

Some People Thrive After Trauma. Here's Why.

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SOME PEOPLE THRIVE AFTER TRAUMA. HERE'S WHY.

Psychotherapists and mental health experts — plus a former sniper — share insights on why certain people thrive after great adversity.



The Post-Traumatic Growth Factor



Fiona Tapp in Ottawa, Canada

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The pandemic was a collective, global trauma. Even if you were lucky and navigated the last few years without losing loved ones, a job or becoming ill, the experience of living under lockdowns, the uncertainty of a dangerous virus spreading through the world and the curtailment of freedom was a lived trauma. It's a loss we all carry.

Some people have responded to that grief in incredible ways. They have started businesses, new relationships, and even social movements. It turns out there's a term for this — and some helpful lessons that go along with it.

The concept of post-traumatic growth was developed in the 1990s by psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun. Suggesting that people can not only survive traumatic experiences but thrive in their wake, the concept of post-traumatic growth means more than bearing the weight of sadness, disease, crime or a cruel twist of fate. It refers to a period of reflection that fuels self-improvement, in which people in some cases emerge wiser and more resilient than before.

Everyone deals with grief and trauma a little differently, but those who experience post-traumatic growth tend to engage in reflection that goes beyond surviving and healing, and then they often seek out new opportunities.



Jeffrey Depatie knows all too well that trauma can affect every day that follows. He served in the special operations force of the Canadian military as a sniper for 13 years, a post that included deployment in counterterrorism activities in Afghanistan and Iraq. He subsequently grappled with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, as many service members do.

It was then that he studied the concept of post-traumatic growth, a journey that has helped him heal. "PTSD is part of a survival mechanism, but surviving doesn't mean living," he says. "As long as you're in the victim mindset, you're not going to thrive."

In 2016, Depatie conceptualized the Special Forces Experience, a rugged outdoor survival program that includes tactical and self-defense training. He ran his first event in 2019 and is currently planning the seventh for this year. In an intense wilderness experience lasting eight days, participants complete activities designed to facilitate post-traumatic growth. Held in either Northern Ontario, Canada, or Northern Idaho, U.S.A., only a handful of those who register actually make it through the tough program, which is called "The Process."

Your Brain on Trauma



Psychotherapist Alyza Berman founded the Berman Center, an Atlanta-based treatment center for mental health and addiction recovery. She explains that recovering from trauma often occurs in stages, beginning with a period of rumination, in which the brain attempts to process traumatic events, followed by something called “event centrality.” This involves a realization of the trauma’s effects and a need to take action to address the pain. Then comes “control,” says Berman. This is a time of learning coping mechanisms — which, for some people, involves post-traumatic growth. The final stage is “mastery,” notes Berman, in which the person has adjusted to a new post-trauma life and deploys the coping skills they’ve developed. Mastery often involves sharing wisdom with others.

Everyone deals with grief and trauma a little differently, but those who experience post-traumatic growth tend to engage in reflection that goes beyond surviving and healing, and then they often seek out new opportunities. Certain types of treatment, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, can help to facilitate post-traumatic growth.

Depatie is on a mission to help survivors choose post-traumatic growth rather than unhealthy coping mechanisms that are so common. He believes post-traumatic growth can be taught.



Depatie says that the opportunity for growth and new wisdom is often missed, as we may downplay our experiences and deny that we have lived through traumatic times at all. “Most people don’t really understand that they carry around trauma,” he says.

Deeply motivated to help others, Depatie has developed an approach to healing from trauma that he incorporates into his wilderness survival programming. It draws on the scientific principle of self-determination, which holds that we all have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, or the control over the course of our life and actions; competence, or the ability to learn and master new skills; and relatedness, which is a sense of connection to others and belonging in a community.

Depatie’s approach is also rooted in what’s known as the “hero’s journey,” a popular narrative arc that describes human growth as a metamorphosis from naivety to wisdom, culminating in using one’s knowledge to lead or guide others.

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An Individual Process



Depatie suffered an enormous loss during the pandemic. His mother, who had been battling cancer, made the decision to end her life through the [Canadian Medical Assistance in Dying](#) service. He says she displayed “true courage in the face of imminent death.”

The experience of losing his mother under such circumstances ignited a desire in him to share the concept of post-traumatic growth with a much larger audience. In collaboration with his wife, Jessica, he is now at work on a documentary project in which the two of them are interviewing survivors of traumatic experiences to record personal reflections about growth. Called [Dark Night of Our Soul](#), the series features an array of stories of trauma and healing paired with insights from cognitive neuroscientists, psychotherapists and others.

Everyone deals with their trauma and grows from it at different rates. Know that the process is gradual, and be patient with yourself.

- Alyza Berman 

If you're interested in exploring whether you've experienced post-traumatic growth or in identifying new opportunities to thrive in the future, the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory Scale is a tool for self-reporting responses to past hardship. Developed by psychologists Tedeschi and Calhoun, it facilitates reflection in the areas of relationships, sense of strength, spirituality, new possibilities and overall appreciation of life.

Berman notes that some people who experience enormous growth after trauma are inspiring — such as Depatie — but that this can also be intimidating. She cautions against drawing comparisons between your growth and that of others.

“It's easy to see others growing and making progress, but feel as if you are lacking because you have not hit those growth points yet,” she explains.
“Everyone deals with their trauma and grows from it at different rates. Know that the process is gradual, and be patient with yourself.”

Over a series of newsletters in the coming weeks, we will profile people who have responded to trauma in surprising ways, and share some lessons they've learned.

COMMUNITY CORNER



Has trauma or hardship shaped your life in a positive way? Please tell us about it.

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