

The Influence of Disclosure and Religiosity on the Posttraumatic

Growth of Bereaved Adolescents

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Abstract

Research supports that disclosing about a stressful life event and strong religious beliefs can lead to positive psychological growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The current study examined the five domains of posttraumatic growth (PTG) in relation to the disclosure choices and religiosity of bereaved high school students. Participants reported how they changed psychologically since the death of a loved one by using the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). They also indicated the strength of their religious beliefs, whether or not they talked about the death with someone and the amount of detail they disclosed about the death. The results of the Mann-Whitney test comparing the scores of the five PTG domains and disclosure showed a significant difference in the domain of *Personal Strength* for bereaved adolescents that disclosed about the death of a loved one. However, detailed disclosure about the death was not significant. While the religiosity of a bereaved adolescent using the results of a non-parametric correlation indicated significance in the domain of *Spiritual Change*. Implications for future research and clinical practice with adolescents are discussed.

Keywords: Posttraumatic growth, adolescents, religion, disclosure, detailed disclosure

The Influence of Disclosure and Religiosity on the Posttraumatic Growth of Bereaved Adolescents

There is no shortage of studies related to loss and trauma that focus on the possible negative and debilitating outcomes of stressful life events (Adler, Vaitkus, & Martin, 1996). In recent literature, a new field of study, posttraumatic growth (PTG) has emerged that now recognizes that positive outcomes can be a result of loss and trauma. PTG is described as significant positive psychological changes manifested as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life events. These changes include shifts in interpersonal relationships, philosophy of life, and perception of self (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

One might ponder how there could be positive affects to experiencing the death of a loved one; however, there are studies being conducted that report individuals as having a stronger sense of self and the world after surviving the death of a close family member or friend. Like adults and college undergraduate students, adolescents experience high levels of trauma. Yet, adolescents may be at greater risk to experience negative outcomes (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), emotional distress, substance abuse and dependence, and major depressive episodes) due to their developmental immaturity, lack of skills to resolve conflict, limited resources and struggles for identity formation (Compas, 1998) when compared with young and middle age adults (Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, & Hughes, 1995). Although, adolescents are at risk to the negative affects of trauma, they could also possibly benefit from experiencing posttraumatic growth (PTG).

There are factors that researchers believe can assist in the development of PTG and previous studies show that disclosing about a traumatic event can facilitate PTG. Disclosing about personally experienced stressors or traumatic events has been associated with

improvements in mental and physical health in numerous studies (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000). Another factor associated with positive psychological growth is the religiosity of an individual (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). One's spirituality can help individuals because most religions have developed their own framework through which trauma can be viewed as meaningful.

Thus, this pilot study with high school students was conducted to examine how having strong religious beliefs, talking about the death and detailed disclosure about the death of a loved one influence positive psychological growth in bereaved adolescents. Three hypotheses guided this study: *1. Bereaved adolescents who speak with someone concerning the death of a loved one will show higher PTG than adolescents that don't speak with another individual concerning the death, 2. Bereaved adolescents who report more detailed disclosure of the death of a loved one will experience higher PTG, and 3. Bereaved adolescents that report stronger religious beliefs will report greater PTG than bereaved adolescents with no or weaker religious beliefs.*

Methods

Participants

This pilot study includes 18 participants comprised of 10 males and 8 females. The participants were ninth to twelfth grade students from public high schools in the United States of America. There were eight first year high school students, zero sophomores, eight juniors and two seniors. These participants were part of a larger sample of high school students. They indicated the death of a loved one as the "most stressful life event that they felt comfortable sharing" with the research team.

Measurement

Disclosure. Participants were asked whether or not they had spoke with someone about the death of a loved one. Disclosure was classified as spoke with someone about the death of a loved one and had not disclosed to anyone about the death.

Detailed Disclosure. The variable of detailed disclosure was measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 7, “1” being “the participant spoke about the death using little detail” and “7” being “very detailed”.

Religiosity. To measure religiosity, participants were asked to indicate how strongly they believed in their religious affiliation by selecting one of the following statements: I strongly believe in my religion, I believe in my religion, I believe in my religion a little bit, I do not believe in my religion, I do not believe in religion at all and I do not know.

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG). The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) is used to measure the positive psychological growth of a participant in five domains: Personal Strength, Appreciation of Life, Spiritual Change, New Possibilities and Relating to others. The PTGI contains 21 statements that assess psychological changes by using a 6-point Likert-type scale. Participants rate the statements from 0 to 6: 0 is “I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis”, 1 is “I experienced this change to a very small degree as a result of my crisis”, 2 is “I experienced this change to a small degree of my crisis”, 3 is “I experienced this change to a moderate degree as a result of my crisis”, 4 is “I experience this change to a great degree as a result of my crisis” and 5 is “I experience this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis”. The sum of these items, gives the individual his/her total score for growth, ranging between zero and 105.

Procedure

To collect data for this study, the researchers contacted personnel at local schools. Once a school agreed to allow the study to take place on campus, the school was given information-consent letters for participation. The letters explained the purpose of the study and what to expect if a student chose to take the survey. Consent forms were collected and surveys sent to the school for students who volunteered to complete them. On the day of the survey, students were introduced to the researchers, participated in an icebreaker, and completed the survey.

The survey taken by the participants was a paper and pencil questionnaire containing; the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) and questions about a traumatic event the participant felt comfortable sharing on the survey. In the survey we also asked students to indicate if they had spoken about the death of a loved one to someone else or not. Participants were also asked to indicate in how much detail they spoke about the death of a loved and level of religion beliefs.

Results

Disclosure and PTG

Hypothesis one, which stated that speaking about the death of a loved one will show an increased experience of PTG, was supported. The Mann-Whitney test was used to compare the scores of the five PTG domains and disclosure. PTG levels differ significantly between participants that disclosed ($Mdn=10.45$) and those that did not ($Mdn=5.25$). These participants showed a significant change in the PTG domain of *Personal Strength* ($Mann-Whitney U= 8.00$, $z=-2.12$, $p<.05$). Therefore, bereaved adolescents have a greater chance of experiencing growth when they choose to talk about the death of a loved one.

Detailed Disclosure of the Death of a Loved One

Hypothesis two, the belief that bereaved adolescent who spoke in more detail about the death of a loved one would experience greater PTG than those adolescents who spoke about the

death in less detail, was not supported. Kendall's rank correlation coefficients were ran for detailed disclosure and the five PTG domains. For this pilot study of 18 participants, the results suggest that there is not a statistically significant correlation between bereaved adolescents that disclosed in minimal detail in comparison to those participants that disclosed in great detail in *Relating to Others* ($\tau = -.23, p = .25$), *New Possibilities* ($\tau = -.11, p = .56$), *Personal Strength* ($\tau = -.14, p = .49$), *Appreciation of Life* ($\tau = -.09, p = .64$), and *Spiritual Change* ($\tau = .07, p = .72$).

Religious Strength and PTG

Hypothesis three, the stronger a bereaved adolescent's religious beliefs the greater their PTG experience will be, was supported. Analysis of religiosity and the PTG of bereaved adolescents yielded significant results. The Kendall's rank correlation coefficient indicated that in the area of religious strength, the PTG domain of *Spiritual Change* ($\tau = -.81, p < .001$) is the area most influenced in terms of positive psychological growth, whereas in the other four domains there were no significant correlations: *Relating to Others* ($\tau = -.19, p = .35$), *New Possibilities* ($\tau = -.35, p = .07$), *Personal Strength* ($\tau = -.06, p = .78$), and *Appreciation of Life* ($\tau = -.04, p = .84$).

Discussion

It is evident in this study that disclosure and religious beliefs significantly impact the positive psychological change of an adolescent. Previous studies show that disclosing about a traumatic life even can lead to experiencing greater PTG. The results show that talking about the death of a loved one builds an adolescent's growth in the area of *Personal Strength*. Therefore, talking about the death of a loved one should be encouraged in order to facilitate PTG. This pilot study also supported that religious strength is positively associated with PTG.

Previous research shows that speaking about the death of a loved one clearly increases

the amount of total PTG experienced by bereaved individuals (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000). In this study, although bereaved adolescents that shared their thoughts about the death of a loved one experienced greater total PTG, after looking at the five PTG domains only the domain of *Personal Strength* yielded significance. A closer investigate of the relationship between PTG domains and disclosure should be conducted to ascertain why only the area of *Personal Strength* showed greater positive psychological gains and not *New Possibilities*, *Appreciation of Life*, *Spiritual Change* nor *Relating to Others*. Could it be that bereaved adolescents would show greater *Appreciation of Life* following a recent death or that speaking about the death would foster a stronger connection to other people, *Relating to Others*? Upon further examination of these domains, there may be reasons for an adolescent to experience greater growth in the area of *New Possibilities*. For example, if adolescents become better problem solvers after the death of a loved one; thus, learning how to cope with life altering situations. For an adolescent the amount of *Spiritual Change* experienced may vary depending on how the adolescent views their role in life following the death of a loved one. Perhaps, the act of disclosing about the death of a loved one takes courage and once an adolescent has disclosed about the death he or she feels a great sense of accomplishment. Although there were no significant findings in this study based on detailed disclosure, further research may show that more disclosure may lead to greater PTG in varying domains analyzing a larger sample size.

Being a part of a religious affiliation can be a major aspect of a teenager's life (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The findings clearly show that adolescents experience growth in the area of *Spiritual Change* depending on the strength of their current religious beliefs, but the current study cannot explain why or how this change occurs. This change may occur because a religiously committed adolescent makes a stronger connection to

their religious affiliation after the death of a loved one. Based on the findings of this study, a follow up study may show that religiously strong adolescents may show greater growth eventually in the PTG domains of *New Possibilities* and *Relating to Others*, especially if an adolescent's religious affiliation is viewed as a social network. This finding may be due to the social support system that individuals develop in their places of worship. Attending services regularly could influence how an individual views death. If death is not viewed as an ending, but a new beginning in a wonderful place, such as heaven, then individuals may experience PTG instead of viewing the death of a loved one as a loss. Knowing whether or not a teen has a social network through a religious affiliation can assist in facilitating positive psychological growth with the knowledge of how often he/she attends religious outings/events.

Limitations and Future Directions

There is one major limitation in this pilot study, having a sample size of only 18 participants. In order to confirm the results found in this study, there needs to be confirmatory analysis using a larger sample size of bereaved adolescents. Future studies should examine the impact of disclosure and religiosity further. In the area of disclosure, is it more beneficial for an adolescent to disclose to a family member, friend or teacher? Does the same amount of growth occur when an adolescent writes about the event? In the area of religious strength, investigating a student's religious affiliation and how the organization views death could provide adults with a method for explaining the death of a loved one in a meaningful manner. Perhaps, if an adolescent has an outlet where he or she feels comfort expressing his/her grief may duplicate the results of religious strength. Conducting future research to answer these questions could be beneficial to grief programming for adolescents.

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