

The
Posttraumatic
Growth
Workbook

COMING THROUGH TRAUMA
WISER, STRONGER,
AND MORE RESILIENT

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To Joan, Michael, and Anna Caroline, for all your enthusiasm for life.

—RGT

To Lori and Kaitlyn, for your patience, understanding, and unconditional love.

—BAM

We would like to dedicate this book to the thousands of men, women, and children whom we have had the pleasure to serve over our collective fifty years of practice. Their experiences, stories, and lives have done much to shape who we are and how we see the world today.

—RGT and BAM

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Introduction

At the time of our writing this book, the American military has taken virtually all of its troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq, which would appear to close a chapter on a traumatic period in American life that began on September 11, 2001. But 9/11 and the ensuing combat were not the only traumas with which the American public became intimately familiar. Also in the news were natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy. More difficult to understand is the horror committed by humans. In San Bernardino, California, a radicalized couple killed fourteen innocent people enjoying a holiday party and wounded twenty-one others. And none of us will ever forget the tragic slaughter of twenty first-graders and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. However, it doesn't stop there. There are the stories of clergy sexually abusing children. The country endured a major economic recession that dashed the plans of many and put thousands of Americans out of their homes. There is the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. And many individuals have personal traumas that never make the news but are just as emotionally wrenching—battles with terrible illnesses, unemployment, family disruption, loss, and grief.

Because of the attention paid to trauma in the media, Americans have become increasingly familiar with the problem of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an often chronic and disabling psychological condition that wreaks havoc on those who suffer from it as well as on their loved ones. Even though PTSD is a response that can be linked to a variety of traumatic experiences, such as rape, car accidents, and natural disasters, most people relate this syndrome to the experience of combat veterans. But anyone who is confronted with an experience that is physically or emotionally threatening can develop PTSD or some symptoms of it.

There are a number of good books already available to help people cope with the symptoms and experience of trauma, recover from trauma, and become stronger. Like other books on trauma recovery, this book is for people who have faced or are continuing to face adversity in their lives and are looking for ways to navigate it successfully. But this book takes trauma survivors beyond simply learning how to cope better. This book is designed for those who wish to go beyond being resilient, to experience meaningful personal growth and perhaps radical transformation in the aftermath of a trauma. We will give you the tools to thrive, grow, and transform yourself. As one trauma survivor told us, "Why waste this traumatic experience on just getting back to who I was?" Consider the following story.

Joe had wanted to join the Army as far back as he could remember. He got the chance when he turned eighteen, only two weeks after finishing high school. Joe was from a small town in Mississippi and grew up in a lower-middle class family. He was the oldest of four boys, all of whom had visions of escaping their small town existence with the help of the military. Joe's mother was a kind and caring woman. A devout Christian, she was heavily involved in the church, which meant Joe and his brothers were as well. His father was a different story. Although not a physically abusive man, Joe's dad was prone to angry outbursts that could easily be classified as emotional abuse. These outbursts were most prominent when he was drinking, which happened frequently. His father's drinking and anger drove a wedge between his father and him at an early age. They fought constantly. Being the oldest, Joe found himself acting as a buffer between his dad and the rest of the family. He despised his dad for putting him in this position. Things came to a head the night before Joe was scheduled to leave for basic training. During a drunken episode, Joe's father told him that he was a deserter and a coward for leaving the family. Joe's last words to his father were "I hate you and hope you die."

The week before Joe was set to deploy to Iraq, he received a call from his father. The last time he had heard from him was two years earlier, the night before he had left for the Army. When Joe's father disclosed that he had been diagnosed with cancer, Joe was surprised by his own reaction. Although he felt sad, his anger toward his dad seemed to somehow blunt his reaction to the news. It's not that he didn't care; he just wasn't devastated like he thought he should be. The phone call ended with a promise by Joe to stay in touch throughout his deployment.

Joe thrived in the combat zone. He was part of a close-knit team and enjoyed his work. Most days he spent walking through neighborhoods searching for suspected terrorists. Then one day, about five months into his deployment, things changed for him. On a routine patrol in a “friendly” neighborhood, Joe’s unit came under attack, and over one-third of his unit was injured, including Joe and a buddy. Joe received relatively minor shrapnel injuries to both of his legs and suffered a dislocated shoulder. His buddy wasn’t so lucky. The roadside bomb that caused Joe’s injuries severed both of his friend’s legs, and he later died.

Joe struggled after his friend’s death. He had problems with sleep, suffering from constant nightmares. He couldn’t stop thinking about what had happened to his friend and how he wished he could somehow have saved him. He became depressed and withdrawn. After a while, he came to this realization: “I’d been so concerned about how I might have saved Randy that I ignored something else. I just miss the guy. I’ve had lots of friends but no one like him. Maybe it’s because of all we went through together, but it was more than that. We just knew what the other was thinking. He was more a brother to me than my real brothers have ever been. I guess I should be grieving, and I have just been kicking myself around, feeling guilty. Now, I think it’s selfish. I think I have been thinking more about myself than honoring him—what a great guy he was, how he always backed me up. I don’t know if he knew that’s what I thought of him. I guess you always think you have plenty of time.”

Thinking this way led Joe to see the importance of relationships and how hard it is to predict how long people will be in your life: “I’m wondering now how I’ll feel when my father is gone. We’ve had a crappy relationship for years. I guess I’ve just chalked it up as a waste. I started to think about how I’ll feel about all this in years to come. I already knew there was something not right about my reaction to my dad’s cancer. I knew it was a weird reaction. I was numb to it. I knew I would like to feel differently, but I didn’t know how to get there, and part of me was so angry and hurt by him, I didn’t want to. It was easy to feel the loss of Randy because we were all good with each other, but I couldn’t feel what it would be like to lose my dad. This whole thing with the war and loss and all, it forced me to deal with stuff that maybe I would never have gotten to. I don’t know. It all forced my hand?”

Joe describes how trauma can be a window into a new perspective on how you are living your life. For Joe, there was more to it than he’d imagined.

Ultimately, Joe's anger toward his father seemed to give way to compassion. In one week, Joe called his father on two separate occasions. Their conversations focused on how his father was doing and on how Joe would like to mend their relationship. He apologized for telling his father that he hated him and expressed how ashamed he was for telling him that he wished he would die. After all these years, a caring, open, and respectful relationship between Joe and his father began to form.

This book is about the kind of growth that can happen in the aftermath of trauma, as Joe discovered. We refer to this process as *posttraumatic growth*, or PTG. One of us, Rich, coined this term in the early 1990s, and together with his colleague Lawrence Calhoun, Rich has been at the forefront of gaining an understanding of this process and gathering research on how and why it occurs. The basic concept is that positive personal transformation can occur in the aftermath of trauma. The stories of survivors of combat, rape, cancer, natural disaster, and other traumas are often not only about psychological suffering but also about some remarkably positive changes that these survivors have experienced following trauma. Their stories are often stories of discovery and a sense of newfound meaning and purpose.

In this book, you will find ways in which you can enhance your chances of strengthening yourself through the great pain of loss or trauma. This book will show you how to use your struggles with life's losses and tragedies to develop in ways that might not have been possible without them.

The concept of posttraumatic growth has been recognized for centuries. From the ancient Greeks to today, tragedy has been a common theme in many great works of literature. It is also an essential ingredient in soap operas, movies, novels, and the stories people love. Perhaps the enduring appeal of these stories for most of us is that they teach the lessons of suffering without our having to experience the pain directly. The great religions of the world also teach that suffering can lead to wisdom. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, stories of suffering are viewed as lessons. The story of Job is one of the most famous examples of human suffering. The central teaching of the New Testament is that without the tragedy of the cross, humans would forever remain unconnected to God. Reinhold Niebuhr, the author of the Serenity Prayer, has pointed out that Christianity changes tragedy into something that is not tragedy, and this is clearly the message of the resurrection of Christ. Other religions also view suffering as a path toward goodness. Certain tenets of Islam suggest that suffering is something to be welcomed, because it is seen as instrumental in the purposes of God. As a Muslim colleague once said, "If you suffer, it means that you have been especially chosen by

God.” Buddhism directs people to approach suffering and learn from it rather than avoid pain, and the Four Noble Truths are a guide to this process.

For most people, the lessons of religion or the stories of transformation found in literature exist in the background, and life just sort of rattles on. But a major loss or, if you are lucky, the mere threat of a major loss, can shake you out of your complacent routine. As the shock of the trauma wears off, you can experience important positive changes. We have found that these changes vary from person to person, but there are some common themes. For example, you may greet each new day with greater appreciation. You may become more aware of the strength in yourself that has enabled you to manage a difficult life situation. As a survivor of trauma, you may have a greater appreciation for how much your loved ones and others care about you. You may have begun to explore new opportunities or life paths. Perhaps your understanding of spiritual matters has changed. This book will explore these kinds of changes. We will provide you with some practical ways to live in the aftermath of trauma so that you may gain the most from your experience.

It is possible. The numbers vary widely, but on average research studies show that 60 percent of people who experience trauma also report posttraumatic growth (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2006). In the aftermath of a wide range of traumatic events, many people are able to find some benefit. These events include the onset of physical disability, terminal illness, divorce, bereavement, natural and man-made disasters, rape, sexual abuse, accidents, combat, or the onset of a child’s serious illness or disability. If you have experienced such an event and wish to respond in a way that makes this a positive turning point in your life, be assured that this experience is possible for you. This book will help you find a new direction.

You may wonder, what if I have PTSD? How can I move toward posttraumatic growth if I am struggling with PTSD? The truth is that the same challenges that create PTSD also set the stage for a psychological rebirth. In the aftermath of trauma, what was once an understandable reality has now become something that is mystifying. You have difficulty navigating the strange new life you find yourself living. This difficulty produces the classic symptoms of PTSD: a self-protective posture toward life that is essentially automatic, treating the world as an unsafe place. Being easily startled, having nightmares, feeling emotionally numb, having flashbacks to traumatic events, and feeling mistrustful are all part of this self-protective reaction. But these shocking challenges to the usual way of living can also set in motion an exploration of new ways of living that becomes posttraumatic growth. In fact, some people may experience symptoms of PTSD and posttraumatic growth at the same time. This is one of the paradoxes of posttraumatic growth.

We also want to emphasize that posttraumatic growth is usually experienced without the help of psychologists or other mental health professionals. Just as the symptoms of PTSD are naturally occurring reactions to the dire threats of trauma and often remit without the help of psychiatric professionals, posttraumatic growth is a naturally occurring process of healing and growth that can happen in the weeks, months, and years following trauma. Both PTSD and PTG are natural responses of the mind to the injury of trauma. We therefore speak of *post-traumatic stress injuries* (PTSI) that produce symptoms and also set in motion natural growth processes. We like to use the word “injuries” to emphasize that the reactions that have been called PTSD have a basis in a natural response to extraordinary circumstances. This idea is also part of the new thinking about trauma response and posttraumatic growth.

Just as injuries heal naturally and growth occurs naturally, there are circumstances that hinder healing and growth and circumstances that facilitate it. In this book, we describe what can be done to facilitate healing from PTSI. We describe what trauma survivors can do to help themselves and what people who care for them can do to facilitate the best outcomes in the aftermath of trauma.

This workbook can help you move toward personal change and development. Unfortunately, this process is not something that can be reduced to an easy formula, and we do not want you to be discouraged by the difficulty of the process. Stick with the workbook. Be assured that if you want to take your stressful or traumatic situation and use it as a turning point for personal growth, we can provide you with a way forward. Most people who face stressful or traumatic events are first concerned with wanting to feel better. They are focused on literally surviving after what has happened to them. Some people think that life is not worth living and may even consider suicide. Given this emotional turmoil, the period just after a trauma is usually not a good time to be thinking about growth. You will probably need some time before growth becomes a possibility. At first you need to focus on your basic needs. A homeless person who does not have food or water, adequate clothing, or shelter is not quite ready to begin college, start a career, or foster a budding intimate relationship. Similarly, the basic needs of the trauma survivor, managing intense emotions and life disruption, must be addressed first.

There are a small number of people who do think of growth very early on. Rich recalls a husband and wife, who upon learning that their teenage son was killed in an auto accident, said to each other within a few hours of the event, “This is too horrible a thing to let it be for nothing. We have to make something worthwhile come from this. Otherwise, our son will have died for nothing.” When you are ready for growth will depend on how you respond to trauma. As you are reading this book, it may have

been years since you experienced a trauma, or conversely, you may still be suffering and perhaps have severe health problems or injuries. Coauthor Bret has worked with many military service members whose injuries represented a daily challenge but for whom growth was still possible.

We want to add that even though posttraumatic growth provides relief from stressful and traumatic events, growth does not make everything better. Many years ago, in her book entitled *Necessary Losses*, Judith Viorst described the perspective that Rabbi Harold Kushner took on the death of his teenage son. Kushner realized that he had changed in many important ways after his son's death: he had become a more empathic and effective rabbi; he had experienced a deepening of his spiritual side. But he also said that he would trade all of that in if he could just have his son back. No amount of growth can completely undo the pain of such a personal loss.

You may still suffer from what has happened to you. Growth will not put an end to all your suffering. However, it may make it easier to bear, because it will become clear that your suffering has not been entirely in vain. There is more to the trauma than the loss or the misery. None of us should be naive about these situations, however. Traumas themselves are never good things, and we do not recommend trauma as a pathway to growth. A misunderstanding about our intentions has led to some angry and misguided responses to us. Rich has received letters from people who have said, "I can't believe you are saying that sending our sons and daughters off to war to get blown up is a good thing for them!" Of course, we are saying no such thing. But given the fact that trauma is a harsh reality of life for so many, how can we encourage the best possible ways to deal with trauma and move forward in life? Ignoring trauma's existence is certainly unhelpful.

Another point to make is that not everyone experiences growth. We do not claim that everyone can. Although growth is commonplace, it is not universal. In some cases, people who experience no posttraumatic growth likewise have experienced little distress following a trauma. Their system of core beliefs allows them to understand what is happening, and they do not have to reconsider what they already know. They are able to get back to their previous way of living without much difficulty. These are the most resilient people. They have a remarkable ability to bounce back. Sometimes these people may have experienced very difficult lives growing up. As a result, they feel that the most recent stressful life experience is more of the same. They may have already learned the lessons of suffering. They have learned that life is hard and full of tragedy. But if trauma has rocked you, and you have not felt resilient, this book will help you change so you feel more resilient in the future. Posttraumatic growth is a pathway to resilience.

As you progress through this workbook, you will meet others who are already on this journey. Their stories are not about despair and hopelessness but about lives made richer and deeper in meaning through posttraumatic growth. We highlight the important tools and methods these trauma survivors used. We draw on our experience as clinical psychologists, educators, and researchers in the areas of trauma, coping, and growth to help you understand the process of posttraumatic growth and how to generate this process in your own life and perhaps in the lives of others. We hope that you will find the stories in this book both comforting and transformative.

One more concept we introduce is *expert companionship*, an idea developed by Rich to help trauma survivors find the support from others that they need to grow. We discuss how you can identify expert companions for yourself and how you can become an expert companion for others. Expert companions are not necessarily professionals and, in fact, are more likely to be friends and family members. You may find it difficult to locate an expert companion, and we encourage you to look in some unlikely places. We are also aware that many of our readers may be friends and family members of trauma survivors, so we will spend some time talking about how to be an expert companion. We describe such characteristics as patience and an ability to join in the perspective of the trauma survivor while noticing and expressing other possibilities for growth.

We have written this book to be accessible and inspirational not only to those who are struggling with trauma and those who are trying to support a loved one who is struggling but also to anyone who is interested in finding greater meaning and purpose. To get the most out of this book, you will need to do more than just read it. This workbook is organized around a series of psychological tasks or exercises that are designed to reveal the seeds of posttraumatic growth in your experience and to nurture them. Again, some of these exercises might be emotionally difficult to do, especially if your trauma is quite recent. You may find that this is a book to start now and return to later. After more time has passed, you may be better able to respond to some of the challenges we present. You may want to keep a blank journal close to hand as you go through this workbook, both to give yourself additional space to complete the exercises or try them again and to record your thoughts about your journey.

We have spent our entire professional lives—over fifty years between the two of us—working with trauma survivors: Bret with active duty soldiers, including nearly two and a half years in Iraq, and Rich with bereaved parents and a variety of other trauma survivors in Charlotte, North Carolina. We have both written many books for our professional colleagues about this work, and Bret has written books for veterans on postcombat adjustment. This is our first book written especially for trauma survivors, and we are pleased to speak directly to you. One thing that we have kept in mind while

writing is that most of our information comes from the people we have tried to help. Who has informed us the most? For Rich, it is the bereaved parents that he worked with for twenty-five years in a nonprofit bereavement agency. For Bret, as an Army psychologist, it is the active duty soldiers and veterans who have endured terrible combat experiences.

But both of us also have worked with many survivors of other kinds of traumatic events, including cancer, sexual abuse, airplane crashes, divorce, hurricanes, and many other personal trials. These survivors have taught us what it has been like to go through their traumas and what kind of help they needed. We have tried to use what we have learned from them to help you. We hope that you can see the good sense of these brave people in the pages of this book. You will find many places where we quote them. Hearing about their experiences may help you see that you are not alone in your struggles and that others have successfully traveled a similar path.

We hope that by listening to trauma survivors and helping them navigate the aftermath of their own traumas, we have learned how to be good expert companions. We want to share what we have learned with you—the trauma survivor or the person wanting to help. We want to share with you how to discover, and often create, a new way of living that makes the struggle following trauma meaningful and valuable, when the trauma itself may have been simply horrific.

You have likely picked up this book because this idea attracted you. If you are going to have to go through the tragedy and loss of trauma, why not make sure there is also something worthwhile in the end? Back as far as the 1980s, Rich, along with his colleague Lawrence Calhoun at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, began to listen to the stories of trauma survivors who found themselves on paths of personal growth and transformation. In this workbook, we hope that you will find a pathway to personal transformation as well. We are eager to share with you the wisdom of other trauma survivors, their accomplishments, and the ways we have devised to encourage the process of posttraumatic growth.

Because of the focus on posttraumatic growth, this workbook is different from others that you will find on trauma recovery, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the like. We are not naive about the difficulties of trauma survivors, but we see clearly their possible futures. We hope that as you read, and as you work through the exercises in this workbook and apply them to your life, you will also see a bright future for yourself.

Note: If you're a clinician hoping to use this book with those you treat, you will find a bonus chapter addressing this at <http://www.newharbinger.com/34688>.

