

Posttraumatic growth: an introduction and review.

Aaron Jarden

Every clinician knows something about the frightening and confusing aftermath of trauma, and is able to describe the negative psychological and emotional consequences in some depth. Decades of research focusing on the damaging effects of stress have been extremely fruitful. However, what do you know of the positive impacts and benefits of traumatic experiences? Maybe you have heard in passing about the concept of “posttraumatic growth”? Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is defined as “the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1), and is one of the topics emerging from the new field of positive psychology (for more on positive psychology in New Zealand: www.positivepsychology.org.nz).

Although research is in its infancy, the list of conditions growth researchers have studied include cancer, heart disease, HIV, rape, assault, combat, paralysis, infertility, bereavement, house fires, plane crashes, and earthquakes. The literature is building a picture illustrating that people can benefit in three ways from trauma, and these ways go beyond the traditional self-efficacy and internal locus of control notions (which could better be described

as three dimensions of growth). The first dimension is that rising to a challenge reveals abilities, which changes a person’s self-concept and inoculates against future stress. The second dimension is that the trauma strengthens important relationships. The last dimension is that the trauma induces changes in priorities and philosophies towards the present and others.

Below are three articles to begin your adventure into the realm of PTG, along with some selected quotes from each to enhance its flavour. Begin with Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) seminal article. They were among the first to research and document PTG (1995), and this is a great introduction. Then read Joseph and Linley’s (2006) article, which is targeted towards a clinical psychology perspective, and reviews theory developments and discusses implications for clinical practice. Lastly, have a look at Peterson et al.’s (2008) article which is a sample of some of the latest research on PTG.

Nietzsche famously remarked, “What does not kill you makes you stronger”, and the current research indicates that he may have been right. Although Nietzsche died an insane man, he may have died a stronger one...

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

This article describes the concept of posttraumatic growth, its conceptual foundations, and supporting empirical evidence. Posttraumatic growth is the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises. It is manifested in a variety of ways, including an increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life. Although the term is new, the idea that great good can come from great suffering is ancient. We propose a model for understanding the process of posttraumatic growth in which individual characteristics, support and disclosure, and more centrally, significant cognitive processing involving cognitive structures threatened or nullified by the traumatic events, play an important role. It is also suggested that posttraumatic growth mutually interacts with life wisdom and the development of the life narrative, and that it is an ongoing process, not a static outcome.

1. "...we have been finding that reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders" (page 2).
2. "The widespread assumptions that traumas often result in disorder should not be replaced with expectations that growth is an inevitable result. Instead, we are finding that continuing personal distress and growth often coexist" (page 2).
3. "The evidence is overwhelming that individuals facing a wide variety of very difficult circumstances experience significant changes in their lives that they view as highly positive. Although much progress has been made recently, little is known about the processes, concomitants, and consequences of the experience of growth" (page 3).
4. "Posttraumatic growth is not simply a return to baseline – it is an experience of improvement that for some persons is deeply profound" (page 4).
5. "Posttraumatic growth, then, has a quality of transformation, or a qualitative change in functioning, unlike the apparently similar concepts of resilience, sense of coherence, optimism, and hardiness" (page 4).
6. "...posttraumatic growth implies an established set of schemas that are changed in the wake of trauma" (page 4).
7. "Growth, however, does not occur as a direct result of trauma. It is the individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which posttraumatic growth occurs" (page 5).
8. "We have noticed that posttraumatic growth tends to surprise people, and has not usually been a conscious goal" (page 15).

Joseph, S., & Linley, P. A. (2006). Growth following adversity: Theoretical perspectives and implications for clinical practice. *Clinical Psychology Review, 26*, 1041-1053.

A number of literatures and philosophies throughout human history have conveyed the idea that there is personal gain to be found in suffering, and it is an idea central to the existential-humanistic tradition of psychology. However, it is only relatively recently that the topic of growth following adversity has become the focus for empirical and theoretical work. In this paper, we review theoretical models of growth, and discuss the implications of growth for clinical practice. Three main theoretical perspectives are reviewed, the functional-descriptive model, the meta-theoretical person-centered perspective, and the biopsychosocial-evolutionary view. It is proposed that these three approaches to theory offer different but complementary levels of analysis, and that theoretical integration between them is possible. We then go on to explore the implications of this theoretical integration for clinical practice, and conclude with a consideration of the role of therapy in facilitating growth following adversity.

1. "It is now well established that stressful and traumatic events may serve as a trigger towards personal growth and positive change" (page 1041).
2. "...there is as yet little psychometric research evidence on the structure of growth" (page 1042).
3. "...the evidence is now overwhelmingly supportive that growth often occurs in people following trauma and adversity" (page 1042).
4. "Research has also begun to document the correlates and predictors of growth, with evidence pointing to the importance of stress-appraisal,

copied and personality variables, with more extravert, optimistic, and self-efficacious people, who use spiritual, and emotionally focused coping being more likely to experience growth. Social support is important too" (page 1042).

5. "Interest in growth can be seen as part of the wider positive psychology movement" (page 1047).
6. "...the study of growth promises to have important applications for practicing psychologists" (page 1047).
7. "...the focus should be on assisting the patient to develop the metacognitive reconfiguration of schema needed to turn anxiety into meaning" (page 1047).
8. "Given that research remains in its infancy, it is too early to be certain what the exact therapeutic implications of growth will be, and how best to facilitate growth, but the fact that the facilitation of growth becomes the goal of therapeutic intervention rather than the alleviation of distress is in itself a major paradigm shift in the field" (page 1047).
9. "...growth following adversity does seem to be predictive of better emotional adjustment in the longer term" (page 1047).
10. "...naturalistic evidence points toward the conclusion that helping people perceive growth can therefore be a useful therapeutic vehicle to help people cope with adversity and illness" (page 1048).
11. "The main clinical implication is the assertion that what we know

about the alleviation of post-traumatic stress does not necessarily apply to facilitating growth. Indeed, it is possible that

some existing approaches to alleviating post-traumatic stress serve to thwart growth-related processes” (page 1050).

Peterson, C., Park, N., Pole, N., D'Andrea, W., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2008). Strengths of character and posttraumatic growth. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 21*, 214-217.

How are strengths of character related to growth following trauma? A retrospective Web-based study of 1,739 adults found small, but positive associations among the number of potentially traumatic events experienced and a number of cognitive and interpersonal character strengths. It was concluded that growth following trauma may entail the strengthening of character.

1. “...positive psychological changes can occur following a potentially traumatic event as *post-traumatic growth*: improved relationships with others, openness to new possibilities, greater appreciation of life, enhanced personal strength, and spiritual development” (page 214).
2. “Post traumatic growth...remains controversial because of measurement challenges” (page 214).
3. “...these findings are important given how many theories emphasise the psychologically scarring effects of such events. That any character benefits at all are associated with increasing exposure to potential trauma adds to a growing literature showing that people are more resilient than extant theories predict” (page 216).

For further reviews of PTG, see: Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis (2002), Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun (1998), Tennen & Affleck (1998), and Updegraff & Taylor (2000). A great text with which to begin more detailed learning is: Joseph, S., & Linley, P. A. (Eds.). (2008). *Trauma, recovery and growth: Positive psychological perspectives on posttraumatic stress*. New Jersey: Wiley.

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Note: New Zealand is currently hosting one of the largest international longitudinal studies on PTG - see The Wellbeing Study (www.wellbeingstudy.com).

Aaron Jarden is a lecturer in psychology at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand and president of the New Zealand Association of Positive Psychology aaron.jarden@openpolytechnic.ac.nz