

CHAPTER 4

The Varieties of Growth

In chapter 3, you learned more about some of the unwanted and troubling emotions and thoughts that can result from trauma. You also learned some new ways to manage your natural responses to trauma to reduce the impact of these symptoms and to gain control over them. But we want to help you do more than that. This book is also about the positive ways you can respond to traumatic events and grow from them. This chapter will go into this topic in greater detail and give you a chance to move in this positive direction.

This chapter will describe what posttraumatic growth looks like for many people and guide you through the process so that you can make the most of your opportunity to change the aftermath of your trauma into a time that you value rather than dread. We know that posttraumatic growth is not something that is easily or quickly experienced by most people; this is not to be discouraging but to emphasize that merely reading this workbook will be just the beginning of a process that takes time. We also believe that the information and exercises in this chapter can help you wherever you are in this process.

Getting Ready to Experience Posttraumatic Growth

Doing certain kinds of things can indicate that you're in a good position to experience posttraumatic growth. People who do these things are more likely to actively seek opportunities for growth. As you read through this list, ask yourself if you already are doing some of these things and if there are others that you could do as well. This list can provide you with an idea of what you can do differently to advance the process of growth.

I try to do things that I find personally enjoyable or engaging.

I do projects or work that I love.

The important activities in my life are often activities that involve the people I love.

I make sure to spend time with people who are dear to me.

I actively seek new ways in which to think about life, even if it means I've been wrong all along.

I ask people what they think about different social issues (on topics like politics, religion, culture, economics, lifestyles), so I can understand different points of view and develop my ability to think about life.

I choose new projects or activities based on whether they will help me develop my mind.

I consciously think about my connection to society and culture.

I set realistic goals for what I want to change in my situation or about myself.

I know how to make a realistic plan in order to make changes.

I ask for help when I try to make changes.

I know steps I can take to make changes in myself.

I know when it's time to change specific things about myself.

The fact that you are reading this workbook is an indicator that you are interested in personal growth. You are almost halfway through at this point, so you are persisting in this process. This is a very good sign. It means that you are already on the path to growing in spite of your trauma and suffering.

Posttraumatic Growth Takes Various Forms

What posttraumatic growth is like for you will be different from what it is like for others. There are different forms of posttraumatic growth and different combinations can happen within each individual. The kind of trauma you experienced, what you were like beforehand, and what you have been exposed to afterward all play a role in determining what form of growth you experience. As you learn more about what post-traumatic growth can look like, you will have an opportunity to move in specific

directions much more deliberately than someone who is dealing with their life after trauma without the knowledge or guidance offered in this book.

You may recognize that you have already begun to experience some aspects of growth. You may already be experiencing growth in certain ways, and as you recognize the positive changes that are occurring, you can build on them. If you are not yet seeing growth, we want to give you an idea of what could happen for you in the future. It's hard to achieve what you cannot imagine. So be aware of these possibilities or imagine these things.

Our research has shown that there are five general types of posttraumatic growth that people report: personal strength, improved relationships with others, appreciation of life, new paths and possibilities, and spiritual change and a new understanding of life's meaning and purpose. We discovered these five forms of positive change as we interviewed people who were doing particularly well in the aftermath of trauma, listened to their stories, and later analyzed what we heard.

Personal Strength

Many survivors of trauma are surprised to discover their own internal strength. Most of us would never imagine being in a situation where we needed that kind of strength, but if we had imagined it, we might not think we could bear being in a car wreck, being the one diagnosed with cancer, or being the parent whose child has died. Although we all realize that it's possible for bad things to happen to us, it may seem that they are other people's life experiences, not yours. What's amazing is that when it does happen to you, you find a way to manage what you're going through, discovering a strength that you had never known or needed before.

Some trauma survivors do not think of themselves as special, despite their ability to survive. They might say to those who admire them or see them as a hero, "What else was I supposed to do? Give up and die?" But your strength as a survivor of trauma is something worth recognizing.

In struggling with a highly stressful event, you may realize that you can handle extremely difficult problems. The daily battle with post-trauma difficulties leads some people to develop a greater degree of self-reliance. They realize that they can face extreme situations successfully. Many people who have lived through traumatic life events have told us that after going through their difficulties, they felt that other troubles would seem trivial by comparison. They've told us that they discovered psychological resources that they never before realized they possessed. They were able to manage their emotional distress, solve problems, and make significant changes in their lives.

You might find yourself noticing some of these strengths in yourself. Just as necessity is the mother of invention, for many people, trauma may be the mother of strength. Whether this strength was there all along or developed in the aftermath of crisis is unclear. Regardless, many people who survive a crisis come to realize it.

Here is what Victor, a young man who battled cancer, told us. "I am stronger psychologically. I can handle any stress situation—struggle makes any stress situation something that can strengthen you." When asked specifically about what had produced this sense of personal strength, he said, "I have been through so many ups and downs with this. I have had to be sick and miserable for so long. I have lost so much time to this disease. I have come up against the thought of giving up, more than once. At some point, I just marveled at myself, *Hey Vic, you're still here!* It was hard to believe how much I could endure. It started to become like some crazy challenge, like 'Bring it on!' I know it sounds crazy, but I got to find out how much I can take, and it was a source of some pride."

Nobody would volunteer to experience a tragic event, but the lesson is clear. In your struggle to survive, to cope, and to prevail, you are given an opportunity to develop a strength you didn't know you had. The struggle can make you stronger, even as you experience the pain that goes along with the trauma.

Here are some statements from people who have noticed or developed personal strength as part of the growth experience. These statements are based on what people have told us about their growth after trauma, such as the death of a loved one or physical disability. See to what extent you would agree with them:

I am better able to accept the way things work out.

I have a greater feeling of self-reliance.

I know better that I can handle difficulties.

I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was.

These statements reflect personal strength. You need personal strength to cope successfully with trauma, and trauma may be a testing ground that reveals these strengths in you. For example, coping successfully requires the ability to accept things as they are. Many traumatic events cannot be changed. Being angry, resentful, or depressed about something that cannot be changed is a waste of time and energy. People who are able to absorb what is now the new fact of life and focus on dealing with their new reality will do better. They can also begin to appreciate themselves for having the ability to do this.

Here again we want to be sure that you do not misunderstand something crucial. Acceptance is not the same as giving up. Accepting something that may be difficult to accept does not mean that you can't change other things in your situation. For example, a soldier who has suffered wounds that resulted in amputations must accept that his limbs are gone, but he does not have to accept that he will no longer be physically active. He may find the strength to focus on how to live with prosthetic limbs rather than give up on life.

Acceptance about everything related to your trauma also does not have to come all at once. You may be able to accept some things more easily than others. For example, a widow once told Rich that she could accept her husband's death after a long bout with cancer, as he was now at peace rather than in pain. But it was harder for her to accept living alone, especially at night, where she felt most lonely without his company. It was also harder to accept that she would never again have in her life the kind of love that they had shared. Still, she was able to recognize that she had shown a great deal of personal strength during her husband's illness when he needed a lot of medical care. And after his death, she had kept many friends and been active with them despite her grief. She had been married almost fifty years and did not ever consider how she could live without her husband, but she found she was doing just that.

This brings us to a second kind of personal strength that you may recognize in surviving trauma: appreciating your ability to rely on yourself and to face hardship. Some parts of what you are going through you must do on your own. No one else is going to live your life for you. You have to live it, whatever it now may be. The ability to face up to this, and to see that you can live this new life using your own personal resources, can be a source of pride and comfort. Here are some questions that will help you appreciate your own personal strength and growth since your trauma (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996).

EXERCISE: Recognizing Your Strength

Respond to each question in the space provided.

1. What have you done to cope that most clearly demonstrates the strength that has gotten you through this difficult time?

2. What are some things that seemed difficult before the trauma that now seem relatively easy for you, given what you have gone through?

3. What advice might you have for others who think that a situation similar to yours is too difficult to manage?

What did you learn about yourself from completing this exercise? You may be stronger and more capable than you previously realized. Write about your experience in your journal.

Improved Relationships with Others

An important part of the post-trauma experience is to find and accept concern from other people. While self-reliance is important, since no one can live out the aftermath of trauma for you, so is finding and accepting support. Accepting support brings you closer to others. You may find that your relationships become stronger and more intimate, in part, as a result of learning how kind and compassionate other people can be. Your relationships may improve with family members, friends, or even the general human family.

One couple we worked with was dealing with their son Charlie's drug addiction and eventual disability from the brain damage that it had caused. Charlie's mother described what Charlie's problems have done to her relationship with her husband. "I know that something like this might pull a lot of couples apart, but it has had the opposite effect with Glenn and me. I think we were kind of going our own ways before, focused on work and career aspirations, but now we've come together as Charlie's parents. We've had to make some tough decisions together, and Charlie is dependent on both of us to help him. And sometimes it is such a struggle that Glenn and I have to be able to tell when the other needs a break. We are much more of a team. We've also seen each other's pain in all of this, and we are much closer emotionally. I see a side of Glenn I never knew before, very tender and protective. And it makes me love him even more and show it too!"

See how your views of your post-trauma experience fit with the statements below.

I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are.

I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble.

I have a greater sense of closeness with others.

I am more willing to express my emotions.

I receive more compassion for others.

I put more effort into my relationships.

I better accept that I need others.

You may notice two general themes in these statements about how relationships with others may change as a result of trauma. One is that your trauma has helped you see that you can count on others and accept their help. This is an aspect of growth

because there is strength in being able to accept help. Men especially have often grown up with the idea that accepting help is a sign of weakness. Consequently, growth for many men involves the recognition that you can deal with difficulties more effectively if you seek help or accept it when offered. While men are prone to this idea that they must be weak if they need help, they are also raised to believe that teamwork is important. Thinking of accepting help as part of a team may make it easier for men. At some point, all of us need other people, and the acceptance of our need for others is an important lesson that trauma teaches us. Learning to accept your own limitations and vulnerabilities may allow you to appreciate the help of others more.

The other theme is that you can gain a greater appreciation for other people and begin to put more effort into your relationships. You learn that there are others who care about you. And as your compassion grows and your recognition of your own imperfections and needs increases, you have a greater chance of growing closer to other people. This is not to say that in times of need everyone will respond as you wish. Some people may disappoint you. Many survivors of trauma have stories of how people whom they thought they could count on were insensitive or absent. But most often there are some surprises, where people whom you may not have even expected to notice or respond have been especially kind.

Here are some questions to help you enhance your relationships with others in the aftermath of trauma (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996).

EXERCISE: Enhancing Your Relationships

Respond to each question in the space provided.

1. Were there people who pleasantly surprised you when you needed help after or during the traumatic or stressful situation? How can you show your appreciation?

2. Who are the people who could best understand what you have been going through? How could you communicate with them?

3. What do you now understand about being a human being that you did not fully understand before you went through your difficulties? How can you put that understanding into action?

What changes in your relationships with others have you noticed in the aftermath of your trauma? You may have felt nurtured by others, established new relationships, or found ways of being better connected to others. Write about your experience in your journal.

Appreciation of Life

Perhaps one of the most common lessons learned from experiencing loss is that life has much to offer. You are left with a greater appreciation for what you have. You may discover that your priorities have shifted. Most frequently, it is the enduring and everyday areas of life that people come to appreciate the most. For survivors of trauma, each simple aspect of life may be a wonderful gift.

The loss or threat of loss forces many people to confront how precious life can be. This confrontation can lead to a radical change of priorities and to a greater understanding of what is truly important. For most people, this radical change does not occur without the shattering experience of major loss, or at least the threat of a major loss. It's like the old saying, "You never miss the water till the well runs dry." The struggle with trauma forces people to confront, evaluate, and change their priorities.

Consider the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements:

I changed my priorities about what is important in life.

I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life.

I can better appreciate each day.

Traumas that threaten your life can make you appreciate the mere fact that you are alive. We often see survivors of floods, hurricanes, wildfires, and tornadoes speaking in front of their demolished homes. Many say, "We are so grateful to be alive. We can replace the stuff we lost but not each other." Some people talk about surviving a trauma as bonus time. Consider Malcolm, a young man who was badly wounded in a drive-by shooting: "I came this close to not being here. I've seen lots of people who got shot, but you know, I thought, *Who cares if I die? So what?* But when it really happened, I was so scared. I knew I wanted to live. Never knew I wanted it that bad. I really gotta take care of myself now. Take care of my life. I got another chance. I don't want to blow it."

This appreciation for life can show up in gratitude. It can lead people to offer prayers of thanks. It can lead people to slow down and savor their everyday lives. You may literally slow down to smell the roses, or pay careful attention to what your five senses bring to your experience. You may choose to eat slower and truly taste your food. You may take time to look around you. You may pay closer attention to the sensations in your own body.

Appreciation for life takes many forms. We have seen some people be more careful, take fewer risks, and then we have seen others who have done the opposite, and both types of people say they have learned to live in a way that makes the most of their life experience. Both are reporting a change in their perspectives and how they approach living in a way that expresses it.

An example of appreciating life by living it with more care is Luis, who lost his hand in an industrial accident. Here is what he said about how he has changed his approach to living.

"Of all people to have this happen, I couldn't believe it was me. Fifteen years at the plant—I had been the safety steward on my shift! Then this machine breaks and wham! It got me. So I figured I was useless now. Without a hand, I couldn't do this work. I was not going to be able to provide for my family. I was done. But the doctors started working with me to get me a new hand, a prosthesis. The doctors and their assistants spent a lot of time on me, and I started to think, *I can't give up, these people are working too hard for me to just give up on them, and myself.* And my family stuck by me. They didn't see me as useless. Lucky for me, the company, or the insurance, paid for things. If not for that, maybe I would have gone down the drain. But I started to think that there were a lot of good people working for me and that life was good—look what I had, all these people caring for me! I was also forced to slow down—I couldn't do my old routines. And doing stuff with one hand, man, it took forever to do things that are easy—easy with two, anyway. So that slowed me down. At first I was frustrated, but I had to learn to go with it, not be frustrated. So slowing down became something I started to do with everything, and it was like being deliberate about everything, noticing things. That is real different for me.

"Before, I couldn't wait to do stuff—I was very impatient and trying to get everything in, as much as possible. I would go out with my buddies and play basketball at night and stay out until midnight and then get up for work early. I always liked to do the stuff that was a thrill. I always seemed to want the adrenaline rush. Then, it all changed, and I changed with it. First, I resented it, losing the way I used to be. But now, I realize it's good. I talk to my kids. I am at home more. I am not impatient and irritable. It's because I have learned how lucky I am to have people who have stuck with me, even though I used to be so self-centered. I think I am a better man. My wife thinks so! I appreciate her more, too."

Here are some questions that will encourage you in appreciating your own life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996).

EXERCISE: Appreciating Your Life

Respond to each question in the space provided.

1. What have you lost or come close to losing as a result of your trauma that you didn't value enough before? Are there some things in your life now that you could demonstrate a greater appreciation for?

2. Do an experiment of slowly moving through a place familiar to you—in your house, your yard, your workplace, a public space, a natural area—and carefully take note of the smallest things. Look at things, listen to things, touch things, smell things, as if you were a child exploring them. What have you noticed in doing this?

3. Introduce a little extra time into certain activities of your day, so you can savor them. These could include eating, bathing, a chore, or your interactions with loved

ones, friends, or even people you hardly know, such as a store clerk. What have you noticed as you have done this?

What have you noticed that you appreciate about yourself and your life in the aftermath of trauma? There may be things that were easier to overlook prior to the trauma. Answer this question in your journal.

New Life Paths and Possibilities

Changes in your life path can be as great as a complete change in careers or as simple as increasing the degree to which you help out others who have experienced a variety of traumatic events. One outcome you may notice in yourself is that you hold more strongly to certain beliefs that guide your actions. These beliefs may reflect a new appreciation of life, and your priorities can change as you appreciate life more. Or it may be that you have new priorities or goals because the trauma has shut the door on old priorities and goals.

One young woman we worked with had been an athlete who was training for Olympic-level competition. Alice's whole life was focused on this goal. She became disabled after being in an auto accident and considered working toward the Paralympics. But during her time in rehabilitation, she became much more devoted to helping other patients who were struggling. Here is what she said about how this experience changed her priorities and goals. "After the accident, I was angry that my dreams had been dashed. I had been working toward my Olympic goals since I was ten. But I have always been determined, and so I figured I could still be a great athlete, but now a Paralympic

athlete. So that was my mind-set. Not too different from what I had always been and wanted to be. I was still going to find a way to be me. Then a strange thing started to happen. While I was in rehab, I saw other people struggling to recover, and the kids especially. I wanted to help them and motivate them. I started paying more attention to them than to my own goals. And one day, I realized my goals had changed. I didn't really want to win medals anymore. I got more out of seeing other people succeed. Especially when they surprised themselves, I loved it! So this was my new goal. And you know, I feel much better about it. I feel more giving and less selfish. Before it was all about me. People admired me for my athletics, but now people love me for my generosity."

Notice that the change in Alice sneaked up on her. She didn't realize that the change was happening. We want you to take time to consider changes in yourself. Think about what may be becoming most satisfying for you, most important, and how these new beliefs could become the basis for new goals in your life. Consider the statements below to see to what degree you may be on the pathway to new possibilities for your life.

I developed new interests.

I established a new path for my life.

I am able to do better things with my life.

New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise.

I am more likely to try to change things that need changing.

Certainly the switch from previously held goals and life paths to new ones will involve some sense of loss. For many people, putting aside what has been important for many years is difficult. Old goals and paths provided a sense of meaning and purpose. They may have been a basis for a great deal of success in life. You can't expect to switch to a new life path without some struggle and grief. This is another example of how post-traumatic growth does not come without struggle and without confronting loss. Out of these losses, however, something even more important and useful to you may emerge. Just think of Alice, who gave up a lifelong goal of becoming an elite athlete when she found that providing help to others gave her more satisfaction, drew her closer to people, and perhaps could provide meaning long after athletic achievements were no longer possible.

Here are some questions that may encourage you to see new possibilities in your own life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996).

EXERCISE: Seeing New Possibilities

Respond to the questions in the space provided.

1. Are there some activities and interests that no longer seem as important to you now as they once were? Take a close look at why that may be and how you view these interests now versus before.

2. What kinds of things do you wish you could do if you were not considering the practicalities involved?

3. Are there some small ways you can begin to integrate into your life the things you wish you could do?

What has become more important to you during your struggles? How can these things find a way into the life you are living and will live going forward? Answer these questions in your journal. You may notice that these changes were unplanned, surprising, and subtle. Try to turn them into more definite goals for yourself.

Spiritual Change and a New Understanding of Life's Meaning and Purpose

As you struggle to make sense out of what has happened and as you wrestle with the trauma you have encountered, you may face the task of trying to fit what has happened into the beliefs you have held. And as you struggle and wrestle with what has happened, an increased sense of the importance of spiritual matters, or an understanding of how to live life well, may be a result. Because of the trauma, things about life that were previously upsetting may have become trivial in comparison. You may even have some impatience with others who remain focused on such issues, who don't have the perspective that trauma can bring. A new perspective may come easily to you, or if you are like most people, it will involve an intensive and even long struggle with the major questions about the purpose or meaning of your life.

When we talk about these new perspectives on how to live life well, you may think about your religious beliefs, your spiritual sense, or your philosophy of life. Many people find guidance in scriptures while others seek it in more secular teachings and ideas. Many people find their own truths not in the words of others but in a very personal way that seems to come from within. Consider the statements below that represent some ways that people can change spiritually, in the broadest sense of that term.

I have greater clarity about life's meaning.

I have a greater sense that I am part of the fabric of life.

I feel better able to face questions about life and death.

I have a deeper sense of connection with the world.

I have a better grasp of what life is all about.

The key is to seek your own truth for how to live life well. And if you haven't figured it out yet, this is less important than the fact that you are searching. In fact, trying to determine how to live your life well is more a process than a specific answer to a question. For example, if you are a Christian and have concluded that the answer to how to live well is to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, you still have to figure out how to do that in this complicated world. Then you have to implement those teachings throughout your everyday life.

In some ways, trauma makes philosophers out of people. Many of us go through life not paying much attention to such questions as "What is the most important thing I can be doing with the time I have on this earth?" Or "Was I put here for a purpose?" Or "After I am gone, will my life have mattered?" Instead, most of us simply go through the daily routine and survive another day. Traumas force us to reconsider these questions or to consider them for the first time in a serious way.

One Vietnam War veteran described being shot down in a helicopter and the effect it has had on him ever since. In his description, we can see this aspect of growth: "The rotor blades were breaking apart. The fire was all around. We crashed and rolled on the side of a hill. I have never experienced a feeling like the one I had at that moment. The greatest experience of my life was occurring. The leaves on the trees were the deepest color green I had ever seen. In the encounter with the North Vietnamese troops, I wanted to capture them, not kill them. I did not want to deprive potential children of their fathers. I had to return fire to avoid being killed myself and to prevent their entry into our perimeter. I compare everything in my life to that experience. It is a question of whether or not I am being loyal to the experience. I simply know whether my actions and attitudes are in line with the experience of completion I experienced on that day in June."

One of the things that some people mention, as they describe what has changed in their deepest beliefs, is the idea of knowing things in a different way. As this veteran said, "I simply know."

Here is another example of this kind of knowing, described by a bereaved mother:

"And I realized before—well, you say you realize things, you read stuff and say, 'Yeah, that's right, like God first, and then your marriage, then your family and children.' And something like this happens, and it becomes more real to you—that priority and what's important. So you know it maybe intellectually before, but you realize it in a different way."

In dealing with your experience of trauma, you may already be involved in the process of addressing the big questions of how to live life well. Wherever you are in this process, here are some questions that may help you identify and use the principles that make sense to you (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996).

EXERCISE: Finding Meaning and Purpose

1. What do you realize now that you never clearly realized before the trauma?

2. What things did you think you knew before that you now know with greater conviction?

3. Do you have questions about how to live your life that are unanswered and perhaps even uncomfortable for you to consider? What are they?

What do you understand to be the deeper lessons of your experience? You might consider how to put this hard-won wisdom into practice in a way that brings you greater satisfaction in living your life. Write your answers to this question in your journal.

Some Concluding Words

The forms of growth we have discussed here are sometimes experienced as knowledge or wisdom achieved but are more often experienced as a work in progress. The fact that you are reading this workbook probably indicates that growth is still a work in progress for you. We think that people who see things this way are probably going to make the most of the difficulties of their traumatic experience. If you think you don't have things all figured out, you will continue to search and will find even more growth and change in the future. If you think you have found everything, you will stop searching.

We all wish to be comfortable, but getting uncomfortable has its set of own rewards. Therefore, this workbook is designed not to get you comfortable but to encourage you to stick with the discomforts you will experience on the path to posttraumatic growth. Of course, when people get too uncomfortable, they start to avoid things, and as we have mentioned before, avoidance is not the most useful way to deal with life after trauma. So we hope that you are finding enough comfort in this workbook to continue on the path to growth. The next few chapters will provide more information on how to engage in a process of searching that is fruitful and rewarding.

