



# Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide

## Spiritual Intelligence and Posttraumatic Growth

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Posttraumatic growth and spiritual intelligence are relatively new concepts that are being investigated in the field of trauma. Both are aspects of positive responses to traumatic events. Posttraumatic growth was introduced by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in 1995, referring to positive changes that some trauma survivors report as a result of the struggle to cope with traumatic events. People report five areas of growth: improvements in interpersonal relationships, a greater appreciation for life, new opportunities or pathways in life, a greater sense of personal strength in ability to cope with crises, and spiritual changes or development. Spiritual intelligence was defined by Robert Emmons in 1999 as consisting of a number of abilities and competencies that allow the adaptive processing of spiritual information. These capabilities may be crucially important when people are coping with trauma because survivors of trauma are confronted with questions that overlap with issues in the spiritual realm, such as the causes of tragedies, how to endure suffering, meanings in life, and the afterlife. One area of post-traumatic growth that has been described is spiritual change, so that there may be an effect on spiritual intelligence posttrauma, or spiritual intelligence may allow further spiritual development posttrauma. Spiritual intelligence also may allow for the development of posttraumatic growth in domains other than spiritual change because the components of spiritual intelligence may aid in the processing of traumatic events and their aftermath into life perspectives and behavior that is of great personal value. Although there is no clear body of empirical research on the relationship between posttraumatic growth and spiritual intelligence, the conceptual relationship is the focus of this entry.

### **The Process of Posttraumatic Growth**

In the model of posttraumatic growth described by Tedeschi and Calhoun, trauma is seen as a challenger of beliefs that one has held about the course of one's life, one's character, the ways one could expect other people to behave, or the kind of world we live in. These beliefs have been described as the assumptive world, that is, the core beliefs about the world as we assume it will be. Traumatic events challenge these assumptions. When this happens, trauma survivors need to rethink their assumptions and come up with a revised set of assumptions that better account for the trauma and may serve them better in the future. At some point in the aftermath of trauma, survivors may come to realize that, even though they have suffered greatly, they have also learned some valuable lessons about living their lives. These changes may occur over fairly long time frames for some individuals—even several years.

Not all persons facing trauma report posttraumatic growth. Not all events that may appear to be traumatic violate the assumptive world, and when people hold core beliefs that allow them to understand the trauma and not be shocked by it, the process of posttraumatic growth is essentially unnecessary. The belief system can already account for the trauma and does not need to be changed. Conversely, some people do not experience posttraumatic growth because the events are so devastating and their capacity to cope is not up to the task of psychologically processing the events and their aftermath. However, it is important to recognize that distress in the aftermath of trauma and posttraumatic growth are not mutually exclusive. People reporting posttraumatic growth also report that they are distressed by the trauma, and growth does not wipe away their suffering. Instead, the posttraumatic growth produces suffering that has some meaning or value, and for this reason is more tolerable. This recognition that something of value has emerged in the aftermath of something tragic requires an appreciation of paradox. People who are able to see things in terms of such paradoxes may be more able to perceive positive changes despite their suffering. This ability to perceive or interpret events in this way may have something in common with spiritual intelligence.

### **Spiritual Growth**

The spiritual changes in posttraumatic growth can vary among individual people. The process of post-traumatic growth is complicated and uneven, with the amount of time that changes take and the specifics of the changes differing greatly. The changes that have occurred may be reported differently at one point in time versus another point in time by the same person. At a particular point in time after a traumatic event, some people might report that their faith has been strengthened in the aftermath of trauma, and others might report feeling that their faith has diminished. Considering one person over time, we might see variation in spiritual or religious beliefs and practices. For example, a person might report an initial questioning regarding spiritual

or religious matters, and later the person may report a new perspective on this realm of life that is more satisfying. People who report changes in their understanding of spiritual matters as a result of a spiritual quest in the aftermath of trauma may be quite different in some way from those who report that existing beliefs have been strengthened, but otherwise are not substantially different.

### **Spirituality and Spiritual Intelligence**

Having an understanding of spiritual matters may be a component of spirituality in general, but is not necessarily an indication of spiritual intelligence. Whereas spirituality has been defined as an awareness of whatever one considers the “Ultimate” or highest power, spiritual intelligence involves more than being aware of spiritual matters and instead encompasses an ability to use spiritual information to problem solve, attain goals, and live a meaningful life. The terms spirituality and religion should not be used interchangeably; spirituality refers to a person's private beliefs about a higher power, whereas religion refers to an organized system of worship with rules and guidelines. People can be religious but not spiritual, spiritual but not religious, both religious and spiritual, or neither religious nor spiritual. Most discussions of spiritual intelligence refer only to spirituality, not religion.

A main difference between being spiritual and having spiritual intelligence is that a person may be aware of and feel a connection to a higher power (thus considered spiritual), but his or her spirituality may not lead to a peaceful or meaningful life. Often this difficulty in attaining a clear meaning in life may be the result of confusion about spiritual beliefs, the afterlife, or how to put spirituality before human desires. Other spiritual persons may overdevelop the spiritual aspects of their lives to the point that their functioning in other areas suffers. In contrast, persons high in spiritual intelligence tend to be protected from distress and maladaptive behavior because of the various abilities that are components of spiritual intelligence.

Emmons identified five components of spiritual intelligence: the capacity to transcend the physical and material, the ability to experience heightened states of consciousness, the ability to sanctify the everyday experience, the ability to use spiritual resources to solve problems, and the capacity to be virtuous. The first two components, transcendence and entering heightened states of consciousness, allow people to develop a bond with humanity and a sense of unity of all people and experience. The third component of spiritual intelligence, sanctification, involves an ability to see a holy purpose in events, goals, and actions. People who view things this way have a sense of collaboration with a higher power in their activities. The fourth component, using spiritual resources in problem solving, allows people to reprioritize goals and decide on new courses of action. This approach is useful in the aftermath of traumatic events that create obstacles to the pursuit of goals and require creative ways of responding to changed life circumstances. The fifth component of spiritual intelligence, engaging in virtuous behavior, is a source of strength and direction in the face of trauma, allowing a person to strive toward moral perfection and gain compassion and wisdom, humility, and gratitude. Practicing these virtues may allow people to perceive possibility for growth in the aftermath of trauma. Persons considered high in spiritual intelligence are able to organize and draw from these five components to deal with everyday problems and, perhaps, larger problems such as those that qualify as traumatic. When problems are severe and traumatic, persons high in spiritual intelligence would be expected to use aspects of their spirituality to cope.

### **Controversy about Spiritual Intelligence**

Not all researchers agree that spirituality should be considered a type of intelligence. Part of this disagreement stems from differences in opinion regarding how to define intelligence itself. Some researchers believe intelligence is a single capacity known as *g*, but others such as Howard Gardner believe there are multiple intelligences. For persons who theorize that intelligence is a single capacity, identifying spiritual intelligence as a separate aspect clearly does not fit their concept of intelligence. However, researchers such as Gardner are open to identifying additional intelligences that operate separately from those previously identified. To date, Gardner's multiple intelligences include linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Each intelligence is thought to operate as a system separate from the others. Gardner considered adding the spiritual as another form of intelligence but concluded that changes in physical states such as meditation best fit in the category of bodily kinesthetic

intelligence. He also argued that changes in phenomenological states such as feeling “one” with the universe should be categorized outside of the realm of intelligence. Lastly, Gardner has explicitly stated that he is unconvinced that brain functions specific to spiritual intelligence exist, which leads him to argue that spiritual intelligence is likely not a separate system. Emmons counters that neuroscience is beginning to identify neural substrates to spiritual experience and that spiritual intelligence has a characteristic developmental history.

## Conclusion

Spiritual intelligence, as a descriptor of various abilities to respond to life events in ways that transcend ordinary experience, may aid persons who are suffering in the aftermath of traumatic events. The ability to experience heightened consciousness may enable trauma survivors to manage their emotional distress, and the sanctification of everyday experiences may allow them to find meaning in the distressing experience. Behaving virtuously in the face of trauma and suffering allows people to experience their personal strength in the most difficult circumstances. Links to posttraumatic growth are apparent. Of course, spiritual change and a deeper appreciation of life are possible through heightened consciousness and sanctification. These spiritual intelligence processes might also allow for new life pathways and opportunities. Personal strength may be acknowledged in virtuous living. Therefore, all domains of posttraumatic growth might be affected by the abilities involved in spiritual intelligence. However, persons who are very high in spiritual intelligence may report little posttraumatic growth following a traumatic experience because of their use of their intelligence in everyday life in ways that have produced belief systems resilient to trauma and coping capacities that keep distress in check. Under these circumstances, events that might otherwise be traumatic are managed, and growth processes are not initiated. However, researchers have yet to examine explicitly the relationship between spiritual intelligence and posttraumatic growth.

- spiritual intelligence
- spirituals
- intelligence
- trauma
- spirituality
- survivors
- distress

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See Also

- [Cognitive Restructuring and Trauma](#)
- [Growth, Posttraumatic](#)
- [Psychospiritual Impact of Disaster](#)
- [Religious and Pastoral Responses to Trauma](#)
- [Spiritual and Religious Growth](#)

## Further Readings

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