TRANSCENDING TRAUMA

Post-Traumatic Growth Following Physical, Sexual, and Emotional Abuse

GERAL T. BLANCHARD
About This Sample Chapter

You are about to preview the table of contents and sample chapter of the new book, *Transcending Trauma*, which will be published by Safer Society Press in October 2013. We have chosen this chapter because it is representative of the practical information you can expect to find in all the chapters.

The book will be available for purchase after October 2013 from our Web Store or by calling 802-247-3132.
Contents

CHAPTER 1 | From Trauma to Transcendence

CHAPTER 2 | Compassionate Responsiveness

CHAPTER 3 | Resiliency and the Birth of Hope

CHAPTER 4 | Post-Traumatic Growth

CHAPTER 5 | Sexual Abuse Recovery

CHAPTER 6 | Vicarious Resilience

CHAPTER 7 | Assessment and Interviewing

CHAPTER 8 | The Soul of Counseling
You are about to examine trauma from a new and encouraging perspective, one that suggests that post-traumatic growth (PTG), and even thriving, are possible after experiencing tragic events. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun, who coined the term *post-traumatic growth* in 1998, people who experienced PTG reported positive change in five areas: they had a renewed appreciation for life; they found new possibilities for themselves; they felt more personal strength; their relationships improved; and they felt spiritually more satisfied. For these people, trauma was not a derailment of their lives, but rather an event that shook them deeply putting them on a healthier life track.

As we will see in this book, the trajectory of a trauma victim’s life is determined not by the traumatic event itself, but by the victim’s response to the event. The victim’s response, in turn, is strongly affected by the victim’s social environment. The influence of the social environment has been seen in studies of American soldiers, where post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is higher among veterans who cannot reconnect with supportive people. The same results were found in a study of Nepalese child soldiers (Korht 2006) and in experiments with lab rats (Plotsky 2008). In each case, the quality of the post-traumatic social environment played a major role in determining whether trauma was the prelude to a breakdown or the initiation of a breakthrough.

This psychological exploration will be imbued with words of hope and encouragement, ideas that I believe will ring true to you as you digest the substantive foundation that post-traumatic growth is built upon. Helping professionals know that trauma victims need much more than pep talks or cheerleading. They benefit most from solid information,
clear guidelines, and real-life examples of people who have blossomed into their best selves following excruciating physical and/or emotional pain. In short, what they need from you is the guidance that will help them make the most out of trying times, a template that can turn adversity into opportunity while steering their lives in the direction of deeper meaning and inner strength. Prepare to sit with some new and invigorating concepts that expand the prevailing PTSD paradigm.

I wrote this book for my fellow health care professionals, including psychologists, psychotherapists, and social workers, who work in the trauma field, especially those who support victims of sexual abuse. Most of you are probably very familiar with much of the psychiatric literature espousing the “breakage theory” of trauma, describing victims as “shattered vases.” Rather than repeatedly referencing existing trauma theory for purposes of comparison, contrast, and argument, I will simply offer a new and consistently positive message of hope that is grounded in research and supported by personal anecdotes and common sense. Again and again I will assert that specific types of events do not, by themselves, determine if someone will be harmed by trauma. A victim’s response to trauma, including the posture and meaning assigned to the experience, will most likely be the factor that will make or break the individual. What victims believe and how they relate to adversity will be every bit as important to recovery as the tragedy itself. Whether a person has been terrorized by sexual abuse, a hostage situation, or a tornado, a resilient response will be required to successfully integrate the experience and grow from it. One challenge for the helping professional is to know all the factors that give rise to growth and fan the sparks of hope into a towering flame. Another challenge is to learn how some types of trauma, sexual abuse as an example, may require additional understanding and a unique language to best tailor an individual treatment plan that will help to assure growth.

There is no one type of definable traumatic event, whether physical, emotional, or sexual, that by itself has greater power than any other to generate a damaging response. What matters most for the creation of lasting injury or a robust rebound is the victim’s personal response to what has happened, the way in which the victim relates to the suffering. In other words, what is important is how victims fashion a belief system
that makes meaning of the experience and successfully fit it into their ever-changing and expanding life narrative. The way in which individuals are guided to talk about their horrors, and how they flexibly tell their story of those events, sets the stage for either the diagnosis of PTSD or the possibility of a positive transformation. Trauma victims clearly have a vote in the matter. The therapist is charged with focusing the spotlight on every opportunity for empowerment and to support new, wise, and increasingly effective choices. I will discuss some of the methods I have used in my own practice to “focus the spotlight” in chapter 7.

A diagnosis of PTSD will be presented not as a fixed, lasting, or final destination for trauma sufferers, but rather as one point on a wide and dynamic continuum ranging from the symptomatic expression of PTSD all the way to a post-traumatic thriving response. Like others before me (Pearsall 2003; Haidt 2006; Joseph 2011) I will posit that PTSD is often the starting point for recovery, in fact it is often the impetus for growth. PTSD is part of a natural healing process that can serve as a catalytic factor, jumpstarting amazing psychological transformations. From that perspective, trauma, and more specifically PTSD, can be regarded as a necessary and liberating first step for individuals to discover a path of flourishing. And while traumas can present in limitless, diverse, and unimaginable forms, there are now documented ways people can respond to pain that eventually help them benefit from the experience; not in every case, but with amazing frequency. The chapters that follow will spell out many of the social, psychological, spiritual, biochemical, and neurological factors that can liberate victims from their past.

As we proceed, I will refer to trauma in many ways: as a crisis, a tragic event, a discomforting wound, a very difficult adversity, and even a near-death experience. All these terms are intended to describe the experiences of pain that naturally and predictably come with being human and being alive. Trauma will not be consigned to just those rare and singularly horrific events that make the evening news, but will encompass what can be just as painful, namely those many smaller yet cumulatively searing experiences that most of us accumulate over a lifetime. As we examine this universally traveled path, you may, perhaps even to your surprise, find the journey to be uplifting and unexpectedly hopeful at times. It should be that way, as the facts about to be presented will
support the promise of substantially better trauma outcomes than have been previously considered.

The first step on this path is to define trauma and differentiate it from suffering. Historically, we have regarded trauma as an unexpected, uncontrollable, and frightening injury, whether physical or emotional, severe enough in nature that it can result in disordered conditions at both levels. Additionally, trauma is regarded as an extreme form of stress or fear that can even be life threatening. It momentarily overloads the human system and, in some instances, results in temporary or permanent immobilization, helplessness, hopelessness, and hyperarousal, carrying the potential for significant body dysregulation and mental detachment from reality. In contrast, suffering will be portrayed as the result of our editorial response to pain. It will be described as the negative commentary, the grumbling, complaining, and labeling—in essence all the background noise of our own making that keeps pain alive and can deepen the original wound. Said another way, trauma comes from an external source but is often maintained or exacerbated by an internal process. Suffering can be regarded as the inability to tolerate painful events for any extended period of time. It results from attempts to escape the discomfort of reality, what Buddhists refer to as “what is.” A traumatic wound is not limited to something that happened to us in the past, it is primarily the inability to stay connected with our best essence and deeper nature in light of what has happened to us.

To expedite recovery it helps to be surrounded by a community of confident individuals who have effectively squeezed every available lesson, every benefit, from their own brushes with adversity. Usually these folks won’t settle for coping or surviving; they want more from life, they want to thrive. There are many such people who aren’t satisfied to merely bounce back after adversity. They desire a life lived fully, including the experience of feeling things deeply including pain, joy, despair, and awe. Thrivers are people who continue to expand after each and every test and eventually flourish. For many people, trauma serves to awaken them to this possibility. From these individuals I have heard many inspirational stories and learned a great deal about post-traumatic growth, about being steeled by life’s most demanding tests. And as more
hope-filled individual stories evolve into cultural stories, an entirely new set of social expectations may develop in this country.

Researchers (Breslau and Kessler 2001) have estimated that 75 percent of all people will experience some kind of trauma over their lifespan. It is healthy and an adaptive part of living to expect the unexpected. Within a given year, one-fifth of us will experience a potentially traumatic event (Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, and Nelson 1995; Elliot and Briere 1995). The good news is that while it is natural for human beings, and all other creatures, to undergo traumas, it is just as natural for us to shake them off.

Most people have experienced at least one trauma in childhood, usually several. The majority of us, including children, seem to escape the damaging effects of trauma, something psychologists have referred to as resiliency (Karr-Morse and Wiley 2012). The exemplary skills and abilities of resilient children, plus the social support made available to them, along with their inspirational philosophies and spirituality, have contributed much to the field of positive psychology and have illustrated the chapters to come.

The theories and solutions outlined in this book will be woven together by some common threads. The way through suffering comes from surrendering to it, but not by passive acquiescence. The way out is the way through. Recovery comes from befriending pain, experiencing the tension of it, and not trying to resolve it too quickly. An important first step to rebound and then thrive is to refuse to allow associated emotions of grief, fear, and sadness to be labeled as pathological. Being in pain doesn’t mean something is wrong with a person; more often than not it means the person is alive, responsive, and normal. By temporarily immersing oneself in the vulnerable emotions of fear, hurt, sadness, and grief one can prevent those feelings from later being transmuted into destructive forces like cynicism, anger, resentment, hate, and vengeance. Sitting with strong emotions, or as I prefer to call it “surfing emotions,” usually does not cause serious problems, whereas avoiding them almost always does. Problems occur when individuals get stuck in their own mental mud, spinning their wheels telling a tragic tale with only one allowable outcome.

Ours is a culture that values the quest for continuous pleasure and, as a result, the immediate elimination of all pain. Many people have settled
on the dictum that the pursuit of happiness is what will provide a satisfying life, a life worth living. It is more than an expectation; this pursuit is regarded by many of us as an inviolable legal right, so sacrosanct that it has even been written into the U. S. Constitution. Yet, our country’s burgeoning addictions are evidence that this philosophy, when carried to an extreme, is flawed. As a nation we are unwilling to sit with pain or discomfort for very long. Massive amounts of instantaneous, readily accessible sources of pleasure and excitement are used to eradicate life’s normal and abnormal discomforts. This process is the very definition of addiction. Antidepressant, anti-anxiety, and mood-stabilizing prescription drugs are readily available to help us tamp down the normal emotional hurt that comes with being alive. At this point in history, Western cultures tend to be reacting in largely fearful ways that are often generated by profitable “neuromarketing” and an irrational shared worldview that is not grounded in scientific facts. This is happening despite the statistics, which reveal that interpersonal violence is plummeting, especially when contrasted with the “good old days” of 10 to 20 years ago when life was far more dangerous. The FBI, the Centers for Disease Control, the American Cancer Society, and the Department of Justice are a few examples of organizations that churn out crime and public health numbers every year that, without expert help in their interpretation, are enough to cause all of us to never leave home without a helmet, a gun, bear spray, and an emergency medical kit. In truth, almost all types of violent crime including homicides, rapes, child physical and sexual abuse, child abductions (the “stranger danger” phenomenon), and online sexual solicitations of children have declined precipitously in the United States and Canada. Teen promiscuity and adolescent risky behaviors are on the decline. Overall, most cancer and cholesterol rates are down too. Despite all this encouraging news, fear of all these presumed epidemics appears to be on the rise (Horwitz and Wakefield 2012; Pinker 2011; Gardner 2009). In confusing times like these, wisdom and clarity sometimes come from the strangest places. I recall the TV cartoon character, Bart Simpson, once saying to a friend, “People can come up with statistics to prove anything, Kent. Forty percent of all people know that.” What we do with trauma can be comparable to what we do with statistics if we operate only from a place of fear.
Living in a time period when the marketing of fear has become very profitable and even trauma industries abound, it is understandable that we have become extremely apprehensive about the awful things that may befall us, albeit of very low probability. Repetitious media exposure to violent events and the corresponding media interpretations of the epidemics that are supposedly engulfing us can shape an exaggerated emotional response. It follows that we would develop symptoms of psychological, physical, and emotional illnesses that match the cultural messages being conveyed by the news/entertainment industry. It is the human inclination to conform individual beliefs to that of the group, to one’s tribe or nation. In the process, people tend to erroneously conclude they are suffering from a psychological condition when their community focuses significant attention on frequently described symptoms. External community pressures can easily negate a person’s slumbering inner wisdom, the common sense that, if given voice, would contradict cultural exaggerations. Closer examination reveals that most painful emotional events, by themselves, are not intrinsically dangerous to a person’s ongoing mental health. Their impact is largely determined by a limited compendium of culturally-scripted and programmed responses to widely publicized types of crises, some of which are promulgated by the psychological and psychiatric professions. Clearly, the time to think outside culturally narrow boxes is today.

In my book, *Ancient Ways: Indigenous Healing Innovations for the 21st Century* (2011), and in the many magazine articles I’ve written, I have explored in depth how indigenous cultures and animal friends can provide life skills for people on a journey of healing. In this book, I will offer examples from other societies—often so-called primitive tribes—of how diverse cultures at different historical times have responded in various ways to trauma, some with greater adaptability than others.

Most people are like willow trees, capable of bending down and back, again and again, when faced with a strong wind. Sometimes branches will be broken and permanent scars will remain, but the meaning attached to those powerful shaping events carries the potential to make individuals stronger than before the storm’s onslaught. They may never be the same following a trauma. Change is likely. But change in the direction of
strength and growth is a strong possibility. In fact, it is a realistic goal for virtually everyone who is languishing in the wake of trauma.

Most everyone can recall inspiring stories about amazing people who surmounted difficult periods in their lives like Nelson Mandella, Anne Frank, Viktor Frankl, Muhammad Ali, Elizabeth Smart, and many more. Their examples are remembered because of accomplishments unrelated to trauma and by their historical presence in the media. The common theme in their stories is that the troubles they faced in life were actually initiatory experiences, events that elevated them to another more satisfying level of adjustment. The pain of trauma was a necessary ingredient standing between each person and their most vital self. The many victims of interpersonal trauma who have come through the doors of my psychotherapy office, whose reputations were not as enormous as the ones I just mentioned, have nevertheless have displayed exemplary coffee-shop wisdom, willowy strength, and a rough ‘n’ tumble grace that brought them home to their elemental best self. They have touched me in ways that were both inspirational and humbling. In the pages to come, I will try to accurately extract the meaning from their struggles, and with the help of current research, craft a message of realistic hopefulness. Tragedy can be taken in any number of directions. This book posits that hope is not a naïve response to trauma. Hope, in tandem with social support and the purposeful search for meaning, is the shorthand prescription for thriving. It is what Native Americans call good medicine.

References


