

## Trauma and Growth

*Cicilia Chettiar*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Professor and Head, Department of Psychology, Smt. Maniben Nanavati Women's College, Vile Parle, Mumbai.*

*E-mail – ciciliachettiar@yahoo.com*

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The well known French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, claimed "Life begins on the other side of despair." A profound thought that has been validated with the studies in post-traumatic growth. For years, PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder has been part of the terminology of the mental health professional when faced with a client having a severe reaction to a stressful situation. Beginning with the concept of 'nostalgia' by Swiss physicians in 1768, to 'combat exhaustion' during WWII, to the inclusion of PTSD in DSM III, the journey has been one of significant funding and research. Trauma has always been perceived as something that is too negative to be experienced. The evidence-based research policy advocated by the APA has led to the proliferation of empirically validated constructs that identify the weakness in humans.

Viewpoints change, and so it was that trauma came to be viewed as an ally in the quest for personal growth rather than a hindrance. This transition from post traumatic stress to post-traumatic growth (PTG) was not an easy one. The term post - traumatic growth was coined by Dr. Richard Tedeschi, a psychology professor at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, and co-author of the "Handbook of Post-traumatic Growth." Although this system can be considered several centuries old as reflected in most spiritual and religious traditions, the systematic study of this phenomenon by scientists and researchers is relatively new. The current definition of PTG is that it is a construct of positive psychological change that occurs as the result of one's struggle with a highly challenging, stressful, and traumatic event [1].

Personality traits and mood states, such as extraversion, optimism, positive affect, openness to experience have been positively associated with PTG while traits such as neuroticism, have been negatively associated with PTG [2-3]. Other demographic variables, including gender and socioeconomic status, are also associated with this process [1].

The advancement of studies in PTG is encouraging, but there also studies that question the illusory nature of trauma and growth. Although most people indicate an increasing value for life and relationships following a trauma, there are sections of the population that may not necessarily witness growth. The negative outcomes of trauma like reduced sleep and appetite, hyper-arousal, increased hostility and suspiciousness are still present. Merely stating that one values people more than one used to earlier cannot be an indicator for growth. There is a possibility that the distress has continued and growth may co-exist with it. How far this is possible can only

be established through a well-planned and conducted study that checks both the experience of growth and pain.

One also needs to consider the nature of the loss experienced through the trauma. If a mother loses her child, the nature of her loss is qualitatively different from a woman who has lost her husband. Both events could be considered traumatic, however the subjective experience of grief and the social repercussions in the situations may vary. Trauma as a result of manmade disaster would more likely lead to anger than that caused by a natural disaster. Both could involve tremendous loss, but the reactions to both would be different. In such a scenario, using Likert type scales or a few open-ended questions will not help in understanding the path from stress to growth, if any.

Every research demands a baseline that can be matched or compared across participants. In the social sciences, particularly in psychology, it is not always possible to arrive at this common baseline. Psychology and most other social sciences and the humanities stress the uniqueness of each individual. But their research somehow overlooks this through various fancy statistical procedures and claims that results arrived at by comparing hundreds and sometimes thousands of individuals will give an insight into the complex interplay of their thoughts, feeling, attitudes and actions.

In the field of trauma research this can get particularly dangerous as results from one study being generalised to another can backfire. Overcoming this methodological hurdle will require improvement in two aspects; one, the measuring instrument and two the subject being measured. The tool has to be improved in such a manner that it accurately reflects the individual's growth or distress as the case may be. The second aspect is standardisation of the human experience of the trauma which is impossible due to the uniqueness of each human being. The question facing researchers therefore is how can one arrive at a study that can be considered technically flawless as a consequence of an accurate instrument and standardised or equivalent subjects? This is a question waiting to be answered. One possibility which many researchers seem to favour is the use of case study method to arrive at an understanding of the individual's experiences and consequent responses or reactions. It still remains to be seen how such studies can benefit the field of post-traumatic growth.

With so many arguments and counter arguments both in support of and against post-traumatic growth, the possibility that a significant intervention method can be developed as a consequence of evidence – based research seems quite distant. This would appear discouraging largely because of the bottom-up approach to the issue. Beginning with understanding the problem, clearly defining it, comparing it with other research, carrying out surveys to prove hypotheses and then arriving at a conclusion that can drive therapeutic intervention would be a bottom up approach. Instead if one focuses on a top-down approach, beginning with intervention and then journeying downwards in the research journey to defining the problem, there is a possibility that success can be achieved.

The various therapeutic interventions currently offered range from the earliest psychoanalytic view point to the most recent humanistic and positive psychology view. Even earlier than the psychoanalytic view point would be the

various spiritual traditions that focused on the growth of the self as an end in itself and not as a means to reduce pain. The Buddha's exhortation to accept pain, both physical and mental, as a reality and a focus on the big picture, was a gentle indication of the life beyond the pain. Hinduism focused on liberation that allowed man to overcome suffering. Suffering here again is considered a path of the journey and not the end stop. The Bible says Christ had to suffer so mankind would be saved. The ancient poets, philosophers and prophets have ruminated and written odes to suffering, pain and loss. Some of the epic works across cultures are tragedies and not stories with happy endings. The impact of trauma appears to bring out that which is most creative and most profound in many human beings. What is most certain is that coping with a tragedy appears to tap the highest self in an individual. Most of them gain a spiritual perspective and learn to look at the big picture. An introspection on the meaning and purpose of life occurs which brings about a longing to break free from material attachments. Finally a service orientation to the mankind gives the greatest amount of strength; an understanding that one is not alone in the struggle makes the struggle more bearable.

The reasons for discussing PTG are many. Primary among them is the onslaught of an internet happy medical community that rises to understand its afflictions, physical and mental through the voice of the virtual world. If they are educated about the possible growth after tragedy strikes, they may choose a response more conducive to mental health if faced with trauma. The low frustration tolerance so widespread among the present generation is a possible indicator of future breakdown in coping in the face of hardships. Educating people about healthier ways to perceive stressors lays the foundation for post traumatic adaptive life. Resilience in the face of stress is possible when over a period of time children have learnt to handle disappointments as a healthy part of growing up. Resilience does not develop over night. Rather it is a consequence of frequent experiences with unpleasant situations eventually leading up to greater tolerance and lowered discontent.

A lot has been spoken and written about PTSD. It's time now to move ahead and look at an alternative, PTG, for surely the path of growth leads to a healthier destination than a path of disorder.

### **References**

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