Pathways to Posttraumatic Growth in Cancer Survivors

Richard G. Tedeschi, Ph.D.
University of North Carolina
Charlotte
Origins of the Posttraumatic Growth Concept

- The wisdom question
Defining PTG

Posttraumatic Growth is both a process and an outcome: The experience of positive changes in oneself as a result of the struggle with traumatic events.

- Stren conversion perceived benefits benefit-finding
- construing benefits positive psychological change
- stress-related growth flourishing
- positive by-products discovery of meaning
- transformational coping meaning-making
- positive reinterpretation thriving
- positive illusions adversarial growth
Christianity and Suffering

• “Christianity transmutes the tragedy of history into something that is not tragedy” (Niebuhr, 1937, p. 193).
Christianity and Suffering

• "Have you ever considered that steel is iron plus fire; soil is rock plus crushing; linen is flax plus the comb that separates, and the flail that pounds, and the shuttle that weaves!" (Graham, 1981, p. 85).

• “Suffering, on the other hand, tends to plow up the surface of our lives to uncover the depths that provide greater strength of purpose and accomplishment. Only deeply plowed earth can yield bountiful harvests.” (Graham, 1981, p. 27).
Islam and Suffering

• In a passion play in which the seventh century Shiite martyr Husain, about to be killed states: “Trials, afflictions, and pains, the thicker they fall on man, the better, dear sister, do they prepare him for his journey heavenward.”
Buddhism and Suffering

• The Noble Truths are organized around the issue of suffering:
  – “There is suffering.” Do not make it personal and react to it in a habitual way.
  – “Suffering should be understood.” Accept the suffering, stand under or embrace it rather than just react to it. When you have actually practiced with suffering - looking at it, accepting it, knowing it and letting it be the way it is - then “Suffering has been understood.”
Buddhism and Suffering

– “There is the origin of suffering, which is attachment to desire. Desire should be let go of.” Feeling is not suffering. It is the grasping of desire that is suffering. Desire does not cause suffering; the cause of suffering is the grasping of desire.

– “All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.” Therefore, don’t attach to that which you want to abide in and trust, because those things will cease.
Existential Psychology and Suffering

• See Rollo May, Erich Fromm, Victor Frankl:
  – The human condition or facts of existence:
    • Suffering, guilt, and transitoriness.
  – By engaging these, we have the opportunity to develop meaning in our living.
  – Suffering doesn’t have to be *mere* suffering.
  – It can produce individuation (not necessarily happiness).
From the sufferers

“I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron’s life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forego all of the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experiences, and be what I was fifteen years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose.”

From the sufferers

[Trauma forces a person] "to be somebody else, the next viable you--a stripped-down whole other clear-eyed person, realistic as a sawed-off shotgun and thankful for air, not to speak of the human kindness you'll meet if you get normal luck."

“This is the one thing that happened in my life that I needed to have happen, it was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. On the outside looking in that pretty hard to swallow, I’m sure, but hey, that’s the way I view it. If I hadn’t experienced this and lived through it, I likely wouldn't be here today because of my lifestyle previously--I was on a real self-destructive path. If I had it to do all over again I would want it to happen the same way. I would not want it not to happen.”

Assessing PTG: Early work


Assessing PTG


Assessing PTG: 5 Factors of the PTGI

• Relating to others
• Appreciation of Life
• New Possibilities
• Personal Strength
• Spiritual Change
Assessing PTG: PTGI variations

• PTGI-C: A 21 item inventory with revised wording and response format suitable for children.

• PTGI-C-R: A 10-item inventory based on original PTGI-C.
Assessing PTG: PTGI variations

• PTGI-42: Separate scales for positive and negative changes in the same content areas

• PTGI-SF: 10 item PTGI
Resilience vs. PTG

• Resilience: “The ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity or the like.” The ability to regain shape.

• Also, resistance to adversity.

• Versus PTG: a new level of functioning and perspective—transformative responses to adversity. (see also Lepore and reconfiguration resilience)
Benefit-finding vs. PTG

• Benefits may not = growth
• PTG focuses on personal transformation, beyond otherwise important benefits such as changes in health practices.
Models of PTG

• Development from Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) concept of the shattered assumptive world. Also debts to Victor Frankl, Colin Murray Parkes, Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, Abe Tesser & Lenny Martin.

• Primary vehicle is *cognitive processing of the shattered assumptive world*.

• Attempts to describe the *process* of posttraumatic growth, incorporating person variables, and environmental influences.


Further development of PTGI-related measures

- **Core Beliefs Inventory**: 9 item measure of disruption of the assumptive world

- **Event Related Rumination Inventory**: 20 item measure of two factors of rumination—intrusive and deliberate

- **Resolution**: 4 categories of degree of resolution of trauma
Research Reviews


  — See in particular chapter by Stanton on PTG and cancer

Some Future Challenges

• Understanding the individual variations in the process of PTG
  – Prospective and longitudinal studies
  – Going beyond group data

• Developing useful interventions to facilitate PTG
  – Careful and respectful “Expert Companionship” (see Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; 2006).
  – Expansion into possible psychoeducational and primary interventions (Tedeschi & McNally, under review).