

*Growth
as the final phase of
trauma recovery*



Growth as the final phase of trauma recovery

The last hurdle

Trauma recovery can be broken down into four major phases. The first phase is stabilizing and attending to immediate needs. The second is learning to calm the inevitable anxiety, fear and stress that are the legacy of trauma. Once emotional stability is attained, the debriefing process can begin. Here, a person expresses the feelings that were either repressed or not fully processed during the trauma.

The third phase is putting the trauma into perspective. The trauma was a fateful time, but not a defining one. You can look at it, firmly rooted in the present, as something in your *past*. Distance and perspective inform that it can no longer reach you or harm you. It is over.

The fourth and final stage of trauma recovery is integration. It is making sense of the trauma in context of an entire life experience. It is forming a new outlook, and perhaps ascribing a new meaning to your life.

Some perspectives on trauma and suffering

At some point after the trauma, the question comes to everyone. Why? Depending on your belief system, this can be a vexing question. For those who see all events as an expression of God's will or plan, this is summarily answered. But then, if this was God's will, what lesson was it meant to teach? And if there was a lesson in this trauma, could it have not been taught in a gentler way? For others, it is a question of the fates. Why did fate deliver such a cruel blow to me?

These are questions for the ages and no one answer can be completely satisfactory.

But perhaps, from trauma and suffering can be distilled a depth and meaning that might not otherwise be found. And sometimes, it is only by contrast that we can appreciate the unspeakable beauty of life. A single flower in a garden may not inspire much admiration. But that same flower, set alone in the desert, may be a transcendental inspiration.

Sometimes, it is the contrast.

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Victor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps writes this about suffering and meaning:

Suffering and trouble belong to life as much as fate and death. None of these can be subtracted from life without destroying its meaning. To subtract trouble, death, fate, and suffering from life would mean stripping life of its form and shape. Only under the hammer blows of fate, in the white heat of suffering, does life gain shape and form. (1973, p. 111)

Pope John Paul II, writing from a Christian perspective, speaks about the redemptive power of suffering:

In the light of this truth, all those who suffer can feel called to share in the work of redemption accomplished by means of the cross. To share in the cross of Christ means to believe in the saving power of the sacrifice which every believer can offer together with the Redeemer. Suffering then casts off the mantle of absurdity which seems to cover it. It acquires a profound dimension and reveals its creative meaning and value. It could then be said that it changes the scenario of existence, from which the destructive power of evil is ever farther removed, precisely because suffering bears its copious fruits. (1998)

And finally, Kahlil Gibran writes that “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy that you can contain” (1985, p. 29)

Can there be growth after a trauma?

Although it may sound paradoxical to look for positive changes after a trauma, it is a key part of successful recovery. There is even a relatively new field of study called “Post Traumatic Growth” that aims to learn about how people grow after a trauma. An Australian study found, for example, that trauma survivors can experience growth in one of four major areas: personal strength, reinvention of self, focusing on life’s positives and compassion (Shakespeare-Finch, J., Copping A., 2006, pp 362-364).

How that growth happens

Trauma is a testing ground. Those who make it through have demonstrated a capacity, will and determination that are an earned source of pride. Survivors can take personal pride in that fact and even become a

symbol of courage and determination to others. Christopher Reeve, the actor and survivor of a horse riding accident, has become just such a symbol.

In addition to a well deserved sense of pride, trauma survivors will often re-appraise their lives. While ordinary experience leads us to believe that “there will always be tomorrow” to make that change, for trauma survivors, the preciousness of time comes into focus. Changes that have been put off, such as a career change or living a healthier life style, may now be prioritized and accomplished.

Arguments and disagreements that were once irresistible may now seem unimportant. A greater sense of perspective about what is important and what is not, is reinforced. To quote one survivor “I didn't come this far to argue over who's gonna wash up tonight” (Shakespeare-Finch, J., Copping A., 2006, p. 365).

Perhaps the greatest instance of personal growth is the creation or growth of a felt sense of empathy. Suffering through a trauma is an education that can never be found in a book or curriculum. Empathy is largely an intellectual experience for someone who has not known significant suffering. Consider the experience of Dr. Joyce Brothers, who had been a psychologist for over 30 years. She said “I had never really experienced grief before, [...] and although the pain was enormous, I became much more sensitive to others.” (1997)

A return to meaning

*But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;
many persons strive for high ideals;
and everywhere life is full of heroism.*

– Max Ehrmann, Desiderata

Trauma can change the way you see the world. Old notions of fairness and justice may not make sense anymore. If you have witnessed evil, that is, if your trauma involved seeing a person take pleasure in inflicting harm, your view of people may change. The world may morph in appearance from a relatively safe place to a more menacing one. If you have these reactions, you should know that they are a common reaction to trauma.

It is important not to allow the trauma to take away what you had before the trauma. If you have grown more suspicious and now tend to

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question the motives of people around you, take some time to re-assess that view. People in the world are mostly benign. There are a rare few who engage in destructive behaviors, but there are many more who would put themselves in harms way to protect others. Think of all the soldiers who have volunteered to go to war to protect their country.

A new you

*Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls;
the most massive characters are seared with scars.*

– Edwin H. Chapin

Having survived a trauma, you have the option to re-assemble your world in a more conscious way. Instead of waking up day after day and following a script without question, you are more apt to seek out a life that has meaning for you. Your sense of invulnerability and your perception about the limitlessness of time are probably very different now. But that means that you will no longer be as easily shocked. Your experience and insight means that you can stay calmer in the face of adversity. And you can more easily understand the pain of others intuitively, without words.

No one would ask for or wish for trauma. But in its wake can lie a more perceptive, awakened and compassionate person.

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