

Survivors of Trauma and Positive Psychological Attributes: A Correlational Study

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ABSTRACT

The current paper titled: 'Survivors of Trauma and Positive Psychological Attributes: A Correlational Study' attempted to understand the impact of trauma on the variables- Grit, Flourish and Posttraumatic Growth. For the purpose of assessment, the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory, Grit Scale, Flourish Scale and a revised version of Pennebaker and Susman's Recent Traumatic Events Scale and Childhood Traumatic Events Scale were utilized. The study was administered on 67 working individuals between the ages 25-35 who have had experienced at least one traumatic event in their life. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to find the relationship between the variables. The results showed that impact of Trauma is negatively correlated with Grit and Flourish and there is a positive correlation between Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth. But there was no significant relationship that existed between the impact of trauma and the variables of Post-traumatic Growth, Flourish and Grit.

Keywords: *Trauma, Posttraumatic Growth, Grit and Flourish*

Trauma is defined by the American Psychological Association (APA 2000) as the emotional response that someone has to an extremely negative event. It is a type of damage to the psyche which is caused by a distressing event. Trauma is mostly the result of an overwhelming amount of stress that is above an individual's ability to cope with the emotions involved with that experience. Psychologically traumatic experiences often involve physical trauma that threatens one's survival and sense of security. Typical causes and dangers of psychological trauma include harassment, embarrassment, sexual abuse, employment discrimination, police brutality, judicial corruption and misconduct, bullying, domestic violence, being the victim of an alcoholic parent, the threat or the witnessing of violence (particularly in childhood), life-threatening medical conditions. Catastrophic natural disasters such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, war or other mass violence can also cause psychological trauma. However, the definition of trauma differs among individuals by their

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subjective experiences, not the objective facts. People will react to similar events differently which means that not all people who experience a potentially traumatic event will actually become psychologically traumatized. According to Jon Allen, a psychologist and author of 'Coping with Trauma: A Guide to Self-Understanding' (1995), there are two components to a traumatic experience: the objective and the subjective. Two people could undergo the same event and one person might be traumatized while the other person remained relatively unscathed. It is not possible to make generalizations such that "X is traumatic for all who go through it" or "event Y was not traumatic because no one was physically injured." In addition, the specific aspects of an event that are traumatic will be different from one individual to the next.

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) is a positive change experienced as a result of the struggle with a major life crisis or a traumatic event. There is significant evidence that traumatic events can cause many physical and psychological consequences. However some traumatic events can bring a positive change in a person's life. Three benefits have been identified by researchers they are -A) positive changes in the perception of oneself. Persons coping with a traumatic event feel that they are stronger and more self-assured. They are most likely to face difficulties in an assertive way. B) Changes in interpersonal relationships: relationships are enhanced in some way c) positive changes of philosophy of life: being appreciative of what you have and understanding of what really matters in life. However posttraumatic growth is not universal. Focusing on strengths instead of weaknesses is a basic concept of recovery; however for people who have experienced trauma this can be very difficult. There is a tendency to see themselves as weak due to their experiences. It is also important to have the awareness that people who have experienced trauma can go on to not only "survive" the trauma but also experience what has been identified in the literature as "Post Traumatic Growth". Understanding that this is possible is an important element that contributes to fostering hope. The research suggests that between 30-70% of individuals who experienced trauma also report positive change and growth coming out of the traumatic experience (Joseph and Butler, 2010). Post traumatic growth is defined as the "experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas has surpassed what was present before the struggle with crises occurred. The individual has not only survived, but has experienced changes that are viewed as important, and that go beyond the status quo" (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004).

Flourish is a concept in positive psychology which measures overall well-being in life. It is a concept that helps psychologists study and measure purpose, fulfilment, meaning and happiness. It is characterized by four main components which are goodness, generative, growth, and resilience. Flourishing is something that must be developed over the course of a lifetime. People who experience and express positive emotions cope more effectively with chronic stress and other negative experiences. Flourishing has benefits that can go beyond the individual and can have implications for communities and society as well.

Angela Duckworth (2007) defined grit to be perseverance and passion towards long term goals. Grit is an individual's passion towards a particular long term goal and the motivation

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towards achieving the goal. Individuals high in grit are able to maintain their determination and motivation over long periods despite experiences with failure. Their passion and commitment towards the long-term provides the stamina required to stay despite the challenges and setbacks. Some individuals have grit as part of their personality however researchers believe that individuals can be taught how to adopt grit. This can help individuals to be successful because it is important not to give up until you reach the goal.

Thus trauma can be related to the concepts of Post-Traumatic Growth, Flourish and Grit in a very direct way. It is obvious that for PTG to occur, there must be some impact of traumatic events. In the case of Flourish, trauma is connected in terms of resilience and being able to overcome trauma. Grit is a variable that is generally not applied to trauma directly since it looks into a sort of commitment in spite of failures in the long term sense. Here the failures that may influence the concept of Grit is that of trauma itself. Thus the relationship between impact of trauma and these three variables can indicate something very important regarding the nature and influence of trauma.

METHODOLOGY

The objectives set for the current study were as follows-

1. To develop a revised tool to assess impact of traumatic events based on Pennebaker and Susman's Childhood Traumatic Events Scale and the Recent Traumatic Events Scale.
2. To study if there is a significant relationship between impact of traumatic events and posttraumatic growth.
3. To study if there is a significant relationship between impact of traumatic events and flourishing attribute.
4. To study if there is a significant relationship between impact of traumatic events and grit.

Null hypotheses were set to explore the objectives mentioned above i.e. there exists no significant relationship between impact of traumatic events and post-traumatic growth, flourishing attribute and grit.

It was a mixed method research study which employed both qualitative and quantitative elements in its design. The study was conducted in four phases-

- 1. Phase 1:** Interview-10 participants were chosen from a working population, between the ages of 25-35 years. Convenient sampling was used in this phase. In this phase we tried to find out what events would potentially be called traumatic for people in general. An interview was conducted which was semi-structured and included open ended questions. Questions were asked regarding events leading to trauma and the emotional disturbances. These included those from childhood onwards till the current point of time.
- 2. Phase 2:** Revision of existing tool (Pennebaker and Susman's Childhood Traumatic Events Scale and Recent Traumatic Events Scale) Pennebaker and Susman's scales on childhood traumatic events scale and recent traumatic events scale (1988) was reviewed

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and based on the data obtained in phase 1, revisions and additions to the items in the scales were made. The objective in this phase was to develop a scale which assesses the impact of traumatic events from childhood till the current stage. For Childhood Traumatic Events Scale, three new questions were added and for Recent Traumatic events scale two questions were added based on the feedback received from the interview phase. Also few changes were made to the existing questions for both the scales.

- 3. Phase 3:** Pilot phase- A pilot study of the revised tool developed in phase 2 was administered to 5 people from a working population, between the age group of 25 – 35. Feedback was taken regarding the nature of the items and changes were made accordingly.
- 4. Phase 4:** Administration of the four scales-Convenient sampling was used in the study on a sample of 67 individuals who have experienced at least one traumatic event as listed in the tool.

Inclusion Criteria

The sample was chosen based on the following inclusion criteria.

1. Respondents residing in Bangalore city
2. Respondents between the age group of 25 to 35.
3. Respondents belonging to the working population
4. Respondents who have experienced at least one traumatic event in their life

Exclusion Criteria

The people who were excluded in the current study were those who came under these three criteria-

1. Respondents who have been diagnosed with psychological disorders
2. Respondents who have been diagnosed with chronic medical conditions
3. Respondents who are on medication for any kind of illness.

Ethical Considerations

Since the current study proposed to make the respondents recall traumatic memories, a few ethical considerations were set-

1. All doubts cleared before administration of the tools
2. Informed consent was taken where the respondents were explained the nature of the questionnaires and told they were free to leave the study at any point in the administration of the questionnaires
3. Traumatic counselling skills was utilized during the administration of the questionnaires and Debriefing was done after administration. Referrals were also made where necessary.

The following psychometric tools were used for the study

Impact of Trauma Scale: (Revision of Pennebaker and Susman's Childhood Traumatic Events Scale and Recent Traumatic Events Scale-1988) (Appendix)-Revision was made

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based on the Interview from Phase 1 plus the existing items from Pennebaker and Susman's Childhood traumatic events scale and recent traumatic events scale was used. Face validity had been established for the items previously. Verification of the items' relevance was confirmed via the interview as well. Reliability has not been previously established for these scales. Childhood traumatic events scale included 9 questions. Each question refers to any event that the person has experienced prior to the age of 17. A 7-point rating scale was used to rate the events, where 1 = not at all traumatic, 4 = somewhat traumatic, 7 = extremely traumatic. Recent Traumatic Events Scale also consisted of 9 questions, each question referring to any traumatic event that has occurred within the last three years of an individual's life. A similar 7-point rating scale was used to rate the events, where 1 = not at all traumatic, 4 = somewhat traumatic, 7 = extremely traumatic. The events that are measured as traumatic in childhood include death of a close friend or family, an upheaval between parents such as a divorce or a separation, traumatic sexual experience (rape, molestation), victim of violence (child abuse), an illness or injury. Three new questions were added to the existing questionnaire based on the feedback received from the interview phase. Also changes were made to the existing questionnaire. The events that are measured as traumatic in the Recent Traumatic Events Scale include death of a close friend or family, upheaval with a partner, traumatic sexual experience, victim of violence, illness, traumatic experiences at work, negative changes in life. Two questions were added to the existing questionnaire based on the feedback received from the interview phase. Also changes were made to the existing questionnaire.

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) was developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun in 1996. The inventory was developed to assess positive outcomes reported by persons who have experienced traumatic events. The 21 item scale includes factors of new possibilities, Relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, an appreciation of life. Persons who have experienced traumatic events report more positive changes than do persons who have not experienced extraordinary events. The posttraumatic growth inventory is modestly related to optimism and extraversion. The scale appears to have the utility in determining how successful individuals, coping with the aftermath of trauma are in reconstructing, strengthening their perceptions of self, and the meaning of events. The internal consistency of the 21-item PTGI is $\alpha = .90$. Concurrent and discrimination validity and construct validity have been established for the inventory.

Flourishing Scale is a brief 8-item summary measure of the respondent's self-perceived success in important areas such as relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism established by Diener et.al. in 2010. The scale provides a single psychological well-being score and can be used to provide useful feedback for how to improve one's life and provides useful stimulus for self-reflection. The test has a Cronbach's alpha of .87.

The Grit scale consists of 12 items and was developed by Duckworth et.al. (2007). The internal consistency, test-retest stability, consensual validity and predictive validity have been

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established. The Grit scale consists of two subscales; Consistency of Interests and Perseverance of Effort.

RESULTS

The results for the objectives and testing of hypotheses dealing with understanding the relationship between impact of traumatic events and the variables of Post-Traumatic Growth, Flourish and Grit have been presented in a consolidated table. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was the statistical technique used to assess the correlation.

Table 1: Showing the consolidated results of the Product Moment Correlation

TYPE OF TRAUMA		PTGI	FLOURISH	GRIT
Childhood Traumatic Event Score	Correlation Value	0.090	-0.02	0.083
	Significance	0.466	0.827	0.504
Recent Traumatic Events Score	Correlation Value	0.153	-0.072	-0.231
	Significance	0.217	0.560	0.060
Total Trauma Score	Correlation Value	0.147	-0.061	-0.092
	Significance	0.234	0.626	0.457

As can be seen the correlation values are fairly low between impact of traumatic events and the variables of Post-Traumatic Growth, Flourish and Grit. There is no correlation value which is significant at either of the p-value levels of either 0.05 or 0.01.

The Correlation value of Childhood Traumatic Events Score with PTGI is 0.090 which indicates a positive and weak correlation that is not significant. Childhood Traumatic Events score is negatively correlated with Flourish at -0.02 and is not significant. Childhood Traumatic Events Score is positively correlated with Grit at 0.083 but has a weak correlation and is not significant. Recent Traumatic Events Score has a positive correlation with PTGI at 0.153 and is not significant. Recent Traumatic Events Score has a negative correlation with Flourish at -0.072 and is not significant. Recent Traumatic Events Score is also negatively correlated with Grit at -0.231 and is not significant. The total Trauma score is positively correlated with PTGI at 0.147. Thus the null hypothesis stating 'there is no significant relationship between impact of traumatic events and post traumatic growth' is accepted. Research suggests that between 30-70% of individuals who experienced trauma also report positive change and growth coming out of the traumatic experience (Joseph and Butler, 2010). However, the result in the present study indicates a weak correlation and is not significant at 0.234. The results may have been insignificant because the overall score on trauma received by the group is very low which indicates that the severity of trauma experienced by the group is low. Morris et al., (2005) conducted a study on the nature of PTG and found that the participants that rated their trauma as more severe exhibited higher scores on the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) than those that self-reported lower trauma severity. Though this relationship has been observed, little has been done in the area of comparing differing levels of severity and traumatic events, nor has there been any research to observe the relationship with PTG correlates by comparing varying levels of trauma.

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The total Trauma score is negatively correlated with Flourish at -0.061 and is not significant. Thus the null hypothesis stating 'there is no significant relationship between impact of traumatic events and Flourish' is accepted. It is imperative to note how important the negative or inverse relationship between the two variables that this study points out to though not significant. As mentioned above, flourish is indicated by goodness, generative, growth and resilience. This means it is quite related to the concept of Post-traumatic growth. As presented above, the results indicating PTG and trauma have not been found significant but indicative of a positive relationship and therefore it can be seen that people who have experienced trauma have experienced a very small amount of PTG. This means that they are still in the very initial stages of getting over the trauma and helping to convert that experience in to something positive, which is what flourish requires. Therefore, it is only obvious that there be no significant relationship as yet between trauma and Flourish.

The total Trauma score is negatively correlated with Grit at -0.092 with a weak correlation and is not significant. Thus the null hypothesis stating 'there is no significant relationship between impact of trauma and Grit' is accepted. Grit as defined above basically denotes something related to perseverance in the long term sense in spite of failures. So in the current study, for the concept of Grit, failures are indicated by trauma. Since it has been found to be not significant, it means that trauma and failure are much more widely different than considered, especially when it comes to grit.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

One of the major limitations for the current study is the sample size and lack of homogeneity among the respondents generally. Due to the time limits set for the completion of this study, it was found that a bigger and more inclusive sample size were not possible to be considered. The nature and length of the questionnaires could have been another factor that may have made people answer in a defensive manner. The last and most important limitation was the fact that overall, the level of trauma experienced by the group, on the whole, was quite low and that may have impacted the correlations for the three variables.

All in all, it was seen that due to the above limitations, there exists no significant relationship between impact of trauma and Post-Traumatic Growth, Flourish and Grit. It also shows the need for further testing of the same variables using a more diverse and inclusive sample of a larger size so that proper and more indicative and representative conclusions can be drawn from the same.

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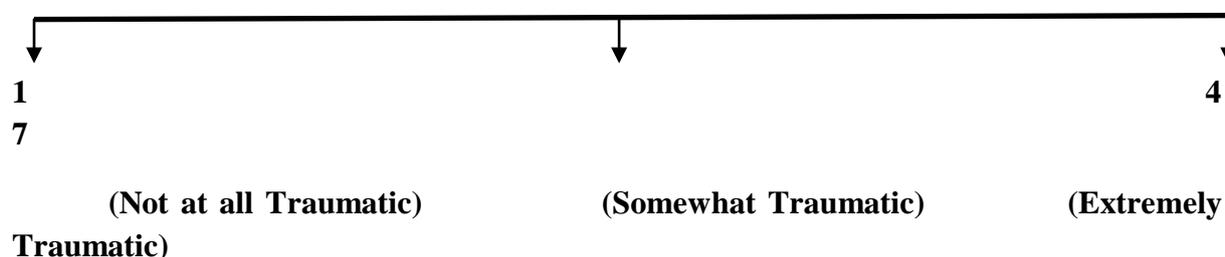
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Recent Traumatic Events Scale (Revised)

For the following questions, again answer each item that is relevant and again be as honest as you can. Each question refers to any event that you may have experienced within the last 3 years.

Again, answer the following questions as indicated. Use a 7-point rating scale to indicate the extent of trauma in each case.



1. Within the last 3 years, did you experience a death of a very close friend or family member? _____ (Y/N)
If yes, how traumatic was this? _____
2. Within the last 3 years, was there a major upheaval between you and your significant other (such as divorce, separation, failure of romantic relationship)? _____ (Y/N)
If yes, how traumatic was this? _____
3. Within the last 3 years, did you have a traumatic sexual experience (raped, molested, etc.)? _____ (Y/N)
If yes, how traumatic was this? _____
4. Within the last 3 years, were you the victim of violence/ abuse (drug abuse, alcohol abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, any other type of abuse other than sexual)? _____ (Y/N)
If yes, how traumatic was this? _____
5. Within the last 3 years, were you extremely ill or injured? (health issues, hospital stay) _____ (Y/N)
If yes, how traumatic was this? _____
6. Within the last 3 years, has there been a major change in the kind of work you do (e.g., forced new job, stressful promotion, demotion, lateral transfer, failure at work, loss of job, cut in salary, unfair treatment at workplace, sexism etc.)? _____ (Y/N)
If yes, how traumatic was this? _____
7. Within the last 3 years, Has there been any significant negative changes in your life (relocation to new city, higher expectation from family/ society, feeling very uncertain about future, feeling very lonely or depressed for a long time, anxiety/ stress over a longer period of time) _____ (Y/N)
If yes, how traumatic was this? _____
8. Within the last 3 years, have you been a first-hand witness to any disturbing incidents around you? (Poverty, accident, natural disaster, child labor etc.) _____ (Y/N)
If yes, how traumatic was this? _____

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9. Within the last 3 years, did you experience any other major upheaval that you think may have shaped your life or personality significantly? _____ (Y/N).
If yes, what was the event? _____
If yes, how traumatic was this? _____

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