



Inspiration

## Recovery and Healing in Cancer patients (Part 2)

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When working with cancer patients (or anyone that has experienced major trauma or loss), giving them the space and safety to express and explore their feelings, something amazing often occurs.

First recognised in the mid 1990's by professors of psychology Tedeschi and Chalhoun, they discovered that a large percentage of people facing serious crisis experience at some point some positive change. They have coined the term 'Post Traumatic Growth', referring to the possibility of growth that can occur as a consequence of a trauma. Suffering can reveal itself as a hard-shelled fortune cookie, a difficult path that can actually lead toward a better life.

Think about a past struggle with a major life crises. Probably as you were experiencing the event it felt like there was nothing positive about it, but looking at it from the perspective of time, you can often recognise positive

changes in you resulting from that crisis.

Research shows that there are 2 common areas of growth and positive change that some people can experience:

**1. Change in your relationships with others** – often close relationships become stronger, more honest and open, we talk about things we never talked about before, and we express and receive more compassion and empathy as we become more sensitive also to other people's suffering.

**2. Change in the sense of self**

– initially, when you go through a trauma there is a great sense of vulnerability. At first this is something we perceive as negative. The world becomes this unpredictable, unsafe place where terrible things happen with no apparent reason and out of your control. But as you struggle through the trauma you also discover something else. The trauma teaches you that you are vulnerable, but the way in which you cope with the aftermath tells you that you are strong.

You learn about self reliance. Meeting challenges head on leads to an increased sense of ability to cope with life. Now you know you can. Now that saying 'you never get more than you can handle' starts to make sense. If previously we had this fool's sense of immortality, accepting the fact that we are mortal might encourage us to pick and choose our moment-to-moment priorities.

I am sure, that like me, you heard many time people say something like: "If it hadn't been for my cancer/ kidney disease/paralysis etc, I would never been able to leave that awful job/ forgive my children/start painting or take that trip".

Being sick is a little like being send to the penalty box in a rugby match; you don't get to play your little part but you get to watch the whole game. Confronting the reality of death leads to a greater appreciation and value of everyday things.



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This growth is also the reason why support groups and individual counseling are often so helpful. By sharing experiences a different point of view and perspective become more possible, and new ways of coping are learned.

It's important to mention that Post Traumatic Growth is not created by anyone outside of the patient. But by knowing that the possibility exists, I can be ready when the patient articulates any elements of it and facilitate this experience of growth.

Life threatening illnesses or trauma can give us new eyes, help us find a deeper satisfaction in life, our values & priorities

can change, often things that have limited us for years can fall away allowing us to live more deeply, fully and passionately then before.

Healing is about supporting the patient emotionally, providing a safe space for them to explore and come to terms with what they are going through, step by step discovering with them new choices and possibilities.

This is not limited to the time during treatment. In fact many people seem to be coping quite well during treatment as they experience a lot of support and focus of their medical team and family. For many cancer survivors the struggle is not over when the treatment ends, as one patient described to me: "It was as if I was spat out of a pipe..."

The reflecting process that occurs during the counselling and coaching process, helps mitigate that sense of abandonment and gives a transition period, from being treated clinically to start again pick up the threads of your life and take responsibility for what happens next. Possibly find new goals or new ways of defining them, put down a plan of action, and look into the future and what is still there for you to achieve.

Healing is a journey – not a destination, and on that journey we might discover that growth and development can occur through the experience of vulnerability. And vulnerability is not weakness; but the birth place of innovation, creativity and change.