



POST TRAUMATIC GROWTH: A CHOICE

Author: Megan Bronson

Being victimized is not a choice, nor is being the survivor of a traumatic incident that causes a burn injury. Children, adolescents, and adults do not make the choice to suffer this sort of injury. Even those individuals who appear to have made the desperate decision to inflict such a devastating injury on themselves do not do so out of sound problem-solving or clear minded judgement. Burn injury affects not only the person who suffered the burn, but also their loved ones, who also do not have the choice to stop whatever caused the burn injury to their loved one. Everyone involved in a burn injury would gladly take a pass on the traumatic incident happening at all to themselves or their family.

Traumatic injury, such as a burn injury occurs in an instant. In that instant, life is changed. Every aspect of one's being—spiritual, physical, emotional/mental, and social—are profoundly impacted after a burn injury. The suffering that occurs in early treatment and adjustment to burn injury is not a choice. Even the best pain management cannot take away all of the physical and emotional discomforts.

WHAT MAKES AN INCIDENT A TRAUMA?

The Diagnostic Screening Manual of Psychiatry (DSM-IV-TR) describes a traumatic event as one in which “the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with actual or threatened death or serious injury, or there was a threat to the physical integrity of self or others. The person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.” Certainly, most burn injuries meet this definition.

Traumatic injury affects our basic sense of safety in the world and can leave survivors feeling fragile, victimized, and out of control. Early in the process of recovery, most survivors struggle physically and emotionally and seek meaning related to their traumatic injury. What did I do to deserve this? Why am I being punished? and How will we ever get through this? are common questions. Statements such as "this is so unfair" and blaming others are common. The future looks uncertain and is often anxiety-provoking for all concerned.

PHASES OF RECOVERY AFTER TRAUMATIC INJURY

Victim: Feels at the effect of the trauma, sometimes feels hopeless, helpless, and victimized.

Survive: Feels less at the effect of the trauma and is beginning to reclaim hope and formulate a plan for going on with life in spite of the trauma.

Thrive: Reengaged with life and reclaiming previously enjoyed activities and relationships and also pursuing school, employment, new activities, and interests.

Transcend: Has found a way to transform the pain and suffering of their trauma into a way to give back and help others.

POST TRAUMATIC GROWTH

While traumatic incidents are rarely if ever our choosing, finding a way to move forward in life and transcend trauma is. This is possible when we choose to heal and recover and set our intention on these.

The concept of **Post Traumatic Growth**, once rarely considered as a possibility, is entering the consciousness of more and more survivors and also caregivers, counselors, and burn care professionals. Post Traumatic Growth refers to the possibility of recovery, positive change, and spiritual growth after traumatic injury and traumatic loss. Humans have the potential to make positive, life-affirming choices in response to trauma. Many survivors decide to do something positive with their lives in spite of their trauma and also for some survivors because of it.

Families and significant others of the burn survivor do not choose to have their loved ones injured. However, they can and most often do choose to support and accompany the burn survivor on the long and difficult path that leads to recovery and healing. Those who are part of the burn survivor's support system also can experience Post Traumatic Growth in the process of healing and recovering after burn injury.

What are the factors that are predictive of a positive recovery after burn injury? And what are the factors that predict the likelihood of Post Traumatic Growth? Richard Tedeschi, PhD and Lawrence Calhoun, PhD are pioneers in the study of Post Traumatic Growth and are part of the Post Traumatic Research Group of the Department of Psychology at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

The areas of change that the Research Group has identified as common areas of PTG are closer relationships, experiencing an increased sense of connection to others who suffer and an increased sense of their own strength, and a greater appreciation of life in general. More information is available regarding the work of the PTG Research Group at www.ptgi.uncc.edu.

Research indicates that the most important factors in the recovery and healing process after traumatic injury and traumatic loss are:

1. A strong social support system
2. Cognitive and emotional processing of the trauma
3. Openness to spiritual growth and change

RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH AFTER A BURN

1. Support groups for burn survivors and loved ones, grief and trauma, or substance abuse
2. Burn camps and retreats for youth, adults, and families
3. Seeking support from family, friends, or community groups
4. Integrative healing like yoga, therapeutic massage, sensory motor work, etc.
5. Therapies that facilitate processing of trauma such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR)
6. Online resources like Phoenix Society's Resource Center
7. Burn community events like Phoenix World Burn Congress

There are many things to be learned from struggle. Many survivors share a new sense of purpose in their lives, a profound shift in priorities and sense of what matters in life. They also can find a way to transform their suffering into a way to help others who suffer and to make a positive difference in the world. Post Traumatic Growth is possible and begins with the choice to set one's mind, body, and heart on healing, recovery, and growth.