



Post Traumatic Growth during a pandemic: A literature review

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Abstract

The rapid and extensive spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has become a major cause of concern for the healthcare profession. The theory of post-traumatic growth suggests that people can emerge from trauma or adversity having achieved positive personal growth. This holds good as we live through a pandemic that's upending lives for people around the globe. Even though the current crisis can bring with it opportunities for personal growth and family cohesion, disadvantages may outweigh these benefits. Anxiety, lack of peer contact and reduced opportunities for stress regulation are main concerns. Children, adolescents and youth are the ones mainly affected as they grapple about their future due to various stressful factors. Studies have shown that college students have a lot of anxiety due to both academic and job-related problems, this includes pre-licensure nursing students. The post-traumatic growth framework is an integrated approach that includes elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy, along with other aspects that emphasize personal growth. It is important to study about post traumatic growth among different age groups and across settings. Based on findings PTG models can be created to help people identify their strengths from the challenges faced and teach them how to deal with and overcome stress as they continue to face the pandemic.

Key words – Post Traumatic Growth (PTG), COVID 19, pandemic, PTG framework

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared coronavirus disease as a pandemic on March 11, 2020¹. The rapid and extensive spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has become a major cause of concern for the healthcare profession.² The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is profoundly affecting life around the globe. Isolation, contact restrictions and economic shutdown impose a complete change to the psychosocial environment in affected countries. These measures have the potential to threaten the mental health of people of all ages, more significantly children, adolescents and youth. Even though the current crisis can bring with it opportunities for personal growth and family cohesion, disadvantages may outweigh these benefits. Anxiety, lack of peer contact and reduced opportunities for stress regulation are main concerns. Another main threat is an increased risk for parental mental illness, domestic violence and child maltreatment. Especially for children and adolescents with special needs or disadvantages, such as disabilities, trauma experiences, already existing mental health problems, migrant background and low socioeconomic status, this may be a particularly challenging time.³



Meaning of Post Traumatic Growth

In the traditional Japanese art of kintsugi, artisans fill the cracks in broken pottery with gold or silver, transforming damaged pieces into something more beautiful than they were when new. Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) is like kintsugi for the mind. Developed in the 1990s by psychologists, Tedeschi & Calhoun, the theory of post-traumatic growth suggests that people can emerge from trauma or adversity having achieved positive personal growth. This holds good as we live through a pandemic that's upending lives for people around the globe. Growing from trauma isn't unusual and studies support the notion that post-traumatic growth is common and universal across cultures. It causes a transformation and a challenge to people's core beliefs that causes them to become different than they were before. The COVID-19 pandemic may have the ingredients to foster such growth. We are still in the middle of this situation, and we don't know yet what might happen—but there will be serious challenges to people's lives. While the effects may be devastating, it is possible to emerge from such adversity for the better. For some people, this event may be a shock to their core belief system. That is when, it has the potential to result in significant positive changes.⁴

PTG framework

When one looks at how people respond to traumatic events, post-traumatic growth seems to be fairly common. Post-traumatic growth isn't something psychologists can prescribe or create. But they can facilitate it. It is seen as a natural tendency to watch for and encourage, without trying to make people feel pressured or that they're failures if they don't achieve this growth. The post-traumatic growth framework is an integrated approach that includes elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy, along with other aspects that emphasize personal growth. It has elements of narrative and existential aspects, too, because traumas often present people with existential questions about what's important in life. Most evidence-based trauma treatments provide a “manualized approach” to alleviating stress and symptoms such as anxiety.⁵

One way to help clients see the possibilities for growth is to be an “expert companion” during



their struggle. Someone who accompanies their trauma, listens carefully to their story and learns from them about what has happened in their lives. By being that kind of expert, people start to open up and look at the possibilities in their lives more thoroughly. Yet post-traumatic growth is not something that can be rushed, and it often takes a long time to bear fruit. The situation presents a challenge to people's lives, and some people will be able to emerge from this for the better. For many people, the pandemic is shining a light on the things that are most important. We might be making more time for things we find meaningful, simplifying our lives and making time for being connected in our relationships. A stressor like this makes all of us think: What does this slowdown mean for our lives? We might be fundamentally changed in some ways that are beneficial.”⁵

Research related to PTG

In the past, the focus of PTG research was on its occurrence, but recently, the focus is shifting to the reasons and causes of the growth experienced by various individuals. According to the PTG model of Calhoun and Tedeschi, individuals who experience trauma will be challenged with respect to the concepts that constitute the individual such as the meaning, value, goals, and belief systems of life, and engulfed in confusion and stress.

According to the previous studies, college students experience traumatic events such as natural disasters, wars, accidents, diseases, and death. Subjects who have positive coping mechanisms or optimistic and positive characteristics adjust more smoothly to critical situations in life and experience a high level of psychological well-being and psychological growth. A repeated investigation is needed, however, since there was a study that showed that if the perceived level of pain is high due to invasive thoughts, the possibility of experiencing PTSD rather than PTG is high. In addition, studies have shown that trauma is restructured to have a positive result.

Undergraduates experience stress and psychological symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, during their time as college students. The greatest sources of stress for undergraduates are academic and job-related problems; other stressors include financial



problems, values, relationships with faculty and family, and romantic and friendship problems. Stress has effects on undergraduates' mental health, and their vulnerability to mental health problems manifests as relationship problems, poor grades, low graduation rates, suicide attempts, and self-injurious behaviors. Therefore, it is important to help undergraduates who are exposed to factors that precipitate negative emotions and are vulnerable to mental health problems, cope with negative experiences.⁶

Studies related to Post Traumatic Growth

A cross-sectional descriptive survey was done in Korea among 305 college students to study the factors affecting post traumatic growth. The study measured the traumatic events experienced, distress, big five personality factors (neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness), deliberate rumination, and posttraumatic growth. To find out the influencing factors on the posttraumatic growth, multiple regression analysis was performed. The constructed model for posttraumatic growth showed that statistically significant explanatory variables were religion, deliberate rumination, agreeableness, neuroticism, and extroversion and the model including these variables has 43.1% explanatory power on posttraumatic growth ($F=45.33$, $p<.001$). It is necessary to carry out the assessment and intervention of psychological state after the traumatic accidents of college students. In addition, there is a need to develop an intervention program so that they utilize their spirituality and characteristics and use deliberate rumination.⁶

A study was done in Germany, the urgent research questions comprised of understanding the mental health effects of social distancing and economic pressure, identifying risk and resilience factors, and preventing long-term consequences, including—but not restricted to—child maltreatment. The efficacy of tele-psychiatry is another highly relevant issue is to evaluate the efficacy of tele-health and perfect its applications to child and adolescent psychiatry. The study concluded that there are numerous mental health threats associated with the current pandemic and subsequent restrictions. It stated that child and adolescent psychiatrists must ensure



continuity of care during all phases of the pandemic. COVID-19-associated mental health risks will disproportionately hit children and adolescents who are already disadvantaged and marginalized. Research is needed to assess the implications of policies enacted to contain the pandemic on mental health of children and adolescents, and to estimate the risk/benefit ratio of measures such as home schooling, in order to be better prepared for future developments.³

Studies related to PTG among nursing students and nurses

The COVID19 global pandemic has affected all students including pre-licensure nursing students as they have experienced changes in completion of the curriculum such as online classes by the colleges and universities. There is a change in the evaluation system such as online examinations and open book examinations. There is also increased screen time experienced by students leading to fatigue, physical and mental stress. The cost involved for data usage and also connectivity issues also contributed significantly to their stress especially in remote areas, this has also resulted in depression and suicide among students. Students are also stressed due to uncertainty of lockdowns, being sent home and worries as to when regular classes will begin and when exams will be scheduled. They have concerns of how the pandemic will affect their future. Hence there is a need to study PTG among nursing students.

A study was done in Korea to investigate the relationships among post-traumatic growth, emotional intelligence and psychological resilience in vocational school nursing students who have experienced childhood adversities. A cross-sectional research design with anonymous questionnaires was conducted and self-report data were analyzed. The Childhood Adversities Checklist (Chinese version), Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, Emotional Intelligence Scale and the 10-item Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale were used. Survey data were collected from 202 Chinese vocational school nursing students. Post-traumatic growth was associated with emotional intelligence and psychological resilience. Results indicated a curvilinear relationship between emotional intelligence and post-traumatic growth, and between psychological resilience and post-traumatic growth. Moderate-level emotional intelligence and psychological resilience



were most associated with the greatest levels of growth. The results imply that moderate resilience and emotional intelligence can help nursing students cope with adversity in their future clinical work.⁷

A study was done in the US on levels of PTG), the type of PT event and as part of an analysis of the nurses' health study 2. Participants were from a sub-study of the Nurses' Health Study 2, an epidemiologic study of female nurses in the United States (N = 1,574). PTG had been documented in the aftermath of a range of traumatic events, including bereavement, physical assault, and rape. The five domains of PTG identified were - Appreciation of Life, New Possibilities, Relating to Others, Personal Strength, and Spiritual Change, and they vary by the type of potentially traumatic event. The study also examined variation in total PTG and PTG domains, as well as posttraumatic stress (PTS), by event type using data from a large epidemiological study. The results revealed that controlling for demographic covariates, it found that rape was consistently associated with lower PTG, both total PTG and all five PTG domains, relative to other event types. Other findings were limited to specific PTG domains; for example, intimate partner violence (IPV) was associated with higher Personal Strength and New Possibilities. In contrast, rape and IPV were associated with higher PTS, and the serious illness or injury of someone close with lower PTS, relative to other event types. These results add to the growing literature exploring variation in PTG by event type and suggest that different events could yield markedly different patterns of PTG domains and PTS.⁸

Studies related to PTG Inventory

Tedeschi and Calhoun's Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) evaluated growth in five areas: appreciation of life, relating to others, personal strength, recognizing new possibilities and spiritual change. The study revealed that it is not necessary or even typical to show change in all five areas. But growth in even one or two of those realms can have a profound effect on a person's life. Some psychologists say the evidence for post-traumatic growth is not yet as robust as it could be. Patricia Frazier and colleagues, of the University of Minnesota, followed undergraduates before and after a trauma. They found that participants' self-reported perceived



growth didn't align with actual growth as measured by the PTGI. And while actual growth was related to positive coping, perceived growth was not, suggesting the construct may not fully reflect the way people are transformed by trauma. But other evidence suggests that people do grow from trauma.⁹

Conclusion: As we emerge from the COVID 19 crisis, it is important to study about post traumatic growth among different age groups, particularly college going students and across settings. Based on findings PTG models can be created to help people identify their strengths from the challenges faced and teach them how to deal with and overcome stress. It will also highlight the issues faced by all people, especially adolescents and youth as they grapple about their future amidst the present pandemic crisis.

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