

Assessing Post Traumatic Growth and Life Satisfaction following Spousal Bereavement

Dr. Komal Chandiramani^{1*}, Prof. Waheeda Khan²

ABSTRACT

Post traumatic growth (PTG) emphasizes the importance of positive transformation following a traumatic event. The present study examines gender differences and the role of PTG in predicting Life Satisfaction (LS) following spousal bereavement. For this, bereaved participants (N=60) completed measures of posttraumatic growth and life satisfaction. Comparative analyses indicated significant differences among genders on the measures of LS and PTG (dimensions namely new possibilities, relating to others, spiritual change). Results of regression analyses indicated significant contribution of PTG in LS among bereaved participants. Deductive thematic analyses identified themes through a process of reading and re-reading the data to find patterns in order to develop a deeper understanding of human experiences. The research was concluded by briefly foregrounding some of the study's implications and future directions.

Keywords: *Adolescent Learners, Cognition, Personality, Motivation, Interest*

An individual confronted with an event that involves serious injury, death or a threat to integrity of self and others is referred to as trauma. Usually, the person's first response towards a traumatic event is fear and helplessness (APA, 2000). Examples of traumatic events are injury, accident, a physical/sexual assault, chronic illness etc. Even observing a death or serious injury of someone can be considered as witnessing a traumatic event (Joseph, Williams, & Yule, 1997). The focus of the present research is to understand the positive transformation following spousal bereavement. Most of the studies have stated that both widows and widowers engage in intense grief after the death of their spouse (e.g. Zisook & Schuchter, 1991).

Recently, trauma literature has started giving emphasis on the possibility of positive transformation that may occur after suffering. The construct Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) gained impetus due to the pioneering work of Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) who also coined

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Delhi University, Delhi, India

² Dean, Faculty of Behavioural Sciences/SGT University, Gurugram, Haryana, India

*Responding Author

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the term. It refers to positive psychological changes following a highly stressful and challenging life event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Two important points about PTG are noteworthy. First, an individual should be exposed to an extremely undesirable and intense event as the construct is not associated with minor stressors or normal developmental processes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Second, positive transformation can only occur after the struggle with a traumatic event. An individual's past and future assumption about his/her life becomes distorted after an exposure to an intense and severe trauma (Bellizzi & Blank, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Research on PTG has indicated individual's tendency to report growth following an adversity in five areas: interpersonal relationships (positive relationships that individuals maintain after their struggle with a traumatic event), new possibilities (individual's identification of new possibilities in his/her life), personal strength (feeling more capable of meeting life circumstances), spirituality (connection with a transcendent being and engaging in spiritual development) and appreciation for life (being appreciative for each new day) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004).

Life Satisfaction (LS) is one of the most important components of subjective wellbeing (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). It refers to an individual's contentment with life and his/her degree of subjective appraisal of goals and achievements that have been accomplished (Pavot & Diener, 1993). It is also referred to an individual's cognitive evaluation of his/her satisfaction with past, present and future events (Durayappah, 2011). Moreover, significant other's view of one's life also constitutes life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). The construct of LS is related to better physical and mental health, longevity and other positive outcomes (Beutell, 2006).

An individual's satisfaction with life remains somewhat stable; however, life circumstances do influence it temporarily but does not have a long-term effect on it. The above explanation can be supported with the concept of hedonic adaptation which refers to an individual's tendency to quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness regardless of him/her experiencing positive or negative life changes or circumstances (Bottan & Perez-Truglia, 2011). So, as people undergo a positive event in their life, the satisfaction will increase temporarily but, as they accustom to this new change, their level of satisfaction will return to an initial point. But, this level of satisfaction may be disrupted if an individual is confronted with drastic negative life circumstances. Also, the lesser the incongruity between the individual's desires and achievements, the more life satisfaction will be (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003).

Previous researches have emphasised on the importance of an individual's ability to experience positive changes after undergoing a traumatic event and these findings are strongly influenced by gender. Wortman (2004) suggested that widows were more likely than widowers to experience growth mainly because bereavement tends to be more challenging for

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men compared to women. However, some studies reported women experiencing more difficulty whereas others have reported no gender differences (Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut (2001). According to Carr (2002), women develop new strengths and coping skills because they have to do things that they have never done before thus indicating positive growth. In a study by Zwahlen, Hagenbuch, Carley, Jenewein and Buchi (2009); women had higher scores than men in dimensions of appreciation of life, communicating with others and becoming stronger. Calhoun and Tedeshi (1989-1990) interviewed fifty-two adults who had lost a spouse. They reported that their experience with bereavement process has led to fundamental changes like better social support system, feeling more able to express their own emotions and spiritual transformation.

Gender differences have also been found in the context of LS with men reporting low satisfaction than women after the loss of a spouse. This is because men tend to receive more emotional support than women in their married life and hence, death of a spouse leads to lack of social support more among widowers than widows (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007). Time since loss is considered to be one of the most significant contributors of life satisfaction following spousal bereavement (Lund, Caserta & Dimond, 1993). Chipperfield and Havens (2001) reported that losing a spouse was associated with a greater degree of decline in LS for men than for women after controlling for time since loss.

PTG have also been found related to life satisfaction (Pakenham, 2005) wherein the former can affect the level of the latter (Wild & Paivio, 2003). Individuals who can make sense of their traumatic event report PTG and thus a greater satisfaction with life (Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun & Reeve, 2012).

Traumatic events involve threat to life but some individuals experience positive transformation as a result of their struggle with a traumatic event. The present study was designed to understand whether there are any gender differences in how individuals report growth and subsequent satisfaction with life following spousal bereavement. Also, this study may aid researchers to further understand how PTG may affect satisfaction with life. Many current researches stated that there is still a need to uncover positive responses to traumatic events (e.g. Park & Helgeson, 2006). Moreover, there is a need to study the phenomena in the Indian cultural context as researches carried out in the west may not lend insight to the nature of growth and subsequent satisfaction in spousal bereavement. Keeping all of the above mentioned factors in mind, the present research attempts to study gender differences in post traumatic growth, life satisfaction and growth to be a significant predictor of satisfaction in life. The following hypotheses were formulated:

1. There would be significant difference between bereaved males and females on the measure of PTG and its dimensions.
2. There would be significant difference between bereaved males and females on the measure of LS
3. PTG is a significant predictor of LS.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study population consisted of males and females undergoing spousal bereavement. The size of the total sample was 60 (males=30; females=30) aged 35-75 years. The data was collected using convenience sampling method. Only those cases were included whose time since the loss was between 12 to 48 months due to natural causes, accidental death and illness. This timeframe was determined based on previous research (Cohen, et al., 1998) on the possibility that longer time intervals (usually years) between the traumatic event and the assessment of posttraumatic growth might be necessary in order for growth to become apparent. Majority of the participants were Hindus and all of them had at least a college degree. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect qualitative data from 6 participants including both males and females.

Instruments

The following instruments were employed for data collection in the study:

1. **Biographic Information Schedule:** Biographic information schedule was used to record gender, age, religion, educational qualifications and time since loss of spouse.
2. **Post Traumatic Growth Inventory:** It was developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) to measure positive growth from the trauma. The current version consists of 21, positively worded items, with a 0-5 response choice (0 = *I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis* and 5 = *I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis*). It assesses five dimensions of growth which are New Possibilities, Relating to Others, Personal Strength, Appreciation to Life and Spiritual Change. The PTGI has reported high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficient $\alpha = 0.93$. Test-retest reliability after a two month delay was found to be 0.71 (Cohen, Cimboric, Armeli, & Hettler, 1998).
3. **Satisfaction with Life Scale:** It was developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985) to measure current global life satisfaction. It includes items that assess the cognitive component of subjective well-being. The current version consists of 5 items, with a 1-7 response choice (1= *strongly disagree* and 7=*strongly agree*). The scale has good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficient $\alpha = 0.87$. Test-retest reliability after a two month delay was found to be 0.82 (Diener et.al., 1985)
4. **Semi structured interview:** Qualitative data was collected in response to three open ended questions. These were: 1) In what way this traumatic event has changed your perceptions towards life? 2) With all that has happened, what makes you happy even just a little? 3) Now that you have faced a traumatic event in your life, how do you see your future years?

Procedure

The objective of the present study was to study gender differences in PTG and LS and also to understand the role of positive growth in predicting subsequent satisfaction with life. The data was collected using convenience sampling method and the participants were compared

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on the measures of growth and satisfaction. Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study and an informed consent was obtained from interested participants stating that the questions answered would be kept anonymous and the identity of the participants would be kept confidential. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were used to analyze the data. T-test was used to find significance of difference between the groups. Regression analysis was conducted to determine the proportion of variance in the dependant variable (Life Satisfaction) that is predicted by the independent variable (Posttraumatic Growth). Qualitative data was analysed through thematic analysis by identifying themes through a process of reading and re-reading the data to find patterns

RESULTS

Descriptive and inferential statistics was used and the data was analysed using SPSS (version 16). Summary results of t-statistics stated significant t-values for PTG and its dimensions new possibilities, relating to others, spiritual change and overall life satisfaction at $p < 0.05$ indicating the mean scores were higher for females as compared to males (Table 1).

Table 1 indicating Mean, SeM, t-value and level of significance on the measures of Posttraumatic Growth with their dimensions and Life Satisfaction among males and females (df=58)

Measures	Gender	Mean	SeM	t-value	p-value
Posttraumatic Growth	Male	70.40	1.93	2.04	0.046
	Female	76.40	2.40		
New Possibilities	Male	19.06	0.77	2.22	0.030
	Female	21.63	0.85		
Relating to Others	Male	19.86	0.64	2.29	0.025
	Female	22.30	0.84		
Personal Strength	Male	13.96	0.49	0.04	0.964
	Female	13.93	0.54		
Appreciation to Life	Male	10.73	0.41	1.23	0.221
	Female	11.33	0.24		
Spiritual Change	Male	6.76	0.25	2.01	0.048
	Female	7.50	0.25		
Life Satisfaction	Male	18.53	0.64	2.06	0.043
	Female	20.70	0.82		

Note: * $p < 0.05$. SeM = Standard error of measurement

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict Life Satisfaction based on Posttraumatic Growth. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 58) = 69.90, p < 0.01$) with adjusted R^2 of 0.54. This means that 54% of the total variability in Life Satisfaction is explained by the Posttraumatic Growth. Participant's life satisfaction increased 0.252 for each unit of posttraumatic growth (Table 2).

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Table 2 indicating Regression analysis to predict Life Satisfaction based on Posttraumatic Growth (N=60)

Variables	R	R ²	Adjusted R	F	B	df	t
Posttraumatic Growth	0.74	0.54	0.54	69.90*	0.252	(2,47)	.8.36*

Note: * $p < 0.01$

Table 3 indicating Themes and sub-themes identified in the qualitative data (N=6)

Theme	Sub themes	Example
Changed Perceptions	Accepting mortality	After my husband's death, I have realized one thing that is; death can take you with it anytime. So, it is very important to live in the present
	Setting goals	Death is inevitable. So, till the time you are living, live your life fully with no regrets and achieve the goals that you laid for yourself.
	Making best of what is left	I can never change what happened, so I no longer plan what I am going to do. I try and 'live' everyday and do things that make me feel better
	Satisfaction with life	I put aside unimportant stress. Hardships don't bother me anymore because I believe if I'm alive and all problems have a solution
Being Happy	Discovering unrecognised strength	I had a passion of dancing but I never realized it. I have recently joined 'kathak' classes with my daughter because both of us have a keen interest in dancing
	Changed lifestyle	With the help of meditation, I was able to make myself calm and became compassionate with others
	Support from friends and family	Talking to others helps decrease my stress. I feel I am not the only one who is dealing with the loss. If others can live happily why can't I?
	Spiritual inclination	I thank my God everyday for the faith in my heart because it is this faith that sustained me. I don't know how much I will live but it's my faith in the divine that is keeping me going
Future Ahead	Taking up new responsibilities	After the death of my wife, I realized how much I was domestically dependent on her. But now, I see my future in accomplishing the responsibilities that she left with me to fulfil.
	Being independent	I am now mother and father of two kids
	Helping others	I try to help others by doing charity
	Spiritual growth	Death is a God's decision. I am no one to challenge it

Note: The above are only one example indicating a sub theme. 'Kathak' is an Indian dance form

Qualitative data was analysed through deductive thematic analysis by identifying themes through a process of reading and re-reading the data to explore varied human experiences (Table 3)

DISCUSSION

Posttraumatic growth refers to positive psychological changes that occur following an experience with a traumatic event and life satisfaction refers to an individual's evaluation of how satisfied an individual is with life as a whole including past, present and future events. The objective of the present research was to study gender differences in post traumatic growth and life satisfaction and also to understand the role of growth in predicting subsequent satisfaction with life.

The first hypothesis stated significant difference between bereaved males and females on the measure of PTG and its dimensions. The hypothesis was supported as significant differences were found on the measure of overall PTG and its dimensions of new possibility, relating to others and spiritual change indicating a higher mean for bereaved females as compared to bereaved males. However, the other two dimensions namely personal strength and appreciation to life did not yield significant results. Overall, the findings of the present research stated that widows reported more positive psychological changes following bereavement than widowers. These findings are consistent with Wortman (2004) who suggested that bereavement tends to be more challenging for men compared to women and this is why they report more growth. Women develop new possibilities in their lives by adapting to a new lifestyle to increase the quality of their lives. Also, they tend to maintain their physical and psychological well being by engaging in religious commitments and social support networks. Social support from friends and family leads to successful dealing with spousal bereavement (Parkes, 1975).

The second hypothesis stated significant difference between bereaved males and females on the measure of life satisfaction. The hypothesis was supported as significant differences were found indicating a higher mean for bereaved females as compared to bereaved males. The findings of the present research were supported by Chipperfield and Havens (2001) who also stated decline in life satisfaction for men than for women. Overall, females are more satisfied with their lives because they experience more positive changes post bereavement than males. They engage in better support network, religious commitments and a new path for life and as a result become more independent and self confident.

The third hypothesis stated post traumatic growth as a significant predictor of life satisfaction. The regression model was significant (adjusted $R^2=0.54$, $p<0.01$) meaning 54% of the total variability in life satisfaction is explained by posttraumatic growth. The coefficient of posttraumatic growth in the model was also significant ($B=0.253$, $p<0.01$). These findings reveal that PTG is a good predictor of LS. The finding of the present research is supported by previous review of literature that PTG can affect levels of LS. Individuals who derive meaning from their trauma report more PTG and a greater satisfaction with life (Wild & Paivio, 2003; Triplett et al., 2012). Both bereaved males and females reported positive changes after undergoing the bereavement process. They connected with their friends, monitored their emotions, managed with the new responsibilities, engaged in

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religious activities. As a result, they became satisfied and developed strength to deal with daily life circumstances.

In addition to the quantitative data that was collected and statistically analyzed, the present study also collected qualitative data in response to three open-ended questions. The qualitative data was collected in an effort to gain depth of information regarding positive outcomes they experienced as a result of trauma. The first question queried participants as to whether undergoing the bereavement process have changed their perceptions towards life. After the death of their spouse, many participants reported changed perceptions towards life. They started accepting mortality as an important part which helped them to construct a new understanding of life. A female participant reported that “after my husband’s death, I have realized one thing that is; death can take you with it anytime. So, it is very important to live in the present” They also reported of what they actually want from their lives and started setting goals for themselves. A female participant reported that “Death is inevitable. So, till the time you are living, achieve the goals that you laid for yourself. I will definitely miss my husband but would not like to be depressed throughout my life because he never wanted me to be like that.” Some also reported that the desire to take every enjoyment from life serves the purpose of distracting from the underlying pain of having lost a spouse. One male participant reported that “I can never change what happened, so I no longer plan what I am going to do. I try and ‘live’ everyday and do things that make me feel better.” Participants also reported that they are satisfied from their lives and they don’t take their lives for granted. A female participant reported “I put aside unimportant stress. Hardships don’t bother me anymore because I believe if I’m alive and all problems have a solution.”

The second question sought to examine as to what makes them happy, even just a little. Participants reported discovering previously unrecognized strengths. One bereaving woman reported that “I had a passion of dancing but I never realized it. I have recently joined ‘kathak’ classes with my daughter because both of us have a keen interest in dancing. In a way it helps me to release my negative energy and keeps me in good mood.” Some participants mentioned changed lifestyle as it made them relaxed and live in peace with them. A female participant reported “With the help of meditation, I was able to make myself calm and became compassionate with others.” Participants share their experiences with others and gain insight about how to live positively in life. It also helps them to understand the coping mechanisms others are using and learn the ways of living in the world without their spouse. In this context, a bereaving man reported “talking to others helps decrease my stress. I feel I am not the only one who is dealing with the loss. If others can live happily why can’t I?” Spiritual inclination also made them contended with their lives. They explained their suffering in terms of a test that the divine is taking. The spiritual theme helped the participants to use spiritual concepts such as trusting in God, patience, forgiveness, gratitude and altruistic tendencies. A participant reported “I thank my God everyday for the faith in my heart because it is this faith that sustained me. I don’t know how much I will live but it’s my faith in the divine that is keeping me going.”

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Finally, the third question queried participants as to how they see their future years of life. Many participants reported being independent and assume all the responsibilities. A male participant reported that “after the death of my wife, I realized how much I was domestically dependent on her. But now, I see my future in accomplishing the responsibilities that she left with me to fulfil.” Almost all participants wished to live a more meaningful life by deepening their spiritual beliefs and turning to spiritual practices. They were of the opinion that God was in control of everything that was happening to them in their life. A female participant reported “Death is a God’s decision. I am no one to challenge it” Continued connections to the deceased can, for some persons, encourage increased spirituality or a desire to maintain spiritual beliefs (Cait, 2004; Sormanti & August, 1997). Few participants also reported they would like to help the humanity. A female participant stated “I try to help others by doing charity “. This helped them to divert themselves from the lingering sense of sadness and longing for the lost person. Many reported raising their children independently. A male participant stated “I am now mother and father of two kids”

Overall, it can be concluded from the above study that bereaved males and females differ significantly on life satisfaction and various dimensions of growth, however, females reported more positive growth than males. Moreover, post traumatic growth came out to be a significant and good predictor of life satisfaction. Finally, a deeper understanding of the human positive growth was discovered with the help of thematic analysis. It was discovered that the bereaved participants accepted morality, started living in present and making best of what life can offer them. They enhanced their support network and religious commitments. Moreover, they became independent by taking up new responsibilities.

Every research has some limitations. The present study consists of 30 participants in each group. This sample size does not provide a safe basis for generalization of the findings of the study. Generalizations were constrained since the sample was taken purely on convenience. Also, self report data could be biased and may not provide the most valid or accurate accounts of an individual’s behaviour. Future research should employ large samples and different research design to better understand the relationships between the variables used in the present study. Further studies should work towards articulating other characteristics like time since trauma, age, personality characteristics, coping styles etc and can also include other variables like social support, emotion regulation, resilience etc.

The current study did reveal some intriguing findings with regard to the positive growth. It is hoped that it will add to the literature and motivate future researchers to explore in greater detail the experience of positive growth in those who find themselves facing traumatic events in the Indian context.

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