



E L Y S I U M H P

## World Extreme Medicine: Growth After Adversity Workshop

### Summary of Key Points

#### 1) What is 'growth' after adversity?

In this context, 'growth' is defined as positive, meaningful psychological changes that an individual can experience as a result of coping with highly challenging life circumstances events. Growth is thought to occur following exposure to a significantly distressing event which challenges an individual's assumptions about the world, creating a dissonance between pre-and-post event world-views; and causing high emotional distress. The drive to resolve the dissonance is perceived as growth, leading to changes in an individual's self-perception, relationships with others and life philosophy. It should be noted that growth is not a return to 'baseline' following the experience of the event, but rather, is an experience of improvement which for some people is deeply profound.

#### 2) What does it look like?

Growth is generally exhibited in five dimensions: greater appreciation for life, warmer and more intimate relationships, enhanced sense of personal strength, recognition of new life possibilities, and spiritual development.

The most common factors associated with it are: higher levels of social support, spirituality, and (positive) rumination.

#### 3) What needs to happen in order for growth to occur?

Events must be of great enough impact to force individuals to reconsider the basic assumptions about who they are, what people around them are like, what kind of world they live in or what the future may hold. In this reconsideration, there are the seeds for new perspectives on all of these matters and a sense that valuable, though painful lessons have been learned. The other key factors are psychological distress (as a consequence of the event) that is severe event to warrant a questioning of one's life assumptions; time; social support; and cognitive/emotional processing. The key is then to turn this processing into action.

#### 4) Do you need to have experienced trauma in order for growth to occur?

Nope, just psychological distress to a level that makes you question your previously held beliefs about the world). The most important part is the cognitive and emotional processing following the event; and then turning that processing into action.

#### 5) Is growth a linear process?

Nope. It is messy and ugly. Think of 'snot-monster-crying' ..... that's what the process of growth is like. Cognitive processing is not a neat process that can be easily reduced to a formula. There are many recursive and iterative aspects to it. Growth does not occur as a direct result of trauma. It is the individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which posttraumatic growth occurs. Remember the metaphor of an earthquake.





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## 6) How does growth differ from Resilience?

Most commonly, resilience is spoken of as positive adaptation despite adversity. Due to the increasing prevalence of disasters worldwide, this capacity to adapt and cope with significant events is important in allowing individuals and societies to either bounce back (to their pre-trauma state) or positively adapt to the new situation in a timely and efficient way after crisis. Resilience has been studied and observed in: 9/11 attacks, healthcare situations, car accidents, interpersonal attacks, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, illness, injury, pandemics, hurricanes, tsunamis, bombings, mass shootings.

The paradox is that high levels of resilience have been found to be associated with the lowest growth scores. These results imply that although growth and resilience are both salutogenic constructs, they are inversely related. Resilience refers to a broad cluster of personal characteristics that facilitate the ability to manage, despite trauma. Those characteristics include hardiness, optimism, self-enhancement, repressive coping, positive affect, and a sense of coherence. Collectively, these characteristics permit such people to emerge from trauma with less psychological wounds and relatively unchanged. Unlike resilience, growth represents a change for the better following adversity. **Accordingly, growth occurs ONLY if the event has been upsetting enough to drive the survivor to (positive) meaning-making of the negative event.** Resilience may make a person LESS LIKELY to perceive threat to self or world views. Thus, more resilient people are more able to mitigate the impact of the event. Accordingly, if growth is the need to find meaning to a traumatic event, resilient people are less likely to engage in the meaning-making behaviours that are associated with growth because they are unlikely to struggle with the implications of the trauma.

## 7) Can we facilitate growth? If so, how?

Well I'm so glad you asked.... Yes, yes we can. Here are some general considerations; but turn to the next handout for the more individualized work....

*For the individual:*

- Training, experience and perceived competence are all protective
- Openness to experience
- Managing distressing emotion through grief-work and emotional processing shortly after the initial event. Grief-work – which often means distress continues to be felt/processed, keeps the cognitive processing active (which we need for GROWTH), whereas a rapid resolution may well be an indication that the assumptive world was not severely tested and could accommodate the event.
- Social support. We've already spoken about the importance of this
- Proactive and confrontational coping styles – ie taking charge of the situation, engaging in proactive behaviours, acceptance of the situation and allowing oneself to face traumatic thoughts – are more effective than avoidant coping style.
- Cognitive processing: (sometimes known as 'positive rumination'.) Several varieties of recurrent event-related thinking, including making-sense, problem-solving, reminiscing and anticipation.

*For organisations:*

- Training for employees both in how to manage crisis situations; but also individual coping etc.
- Ensure they offer adequate psychosocial support to employees. Managers support employees, employees support each other (peer support)





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