Post-Traumatic Growth and Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 11/2013

Key Messages:

- Although stressful, a person?s experience with cancer may stimulate positive life changes and personal growth.
- Coping with the challenges of cancer can improve relationships, open new life experiences, create a greater appreciation for life, promote a sense of personal strength, and increase spirituality.
- There are a number of ways to encourage and evaluate your personal growth throughout your cancer experience.

The concept that suffering can be a source of positive personal change has deep roots in many ancient philosophies and traditions, but scientific research trying to explain it is relatively new. Some studies have found that after a traumatic event, such as a cancer diagnosis, reports of personal growth are more common than reports of psychiatric disorders. There are a number of cancer-related studies that show patients and survivors, as well as their friends and family, may benefit greatly from the challenges associated with the disease.

The positive life changes that develop as a result of a stressful, frightening experience are often referred to as ?post-traumatic growth.? Researchers note that post-traumatic growth should not be confused with resilience. Resilience describes people "bouncing back" or returning to their previous levels of functioning, whereas post-traumatic growth refers to positive personal change of some kind.

Types of personal growth

People may experience different types of growth while coping with cancer, including:

Improved interpersonal relationships. Living with cancer may increase feelings of closeness or intimacy with family or friends and make it easier to connect with others who have experienced a traumatic event.

New life experiences. Being diagnosed with cancer may provide the incentive to make a career change, overcome a fear, or accomplish a life goal.

A greater appreciation for life. Having an increased awareness of life?s value or a new sense of vulnerability to death may result in positive changes in your daily life.

A sense of personal strength. Living with cancer can help you develop increased mental strength and a sense

of empowerment.

Spiritual development. Many people living with cancer find they gain an increased interest in practicing religion or integrating spirituality into their daily lives.

It is important to note that experiencing post-traumatic growth does not necessarily mean that you have completely overcome the stress and other emotional responses to a cancer diagnosis; growth and suffering can occur at the same time. In fact, most people who report post-traumatic growth also report simultaneously experiencing struggles with their trauma. Additionally, a person may grow in one area of their life and not another, or in a number of areas at different times.

Post-traumatic growth, like post-traumatic stress [3], is not universal. Research suggests that there are some personality traits that make a person more likely to experience personal growth, such as openness to new experiences and agreeableness. Other factors being looked at include an ability to confront trauma, a support network that encourages personal growth, and individual coping strategies that help a person adapt to difficult events.

Encouraging personal growth

To encourage personal growth in response to the challenges of living with cancer, consider the following:

Reduce anxiety. Find ways to minimize your anxiety [4] and tension, such as using relaxation techniques, exercising regularly, or talking with supportive friends.

Reflect on your experience. Journaling [5] or talking with a friend or family member are ways to process and make sense of a traumatic event.

Restore a sense of safety. To feel less vulnerable, some people may need to talk with a mental health professional, such as a counselor, while others may find security by talking to a chaplain or spiritual advisor.

Connect with others. Interacting with a network of people who have had similar experiences can help you look at your cancer experience in a different light. Learn more about support groups [6].

Create a post-trauma life vision. Think through what you have learned from your experience and how to put into place a strategy for living more fully.

Assessing your personal growth

The American Psychological Association?s online Post Traumatic Growth Inventory [7] is a questionnaire that assesses personal growth resulting from a traumatic experience. (The experience must have occurred at least six months before filling out the questionnaire.) However, the tool is not a substitute for professional mental health expertise.

More Information

Coping [8]

Counseling [9]

How an Oncology Social Worker Can Help [10]

Support and Resource Links [11]

Additional Resources

UNC Charlotte Department of Psychology: What is Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)? [12]

National Cancer Institute: Facing Forward?Life After Cancer Treatment [13]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/survivorship/life-after-cancer/post-traumatic-growth-and-cancer
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24650
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/30336
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24528
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
[7] http://cust-cf.apa.org/ptgi/
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/21
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/24556
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/25325
[12] http://ptgi.uncc.edu/what-is-ptg/
[13] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping/life-after-treatment/page6