



# **Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide**

## **Growth, Posttraumatic**

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*Posttraumatic growth* describes the positive personal changes that some people report as a result of their attempts to cope with the aftermath of traumatic or highly stressful events. This term was introduced by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in their 1995 book *Trauma and Transformation: Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering*. Since that time, a substantial body of research has developed that describes the process of posttraumatic growth, and the frequency of these reports in survivors of many kinds of stressors, including combat, serious illnesses and injuries, natural and human-made disasters, and bereavement. The reports have come from many countries and cultures. It appears that posttraumatic growth is common and more frequently reported in the aftermath of trauma than are posttraumatic stress disorder and other psychiatric conditions. This entry reviews this concept, the major research findings in this area, and efforts to facilitate posttraumatic growth in trauma survivors.

Although the term *posttraumatic growth* was introduced in the recent past, the view that facing major challenges and suffering can produce transformation in those who undergo them is ancient. Experiences that constitute posttraumatic growth have been recognized for centuries by philosophers, theologians, playwrights, poets, and novelists. Trauma survivors themselves have described personal transformations in various ways in autobiographical accounts of the impact of trauma on their lives. Other terms in the trauma literature are virtually equivalent to the more frequently used term *posttraumatic growth*, including *adversarial growth* and *stress-related growth*. The terms *perceived benefits* and *benefit-finding* are similar, but may include outcomes subsequent to trauma that, although they may benefit the trauma survivor, are not as personally transformational as suggested by the term *post-traumatic growth*. For example, a person with cancer may stop smoking, and this is a benefit, though it would not necessarily constitute personal growth.

### Measuring Posttraumatic Growth

The most frequently used quantitative measure of posttraumatic growth is the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, published by Tedeschi and Calhoun in 1996, which includes 21 questions that address five kinds of changes people report in the aftermath of trauma. The inventory clearly does not include every one of the kinds of positive changes people can experience and report, but it does reflect changes that are part of the experience of people dealing with a very wide range of life difficulties. These five growth domains are as follows: a greater appreciation of life, an enhanced ability to manage interpersonal relationships, identification of new pathways or priorities in life, a greater sense of personal capability to cope with life events, and spiritual change or development. Currently, there are several versions of this measure. One form of the inventory also includes negative changes in the same domains as the positive ones. There also is a growth scale for use with children, and there are short forms of the adult and of the child measures. In addition, the Stress-Related Growth Scale, developed by Crystal Park, Lawrence Cohen, and Renee Murch, has been used in some studies, and there are some other infrequently used measures in the literature as well.

### The Process of Posttraumatic Growth

The most comprehensive model or explanation of the process of posttraumatic growth is one first suggested by Tedeschi and Calhoun in 1995, and revised and expanded several times since then. This model is based on the idea that events are traumatic when they present serious challenges to the assumptions that people have about themselves, the course of their lives, their expectations about the future, the purpose and meaning of their lives, and the kind

of world in which they live. When these core beliefs are questioned, or perhaps even directly contradicted, by the occurrence of a highly stressful set of circumstances, people need to reconsider what to believe in the aftermath of what has happened to them. This process has been compared to what happens in an earthquake, and it can be considered to be a psychologically seismic event, where core beliefs are seriously shaken and perhaps shattered. The structure of the general system of beliefs that people have about the world and their place in it needs to be rebuilt after trauma, perhaps in a way that is more resistant to future psychological shocks. During this rebuilding process, trauma survivors need to learn how to manage their emotional distress well enough to permit constructive reflection on their situation and how to understand its implications. They will be helped in this process by being able to disclose their reactions and thoughts to people who are able to have the patience and acceptance to allow trauma survivors to figure out what their revised system of core beliefs should be. Survivors may also use culturally familiar concepts and stories of growth and transformation. Posttraumatic growth is this process of personal transformation, as well as the outcomes reflected in the five domains of posttraumatic growth described earlier.

### **Challenges to the Concept of Posttraumatic Growth**

There have been a few challenges, in the trauma literature, to these reports of posttraumatic growth. Because reports of posttraumatic growth require trauma survivors to recall how they were before a traumatic event and to attribute changes to experience in the aftermath of trauma, a few researchers have suggested that a great deal of bias tends to enter into this process. Trauma survivors might also understandably be motivated to comfort themselves, and to use reports of personal transformation to accomplish this. All of this can be done out of the survivor's conscious awareness. However, the changes involved in posttraumatic growth are by nature quite personal and may not be readily manifested externally or observed by others; this can lead some researchers to regard reports of growth as not representing "true" change. Despite these concerns, some studies find that the reports of growth by persons who have directly undergone the stressful event do tend to be corroborated by persons who know them well.

### **Consensus Findings on Posttraumatic Growth**

Although it is not clear to what extent the criticisms of growth as mostly illusory are valid, there does seem to be a consensus that some people do experience posttraumatic growth and some do not, that there can be different trajectories of growth over time, and that the type of growth can vary among trauma survivors. It may be that some trauma survivors initially engage in a self-comforting process of perceiving positive changes, and later consolidate some of these changes into a more substantial version of posttraumatic growth as they wrestle with the difficult questions about living that confront them after the traumatic set of circumstances is in the past. It is unclear whether this growth will be maintained over long periods, although trauma survivors have reported the maintenance of such changes over decades. Few studies track the progression of growth over time, but these kinds of studies will help resolve some of these questions.

The findings in the research literature on post-traumatic growth to date allow us to make some tentative generalizations. There is some indication that women are slightly more likely to report post-traumatic growth than men. People who use active, approach-oriented coping processes are more likely to report growth than are people who use less active and more avoidant coping processes. A thought process of reflective or deliberate rumination, in the aftermath of

seriously challenged core beliefs is associated with more posttraumatic growth. There is also some indication that children as young as about 8 years old can report posttraumatic growth. An ability to recognize the coexistence of two apparently opposite experiences may be necessary for children to report posttraumatic growth. They need to have achieved a developmental milestone that allows for an appreciation of paradox, that something bad can also have positive consequences.

The experience of posttraumatic growth does not necessarily relieve the distress associated with a life crisis. It seems likely that growth and distress are independent of each other, and in the wake of trauma, some distress will likely coexist with growth. For example, some people with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder also report posttraumatic growth. The event itself may always remain undesirable or regrettable, but the aftermath of the event has yielded something of value. This distinction between the event itself and the process of growth is important to maintain.

Another important distinction should be made between posttraumatic growth and resilience. Resilience is the ability to recover quickly from traumatic events, or to resist being affected by them in the first place. Therefore, people who are psychologically resilient do not experience significant challenges to their core beliefs and show little post-traumatic growth. In contrast, people who report growth are profoundly affected by trauma. It is possible that people who report posttraumatic growth can be on a path toward greater resilience or preparedness for future trauma. They may have begun by simply struggling to cope and survive what has happened to them, without being resilient initially, but by being forced to wrestle with very challenging circumstances, they grow and become more resilient when they are faced with new challenges.

### **Posttraumatic Growth Interventions**

There are a few suggestions in the literature about how posttraumatic growth may be facilitated in trauma survivors. It is unclear, however, the extent to which interventions may hasten or enhance the process, or even if attempts to “induce” growth are desirable. The available findings do suggest that most trauma survivors report the experience of at least some forms of posttraumatic growth, and clinicians need to be prepared to respond to those experiences with what is most helpful to each individual client. Most people dealing with major difficulties are unlikely to seek or even to need professional help. They are, however, likely to seek and receive support from the informal sources of family and friends. The way those informal sources respond may, or may not, be helpful during the process of posttraumatic growth. People, lay or professional, who offer support that is patient and accepting and encourages deliberate, reflective processing of the trauma itself and of its implications for the changed life story are likely to be of most help in promoting posttraumatic growth. People able to be helpful in promoting posttraumatic growth have been described as “expert companions” by Tedeschi and Calhoun in that these people are companions willing to accompany trauma survivors on an often lengthy path of recovery and change with an appreciation for the complexity of the path, the need for patience, and the possibilities for growth. This approach integrates psychotherapeutic approaches from existential, narrative, and cognitive frameworks.

- trauma
- survivors

- stress-related growth
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- resilience
- inventory
- distress

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### **See Also**

- [Cognitive Restructuring and Trauma](#)
- [Resilience](#)
- [Spiritual and Religious Growth](#)
- [Spiritual Intelligence and Posttraumatic Growth](#)
- [Victim, Survivor, Thriver](#)

### **Further Readings**

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