

THE POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSCULTURAL POSITIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY IN SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH (PTG)



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Abstract

Technological and sociocultural changes taking place over the last decades have, on the one hand, increased the probability of experiencing trauma during human life, and on the other, contributed to the development of neuroscience, and thus to expanding knowledge about the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of trauma-related disorders. Attention began to be drawn to the fact that experiencing trauma can not only lead to negative consequences, but also can be a source of positive changes in an individual. This phenomenon is defined as post-traumatic growth, which may manifest itself in one (or more) of the four areas of human life.

As a result of a traumatic experience, some people may increase the sense of self-confidence and trust in their own abilities, may become convinced of their personal strength and effectiveness, may improve relationships with other people, or begin to appreciate life and have hope for the future's changes. Post-traumatic growth is more than an adaptive strategy to a post-traumatic situation. Growth means development, i.e. achieving a better level of functioning of the individual than before experiencing the trauma.

The development of an individual is part of the Transcultural Positive Psychotherapy (PPT after Peseschkian) objective, which focuses on developing human potential by changing the perspective, enhancing hope, differentiating capabilities, discovering coping skills and finding a sense of meaning even in the most extreme life events. This article aims to show the usefulness of Positive Psychotherapy after Peseschkian in supporting post-traumatic growth. Starting with the characteristics of the post-traumatic growth phenomenon, will discuss the factors correlating with the emergence of positive post-traumatic changes and will finally show how the main principles and tools of this method can be helpful in reinforcing post-traumatic growth.

Keywords: trauma, posttraumatic growth (PTG), positum, resilience implications for practice, positive psychotherapy

Introduction

Observations on the negative consequences of traumatic events are confirmed by many studies.

However, modern trauma researchers [1,2,4,5,11] agree that there are significant differences in people's responses to traumatic events. When it comes to trauma, no two people react exactly the same way. What causes long-term pain for one

may be inspiring for another. As Levine states (2015) these relationships depend on genetic factors, on a person's history of trauma, and on family dynamics. In some cases, especially after severe trauma, symptoms such as anxiety, depression, addictions and PTSD can develop [4,8,9]. Some traumatized people continue with their daily lives and find their trauma to be a strengthening experience over time.

Methodology

When we look at the phenomenon of trauma from the holistic perspective of the concept of *positum* (Peseschkian, 1987, 2014), we discover that the traumatic experience brings with it both suffering and the possibility of growth. Clinical practitioners and researchers state that knowledge about the consequences of traumatic stress would be incomplete without noticing sometimes paradoxical, positive effects of having experienced the traumatic event and coping with it (Zięba, 2021).

The need for in-depth reflection on the issue of post-traumatic growth leads to finding the answer as to what factors are conducive to the occurrence of this phenomenon and at the same time noticing that the method of working in PPT (techniques, tools, rules) can establish a buffer of resources within the patient and in his/her environment. On the one hand, these resources can help in coping with traumatic experiences, and on the other, they become factors correlating with the development of post-traumatic growth. Thus, the holistic perception of trauma and knowledge of the correlates of PTG may become particularly important for positive psychotherapists.

Discussion

The term post-traumatic growth (PTG) was created by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in 1996, while they have observed the positive personal transformation, which could occur after traumatic events. That means a positive change in the patterns of understanding oneself and the world, in such areas as: strengthening the sense of personal strength, deepening the joy of life and the importance of

relationships with other people, changing life priorities and spiritual development (Zięba, 2021).

To describe this concept, those two scientists used the "seismic metaphor". According to them, trauma is understood as an earthquake and the process of growing as a reconstruction of the city after the earthquake (Łyś & Bargiel-Matusiewicz, 2021). With the help of a very strong shock, old cognitive structures are destroyed. This forces a person to create new structures, more adaptive, flexible and versatile ones, that are more adaptable, flexible, versatile and which serve further life (Ogińska-Bulik, 2015; Zięba, 2021). This process cannot be planned. In a sense, it becomes a "side effect" of activating all available resources to survive the crisis. It accompanies all symptoms of distress associated with trauma. Sari and Eryilmaz (2020) state that it is a positive change that comes from fighting.

The PTG concept has been intuitively known for centuries and is described by those religions or philosophical systems which give meaning to human suffering and which promote the acceptance of difficult life events [7, 8, 9, 10].

It is perfectly reflected in the parable "The Story of the Palm Tree"¹. "In the desert, at the edge of the oasis, a young palm tree grew. One day a man passed by. He was an evil man who destroyed everything along his way. He took a heavy stone and slammed it into the crown of the palm tree and ran away. The palm tree could hardly breathe through the pain. The palm tried to throw off this burden, but in vain, nothing helped, she could not move the stone. The stone remained in place and its weight was rushing down upon her. The more the palm tried to move, the more the stone pinned her into the ground. As with her roots she was going deeper and deeper into the ground to gain support, she reached the water vein. The water continued to nourish the palm tree, and enabled her to grow until she became one of the biggest trees in the desert. Years later, the evil man returned, expecting to see a dry, destroyed tree. Suddenly, the tallest palm tree leaned towards him and pointing, she said: Thank you! Your stone helped me to grow!"

According to Tedeschi and Calhoun, positive change usually manifests itself in one or more of five important areas in an individual's life [3,5,9,10,12]:

¹ The story of the palm adapted from:
<https://medicamondiale.org/en/violence-against-women/news/the-story-of-the-palm-tree>

1) Personal Strength - increase of self-esteem and personal strength (mental and/or emotional), development of self-confidence and self-trust, according to the common saying: "What does not kill you, makes you stronger";

2) New Possibilities - discovering new opportunities in life or developing new skills, which are usually conditioned by the loss of existing opportunities. This is reflected in the words of the Polish priest, father Jan Twardowski: "There is no situation on Earth without a way out, when God closes the door - It opens the window";

3) Relating to Others - improvement and deepening of the relationships with other people, i.e.: openness to others, the ability to compassion, sensitivity. As the wisdom of the East says: "Shared joy is double joy; Shared sorrow is half a sorrow";

4) Appreciation of Life - increasing the sense of meaning and satisfaction in life, discovering the joy of life, which means a greater appreciation for life in general, awakening to be "here and now", changing priorities and the hierarchy of values, the ability to affirm the presence, according to the sentence from Horace's poetry: "Carpe diem - Seize the day, enjoy the moment."

5) Spiritual and Existential Change - directing attention to the spiritual dimension of life, to the spiritual development, achieving spiritual depth (which is not always synonymous with becoming religious), and the development of hope. This wisdom is contained in the quotation from Rumi: "Where there is ruin, there is hope for a treasure".

The reader may notice that the areas of positive transformation listed above are similar to the 4 areas of life according to PPT (Peseschkian, 1987). The area of the body corresponds to a change that strengthens the sense of personal strength, the area of work and achievements - the discovery of new possibilities. Improving and deepening relationships with other people is included in the area of contact, while spiritual change and giving life a new meaning correspond to the fourth area of the balance model, which is the future/fantasy. By experiencing PTG, individuals enter a new, more adaptive balance in the dimensions of body, achievement, relationships, and spirituality. Thus, the process of post-traumatic growth becomes in fact a process of restoring life balance in these four areas (Sari T. & Eryilmaz A., 2020).

Research shows that the experience of positive changes usually concerns one area of human life [1,3,4,5,11,12]. For example, among the few positive effects mentioned by women who experienced rape, are resolutions to rely more on oneself, to trust more in their own perceptions and feelings, and to be better prepared for conflicts and dangers (Herman, 2015; Łyś & Bargiel-Matusiewicz, 2021) - the area of the body and senses. In a study of the long-term effects of rape, Burgess and Holmstrom (1974) found that those women who had become involved in anti-rape movements coped best with the trauma. They worked as volunteers in help centers for raped women, advocates for victims in the courts, lobbied for a change in the law (Herman, 2015) – an area of contacts and the future and fantasy.

Many people have the opportunity to grow significantly after traumatic experiences. However, in order to recover, a person must find an individual way to rebuild a sense of connection with himself and the environment. It is helpful if a person is able to find meaning in his/her experience beyond personal tragedy [1,7,11]. Sometimes meaning is found through engagement in social activities.

An example of this can be the statement and story of Anna, whose son died of leukemia. During her son's treatment at the hospice, the client actively used psychological support, and after her son's death, while experiencing mourning, she started therapy. At the end of therapeutic work (stage of broadening goals), while discussing the area of sense and meanings (future/fantasies), Anna decided to become a hospice volunteer.

"Since I have started volunteering at our hospice, helping both parents and kids struggling with this terrible disease, I have noticed that my life began to change. Please, do not misunderstand me, it's not like I'm accepting the loss of my son. It will probably never happen. I guess this pain will always stay in my heart. But I have a deep feeling that his life and death took on a different meaning. I know, that through my experience, I can give a lot to those who need it. I know what they are going through, I have been there myself, I know what it is like. It may sound strange, but for the first time since his death, I feel needed, fulfilled and happy."²

It is worth mentioning that post-traumatic growth is not synonymous with removing all

² For safety reasons data of the patient and details have been changed

negative consequences of trauma. Anna's statement shows that she lost many important resources, going through traumatic life events related to the illness, treatment and ultimately the death of her son. However, the social support she received during the crisis, psychological help, which enabled her to work through the trauma, and involvement in volunteering, which ultimately strengthened the sense of meaning in her life, were of great importance in developing PTG.

Research by Calhoun and Tedeschi showed that post-traumatic growth is experienced by 20% to 80% of respondents who have experienced a traumatic event [5,9,12]. PTG is correlated with such dimensions as [1,3,5,12]:

- resilience - the ability to adapt and the ability to recover;
- integrated personality;
- self-efficacy - conviction of one's influence on one's own fate, internal location of the control center;
- openness to experience, expressed as a willingness to change the world and oneself;
- optimism, contentment, sense of humor, extroversion;
- spirituality, focus on moral values and a sense of meaning, expressed primarily by the ability to find meaning in a crisis and give meaning to suffering
- hope - especially expressed in planning paths of one's own goals and in active striving to achieve them;
- active involvement in overcoming the crisis - strategies focused on survival, performing in a thoughtful and active way;
- high social competences - the ability: to stay in relationships with others, to reach out for support in an active manner, to share one's experience with people who show understanding and commitment;
- adaptive strategies for coping with stress, such as positive rephrasing, religious coping, conscious focus on staying calm and maintaining the ability to assess the situation.

Further research on PTG shows that it can be stimulated by modeling, e.g. in the form of contact with people who have experienced similar events and successfully coped with them (Łyś & Bargiel-Matusiewicz, 2021).

Transcultural Positive Psychotherapy, by its nature, focuses on helping to develop the patient's internal potential. Nossrat Peseschkian (1987) used to say "If you want something you've never

had before, do something you've never done before". A positive psychotherapist, looking at a person through the „positum” perspective, respects the suffering, but at the same time highlights the hidden abilities, natural resources, strengths and competences of the person, thus models an attitude propitious to development. The mentioned resources are not only internal human capacities, they are often external ones. The activation of external resources to which people can refer, such as support networks, authorities, the idea of God or the sacred, plays an important role in supporting the recovery process. By strengthening the sense of resourcefulness, a patient does not feel like a helpless victim of events, but has the feeling that he or she can face all the difficulties and surprises of life.

In addition, a positive psychotherapist, by arousing hope, referring to transculturalism (universal values from different cultural circles), psychoeducation and activating the patient's self-help and self-healing mechanisms, stimulates his/her developmental strength, which in turn strengthens his/her resilience (Peseschkian, 1987, 2014). By creating an accepting therapeutic context, in an atmosphere of safety and trust, the patient can work on developing his/her own effective problem-solving strategies, which ultimately increases the patient's self-efficacy.

Also, by using stories, proverbs, folk wisdom and humor in the process, the therapist is able to make the patient look at his/her problem from a different, previously unknown perspective (Peseschkian, 1987, 2014). Thanks to this, the patient obtains information on more effective ways of dealing with a difficult situation, also finds and activates experiences, feelings and ideas that he/she was not aware of so far. Most importantly, in the case of patients after traumatic experiences, metaphors are used in an accessible, non-invasive way, opening up new possibilities of procedure, showing new points of view, modeling, showing the way, while leaving the possibility of choice.

As humans, we have no control over many aspects of life. Feeling out of control is inherent in the experience of trauma. Using the technique of positive reinterpretation, the positive therapist teaches the patient to regain control, e.g. on how he or she perceives the situation. Positive reinterpretation helps reduce the level of stress associated with a given situation, gives a broader perspective, inspires hope and humor, gives the opportunity to learn, make sense, draw

conclusions - turns a crisis into an opportunity. When the patient has the opportunity to find positive or developmental aspects of the crisis, his or her level of involvement in the therapy process and chances of healing meaningfully increase (Peseschkian, 2014).

Ultimately, the goal of therapy is to stimulate the patient's natural healing mechanisms so that he or she finds life balance. Because the essence of mental health is harmonious functioning in four areas of life: physical, cognitive, relational and spiritual, i.e. their proportional development and adequate use of energy in these spheres of life. Good functioning in the area of body and senses influences better sense of self-acceptance and self-attention, an increase in self-confidence, location of a sense of control within oneself and thus the development of a coherent, integrated identity. A well-developed area of work and achievement after the moment of experiencing traumatic event might be helpful to an active search for ways to deal with the consequences. It will also be conducive to changing existing patterns of thinking and ways of evaluating experience. Moving from being unsolvable to being manageable and working through "being a victim" to "being a survivor" (Studen & Janowski, 2016). Access to the area of contacts allows the development of high social competencies, which in the case of a traumatic experience are helpful in reaching for broadly understood support, receiving it and regaining important social roles [1, 4, 11]. Last but not least, by nurturing the fourth area of life- future and fantasy, a person, when experiencing life difficulties, activates coping strategies through practices related to religion and spirituality, through active search for spiritual support, searching for meanings or giving meaning to events.

By analyzing what kind of developmental possibilities are hidden in each of the four dimensions of the Balance Model in the context of a given patient's life, we help reduce the experienced stress and help restore physical, mental, emotional and spiritual balance.

Conclusions

Knowing all these correlations, a positive therapist can, on the one hand, influence the already existing effects of traumatic events, minimizing their impact. On the other hand, practicing broadly understood trauma prevention can strengthen self-help aspects in clients, so they

can cope better with potentially traumatizing events in the future. Bearing in mind the fact that a person comes into the world with an innate ability to overcome trauma, and trauma is treatable - the healing process can initiate a deep awakening and be a source of genuine personal transformation. In this sense, Transcultural Positive Psychotherapy, drawing on the combination of the science of the West and the wisdom of the East, becomes a method for working with trauma, giving the possibility of post-traumatic growth.

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