



Promoting Post-Traumatic Growth as the World Emerges from COVID-19

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With many businesses starting to return to work following the COVID-19 lockdown, [Barry Pokroy](#) discusses post-traumatic growth and how leaders can promote it in their workplace

"It's the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)..."

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Over the past several weeks, I find the lyrics of REM's 1987 hit song replaying over and over in my mind. I'm not surprised; They do seem fitting after all—well, sort of.

The world has absolutely changed! Every aspect of life is different from what it was just 3 months ago— relationships, work, home, finances, politics, play, priorities...the list goes on. I'm sure each one of us could create our own list of *what was* v. *what is*.

But do I feel fine? In pondering this question, I land on my well-engrained consultant answer—it depends.

I, along with billions of others impacted by COVID, have suffered a trauma—a deep rupture in my life that has rocked



the core foundation of stability, safety and certainty. With that trauma came anxiety, fear, uncertainty and anger. These feelings, I know from my work in psychology, are a normal response to the stress imposed.

OK, so I guess I'm not so fine.

But can I become fine? Can I become more than fine?

As human beings, when we experience stress, an internal mechanism kicks in that begins coping with the trauma. And from this coping, there emerge 3 possible outcomes to the trauma:

1. Homeostatic: This outcome is restorative. It returns us to where we were before the traumatic event.
2. Negative Transformation: When transformation is negative, one is likely to succumb to stress and revert to depression and worry.
3. Positive Transformation: This transformation invites a surge of survival instincts, a higher level of recovery, and increased inner strength to sail through the adversity.¹

Positive Transformation is called Post-Traumatic Growth.

Post-Traumatic Growth

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is a psychological transformation that follows a crisis or adversity. It's a way of finding the purpose of the pain and looking beyond the struggle.

Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun created the term '[post-traumatic growth](#)' in the mid-90s at the University of Carolina. According to them, people who undergo post-traumatic growth thrive in life with a greater appreciation and more resilience. They define PTG as, "*a positive psychological change in the wake of struggling with highly challenging life circumstances*".²

Factors that contribute to PTG include both personal components (optimism, self-regulation, confidence, self acceptance, experience) and external components (friends, family, community, relationships, colleagues). Harnessing these factors, an individual can bounce back (and even grow) following a setback.³

Over the next few weeks and months, the world will begin to emerge from the hold pattern COVID-19 has mandated. In that emergence we need to re-establish *normal*. We need to assess, recalibrate and determine who we are and who we want to be—as individuals, parents, friends and leaders. And in these roles, how will we promote PTG in our homes and workplaces?

Promoting Post-Traumatic Growth and Work

Given the fact that external factors are critical to the development of PTG, leaders now have an opportunity to engage behaviors and initiate formal programs that will contribute to their employees' positive return to work – in



short, support [post-traumatic growth at work](#).

1. Listen with patience and empathy – One of the biggest impacts a leader can make is to practice [advanced listening](#). Visibility, accessibility and a non-judgmental mindset will be key to employee's sense of safety and security. A culture that promotes attention to the human being (beyond work tasks) is one that will successfully transition post-COVID.
2. Help employees reframe challenges as opportunities – Strong leaders will have the ability to facilitate the identification of positive consequences derived from an otherwise negative event. By using exploratory and guiding questions, the leader can help their employee discover another lens with which to view a path forward. Critical to this process though, is to not minimize the trauma. Rather, validate the negative emotions (see point above) and advance to reframing when the individual is ready to do so.
3. Create formal structures to encourage new behaviors – Organizational programs need to be established that will allow leaders and employees to engage differently. One idea is to institute manager/employee monthly check-ins. These check-ins, however, are focused on the employee as a whole person, they are not about work, tasks or performance. These are opportunities to learn about how the employee is feeling, managing, coping, both at work and at home. And how you, as their leader, can provide the support required.

Beyond COVID

The theory and practical applications mentioned here are relevant far beyond our emergence from this pandemic. Ultimately, this is about engaging in an integrated [change management](#) approach. COVID has imposed changes on the world and we had to (and will continue to) react. However, change initiatives are an ever-present reality in today's organizations. Often these initiatives are strategically adopted, and their purpose is positive company impact. Yet even the right decision can create a sense of loss, uncertainty, anxiety and anger in some change recipients. Sound familiar?

It is therefore critical for organizations to address the psychological and emotional elements of change with as much energy, attention and proactivity as they do the process elements of systems, structures and project planning. After all, as leaders, wouldn't we want all our employees to shout from the rooftops: "it's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine".

Are You Hearing the Emotions of the Organization?

Why leaders should take the time to focus on the emotional shifts employees are experiencing during COVID-19 [Find out](#).

¹ Aldwin, C.M. and Levenson, M.R. (2004). Posttraumatic Growth: A Developmental Perspective. *Psychological Inquiry*,



15(1), 19-22.

² Tedeschi, R.G. and Calhoun, L.G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1-18

³ Schaefer, J. A. and Moos, R. H. (1992). Life crises and personal growth in B. N. Carpenter (Ed.), *Personal coping: Theory, research, and application*, 149-170. Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group.

Our Contributors

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