

# Diamonds from the Rough: Positive Growth Through Adversity

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Traumatic events can produce negative effects either physically or psychologically; sometimes both. If it persists longer than three months and causes enough distress to disrupt

work or family life, one of four types of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may be diagnosed: 1. Reliving the event through nightmares or flashbacks; 2. Avoiding situations that remind of the adversity; 3. Negative changes in beliefs and feelings; and 4. Hyper-arousal with a hard time sleeping or concentrating.

Scientists in positive psychology examine the helpful impacts of stress rather than negative. In 2006, Calhoun and Tedeschi studied positive psychological changes that occur after one's struggle with a highly challenging, stressful, or traumatic event. They named it Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG). However, PTG was actually first made popular in the 1800's by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's whose quote is still echoed today in conversations and pop music: "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

A little known surprising realization is that a trauma doesn't mean you will necessarily get PTSD. Only a small portion that experience adversity develop PTSD and instead, many benefit from it. Scientists wanted to know more. They found that many people improved in one or more of five potential ways as a result of going through profound challenge. Some were better able to relate to others; open to new possibilities and people in their life; new personal strengths realized; often spiritual changes were incorporated; and a greater appreciation for living.

Positive psychology advocates became curious if we can gain PTG without having to suffer trauma? Can we escape the ingrained belief, "No pain, no gain?" Findings show that while PTG has evolved from heart attacks, plane crashes, tsunamis, MS, cancer, divorce, death, or paralysis, it is also triggered by non-traumatic events. Vicarious PTG was seen in those not directly suffering PTSD but simply exposed to the suffering of others such as care-giving work, supporting a friend/family through illness, or heartfelt news stories. This is why I love my work

as a counselor or why we enjoy inspirational movies about people overcoming great odds in the face of huge tragedy. Who doesn't like to see the underdog win big?

PTG seems to be the flip side of the regrets of the dying too. Bronnie Ware, an Australian nurse, spent years working for patients in the last 12 weeks of their lives. She recorded their dying epiphanies in a blog called Inspiration and Chai, which gained enough attention that she wrote a book titled "The Top Five Regrets of the Dying. The regrets identified were:

1. "I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, and not the life others expected of me"
2. "I wish I hadn't worked so hard"
3. I wish I had the courage to express my true feelings
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with friends
5. I wish I had let myself be happier

PTG involves a shift from mindless routine to a mindful awareness and gratitude for every day, a commitment to living honestly, emotional connection to loved ones, and exercising courage to protect personal priorities, which are all what the dying said they wish they had done while they had a chance. As Hellen Keller said, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all." Or as Bob Marley said, "Wake up and live." Whatever way it's expressed, PTG is all about Carpe Diem. Why wait for adversity to live fully? It's more fun and just as effective to grow on your own terms. Live the dream: YOUR dream.

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