



AFTER a trauma, imagining post-traumatic growth instils hope

Can you remember a movie where the main character had a better life after going through a traumatic event? No? That's because there are almost no movies like that. Even if this is what happens most often, Netflix is not very interested in telling this story. In the most popular shows, what we see is a good person who goes through a hellish experience after a traumatic event. There are a few variations, with drug addiction, violence, and criminal activity, but there is rarely a happy ending. Or there is the opposite story- the superhero who gets their power (and a costume) after a family tragedy, and who gets off work each day and spends the rest of the night saving humanity.

Why this introduction? Because if you have been through a traumatic event, you might find it impossible to believe that you can get better. You had no choice in what happened to you, and all these stories can make you feel more hopeless and increase your anxiety. When you are more anxious, you might find yourself imagining the worst-case scenario, like the authors of movies and TV shows. That's why I want to start with other possible endings to the story that might help you get through the next few days, or the next few hours. When we watch TV, we don't usually want to hear the spoilers. But in real life, hoping for a better ending can make what's happening now a bit easier to bear. That's why I would like to explain to you what happens for the most people AFTER an event that has shaken their lives.

Most people bounce back and regain a sense of balance. The authors of hit movies and TV shows aren't very interested in those stories, but that's really what happens the most. They don't write about how **most people experience post-traumatic growth**. What is post-traumatic growth? It's an unexpected turnaround. It's like the tragic event creates a perfect storm where positive changes can happen. Sometimes this growth happens without effort, like a natural consequence of the event. The event can also act as an accelerator to help people adjust their priorities and make decisions that will change what happens next.

There are 5 categories of change that happen in post-traumatic growth. I have grouped them in an acronym: **AFTER** (**A**ppreciation for life, **F**aith or existential awareness, **T**oughness, **E**xpectations or new possibilities, and **R**elationships). I have explained each category with examples from real people who have experienced a trauma, people whose stories will never be made into a movie, but who might be closer to your reality. They are not superheroes. They are just people, like you. These abilities are part of our DNA and they have allowed us to survive and to evolve.

Appreciation for life

I will never forget an intervention I did in a factory after an explosion. There were a dozen workers. One of their friends had died and two more were rushed away in an ambulance in critical condition. The leader of the group said, *"They don't know it yet, but the kids are going to get some big hugs tonight. And my girlfriend too."* The others, their heads bowed, agreed. *"Yeah... yeah."* Some were sniffing. Others were laughing nervously. They were realizing what researchers have found with most people. When a tragedy shows us that life is fragile, we appreciate the everyday things even more.

Faith, existential awareness

A few years ago, I gave a conference to people who had been victims of crime. I talked to them about how this event could be a fork in the road. At the end, a participant came up to me and said, *"For me, it was only after the fork that I found my road. That's what you should tell people in your conferences."* He told me that he had found his mission. He knew why he had survived.

Searching for meaning is a normal reaction after a tragic event. This man didn't look for meaning in the crime itself, and he didn't ask why it had to happen to him. He wouldn't have found any answers anyway, and he would have been wasting his time. I chose this example to show how faith and searching for meaning can take the form of a

religious practice, but it can also mean thinking about the kind of person you want to be AFTER.

Toughness

You might be surprised to see the word toughness. You have probably heard that people who have been through a trauma are fragile, and that we have to help them accept this fragility. But it's a mistake to say that these people are broken. This idea can make you feel even more discouraged (on top of being wrong most of the time). I would like to propose another way of looking at it, one that is closer to reality.

It's as if your brain deploys resources it was keeping in reserve for moments like this. Or like a video game where you unlock abilities and resources that help you get to the next level. Once the level is complete, these resources have been unlocked for the rest of the game. So many people have said to me, *"If you had asked me if I would be able to get through this year, I would have said no. It was the worst thing I could have imagined. But now that I have gotten through it, I think I can survive anything."*

Expectations, new possibilities

We often hear about Paralympians who would never have considered themselves athletes before their accident. There are also women who decide to leave a violent partner after an attack that puts them in the hospital. These examples are dramatic, but they show how some terrible events can become motors for change.

Accidents and violence are always negative, and I would never say that we have to see them positively. But it's inspiring that in moments like

these, some people can decide to take control of what happens next. You might find yourself making decisions that are better for you, not because you have no choice, but because you can't wait any longer.

There may be some hopes that won't come true, but this may be a moment where you let other hopes grow- *tiny hopes* that just need to exist. These plans don't have to have any connection to what happened to you. A woman I know always wanted to play music. She said, *"You know, I was always worried about what other people would think about me. It stopped me from doing what I wanted to do. I know that people are going to judge me, but that's not going to stop me. This is my life."*

Relationships

Even if this trauma pushes you to cut off some relationships, other relationships are likely to be stronger, and more authentic. People tend to cut through the superficial and get to what is real. They don't wait as long to tell someone they love them. You might feel gratitude for the friends who were there for you. If you are more independent by nature, you might find yourself letting your guard down, letting people in. Whatever the cause, these changes in the quality of your relationships can be lasting.

It is also possible that this event transforms how you see others. I was touched by a client who told me that in this better version of herself (her words), she would be less judgmental of people who were depressed. She felt more empathy for others, and she wanted to give back. That may be the most realistic part of superhero movies - the way a tragedy can make us want to help others.

I hope these examples will help you choose the direction you want to go in AFTER this event. You can already make changes in the direction of post-traumatic growth. But if you don't have the energy to do that now (and that would be perfectly normal), I would like to invite you to notice what has already started to change even a little bit, and without any effort on your part. By paying attention to these little changes, you might find it easier to hope that the difficult times won't last forever. And you might find it easier to write your own AFTER.

- Brigitte Lavoie



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What small things have you started to appreciate more?

What are the beliefs or convictions (religious or other) that have helped you so far?

Up to now, what are you most impressed with in your reaction?

What would you like to do now that you have always put off?

What has started to change for the better in your relationships?
