



Lines of thought

Reflections on trauma recovery and the personal growth that can come from it

It's common to hope that life will treat you well, that you will find safety, security, love, meaningful work and have enough capacity and resources to engage in play and fun. Sometimes, however, life throws up challenges and, through no fault of your own, you might experience distressing or difficult events and behaviour. Some of these, although painful, might fit within the scope of your coping skills. They could include a mismanaged work project, a serious illness or a disagreement with a friend, for example – all situations that prompt difficult emotions, but where it might still be possible to find a way to some understanding and acceptance.

There's also the chance of being subjected to events that are outside the bounds of normal human experiences, ones that completely overwhelm coping resources. Examples include being abused, sexually assaulted, exposed to life-threatening injury or caught up in wars or natural disasters. Such events, which can result in intense, ongoing emotional distress and a painful struggle to make sense of what's happened or is happening, may be considered traumatic in nature.

Different responses

People experience many difficulties after a traumatic event. Some describe being stuck in a loop of thinking about what's happened while others work hard to avoid any reminders of it because the thoughts cause so much distress. They might find themselves unable to process strong emotions, such as fear, anger, helplessness, shame and guilt, or just feel numb. Thoughts and nightmares about the traumatic event are common, as are changes in perception, such as thinking that the world is unsafe.

According to the charity SANE Australia, approximately 20 per cent of traumatised people go on to develop full-blown post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Yet there is nothing inherently different between those who develop PTSD and those who don't – often, the difference lies in biological predispositions or the manner in which a traumatic event is interpreted. For instance, someone who believes they caused a car crash and goes on to become so anxious about driving

that they avoid it altogether is more likely to develop PTSD than a driver who can accept that accidents are both rare and can involve even the most safety-conscious of road users.

People heal in different ways. Trauma-recovery support strategies, such as group debriefs or on-site counselling after a workplace accident, for example, can help people to access their normal responses to traumatic experiences and, in time, enable them to settle. During this period, they may need to think about what happened and could experience difficult emotions, but gradually – and with cognitive processing – they can make sense of the trauma. Ideally, they will also have support from family, friends and peers as they come to learn and accept that the traumatic event wasn't their fault.

Many, however, will also benefit from the professional support of a trauma-trained psychologist, who can help them to examine their thoughts about what's happened, as well as how it's changed their beliefs about the wider world and themselves. It's common, for example, to believe the world is unsafe, to feel as though other people can't be trusted and to doubt one's own capacity to cope and protect oneself. It can be helpful to consider all these aspects carefully and to work on building a set of healthy and realistic beliefs to support recovery from trauma. In time, a person will hopefully be able to recognise that they have processed and understood the trauma fully, and that they can manage any thoughts about it without becoming too distressed.

Possibility for growth

Some survivors of trauma tell of moving beyond healing, describing how they have grown through the process of trauma recovery. This is a phenomenon called post-traumatic growth. Developed by psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, it suggests that those who experience psychological struggle following adversity might go on to see positive growth. This means that as well as returning to their previous level of functioning and psychological health they might also experience growth through the adversity of experiencing and processing the trauma. They might, for example, feel they



have a greater capacity to deal with strife and difficulties. They could also find they are able to experience more joy and gratitude, healthier relationships and a greater sense of meaning from the world. While it is by no means necessary to experience post-traumatic growth – recovering from a trauma is well and truly enough – some might find that going through hard times can help them better understand themselves as they stop to consider their beliefs about life and think about the things that hold most meaning for them.

In their 2004 paper, *Posttraumatic Growth: A New Perspective on Psychotraumatology*, published in *Psychiatric Times*, Tedeschi and Calhoun also explore how post-traumatic growth is associated with several traits, including being extraverted and open to new experiences. These qualities can help in different ways. The former might mean a person is more likely to seek support after a traumatic event. This opens up space for others to help them understand and process what's happened and to ensure their beliefs about the event are realistic. Being open to new experiences, meanwhile, might mean they are better able to rethink their belief systems, which is a vital part of trauma recovery. Through these processes of seeking support and finding fresh meaning it's possible to see growth and positive change.

Personal approach

When thinking about post-traumatic growth, it's vital to note that it involves psychological growth after a person goes through the process of trauma recovery. It's not a simple by-product of experiencing a trauma. And the first step in recovery is for a person to feel the emotions around it, to mourn any losses and adequately understand what occurred.

The second step might be for them to ensure they have realistic and flexible beliefs about the world and themselves, including how they perceive safety and trust, their own competence, their power and control in the world, the unpredictability of events and their capacity to cope, regardless of what happens. These two steps are essential.

Processing emotions

For most people, it's also helpful to spend a significant amount of time immersed in the natural emotions surrounding a trauma, such as sadness, loss and anger at a perpetrator, before trying to move past or find meaning from it. Only after going through these two steps might it be possible to gently open some space for the person to safely reflect and explore whether their recovery from trauma has brought unexpected growth (see panel, opposite). This process can be empowering.

It's essential, however, to know that traumas do not happen for a reason, that there isn't always a big lesson to take away from them and the process of recovery doesn't have to bring growth. It's okay not to have changed in any significant way – surviving something difficult is enough.

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SPACE FOR REFLECTION

Asking yourself a series of questions can be helpful when thinking about post-traumatic growth. Here are some to consider

- How have I grown in strength through recovering from the trauma?
- Have I learned anything about myself, or about what I want from the world?
- What have I discovered about how to deal with difficult things or experiences?
- Did I surprise myself in my healing journey in any way?
- How have my beliefs about myself changed?