

Post Traumatic Growth and Resilience

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A train carrying petroleum products derailed in the small town of Lac-Mégantic, Quebec on July 6, 2013, causing massive explosions. The blast destroyed the centre of the town and sent flames hundreds of feet into the air. Forty-seven people ranging in age from 4 to 93 died in the explosion. The enormity of this tragedy has created trauma for a whole community. How will individuals, families, and the community respond?

Events such as the Lac Mégantic explosion are rare, but trauma is not. In fact, most people will experience overwhelmingly stressful or even traumatic events in their lifetime, often resulting in severe and prolonged distress. The good news is most people find ways to adapt to traumatic experiences, demonstrating resilience. Still others find ways to grow and transform through the experience – demonstrating what is known as “post traumatic growth.” Some studies have shown that 30 to 70 percent of people report some positive changes following trauma (1). The terms resilience and post traumatic growth are not interchangeable; although they refer to different concepts, they are also related.

Post Traumatic Growth:

Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) refers to positive changes that are experienced by an individual as a result of a struggle with highly challenging life circumstances (2). The life circumstances must constitute a trauma, crisis, or highly stressful experience that challenges the way a person sees the world and their place in it. Experiences where one faces death, disabling injury, or significant loss of possessions may cause people to question what is meaningful in life.

Research by Tedeschi and Calhoun in the area of PTG has contributed to our understanding of what constitutes PTG and what is needed to achieve it.

The researchers identified five types of PTG (2):

1. Greater appreciation for life, which may include a shift in priorities, seeing pleasure in things that were once taken for granted.
2. Closer, more intimate relationships with others, characterized by increased compassion and empathy for others.
3. Seeing new opportunities in life and setting new life goals. This often requires the person to let go of the possibilities and goals that were part of their life before the trauma.

4. A sense of increased personal strength - recognizing that bad experiences happen, we are vulnerable, but survival is possible.
5. Positive spiritual change such as greater affinity with one's faith and more engagement with the bigger questions about one's existence and humanity.

It's important to keep in mind that growth does not occur as a direct consequence of the traumatic experience but in the aftermath of it and the struggle to find a new normal. Growth can, and usually does, happen during the same period of time that unpleasant psychological and emotional reactions are present.

How does growth happen? Growth is considered to be both an outcome and a process. Two main processes are involved in achieving growth:

Emotional processing: In the time following a traumatic experience individuals are often consumed by overwhelming emotion which can be described as intrusive and distressing. Being aware of those emotions, having a willingness to feel the feelings and expressing/disclosing the emotions are critical to moving toward growth. When a person is able to identify those distressing emotions yet still be able to experience positive emotions, then growth from the experience is much more likely. Emotional processing then requires a level of literacy about emotions in order to engage in the cognitive processes and to make meaning of the experience. This is often a lengthy process.

Cognitive processing involves recognizing that life has changed and now must be restructured with a new identity. The traumatic experience becomes part of this new identity and a new life purpose is established. Resilience is required for growth to occur; you have to be able to survive the initial distress in order to achieve positive growth. Being resilient, however, does not necessarily ensure growth will happen.

Resilience: How we piece ourselves back together

Resilience is a broad and complex concept that encompasses all the patterns of behavior which contribute to a person adapting to distressing life circumstances. Resilience is the ability to cope with negative emotions that arise from a stressful experience and function at normal or close to normal capacity; resilience then is a demonstration of survival in the face of overwhelming life circumstances. A range of factors have been identified that are linked to resiliency—they encompass attributes of a person, such as being sociable, having a sense of humor and being hopeful; as well as social dimensions such as experiences of parental warmth, nurturing in the family unit, support at school and success in at least one area of life (3).

Resilience in a specific area of one's life does not guarantee resilience across all functional areas. Indeed, research into, and theories of resilience indicate that resilience in one area of life can co-exist with high risk behaviors, social and emotional withdrawal, and maladaptive survival tactics. Further experience of childhood trauma is associated with lower levels of resilience and PTG following a traumatic event in adulthood (4). Yet, people who suffer trauma can be viewed

as having enormous potential to survive and the survival tactics used must be seen as normal reactions to abnormal circumstances.

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Trauma Informed Care - Guiding Principle: *Trauma Informed practice requires a strengths-based approach that validates the resilience of the individual.*

References

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