

Personally Important Posttraumatic Growth as a Predictor of Self-Esteem in Adolescents

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Abstract

Recent research on posttraumatic growth (PTG), positive psychological changes after trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) reveals adolescents also report growth after experiencing stressful events (Clay et al., 2009). Research found a positive relationship between PTG and self-esteem; however, the correlations are relatively weak. We hypothesized this may be because studies in general assume all positive changes assessed by the self-report inventory are equally indicative of growth. Some changes on the inventory may be more personally important. It was hypothesized that adolescents who experienced PTG in the areas that were important to them would show a higher level of self-esteem. The current study examines how the addition of personally important PTG can better explain self-esteem, beyond using the commonly-defined PTG as a predictor.

This study contains 196 American high school students with the mean age of 15.75 ($SD= 1.13$). Participants were given a paper and pencil survey, asked to disclose a stressful life event they experienced within five years, fill out the PTGI and asked to choose five out of the 21 positive changes they perceived as most important to themselves and complete the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. A hierarchical regression was conducted with gender, total PTGI score, and personally important growth to test the hypothesis. The final model includes personally important PTG and significantly improved the model, $R^2=.11$, adjusted $R^2=.10$, $F(1,155) = 5.95$, $p < .05$. In this final model gender (beta = $-.23$, $p < .01$) and personally important PTG (beta = $.24$, $p < .05$) affected self-esteem.

The current findings demonstrated experiencing growth on personally important changes is a key predictor of self-esteem, and more so than the commonly-defined total PTGI score or gender. In other words, PTG plays a significant role in self-esteem among adolescents, but especially the growth that is personally important for them. Future research should look at the individual importance of PTG, instead of assuming that all items in the PTGI are equally indicative of growth for everyone. Future research should also assess how the meaning of growth may change developmentally.

Introduction

- **Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)** is defined as positive psychological changes after stress or traumatic life events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).
 - PTG research primarily focused on adult populations, until recent interest in **adolescent populations**. Research on younger samples found that PTG in youth is possible (Clay, Knibbs, & Joseph, 2009; Taku, Kilmer, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2011).
 - Although PTG is linked with positive outcomes, there has been **mixed results regarding the relationship between PTG and self-esteem**.
 - Research found a positive relationship between PTG and self-esteem (Senol-Durak, 2013; Spielman & Taubman, 2009); however the correlations are **weak**.
- Hypothesis:** The weak relationship between PTG and self-esteem may be a result of past studies assuming all positive changes assessed by the inventories measure growth and that all the positive changes on the PTGI are scored as equally indicative of growth across all participants.

Methods

Participants:

Measures:

- Participants were asked to disclose stressful and/or traumatic life events that happened within the past three years and report which one event was most impactful.

- **Posttraumatic Growth Inventory** ($\alpha = .92$): 21-item self-report inventory measuring positive changes as a result of the most impactful event disclosed in the survey. 6-point likert scale (0= *not at all* to 5= *very great degree*).
- **Personally Important Posttraumatic Growth:** This variable was created by adding the scores ONLY on items reported as personally important. Each adolescent was asked, “*Please choose FIVE changes out of these 21 that are very important to you.*”
- **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale** ($\alpha = .87$): 10-item inventory in which participants agree with statements on a 4-point likert scale (1=*strongly agree* to 4= *strongly disagree*).

	n	%
Gender		
Male	77	39.70
Female	117	60.30
Ethnicity		
African-American	26	13.30
White	142	72.40
American Indian/Alaska Native	5	2.60
Asian/Middle Eastern	6	3.10
Unsure/other	11	5.60
Missing	6	3.10
Religion		
Christian	137	69.90
Judaism	1	.50
Islam	1	.50
Buddhist	2	1.00
Agnostic, non-religious	18	9.20
Other/unsure	15	7.60
Don't want to answer	17	8.70
Missing	5	2.60
Age		
13	4	2.10
14	34	17.30
15	18	9.20
16	94	48.00
17	37	18.90
18	5	2.6
19	1	.5
Missing	3	1.50
Average Age (SD)	15.75	(1.13)

Results

Descriptive Statistics:

- PTGI: $M=2.71$, $SD=1.02$; Personally Important PTG: $M=3.91$, $SD=1.10$
- RSES: $M=1.97$, $SD=.59$

Variable	b	t	F	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	ΔR ²
Step 1			8.88**	.23**	.05**	.05**	.05**
Gender	-.23**	-2.98**					
Step 2			6.56**	.28*	.08*	.07*	.02*
Gender	-.22**	-2.84**					
Total PTGI	.16*	2.02*					
Step 3			6.50***	.33*	.11*	.09*	.03*
Gender	-.23**	-3.00**					
Total PTGI	.01	.10					
PI PTGI	.24*	2.44*					

Note. PI PTGI = Personally Important Posttraumatic Growth score; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

The first model included only gender and accounted for a significant amount of variability in self-esteem, $R^2 = .05$, adjusted $R^2 = .05$, $F(1,157) = 8.88$, $p < .01$. This model indicates that males show significantly higher self-esteem ($M= 21.49$, $SD= 5.56$) than females ($M= 18.50$, $SD= 5.82$). This finding supports and is consistent with extensive research on gender differences in self-esteem (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999).

The second model significantly improved upon the first model and indicated that the total PTGI score accounts for a significant proportion of variance in self-esteem after controlling for gender, $R^2 = .08$, adjusted $R^2 = .07$, $F(1,156) = 4.07$, $p < .05$.

The final model includes personally important PTG and significantly improved the previous model $R^2=.11$, adjusted $R^2=.10$, $F(1,155) = 5.95$, $p < .05$. **Not only did the final model significantly improve on the previous but also after entering personally important PTG into the model, total PTGI score no longer makes a significant contribution to the final model in predicting self-esteem.**

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Discussion

- The 21 items on the PTGI may not all be indicative of growth for every person and assessing growth on items that are actually important may be of use in research and clinical settings.
- Experiencing growth in ways that are meaningful can significantly predict an adolescent's self-esteem more than commonly defined PTG.
- This result provides researchers with evidence demonstrating why it may be important to assess not only total growth but **growth that is meaningful to individuals**.
- The results demonstrate that experiencing growth on personally important items (i.e. *discovered that I am stronger than I thought, greater appreciation for value of my own life and changed priorities about what is important*) is a **greater predictor of high self-esteem than total growth reported on the PTGI and gender**.
- Experiencing growth in ways that are important may be more valuable than reporting a higher overall score on the PTGI.

Future Directions

- Research should look at importance of positive psychological change on a more individual basis, rather than assuming all changes listed on the PTGI are equally indicative of growth for every participant.
- A person may obtain a lower score on the PTGI overall but report higher growth on the items that are important to them, and that should be assessed and valued in research and clinical settings that utilize PTG.
- Future studies should also assess **how the meaning of personal growth might developmentally vary**.
- **Limitations:** Method of determining item importance.
 - Because the survey asked for five most personally important, it does not mean the other 16 items are not important.
 - Self-Enhancement-reporting items most experienced as most important.

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