

How Trauma Can Help You Grow

Look inward, and you'll find the strength to carry on.



Survivors of traumatic events can learn to cope with their pain through a phenomenon called “post-traumatic growth.”

By [Kristine Crane](#) Sept. 8, 2014 | 4:26 p.m. EDT + More

When Kristen Spexarth’s 22-year-old son, Colby, committed suicide 14 years ago, her own life completely unraveled.

“I was so undone that it was hard for me to relate to people,” she says. “Nobody knew how to help me.”

Spexarth’s own survivalist instincts kicked in, and she began meditating – something she started doing 20 years before. “My practice became a lifeline because there was nothing else tethering me to the world.”

[Meditating didn’t take her pain away](#), she continues. Rather, it allowed Spexarth to be one with her pain. “There was no way out [of the pain],” she says. “I had to go in.”

As a result of meeting her pain head on, she began to [turn a corner and reconstruct her life](#) on terms that were much richer than she had ever known before.

“As foreign as a place as I was [as a suicide survivor], there was also enormous beauty,” says Spexarth, who lives in Seattle and took frequent walks in nature to heal as well. “My senses were heightened. Walking out the door, every little thing was alive. I had never had that kind of sensitivity to my environment.”

Spexarth’s experience – what she calls a “profound awakening” – is not unusual among survivors of traumatic events. The phenomenon is called “post-traumatic growth” and it’s at the opposite end of the spectrum from post-traumatic stress syndrome, which almost always precedes it, says Melinda Moore, a psychologist and assistant professor of psychology at [Eastern Kentucky University](#) in Richmond, Kentucky. In other words, you can’t have growth without trauma.

[Read: [How to Handle Extreme Stress.](#)]

The Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory or “Measuring Post-Traumatic Growth”

“The idea is that the trauma triggers a shattering of an assumptive world view. Everything is shaken, and they have to reconstruct that world,” Moore says. She underwent her own growth after her husband killed himself 18 years ago.

“His death was the most traumatic event of my life. It shattered my world view,” she says, adding that meant, in part, that she forewent medical school and decided to study psychology instead. “It created a strength within me that I had not understood before.”

The idea of post-traumatic growth is not new, Moore adds. It’s in the Bible and in every major world religion. Some type of spiritual transformation can take place, or significant strides in personal growth, which may be measured by a person’s [increased compassion and appreciation for life](#) or their ability to form and maintain intimate relationships, Moore says.

The post-traumatic growth inventory, also known as PTGI, is an assessment tool that includes these measures and was coined by two psychologists in the early 1990s. It emerged from the general field of positive psychology, Moore explains.

“We’re so used to studying what’s going wrong. In positive psychology, we’re actually looking at how well a person is functioning,” Moore says.

Research has looked at various types of trauma victims, including cancer survivors and survivors of the 2004 Madrid train bombing. The level of trauma must be high, but if it’s too high, people may fold instead of grow, she says. And people generally experience more growth closer to the traumatic event, although for suicide survivors, the road to growth may take longer because suicide is stigmatized, so loved ones left behind often remain isolated, Moore says. She adds that future work will look at whether suicide attempt survivors also experience post-traumatic growth.

Moore notes one example of quick growth in a woman who lost her infant son, who had been left in a hot car. Within two months, the woman had undertaken an advocacy role, petitioning members of Congress about protecting against such car deaths.

“Some people would say that’s growth right there. Her increased sense of strength led her to an advocacy role,” Moore says. “It’s not that she’s not grieving.”

And indeed, it’s not that people necessarily “get over” their grief. They just recontextualize their lives as a result of the rumination that takes place following a tragedy.

“You’re never done [grieving],” Spexarth says. “My life is different now. I don’t live for my head anymore. I live for my heart.”

[Read: [How to Find the Best Mental Health Professional for You.](#)]

Can You Prepare Yourself for Trauma?

The truism about trauma is that it’s unexpected, and you never really know how you’re going to react to a traumatic event unless and until it actually occurs.

But there are certain predictors of who might experience growth as a result of trauma, mainly based on personality, but also gender and socioeconomic status, Moore says.

“People who are dispositionally optimistic and open to experience are probably willing to grapple with whatever it is,” Moore says, adding that women and people of higher socioeconomic status also tend to exhibit growth more often than men and poorer people.

Clinicians can also play a role in encouraging trauma victims to experience growth, Moore continues. “You want to encourage people to think about change. But it’s really up to the individual if they are going to be open to changes,” Moore says.

Support groups in which people are disclosing personal growth can also encourage newly traumatized people to undergo growth, she adds.

Ultimately, though, embracing pain is anathema to our nature. The paradox, Spexarth says, is that universally, we try to avoid difficulties and pain, but pain often makes us more human. “Extreme pain helped me break through the illusion [of avoiding pain], and it has so enriched my life” she says. “There is pain in life. Don’t be afraid of it. Through our difficulties, we discover our humanity.”

[Read: [8 Things You Didn't Know About Counseling.](#)]



•

Kristine Crane is a Patient Advice reporter at U.S. News. You can follow her on [Twitter](#), connect with her on [LinkedIn](#) or email her at kcrane@usnews.com.

View Comment