



Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide

Spiritual and Religious Growth

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Spiritual and religious growth during and following traumatic situations may be a significant factor in resilience during and thriving following the traumatization. This entry discusses spiritual and religious coping mechanisms of individuals who have survived trauma. It is important to help survivors interpret, or reinterpret, these coping mechanisms if they are to come to healthy spiritual and religious growth.

Growth While Enduring Trauma

There are many ways in which a person suffering trauma may use spiritual and religious resources to survive as well as to grow. Some resources include the singing of songs or chants, retelling of faith stories as they relate to the situation, and feeling a sustaining spiritual presence during prayer or meditation. These resources help bring hope into situations of utter hopelessness and despair.

When trauma is too intense for individuals to remain present in the moment and feel the mental and physical pain and intense emotional reactions, they may form an association with the spiritual and dissociate from the mental and physical pain. Though long-term dissociation may be considered a symptom of posttraumatic stress disorder, short-term dissociation is considered by many to be a blessing. Victims move out of their bodies and into the soul, as they see it, for a period. The reintegration and reconnection of the mind, body, and spirit may take place immediately or may take a great deal of time and intentionality to accomplish.

During traumatization, with the fear of imminent death, there may be what might be considered a deathbed repentance, confession, or conversion. If individuals have been part of a spiritual or religious tradition that they rejected, they may believe that they were targeted because of that rejection. In the case of religious-based or family violence, the victim may even be told that the victim's lack of godliness or goodness is the cause of the trauma. In an effort to stop the traumatization, the person may beg forgiveness from God, or try to convert to another faith.

Making a “deal with God” for survival of the self or others is not unusual. Although many of these “deals” could be considered unhealthy in that they make a claim that there was a favor given to one person over another, the promises made often give the spiritual assurance or buoy the spirit in ways that allow the person to endure the unendurable. After the traumatic event, this may be problematic in two ways: Individuals may be faced with “survivor guilt” or may feel that they must complete a task or promise that was neither required nor desired by God/gods. Learning to reframe this experience in realistic and positive spiritual terms may require concerted attention.

Surviving Repeated and Long-Term Traumas

Dusty Miller speaks of “your surviving spirit” as that which maintains the person through enduring and repeated trauma. During trauma, many people say they cried out to gods/God to save them. Some say they found comfort from God/gods, some say they felt abandoned, and some say they found comfort in the crying out, or lament. Lamentation, crying out in pain to gods/God about the evil of the world that is being visited on the person, has a long tradition in many religions and spiritualities, Eastern and Western, monotheistic and polytheistic.

Within several traditions, this can helpfully be viewed during or after the trauma as “wandering in the wilderness.” This is a type of spiritual pilgrimage in which spiritual wisdom is gained

through challenges that may deepen faith. Jon Kabat-Zinn and Patricia Mathes Cane both speak of meditation as a means of actively working with and through trauma to find spiritual focus.

Those who speak of religion and spirituality as having most helped them during long-term traumatization will often speak of God/gods, or more specifically God (or a prophet of God) in a human form that was tortured, as “walking with” them during the ordeal. This is usually the view of the person who sees human choice as the main determinant of the trauma, or who understands illness and natural disasters as part of the ebb and flow of life's process of renewal.

People from various traditions speak of a sudden spiritual clarity of beauty in the smallest kindnesses and in creation. These include contemplations on the first light of day, a candle flame, a crumb of food, a cup of water, a bug crawling, human muscles, the personalization of death, and many others. The slowing down of time, the mutual struggle of a group, and the dissociative process sometimes open new avenues of spiritual seeing, feeling, and believing. Although the loss of dominance over nature is unbearable for some people, for others recognizing the connection of humans to nature in its basest forms is a spiritual growth experience.

It is not just an either/or that occurs in traumatization. Many dualities may be confronted either during or after the trauma events. The torturer may have also been the comforter. A loved one may be an abuser. The person's survival may have cost someone else's life. It takes deep spiritual reflection to resolve, or even live with, these contradictions. Until they work through this, individuals may feel as though they are “staying alive,” but not “living life.”

Posttraumatic Spiritual and Religious Growth

Although some people speak of their inability to appreciate the goodness of food, safety, or friendship following trauma, others speak of the knowing of the wonder of God's/gods' gifts even better following a traumatic event. For some people, things smell better and taste better, friendships are stronger, and their connection to God/gods and the faith community are stronger. Although this is often because the community was tempered and strengthened before the trauma, sometimes a new, and even surprising, community of faith is built following the trauma. Although the community may not be privy to all the details of the traumatic ordeal, they may affirm the struggles and process, uplift and support the person, and adopt actions to reduce the trauma for this person and all those who suffer from trauma. Certainly, if the person who has been traumatized decides to speak out, or take action to defend against or reduce trauma, the community of faith can grow by acknowledging the issue and being with survivors in their quest to struggle against further traumatization of themselves and others.

Guidance in Healthy Spiritual and Religious Growth

It is harmful to the spiritual or religious growth of the person who has survived a traumatic situation if it is interpreted as being set up by a higher being as a method of God's/gods'/spiritual punishment or intended for the spiritual growth.

In many religions, the omnipotent and omniscient powers of gods/God allow for the interpretation that the persons were being punished for their “sins” or those of their clan or ancestors. They may also have heard this from clergy or torturers. Some interpretations hold that previous actions in this life or a previous one caused the trauma to occur, or that the

persons called the experience to themselves for their spiritual growth. Each of these interpretations puts the blame on God/gods for a natural or human-created event.

Choices of interpretations, relationships, and actions benefit the spiritual and religious growth and allow the possibility of good to come from the pain that was suffered. Choices of interpretation also allow spiritual alienation and a lifetime of pain. The person who has survived trauma can be helped to look at the options through the healing process, but the decisions about how to grapple with, interpret, and, as Victor Frankl said, “make meaning” of life is the work of the survivor.

A strong and healthy community of faith may offer opportunities to be lifted up following trauma, to be seen as “normal” and loved as a whole person, to share the pain, loss, and grief, and to provide service to others. Some people wish to work directly with a pastor, priest, imam, rabbi, or other spiritual counselor to explore spiritual questions and options. Some people seek answers for what to think, but most struggle with how to make meaning of the past and move into a meaningful future. It is important not to judge the spiritual reactions but to accept them, and the person who is feeling them, as part of a personal process of spiritual and religious growth. Even in communal societies, trauma is personal.

- trauma
- spirituals
- gods
- faith communities
- pain
- spirituality/religion
- coping mechanisms

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See Also

- [Clergy, Counseling by](#)
- [Growth, Posttraumatic](#)
- [Meditation](#)
- [Psychospiritual Impact of Disaster](#)
- [Religious and Pastoral Responses to Trauma](#)
- [Rituals and Ceremonies, Therapeutic Use of](#)
- [Spiritual Intelligence and Posttraumatic Growth](#)
- [Traumatization in the Name of Religion](#)

Further Readings

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