

# ADJUSTING TO MAJOR LIFE CHANGES

When stressful or traumatic life events come along, we all respond in different ways. One of these may seem counter-intuitive, that we can thrive and flourish following adversity. In this article, **Stephen Joseph** introduces the psychology of post-traumatic growth, with **Steven Shorrock**.

The past year has been a difficult one for many of us in so many ways. We have all been presented with challenges, whether it is keeping ourselves and our families safe, maintaining income to pay the bills, or looking after relatives in need of care. For those working in aviation, healthcare, education, and other sectors affected particularly badly by the pandemic, there have been significant – and for some traumatic – life changes. Many pilots, in particular, have had to put their careers on hold, or change them entirely. According to a global survey of 2,600 flight crew in partnership with Flight Global (2021), less than half of all commercial pilots are still flying for a living. According to the European Cockpit Association (ECA), over 18,000 pilot jobs are threatened or already permanently lost as of January 2021. The ECA noted that pilots on precarious atypical contracts and ‘self-employment’ were amongst the first to see their contracts terminated. Many others’ lifelong vocational dreams have been put on hold or abandoned entirely.

It has taught us that although we spend our lives doing our best to avoid the tragedies and traumas of life, such things will befall most of us despite our efforts. It is important to have the right coping skills when things do happen to us, but one thing that seems particularly important is the ability to be able to use challenges in life as opportunities to become stronger and wiser in some way. I interviewed Terry Waite just over a decade ago when I was writing my book *What Doesn't Kill Us*, in which I

explored this idea. Waite was a hostage negotiator who was himself kidnapped and held hostage from 1987 to 1991. One of the things he said was:

*“Suffering is universal: you attempt to subvert it so that it does not have a destructive, negative effect. You turn it around so that it becomes a creative, positive force.”*

What a remarkable thing to say for someone who had survived four years in solitary confinement, being chained, beaten and subject to mock execution. What I was interested in was whether it is only the rare few who are able to manage adversity with such a positive outlook, or is this something that we are all capable of.

As I discovered in my research for the book, there are many scientific studies on how adversity is often a catalyst for positive changes. It is not uncommon at all. This is so much so that psychologists now even have a term for it: *posttraumatic growth*.

Posttraumatic growth refers to changes that cut to the very core of our way of being. First, relationships become deeper. People describe that they come to value their friends and family more, feel an increased sense of compassion for others and a longing for more intimate relationships. Second, people change their views of themselves in some way. For example, people develop in wisdom, personal strength, and gratitude, perhaps coupled with a greater acceptance of their

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vulnerabilities and limitations. Third, people describe changes in their life philosophy. For example, we may find a fresh appreciation for each new day and re-evaluate our understanding of what really matters in life, becoming less materialistic and more able to live in the present. Often this involves new and deep appreciation of the spiritual aspects of life.

But posttraumatic growth can take time. When something happens, we might feel overwhelmed, with constant and troubling thoughts spinning around our minds about what happened, how things might have been different, and what we did or didn't do. This rumination can be destructive and interfere with our lives. We might just want to stay in bed and forget about everything, or find ourselves having a bit more to drink in the evenings than usual, or getting irritable with family and friends. Hopefully, those around us will understand what we are going through is something shattering. It is a reminder that we will need their support and understanding. If this period becomes prolonged and begins to seriously interfere with daily life, it is time to consider seeking professional help, but for most people such feelings will subside over time such that they don't feel completely overwhelmed.

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All this can feel chaotic to a person and they can feel they are going out of control, but actually it is the mind's way of trying to make sense of what has happened. This can be illustrated through the metaphor of the shattered vase which I first introduced in *What Doesn't Kill Us*. Imagine that one day you accidentally knock a treasured vase off its perch. It smashes into tiny pieces. It is a total loss. What do you do? Do you try to put the vase back together as it was? Or do you pick up the beautiful coloured pieces and use them to make something new – such as a colourful mosaic? When adversity strikes, people often feel that at least some part of them – be it their views of the world, their sense of themselves, their relationships – has been smashed. Those who try to put their lives back together exactly as they were remain fractured and vulnerable. But those who accept the breakage and build themselves anew become more resilient and open to new ways of living.

Not for a moment do I wish to downplay the suffering that often follows, the sadness and grief of loss and bereavement, and the anxieties of an uncertain future that comes with job loss. But it is in the midst of our suffering that there often comes a point at which we realise that ultimately it is up to us how we confront the challenges ahead. When things happen to us, we can't just turn the clock back as if it hadn't happened, although often that is what we would like to be able to do. In order to adjust we have to accept the reality of what has happened and find a way to move forward.

And the more we can view adversity as a new beginning, or a new opportunity, the better for us. The key is to notice it. We can ask ourselves questions such as:


- Are there ways in which my relationships with family and friends have been strengthened and deepened in intimacy?
- Are there ways in which I have found a different perspective on life with new opportunities?
- Are there things I did to survive what happened that showed me strengths within myself that I didn't know I had?
- Are there ways in which I have found a greater understanding of life and how to live it?
- Are there ways in which I find myself being more grateful for what I have and for those around me?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, we would suggest taking some time just to think about and reflect on these changes in your life. It might be helpful to write about them in a journal and to make this a regular exercise. As you notice growth taking root, you can nurture it. Regularly ask yourself these questions and find ways to enact the changes you notice, even in the smallest ways. What I've noticed most of all is that posttraumatic growth offers people the opportunity to become truer to themselves, to be able to push aside some of the constraints they have felt put on them by others, and to find new ways of living that seem more real and genuine to them. It can be particularly hard when we lose our job as so much of who we think we are is often tied up in our job description. People will often feel adrift and lost for a while but for some it comes to be a defining moment for them when they realise how much of themselves they have invested in an employer and realise that they have an opportunity to do things differently now. Studies examining people whose careers have

been derailed have shown that for some it was a defining moment for them to find a new direction in life, temporarily or in the longer term.

Martin Bromiley, an airline pilot in the UK, experienced a traumatic event in 2005 that changed his life, and that of many others. His wife was admitted to the hospital for a routine elective procedure. “After just over 20 minutes,” he wrote in *HindSight 25*, “Elaine was brain-dead. It would be another 13 days before she really was dead.” In response to the failings in healthcare, Martin founded the Clinical Human Factors Group (CHFG), which has – by many accounts – been responsible for a transformational shift in understanding of human and organisational factors in healthcare, perhaps helping to save many lives.

After the emergence of the pandemic, many flight crews have offered support to hospital staff (see Carpenter, *HindSight 31*). Others have offered support to peer wellbeing via several national schemes. Still others have turned their attention to helping to end the pandemic in different ways. After two decades as a pilot for the travel firm Thomas Cook, Christopher Bailey was left unemployed when the company collapsed in September 2019. He got a job at a COVID-19 testing site in the UK and was promoted to manager after just one month. His attitude is testament to growth: “I think my transferable skills have been recognised – attention to detail, managing big picture situations, and overseeing things from afar, as well as being comfortable with very strict rules and procedures while having to manage a team” (Shah, 2021).

We realise that what we have said here is not for everyone, but it may be worth some thought. We hope in sharing with you about the psychology of posttraumatic growth that you may find something useful to take away. 

## Reference

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