

Post-Traumatic Growth: Finding Meaning and Creativity in Adversity

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Kintsugi is a centuries-old Japanese art of fixing cracked pottery. Rather than hide the cracks, the technique involves rejoining the broken pieces with lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. When put back together, the whole piece of pottery looks beautiful as ever, even while owning its broken history.

Many people are wondering at this time in history whether we will have a second life. When put back together, will we recover with dignity and grace? The science suggests that not only will we recover, but we will demonstrate the immense human capacity for resiliency and growth.

In his seminal 2004 paper, clinical psychologist George Bonanno argued for a broader conceptualization of stress responding. Defining resilience as the ability of people who have experienced a highly life-threatening or traumatic event to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning, Bonanno reviewed a wealth of studies showing that resilience is actually common, that it is not the same as the simple absence of psychopathology, and that it can be attained through multiple, sometimes unexpected, routes. Considering that approximately 61 percent of men and 51 percent of women in the United States report at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, the human capacity for resilience is quite remarkable.

In fact, many who experience trauma—such as being diagnosed with a chronic or terminal illness, losing a loved one, or experiencing sexual assault—not only show incredible resilience but actually thrive in the aftermath of the traumatic event. Studies show that the majority of trauma survivors do not develop PTSD, and a large number even report growth from their experience. Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun coined the term “posttraumatic growth” to capture this phenomenon, defining it as the positive psychological change that is experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances.

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To be sure, most people who experience posttraumatic growth would certainly prefer to have not had the trauma, and very few of these domains show more growth after trauma compared to encountering positive life experiences. Nevertheless, most people who experience posttraumatic growth are often surprised by the growth that does occur, which often comes unexpectedly, as the result of an attempt at making sense of an unfathomable event.

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Make no doubt: trauma shakes up our world and forces us to take another look at our cherished goals and dreams. Tedeschi and Calhoun use the metaphor of the seismic earthquake: we tend to rely on a

particular set of beliefs and assumptions about the benevolence and controllability of the world, and traumatic events typically shatter that worldview as we become shaken from our ordinary perceptions and are left to rebuild ourselves and our worlds.

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