

The Paradox of Trauma

Is PTSD the engine of post-traumatic growth?

The idea that traumatic experiences can be converted into opportunities for personal growth has long been noted in literature, religion and philosophy, but only over the past decade have these ideas been subject to the scrutiny of research psychologists with surprising results.

First, personal growth following trauma seems to be far more common than originally thought. Referred to as post-traumatic growth, such positive changes include developing a new philosophy of life, a deepening of personal relationships, and a stronger sense of self.

Second, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) seems to be the engine of post-traumatic growth. Studies have shown that greater PTSD symptoms are related to greater post-traumatic growth. This paradoxical finding has challenged how we think about trauma and specifically the nature of PTSD as necessarily pathological.

A new study by Yuki Shigemoto at *Texas Tech University* and Senel Poyrazli at *The Pennsylvania State University* examined the relation between PTSD symptoms and post-traumatic growth. Two samples, 182 US and 163 Japanese college students, completed self-report measures of PTSD symptoms and post-traumatic growth.

In both samples higher levels of PTSD symptoms were associated with post-traumatic growth. Further analysis revealed that it was the intrusion symptoms rather than the avoidance or hyper-arousal symptoms that were associated with post-traumatic growth. Their findings question the idea that intrusions are necessarily pathological. Certain forms of intrusion may actually be beneficial. As opposed to intrusive cognitive processing characterized by repetitive, negative and unwanted thoughts, deliberate cognitive processing refers to repetitive, purposeful thoughts focused on the struggle to meaning.

The implications for the treatment of trauma are profound. Traditionally therapists have tried to help people rid themselves of their intrusive thoughts but the suggestion that arises from this study is that rather than treating intrusions as symptoms of disorder sometimes it may be more valuable to help people to take control of their intrusive thoughts and steer them purposefully.

Reference

Shigemoto, Y., and Poyrazli, S. (2013). Factors related to post-traumatic growth in U.S. and Japanese college students. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*, 5, 128-134.