Experience

Advice and Inspiration

MANAGING YOURSELF

GROWTH AFTER TRAUMA

Five steps for coming out of a crisis stronger

by Richard G. Tedeschi

WHAT GOOD CAN come of this? In times of stress, crisis, or trauma, people often ask that question. This year we've been hit by a pandemic that has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, unprecedented unemployment, and a global economic downturn. In the face of such a tragedy—personal and collective—it might appear that the answer is "Nothing."

However, at some point we will be able to reflect on the long-term consequences of this terrible time and what it has wrought for each of us as individuals and for our organizations, communities, and nations. Almost certainly those

Illustrations by **MICHELE MARCONI**

outcomes will include some good along with the bad. Over the past 25 years psychologists like me have been studying this phenomenon. We refer to it as *posttraumatic growth*.

We've learned that negative experiences can spur positive change, including a recognition of personal strength, the exploration of new possibilities, improved relationships, a greater appreciation for life, and spiritual growth. We see this in people who have endured war, natural disasters, bereavement, job loss and economic stress, serious illnesses and injuries. So despite the misery resulting from the coronavirus outbreak, many of us can expect to develop in beneficial ways in its aftermath. And leaders can help others to do so.

Although posttraumatic growth often happens naturally, without psychotherapy or other formal intervention, it can be facilitated in five ways: through education, emotional regulation, disclosure, narrative development, and service. As a researcher and a practicing psychotherapist, I (and my colleagues) have helped hundreds of people emerge stronger from suffering in these ways. You can emerge stronger yourself. And you can serve as what we call an *expert companion* for others, encouraging introspection and curiosity, actively listening, and offering compassionate feedback.

THE ELEMENTS OF GROWTH

Here are the five ways in more detail:

Education. To move through trauma to growth, one must first get educated about what the former is: a disruption of core belief systems. For example, before the pandemic, many of us thought we were safe from the types of diseases that endangered people in the past; that bad things happened in other parts of the world but not ours; and that our social and economic systems were resilient enough to weather all storms. None of that was true. So now we need to figure out what to believe instead.

When our assumptions are challenged, it is confusing and frightening and tends to produce anxious, repetitive thinking: *Why did this happen? Who's in control? What should I do now?* We are forced to rethink who we are, what kind of people surround us, what world we live in, and what future we will have. It can be extremely painful. But as research shows, it can also usher in change that will be of value. We must begin by learning and understanding that truth.

I once counseled a woman who, in her thirties, was disabled by a stroke and initially struggled to cope. But she soon understood that her changed circumstances would require her to reevaluate her identity: "Now I have to figure out what is next in this life I never thought I would be living. Part of me doesn't want to think I have to do this, but I know I do." That was the first step in her becoming a person with more compassion for herself who could accept limitations without being limited by them.

As we move through the current health and economic crisis, consider how you can reinforce—to yourself and others—the recognition that it may have a positive as well as a negative impact. Remember that you and others in your team and organization can reimagine how you operate and innovate in new circumstances. That may already be evident in the emergency measures taken to keep things going. For example, I know an IT employee of a food service company that laid off most of its workers earlier this year. As one of the few to remain, she was forced to work in functions and areas she'd never touched before, which was a struggle. But she soon realized that unencumbered by the usual bureaucracy and turf battles, she could ferret out inefficiencies and find ways to improve on old procedures.

Emotional regulation. To do any learning, one must be in the right frame of mind. That starts with managing negative emotions such as anxiety, guilt, and anger, which can be done by shifting the kind of thinking that leads to those feelings. Instead of focusing on losses, failures, uncertainties, and worst-case scenarios, try to recall successes, consider best-case possibilities, reflect on your own or your organization's resources and preparation, and think reasonably about what you—personally and as a group—can do.

For the founder of one dining chain, emotional regulation was crucial after his board ousted him from the CEO role. As he wrote in HBR ("Crucible: Losing the Top Job—and Winning It Back," October 2010), the news came as a complete shock, and he was furious at first. But when his father, also an investor, told him to "get [his] head around being supportive," he did. Instead of focusing on his anger and the feeling that he'd been betrayed, he started thinking about how he could stay calm and professional and help the business going forward. He eventually returned to lead the company.

You can regulate emotions directly by observing them as they are experienced. Physical exercise and meditative practices such as breathing also help. Employ these techniques yourself and share them to help others. Acknowledge that circumstances continue to be both challenging and frightening; then demonstrate poise under that pressure. And encourage more-frequent

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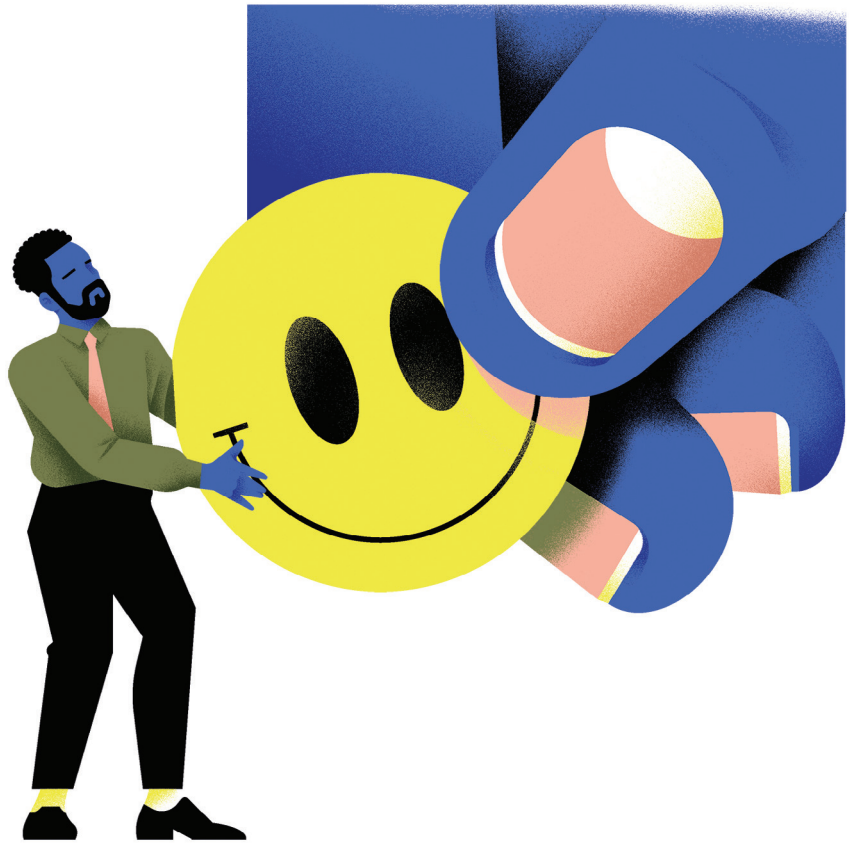

communication so that people feel less isolated and see their collective emotional strength more clearly.

Disclosure. This is the part of the process in which you talk about what has happened and is happening: its effects—both small and broad, short- and long-term, personal and professional, individual and organizational—and what you are struggling with in its wake. Articulating these things helps us to make sense of the trauma and turn debilitating thoughts into more-productive reflections.

If you're helping someone talk about what it's been like to experience this crisis, asking a lot of questions can seem like an intrusive interrogation spurred by curiosity rather than concern. It's best to focus on how the impact feels and which of your counterpart's concerns are most important.

A case study comes from a former client. A talented developer getting established in a new company, he created a program that had great promise. But then his bosses hired someone from the outside to run it, asking my client to report to him. Led by this manager, the program underperformed, and the developer was being blamed, damaging his reputation and career prospects. Finally he went to HR. "I wasn't sure if this was the right move," he told me, "but I needed to get some advice." Talking to the HR representative was cathartic, and he ended up telling her more than he'd planned to, because she asked questions such as "What did it feel like to have this project taken from you and essentially messed up?" She then worked to help him recover from that big professional setback.

It is important for you as a colleague and a leader to understand the varying impacts the pandemic and the ensuing market volatility, layoffs, and recession have had and continue to have on the lives of those around you. Start by speaking openly about your own struggles and how you are managing the uncertainty. You can then invite others to tell their stories, and listen attentively as they locate their difficulties and come to terms with how their challenges and losses compare with those of others.

Narrative development. The next step is to produce an authentic narrative about the trauma and our lives afterward so that we can accept the chapters already written and imagine crafting the next ones in a meaningful way. Your story—and the stories of people you're helping—can and should be about a traumatic past that leads to a better future.

Consider a nonprofit executive who had been fired from two previous positions over sexual harassment allegations. One night, as he and his wife were driving on the interstate, they were involved in a horrific crash, plowing into a stopped vehicle that didn't have its lights on. His wife's injuries were minor, but he was left comatose for a month and needed a year of rehabilitation to walk and talk again. His new narrative went something

like this: "Many would think it was this accident that put my life in jeopardy. But I was already in great danger. I was causing pain to others, ruining my career, and heading for a life without my wife or children. The accident forced me to stop, created time for reflection, and showed me what love really is."

When you're ready, start to shape the narrative of this year's trauma for yourself and your organization. How has it caused you to recalibrate your priorities? What new paths or opportunities have emerged from it? Look to famous stories of crucible leadership involving people such as Oprah Winfrey and Nelson Mandela, and companies such as Chrysler and Johnson & Johnson, that have emerged from crisis stronger. They are examples of posttraumatic growth. Study and derive hope from them and remind those connected to you to do the same.

Service. People do better in the aftermath of trauma if they find work that benefits others—helping people close to them or their broader community or victims of events similar to the ones they have endured. Two mothers I know who'd each lost a child started a nonprofit to help bereaved families connect with others who understood their grief. Forty years later the organization thrives under the leadership of people who have faced similar losses and want to share the strength they've gained.

Another great example of service comes from Ken Falke, who was a bomb-disposal specialist in the U.S. Navy for more than 20 years. Having seen the wounds of war firsthand, he wanted to help others recover. He and his wife, Julia, began by visiting hospitalized combat veterans, but they felt that wasn't enough. So they founded the organization where I now work: the Boulder Crest Institute, which has based its Retreat for Military and Veteran Wellness programs on the posttraumatic growth model.

Of course, you don't need to start a nonprofit or a foundation to be of service. Focusing on how you can help provide relief during the continuing crisis—whether by sewing masks or producing content, stocking shelves or retraining teammates, supporting small businesses or agreeing to a temporary pay cut—can lead to growth. So can simply expressing gratitude and showing compassion and empathy to others.

How you and your group turn to service will determine whether you see the pandemic and its fallout as an unmitigated tragedy or as an opportunity to find new and better ways to live and operate. Maybe you can see how to ensure that similar emergencies are handled better in the future. Perhaps you can help those most seriously affected. Look for personal and shared missions that energize you and help you find meaning.

THE BENEFITS

Hopefully, through this process, you and your teammates or organization

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will experience growth in one or more of these areas:

Personal strength. People are often surprised by how well they have handled trauma. They are left better equipped to tackle future challenges. That can apply to teams and organizations, too. Groups often come through such trials with a clearer picture of their collective knowledge, skills, resilience, and growth potential.

Take, for example, a restaurant owner who opened up his new place this past January. By March social distancing policies meant that his entire plan needed reconfiguring. He thought about laying off his staff, waiting for the pandemic to pass, and starting over. But he surprised himself by instead recommitting to the venture and engaging all his employees—from the kitchen and wait staff to his business team—to see if together they could find a way to proceed.

New possibilities. When new realities prevent the resumption of old habits, roles, and strategies, we must adapt and innovate. Leaders must have the courage and enthusiasm to test these new paths and show their people that change is to be embraced rather than feared.

The restaurant owner encouraged his group to invent a business that would draw on the resources they had—both personal and material—and allow the enterprise to survive. They began taking inventory of one another's skills and experiences and rose to the challenge of redesigning their work.

Improved relationships. These are often born of the need to give and receive support through trying times. Trauma can help forge new relationships and make people more grateful for the ones they already have. Coming through a crisis together is a bonding experience.

This happened quickly with the restaurant employees. They began to fully appreciate the value that each one of them brought to the table. People who had hardly known one another three months earlier became closer and began functioning as a tight and flexible team.

Appreciation for life. When confronted with fear and loss, we often become better at noticing what we still have but may have previously overlooked. Leaders can model this by acknowledging that fundamental things about living and working are to be valued. *We have a great team. Our customers appreciate the work we do. We've kept the business alive for the benefit of all who still work in it. Our organization strives toward a higher purpose.* Even something as mundane as remarking that your morning coffee tastes good counts.

Aware that most others in their industry were losing jobs, everyone at the restaurant agreed to stay on for less pay so that no one would be let go. All felt grateful to still be employed, no matter what role they might play in the revamped business. None seemed to consider any job beneath them. They appreciated having an opportunity to keep doing something worthwhile.

Spiritual growth. This comes from reflection on the "big questions" that are often ignored in the routine of daily life. The challenges to core beliefs that we encounter in trauma often force people to become amateur theologians or philosophers to design a life worth continuing to live. Organizations, too, can be confronted with existential questions: Are we conducting our business ethically? Do we practice the principles we preach? Should we be doing something else with our valuable time and resources? What is our contribution to the betterment of society? What is the primary motive for our ongoing existence? It takes courage and foresight for leaders to open up such issues to scrutiny.

The restaurant team decided that the business should be a hybrid: part grocery store, part food prep and takeout or delivery service, and part warehouse and distribution point for donations to the local food pantry. The owner and employees wanted to serve the community and knew they would build goodwill as a by-product. They were positioning themselves for short-term survival and long-term success. Any person, team, or organization can do the same.

If you're thinking this is all too optimistic or naive, you may still be too close to the tragedy of this pandemic. That may also be true of others around you. So be patient as you work through and facilitate the process of posttraumatic growth. Those of us practicing in this field know that timing is crucial. Growth can't be forced, and it can't be rushed.

However, when you and others are ready, it is worth the effort. Let's make sure that we derive something positive from this time of struggle. The possibilities for personal and collective growth should not be squandered.

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RICHARD G. TEDESCHI *is a professor of psychology emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; the distinguished chair of the Boulder Crest Institute; and a coauthor of* Posttraumatic Growth *(2018).*

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