

Post Traumatic Growth

Mark R. Laaser, MDiv, PhD

Debbie W. Laaser, MA, LAMFT

Introduction

A foundational belief of all Christians is that the suffering and death of Jesus saved us from all of our sins. While we embrace and celebrate that, it is difficult for Christians to accept that we might at times be called to participate in that suffering. Jesus, himself, invites us to take upon ourselves his “yoke” and somewhat “strangely” suggests that his burden is “easy and light”. He goes on to say that if we are burdened we should come to him and find rest for our souls. (Matt. 11:28-30) In this article we would like to suggest that participating in the suffering of Christ can be an opportunity for growth. In fact, there is a “new” school of thought that is telling us that trauma can lead to our growth and is proving it through empirical research. This school is called, “Post Traumatic Growth.” (PTG)

As Christian counselors ourselves, a large part of our training has involved assessing and treating the various kinds of trauma that people can experience. This can be everything from childhood abuse and neglect to dramatic and tragic events in adulthood, including death of loved ones, infidelity, terminal illness, disability, and war. We know that trauma can lead some people to experience the symptoms of the anxiety-based diagnosis called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). We have wondered if some interventions and therapies spend too much time “rehearsing” trauma and thereby keep people stuck in victimization—re-injuring the person, including the neurochemistry of their brains.

Conversely, we have seen well-meaning Christian counselors who encourage clients to quickly forgive those who have harmed them and to “move on” with life or encourage clients to quickly explore their own hurtful behaviors and take responsibility for their ‘fair share’ of the harm. The field of Post Traumatic Growth reminds us of our biblical teachings: as Christian counselors our task is to help people make meaning out of the pain and to discover how God has helped them to be stronger people as a result.

History

The New Testament is rich with teaching that suffering leads to a greater dependence on God and to strength of character. Paul says in Romans, “we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:3-4) James writes, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking

anything.” (Jas. 1:2-4) In the history of theological, philosophical and psychological thought the idea that suffering and pain leads to meaning and growth is certainly not new.

This article’s length only permits us to point you to the current work of Calhoun and Tedeschi whose work over the last 15 years has led to the definition of Post Traumatic Growth and to clinical research supporting it. They define PTG as, “The positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Tedeschi and Calhoun suggest that terms like trauma, crisis, and stressful life events can be used interchangeably. They understand that many people can have significant emotional health issues as a result of suffering and trauma but that, “in the developing literature on posttraumatic growth, we have been finding that reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, p. 2).

The Dynamics of Post Traumatic Growth

PTG does not occur because of the trauma, it occurs when the person goes beyond an adaptive response and learns how to struggle with the potential transformational possibility of the trauma. Tedeschi and Calhoun list 5 possible growth results:

1. An increased appreciation of life in general and a sense of what is really important.
2. Closer and more meaningful relationships.
3. A general sense of greater personal strength.
4. An identification of new possibilities for a person’s life.
5. Growth in the domain of spiritual and/or existential matters.

In terms of number 5, we believe that this growth draws a person closer to God and develops a sense in the person of God’s divine presence.

The Process of Post Traumatic Growth

The literature describes three critical elements that promote PTG for an individual that has experienced a traumatic life event:

1. **Managing Distressing Emotions:** A person learns to express all feelings relating to the trauma including anger, anxiety, and sadness. In reality, this is grief work.
2. **Support and Disclosure:** An individual practices disclosing honest feelings and thoughts about the trauma with other supportive people. This must involve a system of social support including the possibility of a therapy group.
3. **Cognitive Processing:** As most therapists know, the experience of trauma leads to feelings of shame and other core beliefs about God, self, and others. Cognitive restructuring is a function of helping a person “reframe” the experience in light of God’s

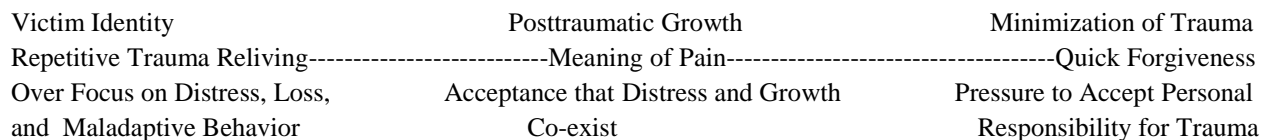
truth. This includes helping the person discover how they are stronger today because of the trauma.

We would add a fourth element:

4. Forgiveness: In the process of religious and spiritual maturity, a person will learn how to embrace the process of forgiving the people and circumstances who caused the harm.

Conclusion and Implications for Christian Therapy

We find it helpful to conceptualize the experience of PTG on a continuum. On one end is the experience of knowing and reliving the trauma. On the other end is the experience of not allowing oneself to think about the trauma, the experience of denial.



If we concentrate on the left end, the person will stay stuck in being a victim. If we concentrate on the right side, the person will experience the destructive emotional and physical consequences of stress and maladaptive emotional illness. In the middle is the healthy growth that is possible when the person can find meaning in the pain and discover how he or she has matured as a Christian of healthy character.

It is our job as Christian counselors to be listeners to the pain, the explorers of it, and the ones who help the person reinterpret God's presence in all of it. When we do, we all participate in the sufferings of Christ, our burdens become lighter, and we have the opportunity to experience the transformation available through trauma.

References

Tedeschi, R. G. and Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*. 15(1), 1-18.

Mark and Debbie Laaser are both counselors in their own company, Faithful and True, based in Eden Prairie, MN.

www.faithfulandtrueministries.com