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Research Paper

Understanding Post-traumatic Growth: The Role of Rumination in Young Adults Bereaved

Suhani Tandon[1]*

ABSTRACT

Background: Posttraumatic growth (PTG) refers to the positive psychological changes individuals experience following adversity. Rumination, a key factor influencing PTG, is categorized into intrusive rumination (unwanted, distressing thoughts) and deliberate rumination (purposeful reflection aimed at meaning-making). While intrusive rumination is linked to distress, deliberate rumination is associated with positive adaptation and growth. This study examines the role of both types of rumination in PTG among bereaved young adults in India. **Method:** The study comprised 106 young adults who had lost a first-, second, or third-degree relative or a close friend within the past six years. The sample consisted of 69.8% females (n= 74) and 28.3% males (n= 30), all Indian nationality. Participants completed the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory – Short Form (PTGI-SF) and the Event-Related Rumination Inventory (ERRI) to assess PTG and rumination. **Results:** Findings suggest that deliberate rumination significantly predicts PTG, supporting its role in cognitive processing and schema reconstruction. While intrusive rumination was initially associated with distress, it also showed a positive relationship with PTG, indicating that intrusive thoughts may eventually lead to deliberate reflection and meaning-making. **Conclusion:** The study highlights the dual role of rumination in PTG. While intrusive rumination contributes to distress, it may also facilitate cognitive processing that fosters growth. These findings suggest that interventions should focus on promoting deliberate rumination to enhance PTG in bereaved young adults.

Keywords: *Posttraumatic Growth, Bereavement, Intrusive Rumination, Deliberate Rumination, Young Adults, India*

A trauma can be defined as an event that a person "experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with […] that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" and that the person responded to with "intense fear, helplessness, or horror."

While past studies have primarily focused on the clinical symptoms that arise following trauma, such as re-experiencing symptoms and hyperarousal, recent research has emphasized the potential for positive changes and growth after trauma (Joseph et al., 1993; Nerken, 1993; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

[1]Student, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India
*Corresponding Author

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Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) refers to the positive psychological changes that can occur following a traumatic experience. PTG can lead to an enhanced sense of personal strength, changes in one's perspective toward life, and improved interpersonal relationships. However, not all individuals who experience trauma undergo PTG; some experience intrusive symptoms such as nightmares, hyperarousal, depression, and negative changes in cognition and mood. According to previous studies, factors related to PTG can be classified into three categories: (1) the characteristics of the event, (2) personal characteristics, and (3) cognitive processing of the traumatic experience.

Rumination plays a crucial role in the process of PTG and is divided into two categories: intrusive rumination and deliberate rumination (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Rumination, in general, refers to repetitive thoughts and meditating on information, metaphorically described as "chewing the cognitive cud." It carries a dual connotation: intrusive rumination refers to a series of unwanted and distressing thoughts that reoccur automatically, contributing to psychological distress. On the other hand, deliberate rumination involves a controlled, purposeful thought process focused on making sense of the traumatic event, which may contribute to PTG (Wu et al., 2015; Zhou & Wu, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018).

According to Calhoun and Tedeschi's model of PTG (2006), PTG is not a direct result of trauma itself but an outcome of purposeful and deliberate rumination following the struggle to understand the experience. Deliberate rumination facilitates the expansion of existing schemas, helps individuals better comprehend trauma, and leads to changes in beliefs and values that promote PTG (Triplett et al., 2012). Individuals engaging in deliberate rumination may experience an increased appreciation of life, a restructured sense of self, and a shift in life priorities (Calhoun et al., 2010).

The process of cognitive adaptation following trauma has been discussed in relation to assimilation and accommodation (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Payne et al., 2007). Assimilation occurs when an event is interpreted as aligning with pre-existing cognitive schemas, requiring minimal cognitive adjustment. This can include avoiding or ignoring the traumatic experience. In contrast, accommodation involves modifying one's core beliefs in response to the trauma, which plays a significant role in PTG. Managing emotional distress is crucial for PTG, and this can be facilitated through cognitive engagement with the traumatic event and the use of effective coping strategies (Bussell & Naus, 2010; Rajandram et al., 2011).

Problem-focused coping, which involves active engagement in problem-solving, has been found to significantly relate to PTG. In contrast, emotion-focused coping is more predictive of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Intrusive rumination can predict PTG by increasing negative emotional and cognitive burdens, compelling individuals to engage in cognitive processing to alleviate distress (Ciesla & Roberts, 2007). However, research suggests that deliberate rumination, rather than intrusive rumination, mediates the relationship between core belief challenge and PTG (Freedle & Kashubeck-West, 2021).

Rumination, though often associated with depression, has also been observed after traumatic events. While depressive rumination is typically maladaptive, rumination about trauma can contribute to PTG by helping individuals restore shattered beliefs about the world (Ciesla & Roberts, 2007). Both intrusive and deliberate rumination are significant cognitive factors in trauma-related growth, with intrusive rumination potentially prompting individuals to engage in more deliberate reflection over time (Lindstrom et al., 2013).

PTG is distinct from resilience, though the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Resilience refers to an individual's ability to "bounce back" from adversity, returning to a pre-trauma state without significant disruption (Neenan, 2018). In contrast, PTG occurs when someone undergoes a struggle to make sense of a traumatic event, ultimately emerging with a transformed perspective and a deeper understanding of life (Collier, 2016). The term "posttraumatic growth" was coined by psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998), emphasizing that PTG does not negate the distress caused by trauma but coexists with it (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001).

An essential factor for PTG is the extent to which a traumatic event disrupts an individual's core beliefs about life, meaning, identity, and the future (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Cann et al., 2010a; Janoff-Bulman, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004). When these beliefs are challenged, individuals must cognitively process the trauma to restore a sense of coherence in their worldview. Research has consistently shown that deliberate rumination plays a pivotal role in fostering PTG, while intrusive rumination is more strongly associated with distress (Calhoun et al., 2000; Cann et al., 2010a).

Several studies have examined the relationship between PTG and rumination. Taku et al. (2008) found that in bereaved university students, deliberate rumination predicted higher PTG. Lindstrom et al. (2013) found that both intrusive and deliberate rumination predicted PTG, though deliberate rumination had a stronger impact.

Additionally, Ogińska-Bulik (2014) found that individuals who experienced the loss of a parent or sibling reported greater PTG than those who had lost a child, while Cofini et al. (2014) observed slightly higher PTG in individuals who lost a close family member compared to those who lost a friend or romantic partner. Armstrong & Shakespeare-Finch (2011) found that PTG was highest in those who lost a first-degree relative (spouse, parent, sibling, child), followed by second-degree relatives (grandparent, niece, nephew), and was lowest in those who lost a friend.

PTG involves positive changes resulting from struggling with trauma and life crises (Munroe & Ferrari, 2022). PTG typically:

- Occurs under conditions of severe stress, rather than low-level stress
- Is accompanied by transformative life changes
- Is experienced both as a process and an outcome
- Requires challenging and reconstructing core beliefs

Rumination is a critical cognitive factor in PTG, with deliberate rumination playing a particularly significant role in fostering growth, whereas intrusive rumination is more strongly linked to distress. Understanding the nuances of rumination and its impact on PTG provides valuable insight into the psychological mechanisms that facilitate growth after trauma.

The present study aims to examine the correlation between Rumination and Post-Traumatic Growth in young adults. The research focuses on individuals who have experienced the loss of a relative or a close friend within the past six years. By analyzing this relationship, the study seeks to enhance the understanding of how rumination influences post-traumatic growth in bereaved young adults.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study comprised 106 young adult participants who had experienced the loss of a loved one within the past six years. The sample consisted of 69.8% females (n = 74) and 28.3% males (n = 30), all of whom were Indian. Given the existing literature on grief research, it is common for bereavement samples to have a higher proportion of female participants (Ogińska-Bulik, 2014). Participants had lost a first-degree, second-degree, or third-degree relative, or a close friend.

The causes of death varied among participants, with 61.3% losing their loved ones due to natural causes, 17.9% due to COVID-19, 5.7% due to accidents, and 4.7% due to cancer. The remaining participants experienced loss due to other causes. This diverse sample provides insights into the impact of different types of bereavement on young adults' psychological processes.

Procedure

The questionnaire included items related to sociodemographic information, such as age, gender, and highest level of education completed, as well as details regarding the loss, including the cause of death, the participant's relationship to the deceased, and the perceived closeness of the relationship.

Post-Traumatic Growth was assessed using the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory – Short Form (PTGI-SF; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The PTGI-SF consists of 10 items and is one of the most widely used instruments for evaluating post-traumatic growth in both clinical and research settings. It has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with studies confirming its reliability and factor structure. The short form of the PTGI has an internal reliability only marginally lower than the full version, with total score reliability generally around 0.90 across various samples. Participants responded to the prompt "As a result of my loss, I have experienced..." by rating each item on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("I did not experience this change") to 5 ("I experienced this change to a very great degree"). The questionnaire assesses five dimensions of post-traumatic growth: Relating to Others (e.g., "I have a greater sense of closeness with others"), New Possibilities (e.g., "I developed new interests"), Personal Strength (e.g., "I know better that I can handle difficulties"), Spiritual Change (e.g., "I have a better understanding of spiritual matters"), and Appreciation of Life (e.g., "I changed my priorities about what is important in life").

Rumination in the context of loss was measured using the Event-Related Rumination Inventory (ERRI; Cann et al., 2011). This instrument consists of 20 items, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all" to "often". The scale comprises two subscales: deliberate rumination, which captures cognitive processes aimed at making sense of the event (e.g., "I thought about whether I could find meaning from my experience"), and intrusive rumination, which reflects involuntary and recurrent thoughts about the event (e.g., "I thought about the event when I did not mean to"). The ERRI demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.96 (intrusive rumination: $\alpha = 0.96$; deliberate rumination: $\alpha = 0.94$).

The questionnaire was administered in electronic form. Prior to participation, individuals were required to sign an informed consent form, which outlined the voluntary nature of the study and assured them that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics for three key variables in the study: Intrusive Rumination (IR), Deliberate Rumination (DR), and Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) were derived. The values reported include the sample size (N = 106), minimum and maximum scores, mean (average) score, and standard deviation (measure of variability) for each variable. Further, Pearson correlation and Multiple Regression analyses were conducted using SPSS version 20. Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the strength and direction of the association between rumination (both intrusive and deliberate) and post-traumatic growth. Additionally, multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which intrusive and deliberate rumination predict post-traumatic growth, controlling for potential confounding variables. These analyses provide insight into the cognitive processes associated with post-traumatic growth and the role of different types of rumination in shaping individuals' responses to loss.

RESULTS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
IR	106	.00	30.00	15.6698	8.55205
DR	106	.00	30.00	15.0472	7.17719
PTGI	106	.00	48.00	23.8774	11.62977
Valid N (listwise)	106				

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the three key variables examined in the study: Intrusive Rumination (IR), Deliberate Rumination (DR), and Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). The values reported include the sample size (N = 106), minimum and maximum scores, mean (average) score, and standard deviation (a measure of variability) for each variable.

Intrusive Rumination (IR) scores ranged from 0 to 30, with a mean score of 15.67 (SD = 8.55). The relatively high standard deviation suggests substantial variability in participants' experiences of intrusive rumination, indicating that while some individuals rarely experienced involuntary and distressing thoughts about their loss, others reported them more frequently.

Deliberate Rumination (DR) scores also ranged from 0 to 30, with a mean score of 15.05 (SD = 7.18). The standard deviation indicates moderate variability, suggesting that while many participants engaged in deliberate rumination to a similar extent, there were notable individual differences in the extent to which they actively reflected on their loss to make sense of it.

Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) scores ranged from 0 to 48, with a mean score of 23.88 (SD = 11.63). The relatively high standard deviation suggests considerable variation in the degree of post-traumatic growth experienced by participants. Some individuals reported minimal psychological growth following their loss, whereas others indicated significant positive changes in their perspectives, relationships, and personal strength.

These findings highlight the diversity in participants' cognitive processing of loss and their subsequent experiences of post-traumatic growth. Further analyses explore the relationships

between these variables to better understand the role of rumination in facilitating or hindering post-traumatic growth.

Table 2: Correlations between Intrusive Rumination (IR), Deliberate Rumination (DR), and Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI)

		IR	**DR**	**PTGI**
IR	Pearson Correlation	1	.515**	.321**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.001
	N	106	106	106
DR	Pearson Correlation	.515**	1	.425**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	106	106	106
PTGI	Pearson Correlation	.321**	.425**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	
	N	106	106	106

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between Intrusive Rumination (IR), Deliberate Rumination (DR), and Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). The correlation coefficients, significance values, and sample sizes are presented in Table 2.

The results indicated a moderate to strong positive correlation between intrusive rumination and deliberate rumination ($r = 0.515$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that individuals who experienced higher levels of intrusive thoughts about their loss were also more likely to engage in deliberate reflection to process their experience.

A moderate positive correlation was found between intrusive rumination and post-traumatic growth ($r = 0.321$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that participants with higher levels of intrusive rumination also reported greater post-traumatic growth. However, the strength of this correlation suggests that intrusive rumination alone is not a strong predictor of growth, and additional factors likely contribute to the process.

Additionally, deliberate rumination was moderately to strongly correlated with post-traumatic growth ($r = 0.425$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that individuals who engaged in higher levels of deliberate reflection experienced greater post-traumatic growth. This finding supports the idea that purposeful cognitive processing may facilitate adaptation following a significant loss.

Overall, these results highlight the complex interplay between different forms of rumination and post-traumatic growth, emphasizing the potential role of deliberate rumination in fostering resilience and positive psychological change following loss.

Table 3: Coefficients[a] Multiple Regression analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	12.304	2.552		4.822	.000
IR	.188	.140	.138	1.342	.183
DR	.573	.167	.354	3.429	.001

a. Dependent Variable: PTGI

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the extent to which Intrusive Rumination (IR) and Deliberate Rumination (DR) predict Post-Traumatic Growth (PTGI). The regression coefficients, standard errors, standardized coefficients (Beta), t-values, and significance levels (p-values) are presented in Table 3.

The model revealed that Deliberate Rumination (DR) was a significant predictor of PTGI ($B = 0.573$, $\beta = 0.354$, $t = 3.429$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of deliberate rumination were associated with greater post-traumatic growth. This suggests that individuals who actively engaged in cognitive reflection and meaning-making processes experienced higher levels of positive psychological change following their loss.

In contrast, Intrusive Rumination (IR) was not a significant predictor of PTGI ($B = 0.188$, $\beta = 0.138$, $t = 1.342$, $p = 0.183$). This indicates that while intrusive thoughts about the loss may be prevalent, they do not significantly contribute to post-traumatic growth.

The regression model suggests that deliberate rumination plays a crucial role in facilitating post-traumatic growth, whereas intrusive rumination does not have a significant direct impact. These findings highlight the importance of purposeful cognitive processing and meaning making in adaptation following loss.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore the relationships between intrusive rumination (IR), deliberate rumination (DR), and post-traumatic growth (PTG) among young adults who had experienced the loss of a loved one within the past six years. The findings provide valuable insights into how different types of cognitive processing impact psychological adaptation following bereavement.

The descriptive statistics revealed substantial variation in intrusive rumination, deliberate rumination, and post-traumatic growth. On average, participants exhibited moderate levels of both intrusive and deliberate rumination, suggesting that cognitive engagement with the loss was common. The standard deviations for all variables indicated notable individual differences, with some participants reporting minimal cognitive engagement with their loss and others experiencing high levels of rumination and growth.

The correlation analysis provided further insights into the relationships between these variables. A moderate to strong positive correlation was observed between intrusive and deliberate rumination ($r = 0.515$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that individuals who experienced higher levels of distressing, involuntary thoughts about their loss were also more likely to engage in purposeful, reflective processing. Furthermore, both intrusive and deliberate rumination were positively correlated with post-traumatic growth, but the strength of the

association was stronger for deliberate rumination ($r = 0.425$, $p < 0.01$) compared to intrusive rumination ($r = 0.321$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that while both types of rumination were linked to post-traumatic growth, deliberate rumination had a stronger relationship with positive adaptation.

The multiple regression analysis further clarified the unique contributions of intrusive and deliberate rumination in predicting post-traumatic growth. Deliberate rumination emerged as a significant predictor of post-traumatic growth ($B = 0.573$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that individuals who engaged in meaning-making and reflective thought about their loss were more likely to experience psychological growth. In contrast, intrusive rumination was not a significant predictor ($B = 0.188$, $p = 0.183$), suggesting that the presence of distressing, repetitive thoughts about the loss did not directly contribute to positive psychological change.

These findings align with previous research on post-traumatic growth, which suggests that while intrusive rumination is often associated with distress and prolonged grief, deliberate rumination plays a crucial role in psychological adaptation (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). The positive correlation between intrusive and deliberate rumination suggests that experiencing distressing thoughts may serve as a trigger for deeper cognitive processing, which, in turn, facilitates growth. However, the lack of a significant predictive effect of intrusive rumination on post-traumatic growth indicates that experiencing involuntary distressing thoughts alone is insufficient to foster positive change.

The significant relationship between deliberate rumination and post-traumatic growth suggests that actively engaging with one's loss, seeking meaning, and making sense of the experience are key mechanisms through which individuals derive positive changes from adversity. This is consistent with theoretical models of post-traumatic growth, which emphasize the role of cognitive restructuring and meaning making in fostering resilience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

The lack of a significant direct effect of intrusive rumination on post-traumatic growth may indicate that intrusive thoughts, in themselves, are not inherently beneficial or harmful. Instead, their impact may depend on whether individuals engage in additional cognitive processes, such as deliberate reflection, to transform distress into growth. Individuals who remain stuck in intrusive rumination without transitioning to more deliberate meaning-making may struggle to experience post-traumatic growth.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias or retrospective inaccuracies. Future research could benefit from longitudinal designs that track changes in rumination and post-traumatic growth over time to better establish causality.

Additionally, while the study focused on young adults, age-related differences in cognitive processing of loss were not explored. Future studies should examine whether the relationship between rumination and post-traumatic growth differs across age groups, as older adults may have different coping mechanisms compared to younger individuals.

Finally, the study did not account for additional psychological factors such as resilience, personality traits, or social support, which may also play a role in post-traumatic growth.

Future research should incorporate a more comprehensive model that includes these variables to provide a deeper understanding of the complex processes underlying growth after loss.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationships between intrusive rumination, deliberate rumination, and post-traumatic growth in young adults who had experienced the loss of a loved one within the past six years. The findings highlight the distinct roles of intrusive and deliberate rumination in the process of psychological adaptation following loss.

Descriptive statistics revealed considerable individual differences in the extent to which participants engaged in intrusive and deliberate rumination, as well as the degree of post-traumatic growth they experienced. Correlation analysis showed that while both intrusive and deliberate rumination were positively associated with post-traumatic growth, the relationship was stronger for deliberate rumination. Furthermore, regression analysis demonstrated that deliberate rumination significantly predicted post-traumatic growth, whereas intrusive rumination did not. This suggests that while experiencing distressing, involuntary thoughts about the loss is common, it is the process of intentional meaning-making and cognitive reflection that facilitates positive psychological change.

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Conflict of Interest

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