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.

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.

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
- Questioning faith and God.
- A necessary and normal step.
- If people don't move past this, they report increased levels of distress, depression and anxiety.

Positive religious coping
- Gain control over their reactions to their trauma.
- Seek meaning from the traumatic experience.
- Find a new sense of closeness with God or faith.


"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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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%.

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