

How Can You Heal in the Face of Trauma?

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For many of us, 2020 has been a year like no other in recent history. Over the course of the past seven months, our lives and the lives of our neighbors have changed drastically. The coronavirus pandemic and recent incidents of police brutality and civil unrest in response have put into sharp focus the inequities of our society and societies across the globe. On an almost daily basis we continue to be exposed to stories of grief and loss, incidents of violence, acts of oppression and the impacts of environment and economic challenges. These events can have an emotional and psychological impact on us, leaving us with distressing emotions, painful memories, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and insecurity. And the ripple effects of these experiences can affect us, our communities, and our descendants over multiple lifetimes. At the core of all of these experiences is what is often described as trauma.



The Definition of Trauma

Trauma can be broadly defined as anything that is deeply distressing or disturbing that incites overwhelming emotions of fear and stress responses. It can be anything that involves a real or perceived threat to life, to a person's sanity and safety and/or to their body integrity. A person's experience of trauma is unique to that individual and is also unique to their subjective experience rather than the event itself. Regardless of the source of the trauma, emotional and psychological trauma has three common elements. It is unexpected; the person was unprepared; and there is nothing the person could do to prevent it from happening. It is a disruption of our core beliefs and challenges our world view invoking questions like: Why is this happening? What can I do? What have I done wrong?

There are several common symptoms related to trauma. Some might occur immediately following the traumatic event while others might be delayed. These symptoms include:

- Changes in eating
- Changes in sleep pattern
- Sexual dysfunction
- Low energy and lack of motivation
- Chronic, unexplained physical discomfort
- Spontaneous crying
- Feelings of despair, helplessness and hopelessness
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Fearfulness, irritability, anger and resentment
- Emotional numbness and withdrawal
- A feeling of being out of control
- Memory lapses, difficulty making decisions, distractibility and difficulty concentrating

It is common to experience a range of these symptoms, however when these symptoms persist for longer than three months, they are considered part of the syndrome of Post Traumatic Distress Disorder (PTSD).

Symptoms of PTSD include:

- Reliving the event which can include flashbacks, nightmares, guilt, extreme fear of harm and a numbing of emotions
- Avoiding activities, places, thoughts or feelings related to the trauma of feeling detached from others
- Hyperarousal includes being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger

Other symptoms of PTSD include panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts and feelings, alcohol/drug abuse and feelings of estrangement and isolation.

When experiencing any or all these symptoms related to trauma it is important to know what you can do to take care of yourself.

- ✓ Understand that your symptoms may be normal, especially right after the trauma.
- ✓ Maintain a routine.
- ✓ Take time to resolve daily conflicts so they do not add to your stress.
- ✓ Practice staying in the moment/grounding.
- ✓ Turn to others for support and talk about your experience and feelings.
- ✓ Recognize that you cannot control everything.
- ✓ Recognize the need for trained help and call a professional.

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)

For anyone who experiences trauma, it is common to feel like life will never be the same. Although, that may be true we, humans, have an uncanny ability to **bounce forward** from trauma and grow from the experience.

This is referred to as **Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)** and is defined as *a positive psychological change experienced because of adversity and other challenges and as the result will rise to a lighter level of functioning.*

I am, by no means, saying that trauma is not destructive and challenging, nor would I ever want to minimize or dismiss the pain and suffering that follows a traumatic events PTG is only saying that, over time, people can find benefits from their hardship. In this moment in history, I imagine that everyone wonders what recovery will look like.

Can the cracks in our society and humanity ever be mended? Science suggests that we will not only recover, but we will demonstrate an “immense human capacity for resiliency and growth. Growth does not occur as the direct result of the trauma: rather, it is the individual or communities struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of the trauma that is crucial in determining the degree to which growth occurs¹”.

Life After Trauma and How to Move Forward

The experience of a traumatic event, by itself, does not always lead to emotional growth nor will everyone who experiences a traumatic event directly develop Posttraumatic Growth. It is the characteristics of the trauma and the personality dynamics of the individual(s) experiencing the trauma that contributes to posttraumatic growth. According to Tedeschi², posttraumatic growth can happen naturally, or it can be facilitated in five ways:

1. **Education** – Know your core beliefs and how they have been disrupted. One such belief might be that bad things happen to others or just to me. Imagine adapting to different core beliefs that focuses on your strengths, on your community's strength and vitality that exists in the wake of hardship.
2. **Emotional regulation** – It is important to process through any emotions of anger, guilt, and shame etc. This takes time and will, eventually, lead to the ability to see available resources and open doors to opportunities you may never have seen before.
3. **Disclosure** – Talk with someone about what has happened and the impact, both short and long term, it is having on you as an individual and/or your community. Simply being able to articulate these things will help make some sense of the trauma and help change the debilitating thoughts into more productive reflections.
4. **Narrative development** – Write a narrative about your trauma and your life afterward. Then write a new chapter, to your narrative, that asks; How have I changed my priorities? What new opportunities have developed? How has my experience in relationships changed?
5. **Service** – Reach out to others, both individuals and communities, and offer help and support in any way that is beneficial. Look for opportunities that will help you find meaning.

Through Posttraumatic Growth, individuals and communities have gained a greater appreciation of life, a change in priorities, warmer and more intimate relationships, a greater sense of personal and community strength and a recognition of new possibilities for one's life. My hope is that everyone will recognize that growth, regardless of how slow it may be, is not only possible but sustainable. I hope that that individuals and communities can, not just survive, but thrive in these adversities.

We Can Help

As part of your VITAL WorkLife EAP, you have access to a wealth of resources to support your mental health and emotional well being related to PTSD and finding opportunities for Posttraumatic Growth. You can talk with a counselor for in-the-moment behavioral health support, as well as virtual and face-to-face sessions. To access your resources, contact VITAL WorkLife at **800.383.1908** or through the **VITAL WorkLife App**.

Additional reading:

Schwartz, A. (2020). The Post-Traumatic Growth Guidebook: Practical Mind-Body Tools to Heal Trauma, Roster Resilience and Awaken Your Potential. January 2020.

Sources:

¹ Kaufman, S.B. (2020). *Post-Traumatic Growth: Finding Meaning and Creativity in Adversity*.

Lees, A.B. (2019). *Posttraumatic Growth. There can be positive change after adversity. Psychology Today*.

Leonard, J. (2020). *What is Trauma? What to Know. Medical News Today. June 2020*.

² Tedeschi, R. (2020). *Growth After Trauma. Harvard Business Review. July-August 2020 Issue*.