



A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMA: POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

Traumatic experiences change the course of our life as they not only affect us physically but also emotionally and psychologically. For many years, trauma related research was centred on its negative consequences and how individuals can deal with traumatic experiences. However, recent research has come up with new findings, as it has been found that trauma holds the ability to affect us positively as well. “Post-traumatic growth” is a new construct, which has brought our attention to the fact that; traumatic experiences can bring out a fresh enlightenment towards life as an after-effect. This new found enlightenment brings many positive changes, such as new found meaningfulness towards life, establishment of deep and intimate relationship, spirituality, believing in something higher than self, appreciation for little joys of life etc. Since, the construct is still new and requires a great deal of research; the present review paper is an attempt towards unfolding the new found construct. The current paper discusses how the construct has evolved over time and the recent research trends. The present paper also discusses the advantages of the insight into post-traumatic growth, it brings, especially for positive psychologists and therapists and various ways of promoting post-traumatic growth.

Keywords: Trauma, Posttraumatic growth, Posttraumatic disorder, Resilience

INTRODUCION

Trauma can be understood in terms of its physical as well as psychological impact on individuals as a result of difficult life circumstances. It can be an after-effect of a major accident, illness, exposure to violence or natural calamity. The way we respond to trauma is very unique and different each individual. For years the focus has been on the negative outcomes of traumatic life experiences. Trauma leads to emotional dysregulation, numbing effect, hyper arousal and sleep disturbance, cognitive as well as behavioural symptoms (Services, 2016). Many people invest their whole life trying to cope with trauma that they have experienced and still fail to do so. However, in recent years, a new construct named “Post-Traumatic

Growth” has been introduced. The terminology itself describes its meaning, which is, the growth that occurs as an aftermath of traumatic past experience.

Post-traumatic Growth, a new proliferating construct has been getting a great deal of attention in these few years. It has great relevance for positive psychologists and therapists. The construct is new and still in its developmental stage. It primarily centres on a new and fresh found perspective among trauma survivors. They are more inclined to have meaningful and Long-lasting intimate relationships, modest and a new philosophy of life where the focus is on small things which can make them feel grateful and lastly great acceptance of self-including the flaws and vulnerabilities. The concept was introduced by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in 1996. They elaborated five signs of Post traumatic growth, namely;

1. **Appreciation of life:** Experiences of trauma shatters the core belief system as our safety and security gets threatened (Giacomucci, 2021). As the core belief system is threatened, trauma survivors find the ability to reconsider the priorities of life and understand the preciousness of life itself. Thus, the loss and trauma experienced reminds us to rekindle with life which makes us appreciate it more and more.
2. **Relationships with others:** the after effects of trauma has the ability to make trauma survivors feel the importance of deep and meaningful relationship in life and how these relationships shape us in so many ways. Individuals become more compassionate and empathetic towards others as trauma survivors (Bauwens and Tosone, 2010). Thus, they are more sensitive towards their relationships and work on making them effective and long-lasting.
3. **New possibilities in life:** Even though, initial period of trauma brings out the worst kind of reaction, with passing time, these survivors find new coping strategies to deal with it and to their wonder, they find out a newness in themselves. It brings hopefulness and new possibilities in many aspects of life.
4. **Personal strength:** trauma survivors meet with their unimaginable greater strengths; they never thought they had, as an after effect of it. They are faced with their ‘new self’. This new evolution of self helps them come out of such a difficult time period of trauma. They realize their incredible personal resources including resiliency, hopefulness, and trust in self and in the process, courage, empathy and compassion.
5. **Spiritual change:** trauma survivors develop a new found interest in spiritual and religious activities. Because the experience of trauma is incredibly difficult to deal with, many people look for reliance beyond themselves in a higher power to find hope and make meaning of the existential crisis (Giacomucci, 2021).

Thus, after the experience of trauma people meet with their transformative self, where they have developed a new philosophy towards life, have a higher sense of self and deep connections with others (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2012). In one research conducted by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), it was found that around 30-90% people, who have experienced trauma, develop some amount of growth as an outcome of trauma. Thus, it becomes extremely important for us to understand the construct of post-traumatic growth.

Post-traumatic stress symptoms and Post-traumatic growth:

Negative experiences or outcomes of trauma are referred to as post-traumatic stress where as positive outcomes as a result of traumatic experience are known as post-traumatic growth. According to researchers, in order for someone to experience post-traumatic growth, one must have come across and grow right through post-traumatic stress (Joseph, Murphy and Regel, 2012). It has also been argued that both have a curvilinear relationship. Apparently experience of post-traumatic stress aids to post-traumatic growth, but only to a certain extent, after which it declines.

A study was conducted on breast cancer survivor patients to find out the interplay between post-traumatic stress symptoms and post-traumatic growth in anticipating symptoms of depression and the quality of life (Morrill et al., 2008). The researchers used Functional Assessment of Cancer Therapy Scale- Breast (FACT-B: a 44-item scale) to measure quality of life; Centre of Epidemiological Studies- Depression Measure (CES-D: a 20-item scale) for measuring depression; Post-traumatic Growth Inventory (PTG: a 21item scale) to measure post-traumatic growth and post-traumatic stress disorder checklist- civilian version (PCL- C: a 17-item checklist) was adopted to measure post-traumatic stress symptoms among patients. The results revealed an interesting finding, which is, Post-traumatic Growth played a significant role in weakening the relationship between post-traumatic stress symptoms and the other two variables- depressive symptoms and low quality of life. Thus, this study highlighted the major role of post-traumatic growth as it moderated the relationship between post-traumatic stress symptoms and depression and quality of life among cancer survivors.

A longitudinal study was conducted by Dekel, et al. (2012) to understand the relationship between post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth. It was found that distress leads to growth outcomes gradually where individuals work through their traumatic struggles. Rumination, a process, that usually occurs as a result of extreme trauma, where individuals continuously ponder over the traumatic event they experienced. This consistent pondering over the traumatic event leads to working through the difficult memories, finding out a meaning out of the difficult experience, which eventually leads to growth in individuals.

Post-traumatic growth & Resilience:

Resilience refers to the ability of individuals to drag themselves out of difficult life circumstances and bring their self to the previous non-problematic or normal state (De Terte & Stephens, 2014). According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) resilience is “the ability to go on with life after hardship and adversity” and “to remain psychologically healthy despite very difficult circumstances”. Post-traumatic growth is bringing self to a new understanding and perception of life or to a new normal. Resilient individuals cope with difficult situation and get back to normalcy; however, they are not transformed through the traumatic experience. People, who experience post traumatic growth just like resilient people, get through the difficult situation, but they experience positive transformation as a result of that experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). They develop a new and positive perspective towards life which is not observed in individuals who are only resilient. A study conducted on early stage breast cancer patients, it was demonstrated that the resilience of

family members contribute to post-traumatic growth of the patients (Lieu et. al., 2018). However, another study done by Levine et al., (2009) found that individuals who were high on resilience, their post-traumatic growth levels were low. They argued that people who are more resilient deal with adversity effectively and do not engage in finding meaning out of the traumatic experience. This conflicting result was also supported by other studies (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007).

Post-traumatic growth and Life-Crisis theory

Post-traumatic growth refers to the great deal of developmental and growth outcomes as an after-math of major traumatic life event. When we discuss post-traumatic growth, it brings to our attention the similar work demonstrated in the Life-crisis model. Schaefer and Moos (1992) gave a model of appraisal used by people as an outcome of life crisis. The model is based on three major components namely; features of the life crisis, personal factors and environmental factors. Features of the life crisis include the severity, duration and timing of the crisis. Individuals' use of personal resources includes resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, prior crisis experience, motivation etc. Social belongingness, family support and effective interpersonal relationships, financial stability, living conditions etc. are part of environmental factors. The after-effects of the crisis, cognitive appraisal and coping strategies utilized, depends on both personal and environmental factors. The theory highlights the development and growth of individuals as an exposure to major crisis in life.

Vicarious post-traumatic growth

Therapists or individuals, who work with those clients, who have survived through trauma, are likely to experience posttraumatic growth vicariously. The prevalence of post-traumatic growth as a result of exposure to trauma survivors have been reported in many research studies (Arnold, et al., 2005; Hyatt-Burkhart, 2014). This outcome is argued to be also true for individuals who are a part of group therapy as they learn about others' strengths, develop helpful resources for themselves, which in turn leads to vicarious post-traumatic growth (Giacomucci, 2021).

Interpersonal relationships have the ability to influence us in various ways. A study was conducted to find out the individual's post-traumatic growth whether has an influence on his/her partner's post-traumatic growth (Canevelo, et al., 2016). They took 61 married couples who had been exposed to severe flooding and measured their level of psychological distress, quality of relationship and post-traumatic growth after 6 months of the incident in the first round and after 12 months in the second round. From the study, it was revealed that partner's high degree post-traumatic growth significantly predicted their respective actor's post-traumatic growth and it also led to increased quality of relationship and decreased levels of psychological distress.

Various ways of promoting post-traumatic growth:

It's unusual for us to experience trauma in day-today life. However, some professions are prone to difficult situations on a daily basis making them more vulnerable to traumatic experiences, such as defence personnel, police workers, fire-fighters and doctors. Thus, Henson, et al. (2021) illustrated various factors, which can contribute towards fostering post-traumatic growth for such individuals.

Expression of Emotions

They have suggested that expression of negative feelings and emotions with supportive others helps reduce the probability of negative consequences such as depression in individuals who have experienced severe trauma (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2003). When difficult emotions are shared with others, it takes away the power to affect you because this particular engagement helps you process the difficult event cognitively. It specially works well when empathetic understanding and support is provided to the trauma survivor (Palmer et al., 2016). In several studies, it has been found that in a supportive environment, where emotional exchange is encouraged, depressive symptoms gets minimized and scope of growth is high (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Saltzman et al., 2018).

Cognitive Reframing coping

In order to overcome difficult situations, we need to cope with them. Different types of coping strategies bring out various outcomes of a situation. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) highlighted the importance of positive reappraisal coping strategy for inculcation of post traumatic growth. The ability to visualize a difficult event in a positive light is known as positive reappraisal. The judgements about a negative situation if considered as a challenge aid in helping us cope with the situation in a positive manner. Prati and Pietrantoni (2009) conducted a meta-analysis to understand the importance of different types of coping on post-traumatic growth and found that religious coping has strong influence on post-traumatic growth.

Coping flexibility is based on the idea that on the convenience of the individual, they can either choose to use approach coping or avoidance coping. This approach has been positively linked with post-traumatic growth (Kunz, et al., 2018). It makes sense because people who experience trauma, gets flashback of those events and it may become overwhelming to deal with it always, and with the help of avoidance coping, it can be dealt with.

Personality traits

Core personality factors play a major role in all aspects of our life as they directly influence our attitude, cognition and behaviour. Out of the big five traits, openness to experience, extroversion, and agreeableness are positively linked with post-traumatic growth (Taku & McLarnon, 2018). Conscientiousness has also been found to be positively related to post-traumatic growth (Owens, 2016).

Mattson et al. (2018) conducted a study and demonstrated that optimism is a strong predictor of post-traumatic growth. Optimistic people are hopeful about the future and they always look for opportunities to grow more in life. Another trait that has been found to be linked with post-traumatic growth is known as sense of coherence (Lopez et al., 2015). It refers to the perception that our environment is predictable and there is a high chance of expected outcomes. Thus, these people have a high sense of control over their environment and they are more likely to experience post-traumatic growth.

Resilience

The ability to bring out self from the worst kind of unimaginable situation is known as resilience. Both Resilience and post-traumatic growth processes are similar, thus, both have a positive association. Resiliency is a positive personality trait that helps us come out of various kinds of emotional, psychological and traumatic experiences. In order to find out the mediating role of positive affect between resilience, social

support and post-traumatic growth among infertile women, 1733 participants were included. From the study it was found that, resilience aids in post-traumatic growth (Kong et al., 2018).

Event centrality

We all have certain memories of particular incident around which our life revolves around. Event centrality refers to such idea where certain difficult life circumstances are given a lot of importance in a way, they are major part of the puzzle and around that particular event meaning making about our life takes place. Individuals who have suffered through trauma, if have high event centrality, it leads to Post traumatic stress disorder and rumination. However, it may also aid in post-traumatic growth as rumination of event helps survivors to process the trauma gradually (Henson et. al., 2021). Even though, the initial stages of traumatic event may force us to ruminate over the event in a negative manner, there comes a different kind of rumination gradually, where individuals deliberately think about the traumatic event, in-order to find a meaning and understanding out of it. Eventually, it leads to approach coping instead of avoidance coping. Thus, event centrality increases the probability of experience of post-traumatic growth.

Conclusion

The current review research was done with the aim to understand the evolvement of the construct “post-traumatic growth” and its various research trends as well as various ways of developing post-traumatic growth. It provides a deep insight into the importance of the new construct. For many years, the negative consequences of trauma have been a matter of discussion. However, with this new finding, it seems, there is a new scope for guiding trauma survivors. Trauma is not the end of life, rather, it has the ability to bring out the strengths people never thought they had in them; it brings new possibilities, opportunities to develop in life towards a positive path.

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