. Facilitator: Redirect if the discussion becomes stuck in negativity, drifts into war stories, or loses focus.

Option B: Reading Meeting

1. Read a short excerpt from a PTG-focused book (e.g., *Struggle Well*, *Restoring the Warrior*, *Transformed by Trauma*).
2. Members share their reflections.
 - Each begins by stating their first name, then their thoughts.
3. Facilitator: Use gentle redirection if the discussion strays.

Option C: Topic Meeting

1. Pick a topic that relates to PTG such as, increased personal strength, new possibilities, deeper relationships, appreciation for life, existential change.
2. Members share their thoughts and experiences around this topic.

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- Each begins by stating their first name, then their thoughts.

3. Facilitator: Redirect if discussion becomes stuck in negativity, drifts into war stories, or loses focus.

Note: These are examples of meeting types, others may be used if it adheres to the guiding principles.

Step 6: Closing the Meeting

Begin the closing 10 to 15 minutes before the meeting ends.

1. Gratitude and Self Care Round

Each member shares:

- One thing they are grateful for today
- One thing they will do for self care

2. Facilitator Reads Closing Statement

“As we close today’s meeting, let us remember why we come together. This group is not meant to replace any other program or clinical approach. It is here to give us space to grow, to support one another, and to remain open to many different paths of healing and recovery.

We carry forward the lessons of the Five Domains of Post Traumatic Growth:

- To find new appreciation in the small moments of life.
- To strengthen relationships through empathy, compassion, and connection.
- To discover new possibilities and directions we may not have seen before.
- To recognize the strength and courage we already hold within.

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- To seek deeper meaning, whether through reflection, faith, or a renewed worldview.

Before anyone leaves, please make sure no one is in distress. If you notice a brother or sister struggling, check in and remind them that they are not alone. Together we can guide and encourage one another as we grow side by side.

Finally, let the work of this group extend beyond these walls. Stay connected, encourage one another, and live out growth with resilience, courage, and hope.”

3. Tribe of the Restored Warriors Pledge

(Stand in a circle. Facilitator says, “Repeat after me,” then recite together):

We are warriors; we are not meant to struggle alone.

I will face the past and the present with my Tribe.

Our mission is to heal and grow with intent and purpose.

Not just to survive but to thrive.

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Weekly Reflections

The following weekly reflections can be used during a Restored Warriors Post-Traumatic Growth meeting. These reflections have been written by First Responders and Veterans who have experienced trauma, have learned to thrive in the aftermath, and have gained a purpose-driven existence. These are their own words. While Restored Warrior meetings are non-religious and do not promote any singular religion or belief, many contributors find motivation and purpose in spiritual texts and practices, which may be mentioned in some of the reflections.

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Weekly Reflections by:

Bethany Adams, Law Enforcement Officer

Jennifer Aleman, US Army Combat Veteran (War on Terror)

David Alercia, USMC Veteran, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

William Carver, Paramedic, Former Firefighter

Thomas J. Carson, US Air Force Veteran

Chuck Durback, US Army Combat Veteran (Vietnam War)

Jeremy Gann, US Army Veteran (Iraq and Afghanistan War)

Christopher Hendricks, Law Enforcement Officer,
Paramedic

John Hill, USMC Combat Veteran (Desert Storm), Retired
Law Enforcement Officer

Dr. Benjamin Iobst, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War)
and Retired Law Enforcement Officer

Amy J. Iobst, EMT

Jason Kesack, Law Enforcement Officer

John Kukitz, US Army Combat Veteran (Vietnam War)

James LaFey, US Air Force Veteran (Iraq and Afghanistan
Wars)

Nate Laskey, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

Kevin McCloud, US Army Veteran

Kate Murray, Law Enforcement Officer

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Adam Perreault, US Navy Veteran, Professional Firefighter

Freddie Reed, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

Dr. Thomas Ritter, US Army Veteran, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

Matthew Rush, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

Brian Sabo, Former Law Enforcement Officer

Shane Schmeckenbecher, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War), Probation Officer

Christopher Schierloh, Paramedic

Kenny Seagraves, US Navy Veteran

Robert Smith, US Army Combat Veteran (Desert Storm and Iraq War)

Trevor Tasetano, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War), Former Volunteer Firefighter

Drew Taylor, Probation Officer

John Turoczi, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

Justin Wright, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

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1. Growth does not mean the trauma was good, it means you were strong enough to create something meaningful after it.

When I returned home from the Iraq War, I felt lost and directionless, carrying a head full of painful memories. I thought becoming a police officer would immediately give me purpose, only to discover that more trauma was waiting for me in that role. After several years of pushing through and beating myself up, both mentally and physically, my world eventually collapsed. In that collapse, I began opening up and sharing with other Veterans and First Responders as my true self, rather than staying armored. This openness created a sense of common purpose, not just to survive but to thrive, and I wanted the same for others walking this path with me.

Today, I still face struggles, but I see them as fuel to keep moving forward rather than reasons to remain stuck. What began as a personal battle has grown into a large community of people supporting one another. Without that original trauma, none of this would have been possible. I have learned to value even the worst experiences because it all comes down to perspective.

Dr. Benjamin Iobst, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War) and Law Enforcement Officer

2. You are not what happened to you; you are what you choose to build from it.

Every experience, good or bad, shapes us. Throughout my life, I have faced many challenges. One began when I was a child, before the chickenpox vaccine existed. I first contracted chickenpox, then developed mononucleosis from a weakened immune system. That led to encephalitis, swelling of the brain, and acute cerebellitis, which inflamed the cerebellum. These illnesses affected my coordination and caused partial paralysis on the left side of my body.

I refused to let a doctor's prognosis decide whether I would regain functionality. Instead, I chose to defy the odds and use that challenge as fuel, determined to prove them wrong. Over time, I regained nearly full functionality, went on to become a collegiate athlete for two years, enjoyed sports as hobbies, and later began my career as a police officer.

Through this and many other challenges, I learned that no event, even a traumatic one, has to define your life. What defines you is the ability to rise from the darkness and use it as an opportunity for growth.

One of my favorite quotes by Bernice Johnson Reagon captures this perfectly: "Life's challenges are not supposed to paralyze you, they're supposed to help you discover who you are." Hard events do not incapacitate us; they reveal what truly matters, the strengths we carry, the values we hold, and the resilience within us.

Bethany Adams, Law Enforcement Officer

3. Sometimes, the cracks in us are where the light begins to grow.

When I first began my journey, my fiancé gave me a “Beautifully Broken” necklace. The idea behind it was a reminder to let go of the illusion of perfection. I am not perfect, I am real. It encouraged me to accept my flaws, allow mistakes, and understand that I will not always have it all together.

At first, a crack may feel like damage, an imperfection that makes us weaker or less whole. We often try to hide it, to smooth over the jagged edges so no one sees the brokenness inside. But life shows us that cracks are not the end of our story; they are often where healing begins. Just as light seeps through a break in a wall, hope, wisdom, and compassion can emerge from the fractures in our hearts. Pain creates spaces that joy alone could never carve, making room for something new to grow.

These cracks are not signs of failure but proof of resilience. They reveal that we have endured, that the weight of life pressed hard but did not crush us. Through them, we see with greater depth and grace. What once felt like weakness becomes a passage for growth, connection, and even beauty. The light that shines through our scars transforms them into something sacred: reminders that brokenness can be a beginning, not an ending.

Kate Murray, Law Enforcement Officer

4. Pain can shatter us or shape us. PTG is the art of choosing the latter.

I have spent years walking into chaos so others did not have to. Before I wore the badge, I sat in therapy rooms, holding space for pain that was not mine. Later, the uniform became my armor. But no matter what role I filled, I carried a deeper weight: the trauma that shattered my world the day I lost my son to cancer.

People tried to comfort me with words like “He is in a better place” or “Everything happens for a reason.” I would nod, but deep down I knew some pain does not come with a reason, and some losses will never be good. What I have come to understand is this: the trauma did not destroy me. It transformed me.

In the quiet after the funeral, I turned to pen and prayer. I surrounded myself with others who had also been through fire; warriors, responders, people just trying to hold themselves together. I let my pain make space for theirs. And somehow, out of heartbreak, I built something meaningful: a place where struggle was not weakness, where tears did not need to be hidden, and where healing did not mean forgetting.

My son’s memory became more than grief; it became my mission. The wound is still there, and it probably always will be. But over time, it became the place where light could break through. Growth did not mean the trauma was good. It meant I was strong enough to create something that mattered from it. Not because the past was kind, but because I chose to be.

Jason Kesack, Law Enforcement Officer

5. Healing doesn't mean forgetting; it means carrying the memory differently.

Throughout my life and career, I have faced challenges and experiences that make me press "Pause" so I can process what just happened. Those pauses are mental stutter steps that help me make sense of an abnormal experience so I can move forward. I press "Pause" to allow myself to catch up, but it does not pause the memory, which continues.

I pressed Pause several times in my teenage years, then a few more times when I was in the Navy, and I continue to press Pause as a firefighter. Pressing Pause temporarily interrupts the movie, but it also takes away from the enjoyment and quality of the production.

When you watch a movie and press Pause to better understand a complex scene, it does not end the movie; it is just an interruption. Traumatic experiences in our lives are interruptions, some longer than others, and often very complex. We will never forget them, but we press play and keep enjoying the rest of the movie.

Adam Perreault, US Navy Veteran and Professional Firefighter

6. Growth sometimes begins in the most difficult places.

For me, it came through loss and an unexpected lesson in letting go.

A few years ago, my mentor passed away from cancer. After his passing, I was not familiar with how to grieve. I shut myself off from the world again and suffered in silence. After two years of this, I attended a bonfire where you write what you want to be free of on a paint stick and toss it into the fire. There were also rocks, or “strength rocks,” with different inspiring messages on them.

I grabbed one of the rocks without looking at it and went back by the fire. I started to overthink what the “strength rock” was for. “Does it need to be something I need help with, or is it something I’m already decent at doing?” I thought. So I went back to where the rocks were and ran into the lady running the event. I asked her, “Do I need the rock to mean I’m good in this area, or that I need help in this area?” She said, “We do that, don’t we? We overthink everything. You should just let go.”

She asked what my rock said, and I pulled it out. Written on the rock were the words: “Let go.”

This began my ability to heal and to let go-not forgetting the memories of my mentor or the lessons he gave me, but letting go of the suffering attached to his passing. Years after this experience, I have found peace with Wilson’s death and learned to truly let go.

Justin Wright, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

7. Even in the ashes of loss, new values and deeper gratitude can rise.

Even in the ashes of loss, new values and deeper gratitude can rise, but only through work. For me, work became a lifeline. I wrestled with addiction and alcoholism for years, never fully losing function but never truly living. I was swollen, sick, and absent, especially as a father. Sobriety brought clarity, and with it, the epiphanies began. I got back on the mat, reclaimed my health, and even endured divorce with steady and sober resolve.

I struggle every day, but I struggle well. I am blessed to work in a culture of peers who understand the weight of our calling, advocate for EMS as a profession, and uphold the highest standards for themselves and for our industry. That support has made all the difference.

I remain a work in progress, but I improve daily. More importantly, I have learned the power of connection. When we unite for a mission or purpose, our resilience is unmatched. Through years of disaster, we have responded, rescued, and rebuilt together. It is time to bring that same strength inward. Just as our law enforcement, fire, and military colleagues have, EMS must invest in wellness and resilience.

The tides are turning. Change is slow in some places, but many EMS systems are beginning to evolve. Together, we can build a culture grounded in wellness, one where we learn to carry each other's burdens. In unity, we will not only struggle well, but we will struggle less, and in doing so, ensure a brighter future for ourselves and those we serve.

Christopher Schierloh, Paramedic

8. Trauma writes a chapter, not the whole book.

Trauma writes a chapter, and some of those chapters are hard to read. But trauma does not write the whole book.

We once had two officers ambushed during a domestic call. When asked if weapons were present, the wife answered, "I don't know." That vague response raised their instincts. As the first officer entered, he heard the charging handle of an AR slam forward and dove for cover. Both officers survived with only minor shrapnel injuries.

A few days later, I responded to a stabbing in progress. Another officer and I went upstairs and knocked, but no one answered. Both cars were outside, child seats still inside. Anxiety rose as I thought of the earlier ambush. We made entry and found her dead. We found him too, and I used my Taser instead of my firearm.

For weeks I carried guilt, believing we could have saved her. The medical examiner's report later showed she was killed about 14 seconds before our first knock. That truth helped, but what helped more were the buddy checks-calls and texts from friends who would not give up on me. At first, I was too shut down to notice, but they kept trying until they broke through.

That is my guidance: keep trying. Let those who suffer in silence know they matter. That moment did not define me, but it gave me brothers I will carry with me forever.

*John Hill, USMC Combat Veteran (Desert Storm), Retired
Law Enforcement Officer*

9. Your survival was the first miracle; what you do with it is the second.

After two tours in Iraq with a combat engineer company in the Marine Corps, I came home, but I wasn't really home. The war followed me. I carried the sights, the sounds, and the ghosts everywhere I went. I didn't deal with it. I drowned it. I self-medicated, I blew up relationships, and I isolated until I was damn near gone.

That's the dark side of survival. You're breathing, but you're not living.

The second miracle came when I finally reached out. I walked into a Veterans group and found guys who had lived the same nightmares. They showed me that strength isn't hiding it-it's owning it. It's facing the demons head-on with brothers and sisters who refuse to let you fall.

Your survival means you still have a chance. The struggles don't define the rest of your life. What you choose to do with that survival does. There's a second miracle waiting, and it begins the moment you take that first step out of isolation and into connection.

Nate Laskey, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

10. Growth is not linear; it's often a journey of hills and valleys.

Ever since I was young, I remember how easily I became frustrated when things did not go my way. Whether it was underperforming at a karate tournament or not earning the test scores I wanted, those feelings of disappointment carried into adulthood.

Over time, I learned something important. If I excelled at everything all the time, I would become bored and complacent, and in my line of work, complacency can be deadly. Struggle forces us to adjust, adapt, and grow. When things do not go your way, you can give up, dwell on the setback, or take a step back to understand what it is you truly want to achieve.

Sometimes going from point A to point B is not the best path. Maybe you need to go from A to C first. Now you have options. You can circle back to B if it still matters, or continue to D if that is the stronger path forward. What once felt like failure becomes part of the map, not the end of the journey.

Life rarely unfolds in a straight line. It is the detours, challenges, and alternate routes that teach us resilience and creativity. In the end, success is not about everything going perfectly, but about continuing to move forward with purpose.

Trevor Tasetano, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War), Former Firefighter

11. Some lessons can only be learned in the aftermath.

After a mission went bad, my weapons specialist and my friend took his own life. He was under the care of professionals who promised to meet his needs and keep him safe. I took a voluntary temporary duty assignment, and when I came back weeks later, he was gone. No goodbye, no send off, not even a final act of sacrifice that others could hold on to. Just gone.

I spent more than a decade blaming myself for not being there. To support, to protect, to watch his six, or simply to hold his hand at the end. The guilt weighed heavily, as though I had failed him.

In time, I came to understand that it was not my choice to make. No matter how much I would have moved mountains to save him, the decision was his. I did not abandon him. He knew he could lean on me in any capacity. Nothing I could have done would have changed what happened, because it was not mine to decide.

Growth came only when I accepted that we are each the arbiters of our own journeys. The most we can do is offer a hand, be present, and show we care. It is up to them to take it. That was a hard lesson, but an essential one.

James Lafey, US Air Force Combat Veteran (Iraq and Afghanistan Wars)

12. Post-traumatic growth is not bouncing back-it's rebuilding forward.

For a long time, isolation felt comfortable until it did not. Being alone felt safe, but I was stuck in negative thinking, trapped in a constant loop of self-defeating thoughts and actions. That cycle kept me small and disconnected.

Everything began to change when I found a group of healthy Veterans. For the first time, I had a tribe I could lean on and share my thoughts with. Talking things through helped quiet the negative self-talk and gave me a clearer perspective.

Now I spend at least three to five days each week either talking with or spending time alongside these men and women. Together, we remind each other of truths that are easy to forget when you are alone. As the saying goes, you cannot see the forest through the trees, but someone else can see it for you.

Justin Wright, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

13. Strength isn't the absence of pain-it's continuing to love, trust, and serve despite it.

As Veterans and First Responders, we know pain is not just physical. It is the memories that weigh heavily, the moments that replay in the quiet hours, the losses that time does not erase. Sometimes the world tells us that being strong means never showing weakness, never admitting the hurt. But in God's eyes, strength looks different.

True strength is found when we choose to keep our hearts open despite the risk of being wounded again. It is trusting that God is still present when our circumstances feel overwhelming. It is showing up to serve, even when we feel emptied out.

Jesus Himself walked this path. He knew betrayal, grief, and suffering beyond what we can imagine, yet He continued to love. He trusted His Father's plan, even in the darkest hours. And He served until His last breath.

Your pain does not disqualify you from purpose; it may actually deepen it. The scars you carry can become the very places where God's light shines brightest, offering hope to others who walk the same road.

Jason Kesack, Law Enforcement Officer

14. Post-traumatic growth isn't a destination; it's a way of living differently, intentionally.

The journey of growth I have experienced is not perfect. There have been ups and downs, leaps forward and slides backward. The key is to keep moving forward with a positive purpose and to avoid destructive isolation.

Where I once dwelled on things, overthinking and obsessing, I now try to talk them through with other healthy members of the warrior community. This allows me to grow rather than destroy. Growth is something I must practice daily, keeping it at the forefront of my purpose.

I remind myself that my mind must be kept in shape to handle life in a positive way, and that comes through positive practices and surrounding myself with positive people.

Dr. Benjamin Iobst, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War) and Law Enforcement Officer

**15. PTG isn't about denial; it's about integration,
discovery, and strength.**

My journey with post-traumatic growth began when I finally gave myself the space to validate my own traumatic experiences. Surviving the unimaginable did not mean I had to forget, minimize, or compare my pain. It meant I had to face it. Real growth does not come from denial. It comes from integrating what happened into who we are now. True growth is about acknowledging our pain, honoring how it shaped us, and taking responsibility for how we carry it forward. It is about offering ourselves grace, love, compassion, and patience through each stage of healing, because recovery is never linear.

When I denied my trauma, I remained stuck in cycles of shame and blame, trapped by negative thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. Choosing growth allowed me to step beyond what hurt me. It gave me the ability to see my story through a new lens, helping me rebuild, reimagine, and reinvent myself.

What once was only a source of pain has become a catalyst for something brighter. My trauma taught me resilience, connection, and strength. It revealed who I truly am. The path to growth is not easy, but it shows us what we are capable of enduring and creating. What we learn along the way becomes the foundation for everything we build next.

Jennifer Aleman, US Army Combat Veteran (War on Terror)

16. A deeper sense of purpose often starts with surviving the unimaginable.

Life is challenging, but until we face the ultimate challenge of surviving a deadly event, we can fail to see the purpose in it. When we sense the potential for our own loss of life and live through it, we find an understanding that many cannot relate to. Those who share that experience develop a bond that can be difficult to explain, or even considered a disconnection from the rest of the world.

The connection between shared suffering or danger establishes an unspoken wisdom only found in that moment between those who shared it. Often, friends and family of soldiers and First Responders feel a disconnection where there once was none. It is this shared experience that reshapes them and those who lived it. The burdened may find it unexplainable to their loved ones, leading to resentment or misunderstanding. This can manifest as an unwillingness to share, despite the fact that only those who were there can truly understand.

Reconnection without suppression with family, friends, and society is difficult without the peers who experienced the challenge with you. Soldiers and First Responders must go through the process of accepting their experience and understanding their new knowledge of life. They can then apply that experience to their lives without suppressing the fears and emotions they felt. This can lead to purposeful integration into the social network of family, friends, and the greater community.

Robert Smith, US Army Combat Veteran (Desert Storm and Iraq War)

17. The pain that almost broke you may one day become the reason you help others heal.

During my time in the Marine Corps, I was almost always angry. That anger led me to argue with senior enlisted, treat the local population poorly, and treat myself as if I did not deserve to feel anything other than rage. When I came home in 2010, the anger was no longer needed, but it was still very much alive. My Platoon Sergeant once told me, "What made you good down range will make you the worst civilian when you get out. It is up to you to figure out what you need to leave here."

For eight years, I held on to that anger, and it dragged me into some dark places. After finding recovery in 2016, I finally reached the point where I no longer wanted to live that way. I told myself, I may not know how, but I am going to figure this out.

With the support of like-minded people who had made progress of their own, the anger began to melt away. It was replaced with care and concern for myself and, more importantly, for others. I learned that anger can be transformed into passion and that my shortcomings were really strengths taken to an unhealthy extreme. Bringing those qualities back into balance is one of the most valuable skills I have learned.

I believe everything I have experienced has prepared me so that someone else does not have to go through it alone.

Justin Wright, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

18. What if this scar is where your calling begins?

On November 11, Veterans Day, I left home for the first time, boarding a plane to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas for Basic Training. Immediately upon arrival, I was herded into a small square and greeted with shouted orders from every direction, a true TI welcome. I adapted quickly, excelling in fitness tests and classes, with only minor uniform infractions.

Warrior Week was the ultimate test: field training, M16 qualification, and the unforgettable gas chamber. The final challenge was a grueling mile and a half obstacle course, which I finished among the first. Proud of my achievement, I made the mistake of celebrating with cake in the chow hall. Three TIs descended, firing questions I could not answer under pressure. Humiliated, I was ordered to see my First Sergeant, “MSGT Big Momma Pain,” who washed me back a week.

Alone in the barracks, negative thoughts flooded in, but I resolved not to quit. My new TI, a former Marine, was the toughest on base. The second time through Warrior Week, I pushed harder and graduated, though my mother, who had arrived early, missed the ceremony.

On graduation day, my TI told me, “Airman Carson, congratulations, you are born again hard.”

That experience taught me that setbacks are opportunities. I was washed back because I froze under pressure, but it shaped my resilience. Since then, I have advised military leadership, spoken on podcasts, and delivered keynote speeches. What was once a source of shame has become a story that has inspired thousands.

Thomas J. Carson, US Air Force Veteran

19. Trauma disrupts identity; growth reclaims it with clarity.

My first experience with trauma was growing up in a household filled with yelling, physical abuse, substance abuse, and alcohol. It was common to see my mother with black and blue eyes from my father's violence. At just seven or eight years old, I often stepped between them, trying to protect her, something no child should ever have to do. My father seldom struck me, but there were a few times when he did, including once when he held me underwater in our backyard pool until I nearly lost consciousness. My grandmother intervened just in time to save my life.

These experiences scarred me deeply as a child. As I grew older, I turned to alcohol and drugs to numb the pain and memories. I carried a lot of anger but found healthier outlets through sports such as wrestling, football, and martial arts. Physical activity became an outlet for my stress and a way to calm the nightmares.

Eventually, I joined the Navy and was stationed on an aircraft carrier, working on the flight deck. I came to appreciate what I call organized and controlled chaos, which gave me a sense of order and purpose.

Later in life, I was fortunate to join our Tribe, where I found qualified friends and mentors who guided me and helped me stop abusing alcohol. They were instrumental in restoring my sense of worth and helping me become a productive and positive citizen. I owe my life to this group and will never forget what they have done for me.

Kenny Seagraves, US Navy Veteran

20. After chaos, many discover they are more connected to life than before.

Looking back at my struggles with PTSD, I was fortunate to be invited to a group meeting with others who also live with its challenges. This is not something faced only by military Veterans. First Responders, emergency technicians, police officers, and firefighters also suffer. It affects not only men, but women as well. The group provides comfort, compassion, and understanding to everyone who attends, all without ridicule or prejudice. It is a place where you can share both struggles and accomplishments.

In these meetings, you hear about many difficulties, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, anger, substance abuse, and trust issues. It is striking to realize how many people carry similar burdens. Many struggles begin at a young age, and people do their best to cope with them as life moves forward.

Fortunately, groups like this exist and are open to anyone in need. They are a powerful support system. Sometimes all it takes is a phone call, a conversation with a friend, or searching the mental health network to find help.

You must allow yourself to grow. You owe it to yourself to see where life can take you. And you do not need to do it alone. Doctors, counselors, advocates, and clergy can guide you. Remember, you are in the driver's seat of your life. Take the path that helps you become the best version of yourself.

Chuck Durback, US Army Combat Veteran (Vietnam War)

21. The world may seem smaller after trauma, but your inner world can grow deeper.

We all experience the outer world in our own kind of virtual reality. We perceive the world through our senses, and then the mind creates a narrative. When we see, what we are really experiencing is light reflecting off an object and interacting with the cornea and retina in our eyes. This light is converted into electrical signals that travel through the nervous system to the brain's visual center, where images are recreated. Our other senses function in similar ways, forming our personal depiction of the outer world.

It is our inner self that perceives the outside world. This is where thoughts occur, emotions arise, preferences take shape, and where delusions and doubt can live. Recovery from traumatic experiences often awakens a new awareness of this inner world that was not available before.

My trauma came from prolonged exposure to combat. Recovery has been a process that continues nearly 20 years later. With help along the way, I discovered that within myself exists a place that is always undisturbed and at peace, no matter what is happening around me or within my mind. This peaceful awareness is our natural state of being, present in all of us.

The distractions of the modern world are endless if we give them our attention. It takes a steady commitment to be still and calm the mind, but from this stillness we recognize our peaceful awareness as the true baseline of life. As Thich Nhat Hanh taught, "the way out is in."

Jeremy Gann, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq and Afghanistan Wars)

**22. When you endure what you thought you couldn't, you
redefine what you're capable of.**

When I left the military in November 2011, I was going through some hard times. I had just ended a toxic relationship, I had no money, and I had lost my sense of purpose. I was one step away from being homeless. I was given the opportunity to live in my mother's basement, and after months of self-pity and sorrow, I decided to go back to school using my GI Bill.

The first few semesters were very challenging. I was close to thirty years old when I started, and my background was in vocational training, not traditional academics. I lacked the math, English, and science foundation that many younger students already had. I remember going before and after class to seek extra help from my professors. With persistence, I passed all my courses and earned a degree from Northampton Community College.

After graduating, I went on to obtain a degree from Penn State University, and today I am working toward my master's degree in executive leadership. Each challenge we overcome redefines what we are capable of.

Scripture reminds us in Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." The Lord places no limits on what we can achieve. Every challenge He puts before us is shaping us into who He intends us to become.

Thomas J. Carson, US Air Force Veteran

23. PTG is often found in stillness, silence, and shared stories.

Through my journey, I have engaged in many different modalities of treatment for PTSD and a TBI, stemming from my military and police career. Through the program established by Restored Warrior and Struggle Well, we come together in a closed group of like-minded individuals who have walked similar paths. While the specific events that caused our PTSD may differ, most of us identify with the same struggles and trauma responses.

Participating in post-traumatic growth and sharing our experiences from the readings helps us connect with one another. It allows us to heal as a group rather than as isolated individuals, knowing we are not alone and that our voices are heard. By sharing openly, we prevent those thoughts from continuing to rent space in our minds.

In this group, individuals support one another by sharing what has worked for them. If someone has faced a similar situation and found effective solutions, they offer insight into what helped. I have learned that instead of letting rage consume me or simply fighting to be okay, I can channel that energy into something positive. When anger builds, I take it to the gym, work it out, and put it away until needed again. Trauma does not have to destroy us. Growth allows us to transform it into strength.

The camaraderie we share here is what many of us lost, or only thought we had, in our First Responder careers. In this group, those bonds are genuine. We operate with one mission, one understanding, and one connection. No matter when or where, someone will be there.

David Alercia, USMC Veteran, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

24. The best parts of you may have been shaped in the worst of times.

The best parts of me emerged during the darkest of times. My battle with drugs and alcohol nearly destroyed everything: my health, my mind, my family, my job, and my will to live. I have been through hell and back, staring down the bottle, convinced it was my only companion, only to realize it was the very thing trying to bury me.

Those nights that seemed destined to break me were the same ones that forged me. Every blackout, every withdrawal, every time I swore I was done and then fell again, they carved something in me I could not see at the time: grit, humility, resilience, and the kind of strength that only comes from crawling out of your own grave and refusing to go back in.

Here is the truth: drugs and alcohol were not the problem. It was the chaos, fear, sadness, hurt, and resentment I carried. My failure to face them properly created anxiety, depression, and explosive anger. Ultimately, it led to isolation and a mind that spiraled deeper into the storm.

I will not sugarcoat it. This fight is ugly and real. If you are in the thick of it, know this: your worst days do not define you; they are shaping you. Every scar and every stumble is proof that you are still swinging. And the best version of you is still there, waiting on the other side of the fight.

“Out of the hottest fire comes the strongest steel.” – Chinese Proverb

Nate Laskey, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

25. The road to growth is uncomfortable, but so is staying stuck.

For Veterans and First Responders, change often comes through fire. We know the sting of discomfort-not only in training or dangerous calls, but in the quiet aftermath. Growth asks us to face memories we would rather lock away, emotions we would rather numb, and truths about ourselves that are hard to swallow. But staying stuck is uncomfortable too. It means sleepless nights that never change, a short fuse that keeps burning bridges, and the sense that life is happening around you, not through you. While growth can be exhausting, it is the kind of discomfort that leads somewhere better.

Consider Louis Zamperini, an Olympic runner turned World War II bombardier. After his plane crashed in the Pacific, he survived 47 days adrift at sea, only to be captured and brutally mistreated as a prisoner of war. Returning home, he battled rage, nightmares, and alcoholism, trapped in a cycle of pain. Only when he embraced forgiveness through his faith did he find true freedom.

The road was not easy, but it led to restoration, purpose, and hope. Growth means choosing the hard steps today so tomorrow is lighter. That might mean starting therapy, opening up in a support group, forgiving yourself, or letting someone else help carry the load.

God promises we are “being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). Renewal is active. It demands courage and calls us forward. Each small step is choosing life over stagnation.

You are worth the journey.

Jason Kesack, Law Enforcement Officer

26. People who experience PTG often discover their values with newfound urgency.

Anything can be used as motivation when I am open to a new perspective. I am not my past or the lies that negative thinking tells me. Growth that comes through discomfort can be an asset, something to harness and use for strength.

Justin Wright, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

27. Post-traumatic growth is about turning wounds into wisdom.

My journey with PTSD began in 1966 when I joined the US Army. After training at Fort Gordon and Fort Eustis, I married in June 1967, welcomed a child in October, and deployed to Vietnam that December. I was stationed at An Khe, home of the 1st Cavalry Division, and later moved to LZ Sharon near Quang Tri.

During the Tet Offensive of 1968, I faced my first traumatic combat experience. Soldiers are expected to be tough and fearless, but I was scared and unsure of what would happen. I knew I had to protect the base and my fellow soldiers. That first moment of decision, was it them or me, has stayed with me ever since. The military is excellent at training for war but does not teach you how to return to society. That part you must figure out on your own.

When I came home, I worked for 16 years but never spoke of Vietnam. Few even knew I had served. I struggled with anxiety, depression, anger, nightmares, drinking, and isolation. At the time, I did not know what PTSD was or that help was available.

It took more than 40 years before I admitted I needed help. In 2009, a fellow Veteran convinced me to attend a VA meeting in Allentown, and that was the beginning of my recovery.

In 2024, I joined a group of Veterans and First Responders who share openly and without judgment. My final thought is simple: it is never too late to seek help.

Chuck Durback, US Army Combat Veteran (Vietnam War)

28. Real courage is facing the aftermath, and still choosing meaning.

As First Responders, trauma and adverse experiences are part of the job. I began in emergency services at 16 and had no idea how to process what I saw. The best I could do was watch how others reacted and try to copy their behavior. It would take nearly 10 years and countless traumatic events before I began to process them in a meaningful way.

As I matured in my career, I learned to take smaller pieces of trauma and talk them through with like-minded responders. Sharing what I saw, how I felt, and how I reacted helped me work through the experience without repressing my emotions or turning to destructive behaviors such as alcohol or tobacco. Still, there were times when the weight of stress and trauma built up, and I lashed out at coworkers or those around me. I was unpleasant and short-tempered, more defensive than productive.

Over time, I learned the value of stepping away from work, decompressing, and investing in hobbies and family. This allowed me to handle hard calls and difficult patients without letting them linger in the same way.

Today, trauma and stress are no longer hidden in emergency response. They are openly acknowledged as part of the profession. Trauma is not a surprise side effect anymore-it is something I recognize, accept, and manage with awareness.

William Carver, Paramedic, Former Firefighter

29. When you reflect instead of retreat, you make room for growth.

Before I began my journey of growth, I spent years refusing to acknowledge my emotions or the effects that my experiences were having on my mental, physical, and social health. I played endless mind games with myself, denying that anything was wrong. I would do mental backflips to avoid dealing with the truth, often numbing myself with alcohol in the process.

When I finally began to do the work, by accepting the help of others and keeping my body and mind clean, it was uncomfortable at first. It felt like cleaning out old infected wounds. Yet it was also a relief, because deep down I knew I had not been handling things well. That process opened the door to a new way of living I did not realize was possible. Where I once saw only limitations, pain, and unhealthy coping, I now found opportunities to grow and thrive.

This was only the beginning of the journey, but life has since become something I enjoy rather than endure. Difficult moments still come, but I now approach them differently. Instead of constantly managing damage, I can make responsible decisions that strengthen my life and the lives of those around me.

Growth is not about ignoring pain but about facing it honestly, healing from it, and learning to live fully again.

Dr. Benjamin Iobst, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War) and Retired Law Enforcement Officer

30. It's not about "getting over it." It's about getting through it, and growing because of it.

I can remember asking, "Why is this happening to me?" and "When can I move on?" as I went through the most difficult time in my life. I was so focused on making physical progress that I almost overlooked the mental and emotional strides I was making. It is often said that we learn more from our losses than from our wins. In the same way, trauma, while it never feels like it in the moment, can provide opportunities for growth and expansion as we move forward.

There are some things we can never truly get over: the loss of a loved one, a debilitating injury or illness, the loss of a career, or other life altering events that become a permanent part of our story. We can, however, get through them. As we move forward, we can carry the positive aspects, the lessons learned, the love felt, the good times shared, while choosing to leave the pain behind.

The list of possible traumas is almost endless. At times it can feel like a giant wheel on a game show spinning until it lands on the trauma you "win." Like many of you, I did not get to choose my trauma, and I doubt this is the one I would have chosen. What we do get to choose, often the only choice we have, is what we carry forward from it.

Matthew Rush, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

31. You can hold both the weight of the trauma and the light of the transformation.

Life has a way of teaching us that two seemingly opposing truths can exist at once. To hold the weight of trauma is to acknowledge the pain, the loss, and the scars that shape us. It is the quiet admission that what happened matters, that it has altered the way we see the world, and perhaps even the way we see ourselves. Carrying that weight is not weakness; it is proof that our hearts have been tender enough to feel deeply, even when that depth came with ache.

And yet, alongside that heaviness, there is the light of transformation, a glow that does not erase the pain but illuminates the path forward. Transformation does not mean forgetting; it means allowing the pain to become the soil in which new strength, compassion, and wisdom can grow. This light may flicker at first, but over time it expands, showing us that we are not only what has happened to us, but also who we choose to become because of it.

To hold both is to live in wholeness, not forcing ourselves to be only healed or only hurt, but allowing both realities to coexist. It is in this delicate balance that we discover resilience: the quiet courage to carry the shadows while walking toward the dawn. The weight keeps us grounded; the light keeps us moving. Together, they make us more human, more open, and more alive.

Kate Murray, Law Enforcement Officer

32. Through post-traumatic growth, I've come to see that life did not happen to me, but for me.

I never really understood trauma or the impact it had on my brain. Back then, I just thought these were the cards I was dealt, and I did what I had to do to survive. As a kid, I wondered why these things were happening to me and what I had done to deserve it. Living in fear of my dad's authority, I struggled with my identity and spent years searching for my place in the world.

The military gave me structure and purpose, but when I came back to civilian life, I started to realize how much those earlier wounds shaped my outlook. I grew up in the inner city, saw a lot of violence, and lost people close to me. I never processed those deaths; I just numbed the pain with alcohol and substances. That left me angry, resentful, and feeling alone.

Post-traumatic growth opened a new door. I learned I was stronger than I realized, strong enough to keep getting up after every fall. I met others, in groups and workshops, who carried similar struggles. I realized I wasn't alone, and together we built tools to turn pain into growth.

I can't change what happened, but I can choose how it shapes my healing. Today, I'm not a victim. I'm a man creating his own destiny.

Kevin McCloud, US Army Veteran

33. With healing, even the worst chapters can become powerful prologues.

The most challenging experiences of my life, both from the Iraq War and my time as a police officer, can be used in two very different ways. The first is as an excuse to destroy myself, to blame the world for all its pain, and to isolate. The second is to use these experiences as fuel for growth, to take them and put them to good work, to turn them into the foundation of a purpose-driven existence.

The choice of what to do with them is mine, and I have the power to choose.

Dr. Benjamin Iobst, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War) and Law Enforcement Officer

34. Some of the strongest roots grow after the storm.

Having recently retired from city policing after 22 years, I reflect upon my career and the impact it has had on me as a person. I think of how I was able to navigate a difficult job where trauma and traumatic experiences were a reality.

Luck certainly played a part, but more important was my root system, to continue the tree analogy. When I started my career, I was an untested rookie who felt I could take on the world. In truth, my roots were as fragile as a sapling. Over time, as I gained experience, I learned not only from my successes but, more importantly, from my failures. Each experience added strength to my roots. As I progressed in my career, I felt stronger and more firmly grounded.

It was not until I encountered trauma, and dealt with the aftermath of those events, that I realized a different type of inner strength. Surviving the traumatic moments was one thing; coping with the post-traumatic effects was another. Trauma and its aftermath are not predetermined successes or failures. What made the difference was my attitude and mindset, my choice to turn trauma into something positive. My roots grew deeper and stronger because of those experiences. I now know that I can not only persevere but also thrive.

John Turoczi, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

35. Growth after trauma often means you stop trying to be who you were and start becoming who you are.

During my career, I watched other officers engage in destructive behaviors and thought, “How could they?” Over time I learned that self destruction does not always look like cutting, drug use, or suicide. It can be anything that damages what we value most. I eventually realized I was burying my own stress in behaviors that were quietly destroying my world. By 2008, I was living in a rented house with a ruined knee, a family that had distanced itself, and nights where I wondered, “Why am I bothering? Who would miss me?”

After every low point, I eventually got angry enough to fight back. I reached a moment where I was done with self-destruction. Instead of letting others dictate my story, I chose to take it back. I began showing up as my true self at work, reengaging with my family, and investing in life again. The more I lived as the person I always believed myself to be, the more things began to change. I stopped apologizing for every decision and started owning the choices that shaped me.

After my first divorce, I wrestled with feelings of failure. Yet what I once saw as fatal flaws became insights I could use to help others. By recognizing my own destructive patterns, I could guide those on the same dangerous path. In reaching out, I found my own healing-not as penance, but as a choice to grow.

John Hill, USMC Combat Veteran (Desert Storm), Retired Law Enforcement Officer

36. Growth comes when one reflects honestly on life and lets both pain and blessings shape who they become.

When I reflect on my life story to this point (age 60), I see how both good and difficult experiences have shaped who I am. Central to that journey has been my moral compass, established through Christianity. Two people were especially influential in guiding me: my mother and our minister in the church where I grew up. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior early in life, and ever since, my faith has provided direction and strength.

My professional path has been challenging but deeply rewarding. Because of the Lord, I have had perseverance and endurance through trials. I have worked in community mental health, forensic juvenile probation, and later served as Director of Forensic Services. For the past 26 years, I have also been privileged to serve as a therapist in private practice. Over these decades, I have walked alongside tens of thousands of people facing hardships, including some of the most painful circumstances imaginable.

Through it all, I have practiced what I call soul stewardship. This begins with awareness of my relationship with myself, guided by my moral compass. It requires seeing reality as clearly as possible, then choosing to do what is right and healthy according to that guidance. Practicing soul stewardship has consistently given me clarity and growth, even in the most difficult seasons of life.

Drew Taylor, Probation Officer

37. The journey doesn't erase the pain-it transforms your relationship to it.

Medically retiring after five knee surgeries in the middle of my military career taught me how many forms pain can take. I was prepared to live with chronic physical pain, something many who have served before and after me have come to accept. But nothing prepared me for the invisible wounds: the deep emotional pain of losing my abled body, my career, and the identity I had built around both, all before the age of 27. That kind of loss left me isolated, grieving, and untethered. The combination of physical injury and despair only worsened my health, trapping me in a cycle of decline.

Instead of continuing that cycle, I began to break it. I stopped feeding the patterns of pain and started creating new ones, where even the smallest moments of joy became a priority. I worked to shift my view of pain from something purely negative to something meaningful, a signal from within reminding me when I needed rest, care, or reflection.

Now, after 22 surgeries and a diagnosis of Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, one of the highest rated conditions on the McGill Pain Scale, I see that my pain has not disappeared but my relationship with it has changed. Walking the path of post-traumatic growth taught me something vital: you cannot heal the body without also healing the mind.

My pain is no longer a punishment. It is a testament to my strength, my resilience, and the storms I have survived.

Jennifer Aleman, US Army Combat Veteran (War on Terror)

38. Meaning can rise even from rubble.

There is something that is often overlooked in times of struggle and trauma, usually for good reason, as they can be all-consuming. That is the fact that our struggles provide us with the opportunity to discover a new path. It is sometimes after our darkest moments that we realize what we truly have inside of us and where we can best direct those talents. I know that this was true for me.

When I was at my lowest point, I had no idea that my struggle would provide me with not only a new awareness of the strength inside of me, but also a new direction for my life. I was grappling with what would be next for me since my career path was forever altered. I was never going to be able to physically do what I had loved doing. I was having a hard time imagining my life differently, and it was then that I received a card from my sister which contained a single line attributed to Lao Tzu: “When I let go of who I am, I become who I might be.”

This marked a point of change for me. I used the pain and darkness I had experienced to redirect my life into efforts to be of assistance to others going through their difficult times. In helping others during their rough times, I not only shared what I had learned on my journey, but I also learned from them.

For the first time in my life, I feel like I am doing what I was meant to do, and none of it would have happened if I had not been knocked off my old path. It may be a different calling for you, but if you look for them, there are opportunities that never would have been available if you had not gone through your trauma.

Matthew Rush, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

39. After trauma, priorities often sharpen, and trivial things fall away.

Being downrange in Iraq was an experience like none other I have had to this day. You experience trauma as it comes and stow it away for the time being. When I came back home, much of this unpacked into my life without me even being aware of it.

I will tell you this, though I suffered, I found meaning in it. After processing, and continuing to process, my trauma, I have discovered new meaning in life. Instead of the Lt. Dan syndrome I once carried, I have turned it into appreciation for life. I am alive, and others are not. I have the responsibility to live the life they cannot.

I have turned the pain into motivation: going back to school, working on myself to become the best version of me, and being of service to others who are also on this journey.

Justin Wright, USMC Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

40. In the space left by trauma, some find new creativity, compassion, and connection.

In the space left by trauma, I discovered both darkness and unexpected light. Leaving the Army was harder than I ever imagined, not because I missed the uniform, but because I missed the sense of purpose, the brotherhood, and the structure that gave every day meaning. When I came home, PTSD was not just nightmares; it was silence, anger, and the feeling that I no longer belonged anywhere.

But in that empty space, something began to shift. At first, it was only survival, writing down my thoughts, picking up small creative projects, and forcing myself to connect with people I trusted. Over time, those practices became lifelines. The same discipline that carried me through deployment began to guide me through healing. I learned that vulnerability was not weakness but another form of courage.

Today, the scars remain, but they are part of my story rather than the end of it. Through compassion, creativity, and connection with other Veterans and First Responders, I have found a new mission: to heal, to grow, and to help others know they are not alone. Trauma took much from me, but it also left space to rebuild, a space I now fill with purpose and hope.

Freddie Reed, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

41. What if your recovery is part of someone else's survival?

Deployment for me was not just about leading a small signal team on a mission; it was about leaving behind my two young children during a painful divorce. While setting up critical communications under wartime orders, I was also carrying the invisible weight of single motherhood. I returned home with heightened anxiety, nightmares, and a nervous system stuck in survival mode. Yet I was expected to instantly become the nurturing mother my children needed.

The military trained me to lead, make split second decisions, and suppress emotion. These traits were praised in uniform but stood in painful contrast to the tenderness required in parenting. PTSD was often discussed in terms of addiction or recklessness, but rarely in terms of how trauma reshapes a mother. I found myself reactive, overwhelmed, and despising the version of myself trauma had created.

In time, I realized healing was not only something I owed myself, it was vital to my children's survival. I had to unlearn suppression and relearn how to regulate, connect, and nurture with intention. My recovery became the foundation for their growth and sense of safety.

They saw my pain, but more importantly, they saw my progress. Now, as my youngest prepares for college, I see how our shared resilience shaped who they are. My recovery was not just my journey, it was the key to theirs. My healing became their survival.

Jennifer Aleman, US Army Combat Veteran (War On Terror)

42. Growth doesn't erase grief; it walks beside it.

During the Iraq War, several of my friends I was serving with were killed. When I first returned home, I carried their memories like a ball and chain, wondering why I lived and they did not. That thought process took me to some very dark places.

Through working with other Veterans and First Responders, changing my perspective with therapy and wellness practices, and embracing healing, I am now living a life full of possibilities. Where I once carried their memories as wounds and survivor's guilt, I now carry them as a reason to live a good life.

I live with purpose where they no longer can, and I bring their memory with me into places that honor them and are filled with hope and possibility.

Dr. Benjamin Iobst, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War) and Law Enforcement Officer

43. PTG is often sparked by connection and healing in community, not isolation.

In March of 2004, I deployed to Iraq and served with the First Cavalry Division outside of Baghdad. When I returned home in 2005, I thought I was fine and did not need to address the trauma that began in my early childhood and followed me into adulthood. I chose to isolate and avoid rather than face those demons. After serious complications from surgery in 2021, my issues progressed until I fell into the darkest time of my life. I feared losing my family, my career, and even my life.

I soon realized I could not manage alone and needed to reach out for help. I began therapy, learned meditation, and leaned on my family support system more than ever. I was also given the opportunity to attend a weekly support group for Veterans and First Responders. In that group, I discovered I was not alone in my past trauma. Others had lived through similar experiences, and the shared connections created a safe place for honest disclosure.

That community gave me a sense of belonging and brotherhood that I had been missing. It sparked my journey toward post-traumatic growth and showed me the strength that comes from connection. I now have a tribe of brothers I can turn to in times of need and who I can support when they need uplifting. The truth I have found is simple: the tribe is always stronger than any one person.

Shane Schmeckenbecher, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War), Probation Officer

44. After trauma, your presence becomes a quiet rebellion against despair.

A samurai proverb says, “Fall seven times and stand up eight.” I hold this close to my heart because I have fallen more times than I can count. Trauma, grief, and hardship have left me on the ground wondering if I could get back up. Each time I rise, I discover a strength in myself I did not know was there.

Standing up again does not mean the pain disappears. It means I refuse to let the pain be the end of my story. Every scar I carry is proof that I got back up. I remind myself that I am not defined by how many times I have been knocked down, but by the choice to rise again.

For me, post-traumatic growth is about choosing to rise, to live, and to prove to myself that I am not broken.

Dr. Benjamin Iobst, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War) and Law Enforcement Officer

45. From crisis can come clarity.

For years, my identity was rooted in being a police officer. I took pride in serving, but the trauma from both my adolescence and my time in uniform left deep scars. PTSD and alcoholism eventually consumed me, forcing me to resign from the career that had once defined my purpose. Without the badge, I felt stripped of who I was. Suicidal thoughts and attempts became part of my daily struggle.

What followed, however, was an unexpected process of transformation. Through therapy, faith, community support, and connection with others who had walked similar paths, I began to experience post-traumatic growth. Rather than being crushed by trauma, I learned to rebuild myself through it. Healing required vulnerability, humility, honesty, and the courage to seek help. In that process, I discovered that my experiences, while painful, did not make me less. They gave me depth, empathy, and resilience.

Post-traumatic growth did not erase the hardships I faced, but it allowed me to find meaning within them. My journey through PTSD and addiction gave me a renewed sense of purpose. Sobriety restored clarity, and connection restored hope. Today, I use my story not only to continue my own healing but also to encourage others who are struggling.

I may no longer wear the uniform, but I have found an identity far greater: a man who has endured, grown, and now seeks to serve by showing that healing is possible.

Brian Sabo, Former Police Officer

46. The most profound wisdom often follows struggle.

Operation Wayne Grey, Task Force Swift in the Plei Trap Valley RVN, 1 March to April 14, 1969. Little is known or written about this Op, but it remains with me daily. I was a squad leader with Bravo 3/12, 4th Infantry Division. We pursued the 66th NVA Regiment throughout the Central Highlands of Vietnam, from the Cambodian border and back. On 11 and 12 March, we encountered heavy contact. We lost many good men in those two days. I was wounded and medevac'd on the 12th, spent months in hospitals, and was discharged in 1970.

As a civilian, I had no direction. I suffered with PTS, anxiety, depression, and anger. The slightest noise or action would trigger me, but like many of my generation, we were too strong and too proud to seek help. I pushed forward, using alcohol to deal with the memories and pain. I married and we had three sons. My father was an alcoholic and not much of a role model. I tried to be a good father but failed many times. Living with me was a challenge for my wife and children.

In 2018, I met a former member of my unit. After months, he convinced me to seek help. I was treated by the VA and began reconnecting with other Veterans. It wasn't until I joined a group of Veterans and First Responders that my life truly moved in a positive direction. Sharing our stories and trauma has helped me see life differently. I still have issues, but weekly meetings and the bonds we've built keep me moving forward. I am now struggling better.

My goal is to Struggle Well.

John Kukitz, US Army Combat Veteran (Vietnam War)

47. Healing is not going back to who you were; it's becoming someone wiser.

After leaving the military, I thought the chaos I carried inside would never quiet down. The weight of PTSD felt like it cut me off from the world, from people, and even from myself. Yet slowly, through the pain, I began to see a different path, one built not on shutting down but on reconnecting with life.

Becoming a Reiki Master was a turning point. At first, it was simply a way to find calm and let my nervous system rest. Over time, it became a doorway to healing. The energy work helped me move beyond survival and toward balance, and it showed me that connection does not end when the uniform comes off; it just transforms.

I began to give back, guiding other Veterans and First Responders who also carry invisible wounds. In serving them, I found my own strength growing. I realized that healing is not just personal, it is shared. Every time I held space for someone else's story, I felt a little more whole myself.

The chaos that once defined me no longer has the final word. In its place is compassion, community, and a renewed sense of purpose. My journey is proof that after trauma, life can become more connected, not less, and that giving back can be the most powerful way of healing forward.

Freddie Reed, US Army Combat Veteran (Iraq War)

48. You didn't choose the trauma, but you can choose the transformation.

Trauma is what we experience, whether from many exposures over time or from a single event. If we do not work on our mental health, those experiences continue to shape us and prevent us from achieving post-traumatic growth. Whatever the cause, trauma creates a blueprint in the brain, leaving symptoms and behaviors that ripple through every part of life.

I enlisted in the US Army in April 1974 and was assigned to the Military Police Corps. The Vietnam War was officially declared over, and front-line troops were returning home, but smaller forces still remained until the fall of Saigon in April 1975. The military was shifting into a Cold War role, providing peacekeeping and security for thousands of Vietnamese refugees.

That transition prepared me for a 22-year career in law enforcement from 1977 to 1999. Over that time, I served in patrol, criminal investigations, undercover work in the Vice and Intelligence Division, and as a Detective Sergeant in the Central Investigation Division. I endured 16 injuries, one line-of-duty shooting, and a serious motor vehicle accident that kept me out most of 1996. My trauma exposures were many, but no resources were available to help us cope in healthy ways.

It was not until my third marriage was failing and I admitted I had a drug and alcohol problem that I realized I needed to change. Choosing to advocate for myself, seek help, and learn new coping skills not only saved my life but made me a better person in every area of it.

Dr. Thomas Ritter, US Army Veteran, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

49. Post-traumatic growth means finding strength, wisdom, and purpose in the struggles that once nearly broke you.

“There is nothing like the heart of a volunteer.” I am not sure where I first heard that saying, but I live by it. I don’t hesitate to help; whether it’s at an accident, looking for lost animals, or even rescuing an alligator, I’m there.

Becoming an EMT, paramedic, firefighter, and now a police sergeant felt like a natural progression for me. I’ve always wanted to serve, and I’ve lived it all.

One of the hardest experiences I ever faced came during a rather aggressive police call when I sustained a cardiac arrest. It was traumatic in every way. I fought hard to come back from the physical damage, but the mental trauma lasted much longer. I never expected how difficult that recovery would be.

Joining the Tribe has helped me more than I could have imagined. It has given me a place to share my thoughts with others who have also been in dark places. The truth is, you can’t talk to most people about feelings of loss, fear, and survival in the same way. But in this group, there is understanding. That shared connection makes healing possible.

What I did was who I was. My accident forced me to stop and think deeply about where I go from here. Through reflection and support, I’ve grown mentally and emotionally. Post-traumatic growth means finding purpose and realizing the love of my wife, my family, and my dogs-the greatest gift of my journey.

Christopher Hendricks, Law Enforcement Officer and Paramedic

50. The weight of what you've endured can strengthen the foundation of who you become.

My greatest trauma shrank my external world considerably. Physically, I could not move the way I once did, and being a police officer, along with many of my off-duty pursuits, was no longer an option. These realities took their inevitable toll on my mental health. It was then that I realized the only things I could still control were how I thought about and reacted to these events.

I turned to meditation and began studying Stoic and other philosophies. This channeled my energy away from my physical self into my mind and spirit. I discovered that the mind is far stronger than the body, and I grew as I learned about myself in ways I never had before. I built a new understanding of who I was and what I was capable of. Even if I could change the past, I would not trade my experiences of pain and trauma for anything.

I have become a better father, friend, husband, and person than I was before. There is no doubt that my trauma permanently changed me physically. Mentally, I also came out of it a different person than I had been going in. And the truth is, that is a good thing.

Matthew Rush, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

51. Let your healing be proof that something beautiful can come from what was broken.

We have all felt the depths of being broken. But broken does not mean beyond repair. Just like setting a broken bone, healing requires a process. It comes with pain, frustration, and eventually new growth. When we commit to that process and do the work to find ourselves again, we are reintroduced to someone we never knew before, someone with strength, courage, and perseverance.

We are always growing and learning. In healing, we also give others the opportunity to witness what is possible through the changes happening within us, and that is a true gift.

Give yourself the gift of turning your brokenness into beauty. The road will not be easy, and the stumbles along the way will test what we are truly made of. But the clearing at the end, the renewal, the strength, the light, is what many would call a miracle.

Amy J. Iobst, EMT

52. You're not just surviving, you're evolving.

Traumatic experiences and cumulative trauma are, by any definition, incredibly difficult and stressful to endure. Experiences of this magnitude are always life-altering and often life-changing. But altering in what way, positively or negatively? The answer is entirely up to the person affected.

There are really two options. One option is to let the experience beat you, to wallow in prolonged self-pity and become comfortable in the role of victim. To numb the problem with drugs or alcohol. The inevitable result is a diminished quality of life.

The second option is to face the trauma in a positive and realistic way. This means seeking and accepting help from a variety of sources, learning from the experience without dwelling on it, and allowing healing to gradually take place.

In my 22-year career as a city police officer, I encountered both traumatic incidents and cumulative trauma, the daily stress of policing compounding over time. I survived those experiences in the moment, but more importantly, I chose to cope positively with the effects that came after. That choice allowed me to evolve into something stronger.

The evolution of a person who has faced trauma and chooses to cope positively is remarkable. To evolve is to “develop gradually,” and that is exactly what happens when we face trauma head-on. We choose not to let the trauma define us, but to be defined by how effectively we deal with it.

John Turoczi, Retired Law Enforcement Officer

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