

## The Science of Post-Traumatic Growth

### TRAUMA AND POSITIVE CHANGE

**Jim Rendon**

Author of

*Upside: The New Science of Post-Traumatic Growth*

ajrendon@gmail.com

### Overview

- What is post-traumatic growth?
- Growth demands a new narrative.
- Religious growth requires push-back and change.
- One program that promotes growth by developing gratitude and community.
- Trauma and happiness.



### Batman's Growth

*“And I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals.”*



### Psychology's history with trauma

- Despite a millennia of stories of soldiers suffering after battle, post-traumatic stress disorder was not officially recognized until 1980.
- But the field took a one dimensional view of trauma: something bad happened to you and you would suffer.
- Psychologist strove to alleviate suffering and return people to who they were before the trauma happened.

### William Sledge's Vietnam War POW Study

- 61% of POWs reported positive mental changes.
- Those held the longest and treated the worst were more likely to report positive change.
- More optimistic.
- More insight into themselves.
- Better able to identify important things in life.
- Increased understanding and patience.

Self-Concept Changes Related to War Captivity, William H Sledge, Archives of General Psychiatry (1980)

### Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun pioneered the study of post-traumatic growth

- Tedeschi and Calhoun spoke to older widows to learn about wisdom
- The women were sad to have lost their husbands.
- But they also changed into stronger, more independent people.
- They had new friends, they had better relationships with their children.
- The changes were mostly positive.

### Tedeschi and Calhoun define post-traumatic growth

- Increased inner strength.
- Openness to new possibilities.
- Closer and deeper relationships with others.
- Enhanced appreciation for life.
- Stronger sense of spirituality.

### Post-Traumatic Growth is Common

- Tedeschi says that if a person is like a building, trauma is like an earthquake that knocks that building down. Survivors have an opportunity to build a new and better building. And most do.
- They found, and subsequent studies have confirmed, that between 50% and 65% of trauma survivors experience post-traumatic growth.

The Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the Positive Legacy of Trauma, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, Journal of Traumatic Stress (1996)

## Narrative: The Stories We Tell Matter

***Trauma changes our narratives  
and opens the door for growth***



Shane Mullins

### Shane struggled to take up his old life after the accident

- Shane was partially paralyzed. He lost his sense of balance. When he spoke, he never knew what he was going to say.
- After rehab he moved home and started drinking again. He was hospitalized more than once because he was suicidal. That just made him drink more.
- He finally got sober but was angry. Why did he have to stop drinking when everyone else did not?
- He began opening up to a therapist and saw that he could not return to his old life. He could no longer drink. With poor balance, working on the farm could be deadly.
- He had to reimagine who he could be.



Shane is reintroducing himself to the world while trying to help others who may also be struggling.

### Shane had to change his narrative

- Narratives enable us to understand ourselves, who we are and what our possibilities are.
- Most of us have a concept of a moral universe. If we are good people, then good things will happen to us. Trauma shatters our understanding of the world and ourselves.
- Most people want to go back to their old lives. It's safe and familiar and easier.
- But Shane couldn't do that. He was changed, physically and psychologically. He had two choices, stew in bitterness, or understand that he had to change.



"Braveheart" provided Shane with a model of post-traumatic growth

### 2004 Study of 74 Breast Cancer Survivors

- Women reporting contact with a cancer survivor who perceived benefits from their struggle reported significantly greater post-traumatic growth than women who had no contact with those reporting growth.

Correlates of Posttraumatic Growth in Married Breast Cancer Survivors, Tsippi Weiss, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* (2004)

### The Religious Struggle with Trauma and Change

#### *Tina Chery's Transformation*



*Louis D. Brown planned to go to graduate school for aerospace engineering then onto President.*

*He was killed by a stray bullet on his way to a Christmas party for his anti-gang group.*



*Louis' mother, Tina Chery, lived a virtuous life. She went to church, prayed, read the bible, so why had that not saved her son?*

*After Louis' death, she pushed back against her faith and God.*

### Religious stories of post-traumatic growth

**Most world religions feature stories of trauma and change**

- Buddha's observance of suffering, and the trauma that causes him, transform his life, sending him on a path to enlightenment.
- Jesus' story assures people that they do not suffer alone.
- Even the story of Job shows that terrible tragedies can upend our lives regardless of our faith, and they can unveil some of the mystery of God to the survivor.

### Religious Coping

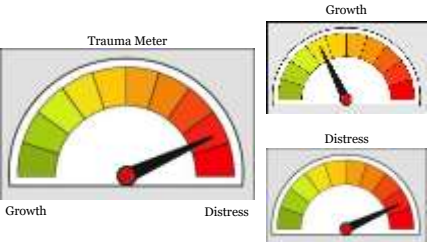
Negative religious coping	Positive religious coping
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning faith and God.</li> <li>• A necessary and normal step.</li> <li>• If people don't move past this, they report increased levels of distress, depression and anxiety.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain control over their reactions to their trauma</li> <li>• Seek meaning from the traumatic experience.</li> <li>• Find a new sense of closeness with God or faith.</li> </ul>

The Many Methods of Religious Coping: Development and Initial Validation of the RCOPE, Kenneth Pargament, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2000)



*"I need to be able to find a way to channel my grief and pain into something positive, and at the same time help other survivors mentor those who are going through this." —Tina Chery*

### Growth is not linear



The figure shows a 'Trauma Meter' gauge with a needle pointing towards the 'Distress' end (red). Below it are two smaller gauges: one labeled 'Distress' with a needle pointing towards the 'Distress' end, and another labeled 'Growth' with a needle pointing towards the 'Growth' end (green).

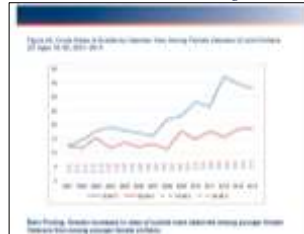
## Boulder Crest Retreat

**Promoting Growth from the Ground Up**



*Boulder Crest was designed to help veterans to do more than just cope with the aftermath of trauma. They are expected to use those experiences to grow.*

*In 2014, female veterans between the ages of 18 and 29 killed themselves at six times the rate of civilian women the same age*



Suicide Among Veterans and Other Americans 2001–2014, US Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Suicide Prevention (2016)



*Emotionally draining discussions are followed by activities like archery or kayaking where the day's lessons are reinforced.*



*The "guides" are veterans and some civilians who have faced deep struggles in their lives. They share their experiences often.*



*After her deployment, she was on anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication. She had a stroke. After attending Boulder Crest, she works here helping other female veterans.*



*Burning the trauma family tree.*

### Service members are more likely than civilians to have suffered childhood abuse

- Half of women in the military reported either childhood sexual or physical abuse.
- 65% of soldiers who attempted suicide also experienced childhood trauma.

The Measurement of Childhood Trauma Among Male and Female Soldiers in the U.S. Army, Rosen, *Military Medicine* (1996)

Prevalence of Childhood Trauma Among U.S. Army Soldiers With Suicidal Behavior, Rosybel Perales, *Military Medicine* (2012)

### Fostering Gratitude Promotes Growth

- *“When others start helping you, it becomes obvious that there is something you can do for other people too.”* –Rich Tedeschi
- Breast cancer survivors who were predisposed to gratitude had much higher post-traumatic growth scores than others.
- They reported reduced distress and more positive emotions.

The Role of Gratitude in Breast Cancer: Its Relationships with Post-traumatic Growth, Psychological Well-Being and Distress, Chiara Raini, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2012)



*This group became so close that after they left, they set up a group text and they communicate many times a day.*

### Social Support Thwarts PTSD and Fosters Growth

- A study of mothers in New Orleans five years after Hurricane Katrina found that those with strong social support networks had lower levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- A study of veterans from the first Gulf War found that the single best predictor of post-traumatic growth was the level of social support the soldier had post-deployment.

Pre-Hurricane Perceived Social Support Protects Against Psychological Distress: A Longitudinal Analysis of Low-Income Mothers, Sarah R. Lowe, *Journal of Consulting Clinical Psychology* (2010)

Posttraumatic Growth Among Gulf War Gulf War I Veterans: The Predictive Role of Deployment-related Experiences and Background Characteristics, Shiraz Maguen, *Journal of Loss and Trauma* (2006)

### Boulder Crest Assessment Results

#### **Six months after completing the program:**

- Participants' PTSD scores fell by 41%.
- Anxiety and depression were cut in half.
- Post-traumatic growth scores were up 24%.

Trauma and Happiness

## Who is Happier?

- A lottery winner.
- Someone who was paralyzed in a car accident.



*H'Sien Hayward was paralyzed in a car accident when she was a teenager. She went on to study psychology at Harvard and researched happiness in trauma survivors.*

## H'Sien Hayward's Happiness Study

- 50 people who had been paralyzed in accidents a decade earlier.
- 50 lottery winners who had received an average prize of \$6 million about a decade earlier.
- 50 people who hadn't experienced either.

## Results

- Each group reported similarly high levels of happiness.
- The accident survivors took more pleasure in daily activities than lottery winners or the control group.
- Those paralyzed in accidents had far more meaning in their lives and a fuller sense of happiness.

Post-Traumatic Growth and Disability: On Happiness, Positivity, and Meaning. H'Sien Hayward, Ph.D. diss., Harvard University (2013)



*"A traumatic event shakes you up. And people in that situation have to grab onto positive glimmers of hope; they have to stretch themselves to find a whole new way of living, and that makes their lives more meaningful."*

— H'Sien Hayward



*"I love what I do, and who I am. I can't imagine a better life."*  
— H'Sien Hayward



Happy Batman