Finding New Meaning After Trauma – With Love from Dr. G

In the world of sports it is not uncommon for athletes to utilize visualization. In our recovery, perhaps we may take a similar approach and try to visualize a path towards recovery. And maybe we can even think about our lives and new meaning further down the line, past recovery and our expected return to baseline. There is a good deal of new research not only on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or other trauma-related disorders and symptoms, but more recently there has been an increase in discussion of a phenomenon termed Posttraumatic Growth. This is not a new concept, simply newer terminology for something that has been long known in the field of psychology and mental health. In recent decades, the field in general has been shifting the focus from identifying pathology to a more constructive approach called “Positive Psychology” that capitalizes on peoples’ strengths rather than highlighting shortcomings.

We have known for a long time that the trait of optimism is associated with human resilience. Resilience is defined as our ability to bounce back after crisis. So then the question is, how do we increase and improve upon our own resilience? Life balance, resources, and healthy lifestyle (which includes learning how to think, feel, and behave in healthy ways). We want to nurture all areas of life – professional, psychological, physical, spiritual, emotional, and personal (See diagram for examples). So in addition to NOT avoiding the difficult things that we tend to want to avoid after a traumatic experience, and in addition to challenging unhelpful thoughts that simply reinforce those behaviors, we must also be cognizant of protective factors in our lives. Protective factors include friends and family, healthy lifestyle habits such as regular exercise, adequate nutrition, quality sleep, attending to the health of other organ systems aside from the brain, obtaining medical care for your teeth, skin, etc., not ingesting any more toxins then you need to (i.e., so moderating the use of stimulants and depressants in our lives). These will help us bounce back, but perhaps for some people this will enable progress beyond simply bouncing back (depending on what your life looked like before this traumatic experience).

My patients who come into treatment often state early on, “I want to be the old me again.” I immediately challenge this comment and remind them that the “old” them got them stuck. How about a NEW you, one who is more self-aware and mindful, more psychologically-minded, more compassionate, more intelligent about mental health and health in general, more capable of critical thinking, and more balanced! Some of you may begin to feel better and feel like life is returning back to normal, but it may not feel exactly the same. Take this opportunity to introspect (look inward) and evaluate the nature of that change. Many of you will not only recover from this traumatic experience (and others), but you may find that you are an even stronger, better, and happier version of yourself.

Posttraumatic GROWTH is characterized by growth beyond the “norm” or your baseline. You may begin to feel a paradigm shift in terms of your worldview (but in a positive way), or the way you think (e.g., perhaps more compassionately and thoughtfully vs. previous more judgmental ways). You may feel a sudden shift in life priorities – before Route 91 your life was all about work, but now you recognize you were totally missing out on human relationships and that is a greater source of happiness to you. You may have clarity in terms of certain realities in your life – perhaps you used to get upset about all the little issues of the day and now you “Don’t Sweat The Small Stuff – It’s All Small Stuff” (i.e., a great read by Richard Carlson). Because of this new clarity, you may now feel open to possibilities in life that you were not open to previously (e.g., moving, changing careers, getting married or divorced). You may come out of this traumatic experience with a new or renewed sense of spirituality and connectedness to other people. And in general, you simply may feel that you appreciate your life much more than you did before. If any of these occur, you have not only bounced back, but you may be bouncing beyond!

Folks, continue working on NOT AVOIDING, and CHALLENGING IRRATIONAL or UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS, but let’s not stop there! Once you feel like things are back to a “normal” keep pushing ahead and digging down to see what you learned from this experience, about yourself and other people. Here’s to a 2018 aspiration to become the very best, most authentic version of you!