

St. Stephen's College

POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH AND SPIRITUALITY:
THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

By

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Abstract

Posttraumatic growth is a phenomenon that is characterized by the significant personal changes and growth that an individual can experience after a traumatic event. This research contributes to the existing body of research on posttraumatic growth by deeply looking into the experience after trauma, gaining insight into the process of growth after trauma, and the role that a person's spirituality plays in their growth process. This research answered the question “What is the experience of growth in the aftermath of a traumatic event?” with a particular focus on how aspects of spirituality and religion affected their journey. Semi-structured interviews were given to a convenience sample of five co-researchers. This research uses the hermeneutic phenomenological method to analyze the experiences of growth after trauma. The picture of my co-researchers’ growth is consistent with existing research on posttraumatic growth. The process of growth involves a continuous journey, a series of choices, existential questioning, support, and acceptance. My co-researcher’s experience highlights the importance of their personal spirituality. Spiritual themes: suffering, openness, and meaning making, had corresponding active processes: existential questioning, acceptance, and daily application, that helped change the traumatic experience into growth. The primary implication of my research to psychotherapeutic practice and posttraumatic growth research is the role spirituality plays in the growth process. Further research should investigate how spirituality can be used as support for clients and how therapists can assist their clients in cultivating this important resource for growth.

Key Words: posttraumatic growth, spirituality, suffering, openness, acceptance, meaning making, existential questioning, hermeneutic phenomenology

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Chapter One: Introduction

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.” (Kübler-Ross, 1975)

Posttraumatic growth is a phenomenon that has existed for thousands of years (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). The literature contains examples of posttraumatic growth from ancient texts including the Bible (Armstrong, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). One example is the experience of the Buddha, a 15th century prince in Asia minor, who witnessed three tragedies and as a result devoted his life to contemplation and compassion, and founded the Buddhist faith (Armstrong, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Posttraumatic growth is a term describing significant growth that occurs in the aftermath of a traumatic event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2018). The growth must go beyond the starting characteristics of the individual; it is not a return to baseline, but rather the experience of surpassing already achieved strengths, awareness, and goals (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Posttraumatic growth focuses on the transformative possibilities, which could result from a traumatic event that go beyond simply healing and lead to a new state of being (Chen, Zhou, Zeng, & Wu, 2015; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). In recent times, researchers started studying growth after trauma in a systematic way in order to deeply understand the experience of growth after trauma (Armstrong, Shakespeare-Finch, & Shochet, 2014; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013, Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann, & Hanks, 2010; Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, Triplett, Vishnevsky, &

Lindstrom, 2011; Chen, et al., 2015; Cordova, Cunningham, Carlson & Andrykowski, 2001; Erbes, Eberly, Dikel, Johnsen, Harris & Engdahl, 2005; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Taku, Cann, Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi, Calhoun & Cann, 2007; Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, & Calhoun, 2018; Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun & Reeve, 2011). With the prevalence of trauma in our society, it is important to know not only about the negative consequences, but also about the existence of survival and even positive results that can develop after trauma, because they can give hope and inspiration to people who are suffering (Van Ameringen, Mancini, Patterson, & Boyle, 2008; Chittister, 2003; Burns, 2020).

In their book “Posttraumatic Growth in Clinical Practice”, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) develop a metaphor for spiritual growth that can develop after a traumatic event. In Celtic mythology, there are believed to be geographic locations, such as Stonehenge, where the spiritual world and current reality are separated by a thin veil called a “thin place” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). The metaphor is that traumatic events can be a “thin place” bringing the spiritual world closer, in which normal barriers of logic and previously held beliefs are suspended, new experiences happen, new questions are asked, and new beliefs are formed (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). The formation of new beliefs and strengthening through reformation of old beliefs are key components of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013).

In the introduction chapter, I describe my motivations to study posttraumatic growth, briefly explain my methodology, and talk about some of the spiritual and theological themes related to posttraumatic growth. Then I will describe my research

question and how this research contributes to the existing body of research on posttraumatic growth.

Motivation

My motivation to explore posttraumatic growth comes from my personal life. Some of the most compassionate, kind, driven, and strong people I have met overcame significant trauma in their past. These traumas included rape, surviving a major illness, and the traumatic death of a loved one. For years, I wondered how a trauma could directly or indirectly increase a person's compassion and inner strength. When I came across research on the posttraumatic growth by Tedeschi and Calhoun while researching a paper, I knew immediately that this was something I wanted to know a lot more about.

My motivation to look more deeply into the spiritual aspect of post-traumatic growth comes from my own experience. The suicide of my father instigated existential questions that started me down a spiritual path, from despair through hope into compassion and love. The experience still leads me to understand the importance of believing in something, whether it is God, Karma, or humanity, because belief can help give hope in darkness. Contemplation, learning, and insight on existential questions taught me that pain lets us know we are alive, and fear shows us what is important. The awareness that pain and fear had a positive purpose drastically changed my priorities. Education became a way to enrich my life and gain knowledge, which would allow me to eventually contribute meaningfully to the world.

Another consequence of my spiritual journey is a deep compassion for persons in pain. A deepening awareness of the everyday challenges that I faced helped me gain perspective on what could be going on in another person. My compassion and empathy

expanded over the years starting with people in similar circumstances, to those in more dire circumstances, and finally to everyone.

Methodology

To discover more about the experience of post-traumatic growth, I examined the experiences of growth after trauma for five co-researchers. I asked these co-researchers to reflect on moments, events, and interactions that had a significant impact on their recovery and growth journey. I used the process of hermeneutic phenomenology, made possible by Heidegger (Lavery, 2003). The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to “understand everyday skills, practices, and embodied experiences” (Leonard, 1994). This methodology focuses on the subjective experience of the individual co-researchers (Leonard, 1994; Moules, 2002). I focused on information about the context, worldview, and personal experiences that contributed to the psychological and spiritual growth for my co-researchers after their trauma. In accordance with hermeneutic phenomenology, I used thematic and interpretive analysis to find common themes among the experiences of my co-researchers (Leonard, 1994). Hermeneutic phenomenology embraces the constant changes and complexities in life; therefore, the analysis will not be all encompassing, but rather have aided the researcher into a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Leonard, 1994; Lavery, 2003). My goal was to deeply understand the process of growth after trauma for each of my co-researchers. My hope is that this information might be used in future research to develop techniques that therapists can use to help clients experience posttraumatic growth throughout trauma recovery. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the co-researcher’s lived experience and the meaning that they make, which is the primary question of this research.

Spiritual and Theological Themes

The spiritual and theological themes I think are important to the process of posttraumatic growth are the importance of questioning their beliefs, the function of suffering, and constant support through despair (Krause & Pargament, 2018; Taylor, 2012; Zarzycka & Zietek, 2018). Other researchers have also identified the role of spiritual and theological themes in PTG (Montgomery, 2008; Tedeschi, Cann, Taku, Senol-Durak, & Calhoun, 2017). Looking explicitly at spirituality in the context of PTG is rare. However, over the past few years, spirituality and its role in posttraumatic growth has become an emerging speciality.

There are many examples in the Bible of people, even prophets, questioning God, and begging for justice, both from the sins of man, and from the injustice of God. Two examples are in the books of Psalms and Jeremiah:

But I cry to you for help, Lord; in the morning, my prayer comes before you. **14**
Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? **15** From my youth I
have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in
despair. **16** Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. **17** All
day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. **18**
You have taken from me friend and neighbor - darkness is my closest friend.
(New International Version, Psalms 88: 13-18).

A similar sentiment about questioning God is also mentioned by the prophet Jeremiah:
“Lord, if I argue with you, you are always right. But I want to ask you about some things
that do not seem right. Why are wicked people successful? Why do people you cannot
trust have such easy lives?” (New International Version, Jeremiah 12:1) Questioning God

during times of despair is documented multiple times in the bible. Even the apostle Thomas questioned and doubted, which contributed to a deep devotion (New International Version, John 20:25). Within posttraumatic growth literature there is a strong connection to increased spiritual and religious beliefs following time of great suffering (Triplett, et al., 2011). I am curious if those who have experienced trauma question their beliefs and rebuild stronger beliefs in the growth process.

The importance of questioning God serves a vital function in creating a genuine deep belief system. Lamenting after a significant loss is a significant theme in the Bible:

Where there is lament, the believer is able to take initiative with God and so develop over against God the ego-strength that is necessary for responsible faith.

But where the capacity to initiate lament is absent, one is left only with praise and doxology. God then is omnipotent, always to be praised. The believer is nothing and can praise or accept guilt uncritically where life with God does not function properly. The outcome is a “False Self,” bad faith that is based in fear and guilt and lived out as resentful or self-deceptive works of righteousness. The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility... In such a serious conversation and communion, there comes genuine obedience, which is not a contrived need to please, but a genuine, yielding commitment.

(Brueggemann, 1995, p. 103-104)

Unquestioned beliefs can lead to a false self and a lack of true understanding (Brueggemann, 1995). Brueggemann (1995) commented that complete obedience and failure to question can lead to compliance, docility, and despair. Traumatic events can jolt people out of this compliance to order and lead to questioning morality and ethics.

Another vital function spirituality and religion can play in growth after trauma is ever-present support (Pargament & Koenig, 2000). Therapy is a very valuable tool in healing from trauma, but it is one of 168 hours that exist in a week. A person's beliefs can be a significant source of comfort and support when other sources are unavailable.

Support is available from God during times of despair (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). The prophet Isaiah memorably describes how God's presence can offer a powerful sense of support. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze." (New International Version, Isaiah, 43:2) This passage of scripture focuses on how God's support will be present through all of life's challenges. However, the presence of God's love is not necessarily felt by the person. The famous poem "Footprints in the Sand" explores the ever present and unfailing love of God. It describes beautifully how God's love is continuously present even if it is not felt. The recognition and reconciliation of spiritual beliefs after trauma could be a significant stage of recovery or growth after trauma.

Spiritual and religious beliefs aid in coping after trauma (Pargament & Koenig, 2000; Shaw, et al. 2005). The important role spiritual and religious beliefs play in coping after trauma will be explored more in the literature review. There are potentially many spiritual and theological themes present in the journey after trauma, which I will take up later in this thesis.

Overall, the literature on posttraumatic growth indicates that we need more information about the role of a person's spirituality (Amundson, 2014; Christensen, Iversen, Ambrosi, & Elklit, 2015; Denney, 2009; Triplett et al., 2011). Researchers have

briefly explored the role spirituality and religion play in healing from, coping with, and even growing after trauma (Amundson, 2014; Daniels, 2012; Pargament & Koenig, 2000; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). While many aspects of spirituality and religion are beneficial to healing and growth, certain aspects of religion can be harmful (Daniels, 2012; Krause & Pargament, 2018).

Research Question and Structure

This research contributes to the existing body of research on posttraumatic growth by deeply looking into the experience after trauma, gaining insight into the process of growth after trauma, and the role that a person's spirituality plays in their growth process. These topics are hinted in the existing research, but more information is needed for a full understanding (Parapully, 2002; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2013). My main research question is “What is the experience of growth in the aftermath of a traumatic event?” I have focused on significant turning points in the journey of my co-researchers, as well as any positive or negative changes to their emotional state. Additionally, I have asked how aspects of spirituality, and religion affected their journey.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter one introduces the research question, my personal interest in the topic, and the choice of methodology used. In chapter two, I describe existing research regarding posttraumatic growth and spirituality. Chapter three contains information on hermeneutic phenomenology, the methodology chosen in order to focus on the experience of my co-researchers. Chapter four contains the findings of my analysis of my co-researchers’ experience. Chapter five covers how my findings situate within existing research regarding posttraumatic growth and

spirituality. Finally, chapter six covers implications my research has for future research, the field of psychotherapy, and my practice as a therapist.

Chapter Two: Posttraumatic Growth and Spirituality Literature Review

Since the emergence of positive psychology in the 1990s, researchers have studied how negative events can have positive consequences; posttraumatic growth is a prime example (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). Research into posttraumatic growth is in its infancy with the term only being introduced by Tedeschi and Calhoun in 1996 and a key foundational paper appearing in 2004. Consequently, focusing my search on the words “posttraumatic growth” yielded a sufficient body of research. During my search, two scholars, Tedeschi and Calhoun, became my focus as they are a keystone for the understanding of posttraumatic growth.

I completed the literature review using the following tools: the primary research databases used were EBSCOhost, Academic Search Complete, ResearchGate, PubMed and Google Scholar, and books. I conducted the searches between July 2016 to August 2020, using the keywords “posttraumatic growth”, “trauma”, “spirituality”, “spiritual growth”, “spiritual growth after trauma”, and “religious coping”.

Researchers in the field today are continuing to identify how posttraumatic growth affects different populations and types of trauma (Kashyap & Hussain, 2018; Vishnevsky, Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Demakis, 2010). In addition, researchers are trying to identify characteristics, environments, and other factors that influence posttraumatic growth. One key area of research is the effect religion and spirituality have on posttraumatic growth.

My research is centered on the question “What is the experience of growth in the aftermath of a traumatic event?” and this literature review will present a foundation for my thesis. In this chapter, I will first review the topic of posttraumatic growth. The

literature review will cover the following areas: the definition and characteristics of posttraumatic growth, how posttraumatic growth differs from related topics like resilience, the five domains of posttraumatic growth, and limitations with the current state of research into posttraumatic growth. The aims of this literature review are to summarize the main findings and identify gaps in the research of posttraumatic growth. I am particularly interested in the domain of spiritual development or spiritual growth after trauma. After my summation of posttraumatic growth, I will describe research relating to the effect religion and spirituality have on trauma, recovery, and growth.

What is Posttraumatic Growth?

Posttraumatic growth is growth that occurs in the aftermath of a traumatic event, and it focuses on the transformative possibilities that may result as a consequence, which go beyond simply healing to lead into a new state of being (Armstrong et al., 2014; Cann et al., 2011; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013, Calhoun et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2015; Cordova et al., 2001; Erbes et al., 2005; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Ramos & Leal, 2013; Taku et al., 2008; Taku et al., 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 2007; Triplett et al., 2011). Most importantly, posttraumatic growth is positive transformations, which develop after the traumatic incidents (Calhoun *et al.*, 2010, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). These transformations can manifest as changes in perception of self, relations with others, or understandings of worldview (Chen *et al.*, 2015, Cordova *et al.*, 2001, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013).

Who Experiences Posttraumatic Growth?

Posttraumatic growth has been shown in many different age groups, ethnicities, socioeconomic spheres, and education levels (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The traumas these people have experienced include but are not limited to: “bereavement, rheumatoid arthritis, HIV infection, cancer, bone marrow transplantation, heart attack, coping with medical problems of children, transportation accidents, house fires, sexual assault and sexual abuse, combat, refugee experiences, and being taken hostage” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.3). Many people who endure trauma will not experience any posttraumatic growth (Calhoun *et al.*, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013; Wortman, 2004). A study by Van Ameringen and colleagues (2008) found that in Canada approximately 75% of people have experienced an event traumatic enough to possibly trigger posttraumatic stress disorder. Van Ameringen and colleagues (2008) found that the majority of persons do not develop negative lifetime consequences, but rather are unaffected or return to normal shortly after the traumatic event. However, they found that only around 10% develop posttraumatic stress disorder (Van Ameringen *et al.*, 2008). In a similar study with an American population, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) found that around 10% of people who have experienced trauma will develop posttraumatic growth. These two studies indicate that only a small percentage of people exposed to a trauma develop extreme negative symptoms or grow in a meaningful positive way afterwards. The reasons why some people develop harsh negative symptoms, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, and some develop positive attributes, such as posttraumatic growth, remains unknown and is still being investigated.

What Is Understood About How Posttraumatic Growth Develops?

There are many reasons a person could experience personal growth. Posttraumatic growth is a unique category because it requires the growth be either a direct or indirect consequence of a trauma. The traumatic life event or major life crisis must be significant enough to disrupt life and shatter worldviews for any resulting development to be considered posttraumatic growth (Armstrong et al., 2014; Cann et al., 2011; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013, Calhoun et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2015; Cordova et al., 2001; Taku et al., 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 2007; Triplett et al., 2011). A worldview is a person's perspective on his or her reality; it includes the person's understanding of their social, psychological, relational, occupational, political, and belief systems (Wilson, 2008). Worldview includes a person's understanding of what effect or control they have over their environment, and what purpose they might have in it (Wilson, 2008). According to Wilson (2008), a person's worldview consists of: a person's ontology, what they believe to be real; epistemology, how a person understands and thinks about what is real; methodology, how they establish and determine what is real; axiology, a person's ethics or morals that guide their search for what is real. A traumatic event can shatter a person's existing ontology, epistemology, methodology, or axiology (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013; Wilson, 2008). Traumatic events have a seismic component and like an earthquake can shake our worldviews, like a city, destroying the weaker structures, but leaving the stronger structures still standing (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). This means that going through a trauma causes a person's beliefs, values and understandings of the world to be dramatically tested. The beliefs, values, and understandings that are strong will withstand and be possible sources of great

support, whereas weaker ones will shatter or fade away, which can lead to an opportunity to rebuild. However, the shattering of beliefs, values and understandings often have a multitude of negative consequences (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

The negative consequences of trauma primarily involve emotional and/or physical responses. Common emotional responses include anxiety, depression, sadness, guilt, anger, and dysfunctional patterns of thinking including intrusive rumination (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Severe emotional responses to trauma include persistent numbness, panic attacks, and repetitive intrusive thoughts or images, often referred to as flashbacks (Van Ameringen *et al.*, 2008). High levels of stress can result in fatigue, muscle aches, gastric symptoms, and general discomfort. (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These common responses can last for days, weeks, months, or years and can be consistent or randomly occurring. While rare, psychiatric disorders involving hallucinations and delusions are a possible consequence of trauma. Symptoms often occur immediately after the trauma, but delayed reactions can occur with the largest impact symptoms hitting years later; often triggered by a major change such as the birth of a child, loss of a job, or death of a loved one (Van Ameringen *et al.*, 2008). A diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder is given when the symptoms cause significant impairment to functioning and last for more than a month (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The label used for posttraumatic symptoms that do not meet the criteria for the posttraumatic stress disorder diagnosis is posttraumatic stress symptoms. Understanding the negative effect that trauma can have on human beings reinforces how fascinating it is that some individuals grow after their traumas.

It should be pointed out that posttraumatic growth does not lessen the experience of the trauma or mean that everything is back to normal. In fact, posttraumatic growth and posttraumatic stress often co-occur (Calhoun *et al.*, 2010, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). This means that a person who has or has had posttraumatic stress disorder or posttraumatic stress symptoms could experience post traumatic growth. Additionally, posttraumatic growth has not been shown to reduce posttraumatic stress symptoms (Armstrong *et al.*, 2014; Cann *et al.*, 2011; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Chen *et al.*, 2015; Ramos & Leal, 2013; Taku *et al.*, 2009; Tedeschi *et al.*, 2007; Triplett *et al.*, 2011; Wortman, 2004). This seeming contradiction might indicate that people with both posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth could have grown in some ways but not others. For example, a person could have grown in their faith or personal relationships but still struggle with anxiety and have panic attacks. The fact that growth is not mutually exclusive of continuing struggle is a very interesting one that I believe deserves more attention. Persons experiencing growth co-occurring with their posttraumatic stress symptoms might not have completed their healing yet and need more time or assistance in their areas of weakness.

The Role of Struggle. Some of the literature suggests that struggling itself may lead to growth. “Posttraumatic growth is the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). In Tedeschi and Calhoun’s words, “significant posttraumatic growth may require a significant threat or the shattering of fundamental schemas and may at times co-exist with significant psychological distress” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.4). The struggle with the traumatic event and its consequences is theorized to be an essential part of the growth

process (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). Rebuilding the shattered worldviews stronger or healthier than before might lead to developing posttraumatic growth. However, how the struggle affects the growth process, what characteristics of struggle contribute to growth, or why struggle could be beneficial to growth remains unknown.

Posttraumatic growth has three defining characteristics: a trauma was experienced, the person struggled to cope, and the person grew beyond who they were before the trauma occurred (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The significance of these three factors is the relationship between trauma, struggle, and growth. Trauma shatters a person's worldviews (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Consequently, actively struggling with the trauma may influence the rebuilding of a person's shattered worldviews to be stronger than they were before.

A concept analysis of posttraumatic growth by Tehranineshat and Torabizadeh (2020) found four attributes that contribute to the development of posttraumatic growth: spiritual changes, compassion toward others, appreciation of life, and improved self-understanding. These attributes aid the understanding of how posttraumatic growth develops. Additionally, they are consistent with findings of posttraumatic growth researchers.

Even though we are beginning to gain a better understanding of post traumatic growth, there are many areas that remain a mystery. While researchers have proven that individuals can grow after trauma, how they grow remains only theorized. Tedeschi and Calhoun believe that "the psychological processes involved in managing the disturbances are the same general types of processes that also can produce positive change." (Tedeschi

& Calhoun, 2004, p. 2). This implies that revolutionary processes are not necessarily required for posttraumatic growth but may instead be the successful execution of already existing techniques and strategies. While not proven, it is possible that posttraumatic growth is an extension of recovery and healing. It is possible that the individuals who develop posttraumatic growth have used the techniques and strategies necessary for healing and recovery, only taken them deeper. For example, a person with posttraumatic stress disorder might find praying to God to be a great anxiety reliever. This person could then strengthen this technique through awareness, study, and application, thus deepening their faith. Mental health professionals might be able to assist a person in growth by emphasizing how the person grew and inspire that person to use similar strategies to grow in other areas.

Posttraumatic Growth and Related Concepts

In the literature, posttraumatic growth is often related to traits like resilience, hardiness, optimism, and a sense of coherence because they are all positive ways of growing, coping, or existing after a difficult time in life (Armstrong et al., 2014; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Resilience, hardiness, optimism, and a sense of coherence are all traits that will aid someone in recovering after a difficult or traumatic event, however, they are distinctly different from posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Resilience is the most similar, and most often confused with posttraumatic growth, because both concepts involve positive outcomes after trauma. Resilience is the ability to go on with life or continue living a purposeful life after experiencing hardship, trauma, or adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.4). Resilience lessens the effect or consequence of adversity and contributes to a person returning back to normal, expected,

or original levels of functioning more easily (Dillen, 2012; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Resilience is a trait often described in children who do well in spite of the poverty or hardships they faced growing up (Dillen, 2012; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Unlike posttraumatic growth, which requires the person to struggle with negative consequences of trauma, resilience increases a person's ability to cope with a trauma or negative circumstance, decreases the negative effects trauma has, and decreases the need to cope.

Conversely, hardiness, optimism, and sense of coherence are frames of mind that assist in coping with the negative consequences of trauma. Hardiness consists of an expectation that life will be challenging, associated with a willingness to rise to that challenge by means of commitment, control, and curiosity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). "Optimism involves expectations of positive outcome to events" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.4). Sense of coherence describes the ability to comprehend and understand stressful or negative life events in such a way that coping and finding meaning in them becomes not only possible but likely (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Hardiness, optimism, and a sense of coherence are traits that can aid someone's recovery after a difficult event, but they are not growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The key difference between hardiness, optimism, sense of coherence, and posttraumatic growth is that hardiness, optimism, and sense of coherence describe a resistance to the stress of traumatic life events; while posttraumatic growth is not just recovery, it is growth beyond the person you were before the trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

A good analogy to explain the difference between resilience, hardiness, optimism, a sense of coherence, and posttraumatic growth is that of being thrown into deep water

and the different methods of surviving. If you are in deep water, a life jacket prevents you from sinking too deeply into the water, returns you to the surface, and keeps you afloat. This is like resilience. Resilience lessens the negative effects of trauma, helps a person return to their state before the trauma, and lessens the probability of developing major negative consequences from trauma. Hardiness, optimism, and a sense of coherence are all mindsets that help prevent the person from panicking and making their situation worse. Conversely, posttraumatic growth occurs when you are starting to drown in the deep water and fighting to stay afloat, but during this fight you learn how to swim and develop stronger muscles. Posttraumatic growth uses necessity and struggle to grow and develop new skills and strengths.

Posttraumatic growth is not resistance to the consequences of trauma, or the ability to cope with stressful life events; it is the development of personal characteristics, purpose, or quality relationships that did not previously exist (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In fact, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) suggested that persons with high coping abilities, such as resilience, hardiness, optimism, or a sense of coherence, might be less likely to develop posttraumatic growth, because individuals with high coping abilities may not get to the necessary level of struggle needed for the growth to develop. It is the fighting against the water that is the teacher. For a person to grow from a traumatic incident, they must not be so successful in their coping abilities that they do not struggle, but also not so low in coping ability that they struggle too much (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). If we return to the drowning analogy, if your ability to stay afloat is high, there is little need to develop muscles or swimming skills; conversely, if you are drowning and

not getting enough oxygen, your ability to learn new skills or develop muscles is compromised.

Posttraumatic growth differs from the related concepts of resilience, hardiness, optimism, and sense of coherence because it is not about coping better through the trauma like the other concepts. Posttraumatic growth focuses on the growth that developed because of the struggle to learn to cope effectively with the negative consequences of trauma.

The Five Domains of Posttraumatic Growth

In previous sections of this literature review I have described what posttraumatic growth is, who it affects and related concepts that often get confused with posttraumatic growth. This section will dive deeper into what posttraumatic growth is by describing the five different domains that researchers predominantly agree upon (Cordova *et al.*, 2001; Chen *et al.*). These domains are important because they ground the growth into more concrete terms and help to make posttraumatic growth more identifiable.

The five domains of posttraumatic growth are: “a greater appreciation for life and changed sense of priorities; warmer, more intimate relationships with others; a greater sense of personal strength; recognition of new possibilities or paths for one’s life; and spiritual development” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 6). These five domains make up the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The inventory has been shown to be valid, reliable, and multidimensional (Taku *et al.*, 2008). The five domains categorize the primary characteristics of posttraumatic growth, and the five-factor structure of the PTGI was the best-fit model of posttraumatic growth (Taku *et al.*, 2008). What this means is that through quantitative studies and statistical analysis

researchers Tedeschi and Calhoun have found five significantly distinct areas of posttraumatic growth. These domains can assist researchers and practitioners in identifying and talking about posttraumatic growth.

Personal Strength. The domain of personal strength includes emotional, mental, and spiritual courage, as well as an increased awareness of vulnerability (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The saying “if I handled that I could handle just about anything” is a satirical slogan for this category of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). Personal strength also includes an increased acceptance of self, the situation, and the way things worked out. A person with this category of posttraumatic growth may be keenly aware that bad things could happen again, but also have reassurance that since they coped with the original trauma they can cope with other events in their future (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Personal strength is not a narcissistic notion of invincibility but rather a realistic belief in their ability to handle difficulties ahead because of the tools, techniques, and strategies they used to cope, heal, and grow after their trauma. This domain is identified with four items on the PTGI: “stronger than I thought I was”, “better able to accept”, “I can handle difficulties”, and “greater self-reliance” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2017, p 15)

Relating to Others. The next domain is warmer, more intimate relationships. Posttraumatic growth is characterized by developing warmer, deeper, and stronger relationships with others (Cordova *et al.*, 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). One way this domain manifests is an increased focus on quality relationships and a decreased focus on relationships that are less rewarding (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Calhoun *et al.*, 2010; Chen *et al.*, 2015; Cordova *et al.*, 2001; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun,

2004; Tedeschi et al., 2007; Triplett et al., 2011; Wortman, 2004). Posttraumatic growth researchers have not conclusively specified the characteristics that separate quality relationships from those which are less rewarding. This domain is identified in the PTGI by seven items: “Better accept needing others”, “learned how wonderful people are”, “more effort into my relationships”, “more compassionate for others”, “more willing to express my emotions”, “greater sense of closeness with others”, and “can count on people” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2017, p 15).

The shift toward quality relationships and away from less rewarding relationships is not necessarily of the survivor’s own volition but can also be the consequence of the inability of the person listening to the trauma to deal with the anger, sadness, etc.; and the stigma society places on negative emotions (Wortman, 2004). Unfortunately, deeply traumatic events can lead to disruption or termination of some relationships with people around them (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). A common, but unfortunate, example of trauma causing a shift in relationships is the two primary ways that families respond after a loved one dies. Some family members come together, support one another, and love each other through the grief (Bonanno, 2010; Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann, & Hanks, 2010). Other family members blame one another, hold grudges, and separate, emotionally, or legally, as a result of the grief (Bonanno, 2010). This is especially poignant among traumatic deaths, such as parents who have lost a child. Coming together in shared grief is one way in which people can express compassion and increase intimacy. After a trauma people who develop posttraumatic growth might gravitate toward relationships that are nurturing, compassionate, and supportive.

The increased quality and intimacy of relationships seen in posttraumatic growth is related to an increase of compassion in the grown persons (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2013). This increase of compassion for other people, who have experienced a tragedy, applies to both loved ones and acquaintances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). This increase of compassion is most common when the other person's tragedy is similar to his or her own (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). Through shared experience, people can support one another, which creates a deep intimacy (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For example, bereaved parents with posttraumatic growth may have increased compassion toward other bereaved parents, often shown in the form of small kindnesses, such as sending condolence cards or offering assistance (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013).

New Possibilities. A good analogy for this domain is the Chicago fire of 1871. The Chicago fire of 1871 burned most of the city, but once the rubble was cleared away, there were new possibilities for redefining the skyline of the city. Similar to the Chicago fire, trauma can burn down previously held beliefs and expectations for the future, which increases an individual's awareness of new life possibilities for the future (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The resulting awareness and need to rebuild can affect one's path in life in unexpected and positive ways (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This domain is identified in the PTGI with 5 items: "try new things", "new opportunities", "do better things with my life", "new path for life", and "developed new interests" (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2017, p 15).

The domain of new possibilities or paths for one's life is the most objective and identifiable characteristic of posttraumatic growth because it has the most real-world applications. Other domains are predominantly internal shifts, but this domain focuses on

the recognition that life could be different and the outward applications a person makes to follow this new path, volunteer work, a new hobby, or taking courses at school. Persons with this type of growth will often change their career to something more meaningful to them. Frequently these changes are compassionate in nature and aim to better the lives of others. These changes can be small shifts, such as a lawyer taking on more pro bono cases, or a large shift, such as going back to school to become a therapist. This shift toward more compassionate socially conscious professions could be related to growth in the other domains. For example, a greater appreciation for nature could increase a person's desire to volunteer planting trees, while an increase in personal strength could give the courage to apply for a new position.

Appreciation of Life. Having a greater appreciation for life is the most common manifestation of posttraumatic growth. It emphasizes a person's increased appreciation for and participation in the little things, such as a baby's smile, beauty of a butterfly, or coffee with a good friend (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013; Triplett et al., 2011). Greater appreciation for the little things in life can contribute to a change in priorities, making those small, but meaningful moments more important and sought out (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). "An encounter with a traumatic event can provide the strong lesson that much of what we love is temporary, so we should deliberately engage with the important parts of our lives while we can" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013, p. 10). This domain is identified in the PTGI by 3 items "better appreciate each day", "greater appreciation for value of my own life", and "changed my priorities" (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2017, p 15).

Spiritual and Existential Change. The final identified domain of posttraumatic growth is spiritual development. In their foundational paper, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) focused on showing the existence of posttraumatic growth and did not explore this domain in any depth. In their 2004 posttraumatic growth inventory, Tedeschi and Calhoun have only 2 items to identify spiritual development “I have a better understanding of spiritual matters”, and “I have a stronger faith”. These two items are not thorough enough to describe the complexity and unique aspects of spiritual development. Another limitation to this research is that it was done primarily in the southern United States with a large majority of Christian participants (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This skew in population may have influenced their results as the original two items may have been sufficient for people with Christian faith or culture but be limiting to people with different faiths and cultures. This domain has changed significantly between 2004 and 2017. In 2013, Tedeschi and Calhoun added that spiritual growth may manifest regardless of a person’s previous spirituality, be it religious, spiritual, or atheistic (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). This discovery led to research on posttraumatic growth in different cultures and religions.

In 2017, Tedeschi and colleagues reviewed relevant literature about spirituality in posttraumatic growth, including criticism of their approach, and made changes to the spiritual development domain of their posttraumatic growth inventory. One criticism was that their description of spiritual was not universal and did not account for cultural differences (Hussain & Bhushan, 2013; Kashyap & Hussain, 2018). They added four new items to the existing two. The four added items were “I have greater clarity about life’s meaning”, “I feel better able to face questions about life and death”, “I feel more

connected with all of existence”, and “I have a greater sense of harmony with the world” (Tedeschi *et al.*, 2017, p. 13). Tedeschi and colleagues (2017) added these new items because they became aware that their previous version with only two items did not account for cultural differences in religion, and spirituality. They hoped the additional four items would “allow respondents in different cultural contexts to more fully report on their experiences with spiritual and existential growth” (Tedeschi *et al.*, 2017, p. 16).

When Tedeschi and colleagues (2017) tested this new PTGI-X across three populations, US, Japan, and Turkey, they found the additional items maintained internal consistency when analyzed, which allows for diversity of spiritual expression without sacrificing internal validity or reliability. The four new items allowed for Japanese spiritual development to be identified that would not have been seen with only the original two items. Japan is less traditionally religious than the US or Turkey, which perhaps indicates that these new items represent more spiritual growth rather than religious growth. The addition of these four new spiritual growth items and subsequent findings indicate that spiritual growth is more prevalent in posttraumatic growth than previously thought.

In this section, I described the five domains of posttraumatic growth which are: personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities, appreciation of life, and spiritual development. These domains are currently understood to be separate entities; however, little is known about how the domains develop. Therefore, it is possible that domains may influence one another or interplay in some way, which I explored in my thesis.

Commentaries, Problems, and Limitations to Posttraumatic Growth

While researchers looking into the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth have made some remarkable discoveries, the field has some limitations. The field has successfully identified and classified posttraumatic growth, its primary characteristics, and domains, which is an important first step. In this section, I will review a significant critique of Tedeschi and Calhoun's 2004 work by Camille Wortman, as well as the lack of a clear, concise definition for spirituality used in their research which negatively impacts the understanding of the posttraumatic growth domain spiritual development.

In a special issue, the journal *Psychological Inquiry* presented both Tedeschi and Calhoun's foundational posttraumatic growth paper (2004), and numerous commentaries on the paper, some very supportive, some sharing inspired ideas for ways to develop the research, and some were critical. Below are three commentaries that stood out to me.

One of the more positive commentaries was from Pals and McAdams (2004); they proposed a narrative approach to furthering research. Pals and McAdams (2004) believe "posttraumatic growth itself to be an identity-making narrative process" (p. 68). They see this process requiring an embrace of emotional challenges, and to use the struggle to find new ways of thinking about themselves, whereas they see the avoidance or active resistance of the emotional struggle as a potential hindrance to growth (Pals & McAdams, 2004). Pals and McAdams (2004) mention curiosity about the cultural implications of growth, specifically could posttraumatic growth look different in people from differing cultures, and could cultural assumptions affect which traumas result in growth.

Janoff-Bulman's (2004) commentary emphasizes the importance of understanding coping processes and how they are utilized in posttraumatic growth. Janoff-Bulman

(2004) is particularly interested in how the rebuilding of shattered assumptions relates to posttraumatic growth. Janoff-Bulman (2004) hypothesizes three models of change that could result in posttraumatic growth: strength through suffering, psychological preparedness, and existential re-evaluation. The strength through suffering model emphasizes the importance of the self re-evaluation, and the competencies, abilities, and new possibilities the person discovers as a result of healing from their trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). This model is particularly applicable to the domains of personal strength and new possibilities for life. Her second model psychological preparedness states that some survivors may have strong psychological schemas that withstand the trauma and remain strong and helpful in the recovery, resulting in less trauma. This particular model denotes resilience rather than posttraumatic growth, as noted above in my description of the differences between resilience and posttraumatic growth.

Her third model, existential re-evaluation, is “a process set in motion by their traumatic experience” (Janoff-Bulman, 2004, p. 32). Janoff-Bulman (2004) believes that three posttraumatic growth domains - appreciation of life, relating to others, and spiritual change - can be understood through existential re-evaluation. Re-evaluating one’s priorities, and recognition of what is important in life are forms of existential re-evaluation and can lead to posttraumatic growth (Janoff-Bulman, 2004).

Camille Wortman (2004) describes three weaknesses she saw in Tedeschi and Calhoun’s 2004 research. Firstly, she found that Tedeschi and Calhoun’s research relied heavily on self-assessment (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Wortman, 2004). In other words, if the person felt that they grew, Tedeschi and Calhoun took them at their word. Self-reporting is a common and valuable tool for psychology researchers to look into the

human mind. Self-report surveys are a simple and ethical way to get a lot of data from many human participants and it has a low associated cost. Unfortunately, they are subject to weaknesses particularly in the areas of objectivity, validity, and reliability. In response to these concerns, psychological researchers have developed methods to test reliability and validity of their self-report surveys. Tedeschi and Calhoun utilized some of these methods on their posttraumatic growth inventory in 1996 and found that their survey was reliable and valid. Interviews are another self-report method, which take much longer and can contain more nuanced information. In both surveys and interviews, participants might lie to themselves as a coping mechanism, or to the researcher in an effort to be helpful; both would give false data. As a result, Tedeschi and Calhoun might not be measuring posttraumatic growth, but rather a person's hopes of growth (Wortman, 2004).

Secondly, Wortman (2004) believed the research could give both clients and therapists unrealistically optimistic expectations of recovery from trauma. While unrealistically optimistic expectations can lead to unattainable goals and sadness following a failure to meet those goals, completely ignoring the possibility of growth after trauma could create unrealistically pessimistic expectations, which could lead to the client having less hope, recovering less, or growing less simply because they do not believe it is possible. Consequently, the goal should be for both therapists and clients to have realistic expectations given the client's situation.

Earlier in the chapter, I mentioned some key statistics about trauma and its consequences which applies to this very argument. Van Ameringen and colleagues (2008) found that 76.1% of Canadian have been exposed to an event traumatic enough to possibly result in posttraumatic stress disorder. Yet only 9.2% of their participants

developed posttraumatic stress disorder during their lifetime (Van Ameringen *et al.*, 2008). In a 2013 study, Tedeschi and Calhoun found that approximately 10% of persons who experience a significant trauma will develop posttraumatic growth. The significance of these similar statistics is that the realistic position for clients and therapists to have regarding outcomes after trauma is to be aware of both; to be conscious of the possibility of posttraumatic stress disorder and cognizant that they could grow. However, it is unproven whether therapists and clients knowing the possibility of recovery, healing or growth after trauma would help or hinder. In an aim to fill this gap in the current understanding, my research included an exploration into beliefs and values that assisted and hindered my co-researcher's recovery and growth.

Thirdly, Wortman (2004) disagrees with Tedeschi and Calhoun that cognitive processing and disclosure facilitate posttraumatic growth. While important, disclosures of distress are often challenging; although the person receiving the information could respond empathetically, more often they respond with signs of discomfort or silencing (Wortman, 2004). This is the critique of Wortman that I found most problematic. Wortman has an overtly pessimistic view on how disclosures can be received by other people. Tedeschi and Calhoun likely found people where their disclosures facilitated growth, whereas Wortman, in her research, found people where it hindered recovery. The question that needs to be asked is "what makes a disclosure helpful or harmful?". Consequently, a sub-question I explored in my thesis was: what was the effect of empathetic, or uncomfortable responses from the people my co-researchers disclosed to? Wortman (2004) found empathetic responses rare and unhelpful, more pity than compassion, while uncomfortable responses left the person feeling alienated. However,

Wortman did not study people with posttraumatic growth. Further research should be done in how the experience of disclosing one's trauma could affect one's recovery. In my research, I looked at the presence of helpful support, the consequences of a lack of support, and how those might affect my co-researchers' experience of recovery, healing and growth after trauma.

Wortman's critiques of Tedeschi and Calhoun's research were their use of self-reporting; that their findings could cause unrealistically optimistic expectations of recovery, which could harm clients; and that she found in her research that disclosures do not facilitate growth but are instead alienating and uncomfortable. There are two significant differences between the research of Wortman and Tedeschi and Calhoun: participants, and perspective. Wortman studies people with active trauma symptoms, Tedeschi and Calhoun study people who have grown and often healed. The second difference is their contrasting research perspectives. Wortman comes from the traditional paradigm, in which researchers look at the problem and try to find ways to prevent the negative, whereas Tedeschi and Calhoun have a positive psychology perspective, which focuses more on strengths, exceptions, and the ways things went well in order to find solutions. This difference in perspective is essential to researching a topic like posttraumatic growth because embracing and analyzing the positive finds behaviours to encourage, replicate and support. Both enhancing the positive and avoiding the negative aid in recovery and healing, but only enhancing the positive allows for growth.

Overall, posttraumatic growth research has focused primarily on identifying the defining characteristics, proving the existence of posttraumatic growth, and exploring the populations it affects. The three defining characteristics necessary for posttraumatic

growth are that the person must have: experienced trauma, suffered from that trauma, and grown beyond the person they were before the trauma occurred (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Combined, these three characteristics distinguish posttraumatic growth from general personal growth and related concepts, such as resilience.

There are five domains of posttraumatic growth: greater appreciation of life, intimate relationships, personal strength, new possibilities for life, and spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The domain of spiritual development requires a more nuanced examination, particularly into the ambiguity of spirituality definitions and the lack of clear differentiation between religion and spirituality. Changes have been made as recently as 2017 to elaborate on spiritual development, what spiritual growth involves, and an attempt to embrace multiple religions (Tedeschi, *et al.*, 2017). The need for this change comes from an expanding and evolving definition of spirituality.

Spirituality and Religion in Relation to Trauma

“At first sight the notion of ‘spirituality’ is confusing simply, because of its breadth and diffuse nature” (Sheldrake, 2012, p. 22).

In this section, I will describe current understandings of spirituality and religion being used in psychology research. Then, I will explore some of the research regarding religious coping, and spiritual growth in the aftermath of tragedies and traumas. Research has looked into the role spirituality and religion plays in coping after trauma and the spiritual growth that might follow (Montgomery, 2008; Pargament & Koenig, 2000; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). They have discovered that religion and spirituality can be helpful in healing from, coping with, and even growing after trauma (Amundson, 2014; Daniels, 2012; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005), although certain aspects can be harmful

(Daniels, 2012; Krause & Pargament, 2018). The majority of research available in the English language comes from the United States and United Kingdom, and is predominantly Christian, which limits the applicability to other faiths and spiritual understandings. Other faiths are starting to be explored in recent research (Tedeschi *et al.*, 2017).

Describing Spirituality and Religion

In this first section, I am going to explore descriptions of spirituality and religion present in the literature. Spirituality is a topic of much confusion and debate in psychological research. Spirituality and religion are often defined in overlapping, polarizing, or confounding ways.

Spirituality can be seen as the personal experience of religious faith or the informal beliefs of people separate from religion (Denney, 2009). Rudolfson, Berggren, and de Silva (2014) discovered three common meanings for the term ‘spiritual’: ‘cultural’, ‘existential’, and ‘religious’: ‘cultural’ when used in a political context such as preserving spiritual heritage, ‘existential’ when humans contemplate experiences like morality, suffering, or death, and ‘religious’ when referring to religious experiences, higher powers, or a sense of purpose. The ambiguous meaning of ‘spiritual’ makes spirituality particularly hard to define or research. Consequently, a large body of research focuses on religion which is easier to define.

Religion is viewed as systematic, doctrinal, and authoritative, while spirituality is seen as more inward, personal, spontaneous, private, universal, and emotional...Religion is also characterized by a focus on community, orthodoxy, institutional practices, an authoritarian hierarchy, and specific doctrine regarding

good and evil, whereas spirituality is characterized by a focus on the individual, informality, emotionally oriented practices, a lack of formal accountability, and an emphasis on universalism over doctrine. (Denney, 2009, p.2)

Denney (2009)'s descriptions of religion and spirituality imply that religion is formal, communal, and defined, while spirituality is informal, individual, and vague. This differentiation between the two can be a good thing in the realm of trauma recovery and growth. For some the individual aspects of spirituality are very beneficial and the unique relationship to God emphasized in spirituality can be exactly what could help a person heal, as Rilke describes in his love poems to God:

You are the deep innerness of all things
The last word that can never be spoken
To each of us you
Reveal yourself differently:
To the ship as coastline,
To the shore as a ship (Rilke, 2005, p. 177)

The relationship between person and creator is unique, and spirituality is ultimately the search and expression of this unique relationship.

Spirituality is highly personal, which has led to a range of definitions. In 2004, Tedeschi and Calhoun defined spirituality as “a less specific set of beliefs or experiences ... that have in common a connection to something transcendent, or at least an existential state beyond the self” (p. 119). Montgomery (2008) defined spirituality as “a deeper engagement with one’s religious traditions and/or an open-ended dialogue with existential questions.” (p.5) Sheldrake (2012) defines spirituality as the “lifestyles and

practices that embody a vision of human existence and how the human spirit is to achieve its full potential... an aspirational approach, whether religious or secular, to the meaning and conduct of human life” (p. 1). These definitions focus on completely different aspects of what spirituality can be for a person. Tedeschi and Calhoun provide a vague but inclusive definition that allows for all types of spiritual experiences, traditions, and interpretations. Conversely, Montgomery focuses on the relation between religious practices and deep spiritual contemplation. Sheldrake’s definition of spirituality emphasizes both external behaviours and internal beliefs which relate to a person’s aspirations and understanding of meaning. These specifications are essential to obtaining a deeper understanding of how spiritual development takes place.

Focusing on Christian spirituality is a very common characteristic in research relating to spiritual growth after trauma, especially because most research available in English is done in the United States and the United Kingdom, in which the predominant religion is Christianity. Over the years, Tedeschi and Calhoun developed their understanding of religion and spirituality to be more inclusive. In 2017, they expanded their posttraumatic growth inventory spiritual development domain by four additional items, mentioned above, to be inclusive of more religions and understandings of spirituality (Tedeschi, Cann, Taku, Senol-Durak, & Calhoun, 2017). They then tested these items in three different countries with distinct religious and spiritual cultures: USA, Japan, and Turkey to ensure reliability. Despite this significant change toward inclusion, they still define spirituality in the context of religion and not as a separate entity. I believe they should analyze religion and spirituality as separate entities (Tedeschi, *et al.*, 2017).

The understanding of spirituality has expanded considerably in the past 20 years and their 2017 research does not fully reflect this development.

Researchers have struggled to define spirituality separate from religion. For example, in their research paper entitled “Posttraumatic growth and spirituality in burn recovery”, Askar & Magyar-Russell (2009) had trouble describing spirituality, and reverted to the easier understanding that spirituality is related to or part of religion:

Pargament (1997) defines religion and spirituality in a manner that is broadly applicable to people from diverse belief systems: ‘Religion is a search for significance in ways related to the sacred’ (p. 32). Spirituality, in turn, is defined as ‘the key function of religion – the search for the sacred’ (p. 39), though he notes that people can pursue the sacred within or outside of traditional religious institutions. (Askar & Magyar-Russell, 2009, p. 572)

Spirituality is mistakenly represented in the above quote as being a subset of religion with an aside that it can exist outside religion. This example represents a pattern in research regarding spirituality and religion, in which spirituality is often misrepresented and misunderstood.

Spiritual Growth, Religious Coping, and Healing from Trauma

Between the years 2000 and 2018, considerable research went into the role spirituality and religion play in healing from trauma. “The important benefits provided by a religious framework may include having an enhanced meaning of life, increased social support, acceptance of difficulties and having a structured belief system” (Shaw, Joseph,

& Linley, 2005, p.2). Researchers focused on discovering what aspects of religion and spirituality might be helpful to people recovering from trauma.

Positive religious coping can have beneficial effects on mental health, while negative religious coping can have no effect or be harmful (Pargament & Koenig, 2000). Positive religious coping methods include religious purification/forgiveness, religious helping or volunteering, seeking support from clergy or other members, collaborative religious coping, active religious surrender, and a benevolent religious reappraisal (Pargament & Koenig, 2000). Positive coping seems to have themes of support, loving relationships, and letting go of unhelpful emotion. Support can come from God, the clergy, or other members. Forgiveness and surrender are acts of letting go of shame, guilt, and control. Loving relationships can exist with God, through volunteering to help others, or friendships with other members. Negative coping strategies include attributing a stressor to the devil or as a punishment, feeling dissatisfied with your relationship with God or members of clergy, or asking for a miracle to change your situation (Pargament & Koenig, 2000). Negative coping seems to have a theme of placing blame and responsibility on another (the Devil, God, or clergy). While this research did not explicitly address it, Pargament and Koenig (2000) believed that positive religious coping would be especially beneficial to persons recovering from loss or trauma.

Influenced by Pargament's concept of religious coping, Shaw, Joseph, and Linley (2005) looked at 11 studies involving growth after trauma and their relation to religion and spirituality. Their research includes papers on different traumas, including bereavement, bone marrow transplantation, breast cancer, childhood sexual abuse, chronic illness, disaster, HIV infection, military combat, myocardial infarction, parenting

a child with leukemia, political imprisonment, refugee displacement following war, sexual assault, and shipwreck (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). They discovered three main themes: first, “religion and spirituality are usually, although not always, beneficial to people dealing with the aftermath of trauma”, second, “traumatic experiences can lead to a deepening of religion or spirituality”, and third, “positive religious coping, readiness to face existential questions, religious participation, and intrinsic religiousness are typically associated with posttraumatic growth” (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005, p.1). These themes suggest that religion and spirituality can be helpful in coping with trauma, particularly if the religion gives support for existential questioning and participation.

Shaw, Joseph, and Linley (2005) also found that people with posttraumatic stress disorder turned to religion more than those without posttraumatic stress disorder. Religious communities that assisted with positive religious coping, particularly providing support, a way to seek God’s forgiveness, and an understanding that death is a passage were associated with posttraumatic growth, while negative religious coping, such as self-blame, religious deferral, demonic appraisal, and pleading for direct intercession, showed inconsistent results sometimes helpful, sometimes harmful (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). Positive religious coping relies on the person having pre-existing beliefs and a readiness to explore those beliefs, the church or spiritual community providing support for exploration and release of unhelpful emotions, and the relationship between the person and the church or community must be positive (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). However, how beliefs affect spiritual growth was not revealed in this review.

In his research on spirituality in posttraumatic growth, Montgomery (2008) found that previously held religious beliefs presented a foundation for posttraumatic growth to

develop: through deepening of the experience, exploring new spiritual possibilities, and being able to use existing knowledge and beliefs to find meaning in their experience. One of his participants described her spiritual growth as “(her) faith was deepened and made real through her cancer journey” (Montgomery, 2008, p.13). Montgomery’s research highlighted the role previously held religious beliefs have in spiritual and posttraumatic growth.

Askay and Magyar-Russell (2009) confirmed that spiritual or religious beliefs played an important role in recovery and found that survivors wished for more comfortable spiritual and/or religious discussion with their healthcare providers. They found that trauma survivors who used spiritual and religious beliefs to cope show greater ability for post-traumatic growth (Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009). They believe that religion and spirituality “may provide a framework to conserve aspects of themselves and the world that were not destroyed by their injury, as well as to transform significant destinations and pathways that enable the burn survivor to create meaning and accept necessary changes following trauma.” (Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009, p 8). In other words, Askay & Magyar-Russell (2009) believe that religion and spirituality can provide the framework for successful coping with trauma and exploration into existential questioning in ways supportive to posttraumatic growth.

Daniel (2012) expands on this notion of spirituality and religion providing a framework for coping and existential questioning. Daniel (2012) reviewed the work of other researchers regarding trauma coping and religion, and she found that positive religious coping was related to posttraumatic growth, stress-related growth, and better religious outcomes. Conversely, negative religious coping was related to higher levels of

distress, poorer physical health, PTSD, reduced quality of life, and poorer cognitive functioning (Daniel, 2012). “Trauma, grief, and loss can fracture one’s beliefs about good and evil, security, the nature of God and one’s place in the universe, re-evaluation of these beliefs has the potential to produce tremendous personal growth, both psychologically and spiritually”. (Daniel, 2012, p.18) Daniel (2002)’s theory about why spiritual struggles after a trauma or tragedy result in spiritual growth is that weak or harmful beliefs are torn down by the struggle and healthy beliefs with strong foundations are built in their place. Daniel (2012) sees a crisis of faith as a possibility to establish a new perspective, which could apply to beliefs, relationships, priorities, and anything of value in a person’s life. Consequently, the shattered worldviews of trauma can be rebuilt stronger resulting in spiritual and posttraumatic growth.

In 2014, Amundson found that positive engagement with spirituality and religion can be supportive and helpful for survivors of sexual assault if the religion or spirituality provide a framework within which the individual can cognitively process new beliefs and worldviews (Amundson, 2014). A key aspect she found was that the choice to pursue spirituality or religion as a source of support must come from the individual and may require supportive others to become a positive experience (Amundson, 2014). This finding builds on the idea presented by Shaw, Joseph, and Linley (2005) that the church or spiritual community and the individual work together to develop spiritual growth.

In 2017, Krause, Pargament, and Ironson explored the potential of religious frameworks aiding people in coping with trauma by surveying over 2800 people about religion and traumatic stressors. They found that religion lessened negative consequences of trauma, especially in young adults (Krause, Pargament, & Ironson, 2017). They

believe this may be because young adulthood has many significant life changes in it (marriage, career, etc.) and coping well through these significant events could have a long-lasting impact on lifetime happiness (Krause, Pargament, & Ironson, 2017). In 2018, Krause and Pargament continued this research and found that adopting a benevolent religious reappraisal coping response to a life stressor led to increased hope and less stress. “A benevolent religious reappraisal coping response ... helps a person reframe the meaning of a stressful situation by placing it in a larger more positive and hopeful religious context” (Krause & Pargament, 2018, p.1430). Basically, reframing a stressful situation in the context of a loving, kind God reduces the negative impact of stress and aids in positive coping, which is a significant way that spiritual and religious frameworks help trauma survivors cope.

Overall, the research on how religion might assist in coping after trauma found that religion can be beneficial to coping through trauma and tragedy, but it can also be harmful (Daniels, 2012; Pargament & Koenig, 2000; Shaw, Joseph & Linley, 2005). Further analysis showed that some religious behaviours, or positive religious coping, are beneficial, while negative religious coping is related to poor mental health (Daniels, 2012). Positive religious coping includes believing in a benevolent God, seeking support from clergy or community, helping others, a compassionate understanding of events, forgiveness, or surrender Pargament (Krause, Pargament, & Ironson, 2017; Pargament & Koenig, 2000; Shaw, Joseph & Linley, 2005). Consequently, religious frameworks that include support, acceptance, and a structured belief system aid in positive coping through trauma and spiritual growth (Amundson, 2014; Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009; Shaw, Joseph & Linley, 2005). Trauma can lead to existential questioning and a subsequent

deepening of a person's faith (Amundson, 2014; Daniels, 2012). It is a person's readiness to explore existential questions and their ability to find a supportive religion or spiritual community that leads to spiritual growth (Amundson, 2014). The most significant finding for my thesis is that positive religious coping is related to posttraumatic growth (Amundson, 2014; Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009; Montgomery, 2008; Shaw, Joseph & Linley, 2005). The importance of personally choosing, and finding a supportive, accepting, and positive spiritual or religious community is a common thread amongst the research and one that is very important for both psychological and religious practitioners to embrace.

Summary of the Literature and Rationale for this Study

Even though researchers have thoroughly explored the existence of posttraumatic growth and its different domains, there is insufficient research describing the experience of posttraumatic growth, and how it develops (Chen *et al.*, 2015; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

One significant source of identifying gaps was Wortman's (2004) commentary of Tedeschi and Calhoun's 2004 paper. Two of the weaknesses she pointed out I addressed in my thesis. The first is the use of self-reporting and the self-report bias can instate. Self-reporting is a very common practice in psychological research but is important for researchers to lessen self-report bias in any way they can. To address these concerns in my own study, I chose co-researchers who had one or more objective facts that indicated posttraumatic growth, particularly a change in career path to a more compassionate profession. These interventions do not eliminate the possibility of self-report bias, but assist in lessening it, thereby increasing validity and reliability.

The second weakness Wortman (2004) identified that I addressed in my thesis is the role of disclosure in aiding growth. Wortman (2004) believes that disclosure is more problematic than helpful. Conversely, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) believe that disclosure can be beneficial. A better understanding of the experience of growth after trauma might be able to differentiate whether disclosure is problematic or helpful.

Researchers have shown that religion provides a framework of stable worldviews and ways of exploring existential questions, which can ultimately lead to spiritual and posttraumatic growth. (Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009; Daniels, 2012; Pargament & Koenig, 2000). People whose worldviews are shattered after trauma or loss, have the opportunity to rebuild stronger, more robust worldviews than before, and religion and spirituality can support the rebuild (Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009; Daniels, 2012). Other than providing a framework for worldviews and exploration, the ways in which spirituality and religion lead to spiritual development in posttraumatic growth needs further exploration (Amundson, 2014).

In my thesis, I focused on my co-researchers' experience of growth after trauma. Particularly, I focused on the experiences, supports, and events that helped them grow or heal, and the experiences that hindered their growth. I gave special attention to what spiritual growth means for my co-researchers, and what aspects of spirituality and religion influenced my co-researchers' healing and growth.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to develop an understanding of the experience of growth after trauma. The previous chapter discussed scholarly literature on post-traumatic growth, which is a term used in research to categorize people who experience growth after trauma. This chapter focuses on the specific methodology used in this research study. First, I will discuss my chosen methodology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and why it is suitable for this project. Then I will describe the specific processes used to gather and analyze data. Following this, I will discuss the ethics and verification for this research.

In order to discover more about post-traumatic growth, I asked five co-researchers to reflect on moments, beliefs, events, and interactions that had a significant impact on their recovery and growth journey after trauma. After looking at previous research, I felt that the subjective experience of growth needed further investigation. While previous research focused on identifying and describing posttraumatic growth, an understanding of how posttraumatic growth develops, and which life factors might contribute was less described (Armstrong, Shakespeare-Finch, & Shochet, 2014; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013, Chen, et al., 2015; Taku, Cann, Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi, Calhoun & Cann, 2007; Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, & Calhoun, 2018). My thesis aims to further understand factors, such as relationships, beliefs, and activities, that might contribute to the development of posttraumatic growth.

I chose the qualitative research methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology because it focuses on the experience of a few co-researchers. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks a deep understanding of a person's self-understanding and

consequently allows for subjective interpretation. Phenomenology values the context and meaning a co-researcher has for their experience. The hope is to find significant commonalities, which contribute to the collective knowledge about a phenomenon. The phenomenon this research studies is positive growth that a person develops as a consequence of trauma; otherwise known as posttraumatic growth. Posttraumatic growth could be personal, spiritual, psychological, or relational.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is “an interpretive process that seeks to bring understanding and disclosure of phenomena through language” (Lavery, 2003, p. 24). The interpretive process of hermeneutic phenomenology makes it an unusual methodology in psychological research (Dowling, 2007; Koch, 1996; Lavery, 2003; Leonard, 1994; Mackey, 2005; Moules, 2002; Van Manen, 1997). The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to “understand everyday skills, practices, and embodied experiences” (Leonard, 1994, p. 56). The interpretive process is essential to this goal because it can include, combine, and lead to understanding details that might go overlooked if using another methodology (Dowling, 2007; Koch, 1996; Lavery, 2003; Leonard, 1994; Mackey, 2005; Moules, 2002; Van Manen, 1997).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a fitting approach for my research question because it focuses on the lived experience of the co-researchers (Moules, 2002). Lived experience includes context, historical meaning, and the co-researcher’s understanding of the events in their lives. For example, one co-researcher moved to another country. This event was significant not only because of the geographic, cultural, and social changes, but also because of her perspective of the move. Particularly, she saw it as a fresh start, a

chance to leave her bad habits behind and develop healthier habits. This change in perspective was extremely significant in her growth and healing journey. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for an emphasis on the elements the co-researchers feel are significant to their experience. It embraces the subjectivity of the researcher and co-researchers.

In this section, I aim to further describe the assumptions behind hermeneutic phenomenology that distinguish it from other qualitative methodologies. Additionally, I will describe the unique perspective of the researcher and co-researcher, which will aid me in formulating an understanding of posttraumatic growth.

Heidegger and His Three Assumptions

One of the primary theoretical founders of hermeneutic phenomenology, Martin Heidegger, believed that individuals are inseparable from their experience (Lavery, 2003; Leonard 1994). Hermeneutic phenomenology is derived from and consequently influenced by Heidegger's philosophies. There are three major assumptions of a hermeneutic approach to research, as outlined in the classic paper by Leonard (1994). First, the researcher has preliminary understandings of the phenomenon being studied, called pre-understanding. These pre-understandings involve key ideas: the researcher's reasons for studying the phenomenon, the point of view of the researcher, and the fore-conception. A researcher's interest in a topic can be related to a personal experience, or the experience of a loved one. The point of view of the researcher needs to be malleable because the research progresses, and new developments and understandings are found. In hermeneutic phenomenology, it is important that the researcher's point of view is fluid. The fore-conception is the researcher's "preliminary sense of what counts as a question

and what counts as an answer” in other words, the researcher’s expectations of the data collection process and data itself” (Leonard, 1994, p. 57).

The second assumption is that there is no privileged point of view. All points of view are dependent on time and history. This means that there is no objectively valid interpretation of a phenomenon. All interpretations are based in a time and context just as the co-researcher’s experiences are based in time and context. The third assumption is less specific than the previous two. It involves the general role of formal theory in the research. Hermeneutic phenomenological research primarily aims to find new understandings of a phenomenon through thoughtful engagement and views the rigidity of formal theory as a hindrance to full engagement. Formal theory can impose additional structure and assumes causal mechanisms, which can impede the flow of research. By contrast, hermeneutic phenomenology involves creativity, intuition, and insight, which is typically not included in formal theory (Creswell, 2006; Lavery, 2003).

These three assumptions form the theoretical basis for hermeneutic phenomenology and compels a unique perspective and approach to a phenomenon. This new perspective is a good approach to take with a phenomenon such as posttraumatic growth.

World and Preunderstanding

According to hermeneutic phenomenology, individuals live in constant interaction between constructing the world around them and being constructed by the world around them (Lavery, 2003; Leonard, 1994). World, as Heidegger describes it, is a meaningful set of relationships, skills, questions, and practices used to relate to our environment

(Leonard, 1994). For example, money is a construct of the world we are born into (Leonard, 1994). The way we interpret, utilize, and understand money is both a way we interact with the world and how it interacts with us (Leonard, 1994). Because of this constant interaction human beings have with the constructs and world around us, it is impossible for a person to be wholly objective.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a process that seeks to deepen a researcher's understanding of a particular phenomenon through dialogue between the collected data, and the researcher's preunderstandings (Leonard, 1994; Wilcke, 2002). Preunderstanding is a term used in hermeneutic phenomenological research to describe the researcher's pre-existing knowledge, experiences, and understandings (Leonard, 1994; Wilcke, 2002). Preunderstandings provide our "structure for being in the world" (Lavery, 2003, p.24). Individuals construct, interpret and understand their world in unique ways based on their background, culture, and language (Dowling, 2007; Koch, 1996; Lavery, 2003; Leonard, 1994; Mackey, 2005; Moules, 2002; Van Manen, 1997). In my thesis, I used the pre-existing research on posttraumatic growth as a significant part of my preunderstandings. My preunderstandings explicitly included personal and professional experiences, as well as academic knowledge, and were implicitly formed by the culture in which I grew up, my family background, and any covert biases introduced by the English language. In the analysis, my preunderstandings were then held in dialogue with the data I collected from my co-researchers. In many situations, this preunderstanding aided a deeper understanding of what they were saying and had experienced. Using the researcher's own experiences as part of the data and interpretive analysis is a specific characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenology (Leonard, 1994).

Position of the Researcher

Leonard (1994) tells us that a researcher is always bound by her contexts and assumptions, as “a person already in the world, seeking to understand persons who are already in the world” (p.55). Since I am a person in the world, who has her own experiences, language, and culture that make up essential parts of how I exist, perceive, and understand the world, it would be impossible for me to be isolated from my pre-understandings. Because pre-understandings are ingrained in the researcher, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes awareness and understanding of potential biases rather than avoidance. Attempting to put aside significant experiences in life is seen as naive; however, being aware of them helps to control how much influence they exercise (Leonard, 1994). From my perspective, awareness of possible biases is more academically sound, because both the reader and the researcher are aware of possible biases and can take them into account when evaluating the research.

One unique part of hermeneutic phenomenology is the use of the researcher’s intuition in analysis (Lavery, 2003). Other methodologies often disregard and view these intuitions as an impediment to academic understanding (Creswell, 2006). Conversely, hermeneutic phenomenology uses preunderstanding and intuition as important steps in grasping a phenomenon. Small details in a person’s life can have great meaning when considered together, and it can take intuition or a personal experience with the phenomena to perceive these distant connections. An intuitive researcher can perceive similarities across different co-researchers that they may not have identified as important themselves. The researcher’s intuition is crucial in identifying these significant moments.

Researchers then contribute their own perceptions and insights, which create a more holistic understanding of the phenomena (Leonard, 1994).

Paradigm Cases and the Role of the Co-researcher

Paradigm case is a term used to describe a situation or person that represents a phenomenon exceptionally well (Leonard, 1994). A way to describe this further would be using an analogy of rainbows. Rainbows come in many different intensities and sizes. Most rainbows that we see are partial. They are rarely a full arch, and usually we cannot see the definition of all colours. A paradigm case is like experiencing a rainbow with all colours of the visual spectrum in a full, beautiful arc. A paradigm case is a full manifestation of a phenomenon in which most aspects are represented and easily seen. Other instances still represent the phenomena, but paradigm cases showcase the phenomena in greater detail and consequently are ideal for research. Hermeneutic phenomenology uses paradigm cases as “effective strategies for depicting the person in the situation and for preserving meaning and context” (Leonard, 1994).

Hermeneutic phenomenology uses co-researchers, who are individuals with a particular experience that the researcher wishes to understand more deeply (Dowling, 2007; Koch, 1996; Laverly, 2003; Leonard, 1994; Mackey, 2005; Moules, 2002; Van Manen, 1997). Co-researchers typically have a more active role in interpretation and conveying understanding (Moules, 2002). They are not merely observed, but seen as a teacher, an expert in their experience. Furthermore, the way co-researchers perceive their own experience is important. Hermeneutic phenomenology “focuses on the subjective experience of the individual co-researchers” (Leonard, 1994). In doing so, it is important to understand major and minute details that influenced the situation. I gained information

about the context, worldview, and personal experiences that contributed to the psychological and spiritual growth for my co-researchers after their trauma.

I chose hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodology for my research because of its interpretive process and positions of the researcher and co-researcher. More specifically, I experienced a traumatic event that may help me understand and interpret what the co-researchers experienced. I do not want to be "objective", I want to embrace the experience, and use it to further my understanding and interpretation. It is important to not just describe the experience, as would be the focus in descriptive phenomenology. I am interested in the meaning of the experience to the co-researchers. I want to hear their voices and their lived experience, with their view of the meaning of the post-traumatic growth factors for them. This unique approach will help my research obtain a new understanding of posttraumatic growth that embraces the experience of my co-researchers. During the process of writing the literature review, I did not find many articles or studies of post-traumatic growth using hermeneutic phenomenology; studies asking co-researchers their perceptions and the meaning of factors in their post-traumatic growth. I see this as a gap that I want to address in my study. This research is intended to contribute to the current thinking on the experience of posttraumatic growth within the academic and professional psychological communities.

Sampling

In this section, I describe how I recruited my co-researchers, chose my co-researchers, and decided upon the site for the interview.

Co-researcher Selection Criteria

The predominant criteria I used to select co-researchers were a trauma occurred, and observable growth developed after the trauma. The trauma must have involved a situation that threatened mortality or sense of being (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2009; Wortman, 2004). For the co-researchers chosen, their traumas included the suicide of a loved one (brother, sister, and friend), sudden critical illness of a loved one, childhood car accident, avalanche, sudden death of father in childhood, childhood abuse, and death of a childhood friend. Four of the five co-researchers had multiple traumas. For the psychological safety of the co-researcher, the trauma must have happened five or more years ago, because time often helps with healing, coping, and distancing from a trauma.

In order to be considered posttraumatic growth, the growth must develop because the trauma occurred and likely would not have occurred without the trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2009). The second criterion, observable growth after the trauma, was identified by both self-perceived internal change, and objective external change. Researchers Tedeschi and Calhoun (2009) indicate that in order to be considered posttraumatic growth, the co-researcher's growth must be a direct or indirect consequence of the trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2009). Examples of objective posttraumatic growth could be a change of career to something more meaningful; a new volunteering position; a renewed dedication or changes in their spirituality; or new strategies implemented in their professional or personal life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2009). The common and salient posttraumatic growth for co-researchers in the present study was a change to a more compassionate profession. Two of the co-researchers were finishing their training as mental health professionals, one became a social worker, one became a motivational

speaker and author, and the last became a distress and help line operator. Throughout the interview process, I learned of other posttraumatic growth characteristics in addition to this change in career path, such as self-reported increased internal strength, enhanced spirituality, and improved relationships.

Recruitment

I initially tried to recruit co-researchers by contacting three health and pastoral care practitioners. I asked these practitioners if they would be willing to help me identify and contact qualified co-researchers. The practitioners would have then asked potential co-researchers for their permission for me to contact them. In the contact letter to the practitioners, I described the characteristics of co-researchers needed for my study. Unfortunately, none of the practitioners I contacted had clients with the needed time after the trauma, their clients were still struggling with the effects of a recent trauma, and the professionals reported that none had significant posttraumatic growth.

My next step was a mass email sent out to the graduate students at St Stephen's College. This institution was chosen because of my connection to the institution, the fact that the graduate programs are all in compassionate professions, and because during classes, I heard many fellow students describe a past trauma and how they grew from it. The combination of the previously mentioned characteristics made St Stephen's students a fertile ground to find co-researchers with posttraumatic growth. Two of the co-researchers were recruited this way.

My next step was to use my acquaintances. These were people I had known in previous years, but whose stories and subsequent growth I remembered. I contacted these

people individually by email. Two co-researchers were recruited this way. Lastly, a fifth co-researcher was found when she overheard me talking to a colleague about my thesis and offered to be part of the study.

Once the potential co-researchers contacted me and gave me their contact information, I had a brief conversation over a password protected, private email to confirm that they qualified for the research and scheduled an interview. Then I sent them information and consent forms by email, so they had ample time to read the information before the interview. Additionally, I verbally reviewed the information with them before the interview to ensure informed consent.

Co-researcher Demographics

The co-researchers were four women and one man between 35 and 65 years old. Of the five co-researchers, one was a lifelong Albertan, and another co-researcher was born and continues to live in Ontario. One lived in Ontario for the first half of life before moving to Alberta for work. The other two co-researchers have lived in many countries and places, including Canada and the United States of America, in addition to countries in Europe and Asia. All co-researchers completed post-secondary education. This level of education was not a criterion for participation. However, the postsecondary education likely contributed to their ability to reflect on their experience, making it a beneficial shared characteristic.

Site Selection/Location

The sites for the interviews were chosen with three priorities in mind. First, the site needed to be accessible to both myself and the co-researcher. Second, the site needed

to be private with little to no outside noises or distractions. Third, I wanted the co-researcher to feel comfortable in the location. Before the co-researcher and I agreed upon a location, I checked that it satisfied these requirements. In one instance, the site had to be moved because of excessive noise and a lack of privacy. Each interview had a separate site; the first interview was originally going to occur at the co-researcher's place of business, but once I arrived, I noticed it was too loud and changed the location last minute to my house; two were at the co-researchers' house, and two at the co-researcher's office. I met with four participants in Alberta, two in Edmonton and two in Calgary, and one in Ontario.

The Interview

My primary data collection method was a semi-structured interview. The interviews were completed between March and September 2017. The interviews ranged from 60-180 minutes. All interviews were videotaped with the co-researcher's consent. The interviews contained predetermined open-ended questions and follow-up questions as needed (see Appendix C). The purpose of the questions was to prompt and elicit a comprehensive account of their experience of growth after trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Creswell, 1994).

The first interview was a pilot after which the first co-researcher and I reviewed all aspects of the interview experience including the location, questions, accompanying documents, and my behaviour. We determined that the private environment was important and should continue to be a priority. The co-researcher said the consent form and letter of invitation gave good information about what I was researching, and what the expectations of the co-researcher were. The co-researcher commented that the open-

ended questions allowed her to share her experience in good detail. She also commented that she really liked the questions regarding spirituality and religion as they gave her the opportunity to share that part of her experience in depth. I asked the co-researcher if there was anything about my behaviour that I should change in future interviews and she said that she liked the relaxed atmosphere I created as well as my compassionate and understanding nature. After the first interview, I noticed that self-care was an important topic I wanted to ensure was covered in future interviews and if the co-researcher did not comment specifically on it, I inquired about it.

All of the interviews began with light social conversation to help establish a relaxed atmosphere. Then we went over the consent form and I asked if they had any questions or concerns and addressed any the co-researcher had. Following this the camera was turned on and I asked the open-ended interview questions. Co-researchers were asked to talk about memories, experiences, beliefs, events, and interactions that had a significant impact on their recovery and growth journey.

At the end of the interview, I asked all co-researchers if they had anything else, they would like to add and if they had any questions or concerns that arose during the interview. After the additions, questions, and concerns were addressed, I informed them that I would be contacting them by email with the full transcript of our interview and asked that they review it for accuracy when it arrived.

Transcription

I transcribed and analyzed all videotapes of the interviews. The original recordings were stored on a password protected computer. The transcribed interviews

were also kept on a password protected computer and only shared with the related co-researcher over a password protected and private email. In addition to reviewing the transcription, the co-researchers were invited to add elements of their experience they felt were missing, or list elements too sensitive to be quoted in the final study.

Ethics

The purpose and nature of the research was communicated primarily through the Letter of Invitation (see Appendix A). It informed my co-researchers of my primary research question, purpose for the research, benefits and possible risks of participation, and basic methodological procedure. To ensure I obtained informed consent, I also emailed each of the co-researchers the consent forms before our first interview to give them an opportunity to read the documents thoroughly and ask me any questions in reply email. Additionally, I verbally introduced and reviewed the informed consent process with the co-researcher, as per the Co-researcher Consent Form attached (see Appendix B) at the beginning of our first interview. Before they signed the Consent Form, I asked if they had any questions or concerns, and addressed any that arose. Interviews did not proceed until consent had been given and the Co-researcher Consent Form had been signed.

Both the Letter of Invitation and the Co-researcher Consent Form included a section that informed the co-researcher that they could withdraw at any time. In addition, I verbally repeated their right to withdraw before and after the interview. Participation was voluntary and had no monetary compensation or penalties for withdrawal. Co-researchers were given a copy of the consent form to keep in their records, which contains information on how to address complaints with my school.

I honoured the privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity of my co-researchers by removing names and identifiable information from any written materials. Additionally, I used pseudonyms for the co-researchers and any people they mentioned during data analysis and publication. All documents with the co-researchers' names on them remained in a locked cabinet, and all data on my computer is password protected accessed only by myself. All transcription was done by me. In addition, I will destroy all data collected three years after the completion of this research.

Any research into posttraumatic growth, involves people who have been through trauma, experienced posttraumatic stress symptoms, and possibly had posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Even though my research focused on the aftermath of trauma and their recovery rather than the trauma itself, memories of the trauma and surrounding experiences may have negatively affected my co-researchers. In an attempt to mitigate this potentially negative effect, I asked for participants whose trauma occurred five or more years ago, as coping and healing often occur over time. Additionally, I asked my co-researchers whether they had access to a therapist whom they trusted. All co-researchers mentioned that they had a therapist they trusted, whom they could contact if needed.

In addition to actions taken to do no harm to clients, I also sought to do no harm to myself. To mitigate the potential harm to myself, I continued to engage in self-restorative activities, such as painting, exercise, and seeing my therapist over the course of this research. My research proposal was reviewed and accepted by the Ethics Review Committee at St Stephen's College.

Data Analysis

The process of hermeneutic phenomenological analysis is different from most qualitative methodologies. It is not linear with a specific end point, instead it is circular, constantly building on itself, and has an ending determined by the researcher rather than external requirements. The steps I followed in my analysis are described below.

First, I wrote and described any personal experiences with the phenomenon being studied and provided a full description of those experiences. This description was given to help me become aware of any biases, and pre-existing assumptions. This was done to inform both of the influences that will affect the interpretation of the data. Hermeneutic phenomenology does not view pre-existing assumptions as inherently negative but rather sees them as a potential positive. Previous biases, if fully understood before analysis, can help to deepen future insights. The trustworthiness of this action comes from the openness of the researcher to the reader and themselves as to what the biases are and how they impact their research.

The second step was to develop a list of significant statements from the transcripts of the interviews and other data sources. I watched and listened to the video tapes to understand the experience and context my co-researchers were telling me. The focus for finding these significant statements was to look for descriptions of how each individual was experiencing the phenomenon. I accomplished this by reading each interview individually and then looking across all the interviews to find similarities and differences. The list of significant statements helped to define parts of the research to take into further analysis. A focus on non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements was beneficial in identification. Next, I used the gathered data to describe “what the participants

experienced” including verbatim examples or quotes. The parts were then interpreted in relation to the whole, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

“The interpretative process is necessarily circular, moving back and forth between part and whole, and between the initial forestructure and what is being revealed in the data of the inquiry.” (Leonard, 1994, p.57) The interpretation focused on the context or ‘how the experience happened’ and the experience or “what the participants experienced”.

Next, I grouped the statements into 25 themes or meaning units. Each with quotes from co-researcher interviews which substantiated the theme as well as additional notes. The next step was to identify which themes were seen in all or the majority of my co-researchers. I then identified paradigm cases of posttraumatic growth. These were themes that may have applied to one or more co-researcher, but strongly indicate posttraumatic growth. Following this step, I analyzed the themes to relate, combine, and identify missed themes in the previous steps. During this step, secondary connections arose. Secondary connections are themes or items that are not the same but have a similar impact. For example, in my first pass I noticed that participants had improved relationships with their children, and others had improved relationships with their parents or spouse. On the second pass, I noticed these improvements were connected, because the approach that improved the relationships was very similar between co-researchers. In addition, the importance of certain themes emerged and started to form groups. During this analysis, a framework to discuss the findings emerged. This was another part of the whole that was developed and analyzed in conjunction with the rest of the data. During this process, conversations with my supervisor were beneficial to deepen my reflection on my findings. In addition, my notes were important for remembering thoughts and intuitions.

Reflection and revisiting the data from multiple perspectives was key throughout the analytical process.

My preunderstandings (e.g., my personal and professional experience, academic knowledge, and cultural background) helped identify significant topics and important themes for the research. My preunderstandings were held in dialogue with the data I collected from my co-researchers, which helped me understand what they were saying and had experienced.

I kept going back with what I was finding with one researcher to see if it applied to others and comparing it to what other co-researchers said or experienced, using the process of circular analysis. During my re-visitation, I also considered facts I knew to be true about my co-researchers. For example, the co-researcher's job and education were not always explicitly discussed in the interview, but I still included this information during my analysis. The statements and themes were then combined together to create a whole. Once the whole was created, it was analyzed against the parts in a spiral process called the hermeneutic circle until "sensible meanings of the experience are understood without inner contradictions". A journal was kept during the analysis process to record and account for the researcher's position and movement through the hermeneutic circle.

Rigour

Qualitative researchers have been debating the concept of rigor in qualitative research for decades (Connelly, 2016; Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Northcote, 2012; Stiles, 1999). While all qualitative researchers think rigour is important, a clear, consistent set of standard criteria has not been agreed upon (Connelly, 2016; Northcote, 2012). In fact,

qualitative researchers cannot agree upon a term to use. Morse and colleagues (2002) call it verification, while Connelly (2016) uses the term trustworthiness, and Dewitt and Ploeg (2005) use the term rigour. While they use different terms, they are describing very similar concepts. Morse and colleagues describe verification as “the mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring reliability and validity” (Morse et al., 2002, p.17). Verification should be included in every step to ensure academically sound research (Morse et al., 2002). Connelly defines trustworthiness as “the degree of confidence in the data interpretation and methods used to ensure the quality of a study” (Connelly, 2016, p.435). Inspired by researchers Van Manen, Emden and Sandowski, DeWitt and Ploeg define rigour as “the goodness of qualitative research” (Dewitt & Ploeg, 2005, p.217). Whether verification, trustworthiness, or rigour, the general theme of qualitative researchers is consistent; take steps to ensure your study is academically sound.

The term I use in this study is rigour, from the 2005 paper by DeWitt and Ploeg, because it is one of the few papers that describes rigour in the context of hermeneutic phenomenology. One main reason for disagreement about criteria is that qualitative methodologies have different underlying philosophies, approaches, and requirements (Northcote, 2012). Consequently, what academically sound research looks like depends heavily on the methodology used (Connelly, 2016). This section will describe criteria for rigor in general qualitative research, describe criteria for hermeneutic phenomenological research, and describe the steps taken to ensure my research is trustworthy, verifiable, and rigorous.

Rigour in General Qualitative Research

While qualitative research has no clear consistent criteria that must be met, researchers have developed guidelines to developing academically sound research. In 2016, Connelly analyzed multiple qualitative research needs to address five criteria for rigour, or as she calls it trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity. Every qualitative methodology is going to approach these criteria differently, but all research needs to address these criteria in some way (Connelly, 2016).

As mentioned above Connelly (2016) have five criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research, the first three, credibility, dependability, and confirmability, are steps and strategies the researcher can use to increase the quality and rigour of their research. The following two, transferability and authenticity, are more dependent upon the reader. This point will be evident after they are described.

According to Connelly's criteria, credibility is "the confidence in the truth of the study and therefore the findings" (Connelly, 2016, p.435). Credibility is the criterion closest to validity and reliability in quantitative research. Ways to approach credibility include using standard procedures, providing an explanation for variations, peer debriefing, member checking, reflective journaling, and repeated questioning of the data (Connelly, 2016). I used reflective journaling to organize my thoughts and keep a record of insights and decisions. Hermeneutic phenomenology utilizes circular processing to continuously return to the data and from different perspectives trying to obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Leonard, 1994). Exploring alternative explanations for the data also aids with credibility (Connelly, 2016).

Dependability is “the stability of the data over time & over the conditions of the study” (Connelly, 2016, p.435). Dependability is similar to the criteria of reliability in quantitative research as it relates to the stability of the data (Connelly, 2016). This criterion is particularly challenging in qualitative research because conditions are less controllable, especially when human beings are involved. Consequently, qualitative researchers understand that conditions change and instead focus dependability on the consistency of process, keeping logs and research notes, and obtaining second opinions from other qualitative researchers (Connelly, 2016). In my case, my thesis supervisor, fellow students, and colleagues served as my second opinions.

Confirmability is “the degree findings are consistent and could be repeated” (Connelly, 2016, p.435). Maintaining a record of your processes from data collection to analysis greatly contributes to confirmability (Connelly, 2016). Keeping detailed notes of any decisions including rationale for inclusion and exclusion of tests (Connelly, 2016). For qualitative methodologies, especially hermeneutic phenomenology, confirmability is hard to achieve, because the ethical considerations and limits around sharing the information of human participants, since the raw data from the interviews are confidential. Consequently, large or potentially identifying sections of interviews cannot be shared. However, direct quotes from the co-researchers are permissible and were added to increase the confirmability of the study (Leonard, 1994).

The previous three criteria categorize good research practices and are the responsibility of the researcher (Connelly, 2016, Stiles, 1999). The next two criteria rely more on the reader, particularly their understanding and application of the findings.

Transferability is “the extent to which findings are useful to persons in other settings”

(Connelly, 2016, p.435). This criterion does require some reader participation as it is the reader who determines if it is applicable to their life or profession. For my study, I hope other psychotherapists might be able to apply my findings to their work with traumatized clients or to aid themselves in their own growth. The focus for the researcher is to richly describe a vivid picture that is understandable and relatable, which hopefully will resonate with the reader (Connelly, 2016).

Authenticity is “the extent to which researchers fairly and completely show a range of different realities and realistically convey participants' lives” (Connelly, 2016, p.436). This starts by selecting the right people for the study and throughout the entire study. The goal is to “portray fully the deep meaning of a person’s experience with a phenomenon in order to increase the reader’s understanding” (Connelly, 2016, p.436). If a researcher successfully portrays the phenomenon in a way that increases the reader’s understanding, they have accomplished the main advantage of qualitative research.

Rigour for Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Two main sources for rigour criteria in hermeneutic phenomenology are Leonard (1994) and DeWitt and Ploeg (2005). The majority of papers discussing rigour tend to fall into three categories: general qualitative research paradigms, other qualitative methodologies, or interpretative phenomenology. Interpretative phenomenology is related to hermeneutic phenomenology, but it has a different base philosophy reducing its applicability to hermeneutic phenomenology. Consequently, this section will focus on the criteria or rigour described by Leonard (1994) and Dewitt and Ploeg (2005).

Rigour of the interpretive process was achieved by continuous analytical movement between the parts and whole (Laverly, 2003; Leonard, 1994). The interpretive process stops when sensible meanings of the experience are reached with no internal contradictions (Laverly, 2003). The cycling allowed for multiple stages of interpretation and the subsequent emerging patterns that revisiting the information with a new perspective provides (Laverly, 2003). “A good qualitative researcher moves back and forth between design and implementation to ensure congruence among question formulation, literature, recruitment, data collection strategies, and analysis” (Morse et al., 2002, p.17). While this step was followed the only proof of it is the mountain of paper and notes seen only by my supervisor and myself. These notes are unpublishable due to the intimate details in these notes of the individual co-researchers, which might be identifiable to the reader and break the ethical imperative of anonymity and confidentiality.

After analyzing multiple qualitative research papers, DeWitt and Ploeg (2005) found that most qualitative research methods were problematic for the philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology. Consequently, they developed a new framework for rigour for hermeneutic phenomenology. Their framework has five expressions for rigour: balanced integration, openness, concreteness, resonance, and actualization (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005).

Balanced integration is the incorporation of the research with the philosophy (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005). More specifically balanced integration combines the topics, methods, and findings of the research with the themes, concepts, and explanations in the philosophy (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005). It focuses on the unique voices of the co-researchers

and the philosophical explanation (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005). In this research, I addressed this criterion by approaching my co-researcher's experiences and seeking to understand them through a phenomenological lens.

Openness is the "explicit systematic accounting for decisions" (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005, p.225). This means that a researcher will communicate with the reader their reasonings for including or excluding certain research paradigms, such as standardized tests (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005). Openness in this research is demonstrated in the detailed rationale I provided in this section for why hermeneutic phenomenology was the method of choice. Additionally, the use of direct quotes from my co-researchers illustrating each theme expresses openness.

Concreteness is the ability to clearly explain the phenomenon so that the reader understands and has links to their experiences (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005). Concreteness aims to expand the reader's understanding by helping link the phenomenon to the reader's experience (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005). So not only does the reader understand the phenomenon intellectually, but they also have an empathetic understanding experiencing the phenomenon. Consequently, I made efforts to present the findings in a way that helped to convey the deeply personal aspects of my co-researcher's experiences.

Resonance is "the experiential or felt effect of reading the study upon the reader" (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005, p.226). Resonance is the word used in phenomenological research to define the epiphany, or deeply felt understanding the reader obtains through the research. Resonance often relates to an ineffable quality, more easily felt than described. Resonance is not applicable in other methodologies as it is the act of conveying the co-researcher's experience to the reader. Dewitt and Ploeg (2005)

exemplify resonance in the following example. “Alzheimer’s comes in very sneakily, it, it doesn’t say like an appendectomy, boy, you got a pain, it doesn’t do that, it sneaks in...it sneaks like a stealing little thing” (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005, p.226). By choosing direct quotes that conveyed deep emotion and the struggle my co-researchers went through, I facilitated the reader’s ability to engage and to sense the nuances of the experience.

The fifth expression of rigour is actualization. Actualization is the understanding that phenomenological interpretation continues after the study is finished (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005). The reader’s interpretation will continue the research. Actualization is the criterion of the future possibility of additional interpretation (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005). Actualization comes from the cumulative effect of the previous four criteria. In this research, actualization will depend on how effective the findings are in conveying the experience and their effect on the reader.

DeWitt and Ploeg (2005) identified some limitations and strengths in their framework for rigour. The limitations include using very broad terms however they worry that a more rigid approach would “stifle creativity and innovation in research design” (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005, p226). Tension that exists between competing aspects of phenomenological research can be either a weakness or a strength depending on the outcome. A good balance between reporting methods and unique findings, as well as between fitting the philosophical themes and the voice of the co-researchers, are indicative of quality research, while a poor balance means the research is poor. The tension is important because a solid foundation in the philosophy establishes foundation while the unique aspects of the research provide new understanding, and both need to be

respected and present for it to be solid research. DeWitt and Ploeg (2005) believe that their framework could contribute to research insights and stimulate innovative ideas. Ultimately, the goal of their framework is to “preserve the integrity and legitimacy of phenomenological research” (DeWitt & Ploeg, 2005, p.226).

A key factor when discussing the integrity and legitimacy of a hermeneutic phenomenological study is the outcome, particularly whether the study discovered a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, practical applications, and new avenues of inquiry (Leonard, 1994). “A study can be judged by how carefully the data collection is accomplished and documented, and how rigorously the interpretive effort goes beyond publicly available understandings of a problem to reveal new and deeper possibilities for understanding.” (Leonard, 1994, p.61) The papers by Connelly (2016) and DeWitt and Ploeg (2005) accomplish the above requirements together. Their criteria complement one another. Connelly (2016) is better at describing methods of good practice like rigorous data collection, while Dewitt and Ploeg (2005) is better at rigorous interpretative process and incorporation of the hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy. On their own they would each be insufficient for a rigorous hermeneutic phenomenological study, but together they are more than enough. Combine those 10 criteria with Laverty (2003)'s rigorous data collection and Leonard's (1994) hermeneutic phenomenological insights including analytical movement and a comprehensive procedure for hermeneutic phenomenology can be followed to ensure credible research. “The ultimate criterion for evaluating the adequacy of an interpretive account is the degree to which it resolves the breakdown and opens up new possibilities for engaging the problem” (Leonard, 1994, p.60). In this study, it means that the research obtained a deeper understanding of the

experience of posttraumatic growth, which can lead to new ways to support people going through a trauma, and new questions of inquiry to further the understanding of growth after trauma.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter contains the findings of the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of interviews with five co-researchers who experienced growth after trauma. All five co-researchers expressed characteristics of the five posttraumatic growth domains identified by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). The purpose of this study was to examine growth after trauma, particularly in hopes of identifying the experiences that inspired or supported posttraumatic growth. The dominant finding was that growth is a continuous journey consisting of a series of choices. An intriguing finding was that spirituality is interwoven into every experience of growth.

This chapter includes three sections: my co-researchers, the picture of growth and the process of growth. The section titled ‘my co-researchers’ introduces my co-researchers briefly and gives context for the quotes found in the other sections. The other two sections, the picture of growth and the process of growth break down the experience of growth for my co-researchers into multiple major themes and subthemes. Quotes from my co-researchers are added in italics to support the findings. In the picture of growth, I described the characteristics or outcomes of growth my co-researchers presented at the time of the interview. The major themes of the picture of growth follow the five posttraumatic growth domains: personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities, appreciation for life, relationships, and spiritual and existential change (Tedeschi *et al.*, 2018). In the process of growth, I describe how my co-researchers grew, including the processes and experiences that supported their growth. The subcategories in the process of growth are: growth as a continuous journey, growth as a series of choices, growth through existential questioning, growth through support, and growth through acceptance.

To use an analogy of a garden, the picture of growth identifies the plants, fruit and flowers that grew in my co-researchers' gardens. Whereas the process of growth describes the fertilizer, sunlight, plants, and water that assisted, and supported their growth.

This exploration into the experience of growth after trauma is meant to add depth to the understanding of posttraumatic growth by showcasing elements of my co-researchers' experience. Ultimately, I hope this work will inform my future practice as a psychotherapist and help other researchers and mental health professionals understand and identify the early signs and processes of growth, and, consequently, help their clients to grow whenever possible.

My Co-researchers

In this section, I will briefly introduce my co-researchers to help give some context to the quotes that appear in the rest of the chapter. I had five co-researchers that I have given the following pseudonyms: Alex, Becca, Cathy, Diane, and Ed. All are educated adults between the ages of 30 and 65. The four women are all mothers who have experienced multiple traumas or tragedies in their lives. Ed had no children and has endured one major trauma.

At the time of the interview, Alex was in graduate school to become a mental health professional. She has been through two significant traumas in her life. The first was the death of her father when she was 16. Alex struggled with his death and developed a drug addiction and bulimia. Years after, she found the 12-step program, a therapist, and a new perspective on life which helped her heal from her addictions.

During her pregnancy with her second child, she suffered a second trauma when her brother took his own life. After his death, she felt a deep connection to her unborn baby, and her brother, which took her spiritual journey to new depths.

When Becca was an adolescent, she was in a car accident with her mother, and even though both survived, this event triggered deep existential questioning. Becca also suffered multiple miscarriages which lead to a questioning of her faith and relationship challenges with her husband and in-laws. This experience tested her beliefs and ultimately led to a change in her beliefs and a stronger relationship with her husband. After the birth of two healthy children, Becca's youngest daughter suffered an acute and severe illness. Her daughter almost died, and Becca felt the pain of that acutely. After her daughter's recovery, Becca's priorities drastically shifted. She began thinking about how she wanted to live her life and making changes to follow those priorities. One major change was the decision to become a mental health professional.

Cathy survived an abusive childhood and her best friend's death from cancer when she was a teenager. These experiences inspired religious and spiritual exploration. However, it was not until the death of her mother from cancer that major growth started. Cathy grieved, and sought help from friends, family, and professionals. Her healing journey led her to greater management of previously debilitating obsessive-compulsive disorder, better relationships with her husband, mother, son, brother, and father. She developed a deep desire to help others, which led to a change in career to something she found more meaningful.

Diane experienced two major traumas and a challenging upbringing. The first trauma was the suicide of her sister, when she was a teenager. Unfortunately, her sister's

death inspired judgement and silencing from her friends and church. Many years later, her work led her to think about the circumstances of her sister's death again, but this experience was different. She found supportive friends who helped her process and grow from it. Her second trauma was the suicide of a dear friend, which she accepted, grieved, and grew from. At the time of the interview, Diane was a leader in suicide prevention and reducing mental health stigma, as well as a group therapy leader and social worker.

Ed survived an avalanche that took the lives of many people, during an adventure trip in which he was the assistant guide. His recovery journey from this trauma involved writing a book, living at an ashram, going to therapeutic practitioners, and participating in spiritual retreats. As a result of his journey, he incorporated spiritual self-reflection to his adventure travel and led seminars about his experience and growth.

The rest of this chapter presents findings and quotes from these remarkable people, divided in two major sections: the picture of growth, and the process of growth.

The Picture of Growth

The picture of growth refers to the characteristics of posttraumatic growth my co-researchers embodied in their interviews. If we use the analogy of a garden to represent growth after trauma, the picture of growth is where I describe the plants existing in my co-researchers' gardens. Each co-researcher had a different combination of characteristics, but significant growth is noticeable in all five co-researchers. I could see elements of all five domains of posttraumatic growth identified by Tedeschi and colleagues in their 2018 book: personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities, appreciation of life, and spiritual and existential change (Tedeschi *et al.*, 2018, p 26-28).

This section intentionally mirrors the order of the domains of posttraumatic growth in the literature review to highlight the characteristics of growth that existed in my co-researchers at the time of the interview. The subheadings within the domains, while inspired by Tedeschi and Calhoun's research, are mine. In this section, I will illustrate the characteristics of growth with relevant quotes in italics from my co-researchers.

Personal Strength

All co-researchers developed personal strength they did not have before their trauma. The subcategories for personal strength are as follows: overcoming challenges, courage, empathetic strength, and increased coping ability.

Overcoming Challenges. One of the most significant strengths was that all co-researchers were able to overcome challenges. More specifically, they were willing and able to cope with difficulties that kept them from fulfilling their self-identified purpose. Going through the incredible pain and fear of their first trauma helped all five co-researchers feel stronger and more able to cope with future difficulties. Diane exemplified personal strength when she described overcoming internal challenges:

You do it because there is a purpose behind it. You put away all the self doubt and the negativity and the fear and you know look at yourself go oh god my hair is a mess, and I am fat and all that stuff right, you just have to put it away because you've got a message.

Diane's purpose to get her message about suicide prevention out helped her overcome her own self doubt and focus on helping others. Before her trauma, Diane shied away from

public speaking, but after her trauma, the message she wanted to share was more valuable than her fear. The fear was not gone, rather she had more courage, strength, and ability to overcome that fear. Diane described how she faced her fear of public speaking: *“It's coming out of your comfort zone each and every time. It's not something I ever do. So that's a growth. I don't know if I'll ever get comfortable doing it, but I do it.”* Diane explained how her area of growth was being willing to step out of her comfort zone to speak publicly about something important.

Alex described how overcoming her own trauma, bulimia, and addictions made her less hesitant to engage with emotional pain:

I can say that going through really painful experiences in life definitely ... expanded me. Expanded me and made me deeper and made me umm... less afraid... like less afraid to... meet pain. I see that as growth.

Alex's experience with trauma and subsequent growth increased her ability to handle emotional pain. Alex applied this strength in many areas of her life including her relationships and career.

Cathy struggled for years with obsessive compulsive disorder. However, while grieving and coping with the death of her mother, she also healed her obsessive-compulsive disorder, discovered that she wanted to help people, and found a way to make it happen:

Right, I need to do something meaningful in my life and that's where I was trying to plan to integrate back into going back into work once I was doing the work for my obsessive-compulsive disorder, which was really severe, with a very fortunate

mix of medications and cognitive behavioral therapy. I am in a very good place with that. I just rubbed my nose for example, that is something that I could never have done. I was washing my hands up to hundreds of times a day when I was at my worst. My hands were falling apart. Yeah, it was bad. And again, not uncommon with trauma survivors to have these kinds of reactions, but I needed to do something that made a difference in the world. So, when I was searching for a job, I found 211. 211 was something I could see myself doing. I really wanted to be part of a helpline and get into the social services. My degree was in psychology, so it seemed like a good fit. So, I started by volunteering to get working again.

Grieving, healing, and finding her desire to help others after the death of her mother helped Cathy to heal her severe obsessive-compulsive disorder to the point where she was able to shake my hand at the start of the interview.

Courage. All co-researchers expressed courage in their actions, choices, and relationships, but only Ed explicitly described the concept courage as part of his growth journey:

Before the avalanche tragedy and the trauma. I was a boy, and a boy wants freedom, but they do not want responsibility or accountability. A boy is controlled by fear, they are afraid of telling the truth, for fear of getting in trouble, A boy will run from things. Yeah, and in my deficient definition, being a man is somebody who is a person, and they would actually back up a little bit. The masculine is courageous: social courage, physical courage, and emotional courage. The masculine energy is a courageous energy and umm simply put, I am

more of a man. I better understand what courage is. I think that my definition of courage was kind of like a lot of males kind of included the physical realm but not the social realm, or the spiritual realm. And so, I see myself as much more courageous in those arenas now and that's been an adjustment.

Ed's growth journey expanded his definition of courage to include social and spiritual courage. His expanded definition of courage helped him overcome internal challenges, and inspired him to write a book, give lectures, and teach classes, which he did not do before the trauma.

Empathetic Strength. Empathetic strength is a growth area that fits in multiple domains, personal strength, warmer more intimate relationships, new possibilities, and spiritual development. However, I believe it is best placed in personal strength, because a strong foundation of personal strength is integral to it manifesting in the other areas. It is a crucial aspect of my co-researchers' posttraumatic growth. All co-researchers embodied empathetic strength in their careers and lives by wanting to help others through difficulties. Three co-researchers specifically mentioned empathy and being there for someone who was going through incredible emotional pain as a significant aspect of their growth.

Diane stated that empathy was an area of growth for her stating: *"Empathy for sure. Certainly, my ability to listen to what people are saying and really decipher. Like if they are saying, 'I can never get over the guilt' Is there another message? trying to understand what people are saying."* Diane used her empathy to understand a person's situation more deeply.

Becca described how she was willing to listen to the tragedy of others: *“I am not afraid of hard stuff. And so, I am not afraid to sit with people when their lives are collapsing.”* She put compassion before her own discomfort and fear.

Alex described how increased personal strength influenced her choice in profession. *“I would say that is a reason I have decided to be in this profession, therapy, because I feel like I am not afraid to meet their pain.”* Being able to listen to and engage with someone else’s pain is essential to therapy, and Alex’s increased personal strength gave her the strength to pursue a career in helping others through pain.

Increased Coping Ability. A significant personal strength that grew out of their trauma was the ability to deal with a second trauma or tragedy more effectively. Four of my co-researchers had a second tragedy later in life and each described dealing with it in healthier ways. Years after their first trauma, Alex, Becca, Cathy, and Diane, all had a tragic loss. For Alex, it was the suicide of her brother. Becca had a loved one die from cancer. Cathy’s mother passed away after battling cancer for a year. Diane lost a friend to suicide. Each not only describes their coping as better after the second tragedy, but also describes the grief experience in a positive way. Diane did not share a specific quote on the issue but described it in pieces throughout the interview. However, Alex, and Cathy shared beautiful quotes about their grief experiences. Becca and Diane took their experience further by their questioning of how we handle death in our society and how we could do it better.

Alex described her grief after her brother’s suicide: *“I have never heard that mourning can be magical, grief can be magical, but it was magical. And horrible and everything but it was also magical.”* Cathy described the experience of being with her

mother, when she died: *“It was terrible that she died, but it was a beautiful experience as well which is really weird.”* Their growth allowed them to accept the pain of the loss, obtain the support they needed, and experience the magical, beautiful love that was behind their grief.

Becca described how the death of a relative inspired reflection on how society treats death and dying.

Yet another experience with a relative dying last year from cancer and again through my experience with my daughter and all my reading and then this family member. I actually think the area I want to work in is grief and loss and bereavement. And just really improve the quality of end-of-life care, I think we do a really crappy job of it in our society. And so much of that has to do with our fear of death and our unwillingness to have those conversations or even acknowledge for ourselves that life is finite, and we will die. It is a certainty that no one wants to think about it. So, it has just completely re-shaped the trajectory of my life.

Through the recent death of a loved one, Becca’s grief led her to a deeper understanding of how our society handles grief and loss, which led her to want to improve that process. Through her grief, Becca used her sadness to learn and find something that she could do to better the experience of others.

Diane also reflected on her most recent experiences with death and concluded similar to Becca’s conclusion:

We are afraid to talk about death. You know as a society we are not great at it... then when you add suicide and all that stigma and the myths and everything goes along with that it just exacerbates. So, I think being able to talk about death would be really good... yeah I think that that's something that we need to talk to kids about. Whether we use you know a bug on the ground or you know a pet. In (a children's grief support group) actually, we talk about that kind of stuff ... and I do have lots of great books with the leaves falling or natural bugs falling on the ground. You talk about what dead is.

Diane's experience with death led her to a deeper understanding of how badly our society handles death and a desire to be part of the individual and cultural change surrounding it.

Overall, my co-researchers developed courage, overcame difficulties particularly those related to fulfilling their purpose, and coped with tragedies and traumas that happened later in life. They developed skills to cope with pain and difficulties, which made them more resilient when dealing with vicarious pain and trauma involved in helping others. Knowing they had successfully coped with their own pain and had the strategies to heal from that pain allowed them to be empathetic and compassionate to others experiencing pain. The domain of personal strength was primarily the growth of courage and the ability to face challenges, both the challenges life threw at them, as well as the challenges they chose for themselves.

Relating to Others

All co-researchers developed better relationships with their loved ones than existed before their traumas. Co-researchers specifically mentioned improvement in their

relationships with their children, parents, siblings, husbands, and self. All co-researchers described the importance of accepting their loved one's flaws, while also not letting judgment from loved ones affect their sense of self. All co-researchers learned to accept their emotions, such as anger and sadness, as a way to reduce its power and gain emotional control. Two co-researchers emphasized embracing the vulnerability of emotional pain and aimed to set their desire to be right aside, because the relationship was more valuable than their ego.

Emotional Awareness, Mindfulness, and Vulnerability in Relationships. My co-researchers expressed being more emotionally aware, mindful, and vulnerable in their relationships. Below, I will explore the applications in my co-researchers' relationships with their children and husbands.

Emotionally Aware Parenting. Becca, Alex, Cathy, and Diane all believed that their growth improved their relationship with their children. All were able to be more emotionally present and accepting with their children. Even though the emotional needs of their children vary, all were able to meet those needs because of their growth.

Becca recognised how her own emotional reactivity to parenting challenges changed from before to after the trauma:

My kids have taught me just so much about my own growth... I have two little girls... and umm for the first several years, of their lives I was again quite reactive and just umm, you know I am quite vocal. And so, I can be known to yell, just very responsive in my frustration. Umm quite loud and come across quite verbally aggressive and so yeah there has been a shift recently just in terms of my

ability to just kinda take a break, just a moment of pause to reflect, to acknowledge my growing emotion. That was not always the case, where it would be it seemed to be a bit of a switch but now, I am growing my awareness of my emotional reactivity, and so that allows me to take that mindful pause, take a breath, and be able to relate with my children in a way that is healthier and more conducive to their growth. And act in more alignment with my own integrity and the type of mom that I want to be.

Becca described how gaining awareness over her own emotions allowed her to relate to her children in a healthier and conducive way.

Alex expressed how she is better at dealing with her children's emotions after her growth. *"I can say that with my daughters... just say that I am more able to contain their difficulty, to meet their difficulty."* After healing from her own trauma, she developed the ability to create a safe space for her daughter's emotions.

Cathy described how her emotional growth led to better emotional communication with her son:

I learned so much about the importance of emotions. And I have a very emotional 15-year-old and I am sure it is going to get more fun for the next two years as his hormones continue to kick in. He is a very emotional boy and, but he knows how to express his emotions because we have always used emotional language. So, you know he knows how to talk about what is going on for him. So that would be significant... That is my purpose in life. You know I have my purposes in life are fairly clear to me. And that it is to raise my kids the best that I can, to be good human beings, feminists. I have got two boys so I'm trying to raise them as

feminist as I can and to raise them to understand social justice and the importance of equality.

Cathy's learning and subsequent teaching of emotional language with her son significantly changed their relationship and fit with her sense of purpose.

Diane developed such a strong belief that the purpose for doing something is greater than her fear of doing it that she was able to have some very difficult conversations with her children that she may have shied away from before her experience.

Boy it's tough though you know, but like yeah, we've had some good conversations with my kids, but yeah... That's the question that is hard to ask though. You really have to want to hear the answer. Regardless of what it is. Right.

Diane talked with her kids about mental illness and death, specifically inquiring about their mental state. This is one of the hardest tasks as a parent and because of her strength and growth she was able to have these conversations with her children.

Embracing Vulnerability and Seeking Understanding with Husbands. Alex, Cathy, and Becca all developed stronger relationships with their husbands in different ways.

Alex's growth changed the way she reacted to her husband:

It is really connecting to his beautiful essence which is there beyond all those nasty words. and I do that now and it really neutralizes the anger. It takes it out of the socket. It really works and it really... it like weakens the muscle of anger

which was so... such a powerful muscle in me once. It just like weakens it. I stopped giving it weights. And another muscle started to get stronger the muscle of being soft.

Alex applied her emotional awareness and control to fights with her husband consequently she developed a less defensive and more loving relationship with him. By strengthening her muscle of “*being soft*”, she embraced vulnerability, allowed herself to feel the underlying emotion, and subsequently changed the interactions with her husband for the better.

Cathy’s relationship with her husband improved as a result of emotional awareness, patience, understanding, acceptance, compassion, and boundaries:

I have grown in my patience and compassion for my husband dealing with his addiction issues which is not an easy thing to do because he slips, and I have to decide. And those slips... like we have boundaries. The children are a boundary, but it is a boundary he has not crossed because I've set very clear ones, but he still slips and I have to accept that that's going to happen, and to just start over.

Cathy’s growth gave her awareness, the capacity for acceptance, the power to choose, and the courage to stand up for what she feels is right, and the strength to set healthy boundaries for herself and her children.

Becca described a unique situation in her marriage that was a particularly intriguing aspect of growth. She talked about how shared tragic experiences with her husband led to growth in her relationship:

In our marriage we suffered from two miscarriages, and those were fairly traumatic for us. We both value family. We both wanted children but certainly having those occur, it was painful, but the added layer of that was the sense of shame that my spouse felt that somehow, some way we were being punished for whatever. But this event happened because we must not have done A, B, or C, and that almost broke us. It was an extremely trying time for us. I mean even his family sort of fed into this belief that you know “God is sending you a message, maybe you two aren’t meant to be together”. Just these sorts of really painful. Yeah, it just added layers upon layers of the pain that we were experiencing. We endured through those experiences and we ended up with two children, two healthy babies. And we grew in our relationship. I think those experiences helped us sort of mature in our own understanding. You know these experiences make you confront, sort of, what you believe to be true and how long you are going to make sense of what has happened. We eventually got to a place, I do not know necessarily at the same time, that you know these were just experiences that were provided on our past to enable us to learn. So, I do believe we became stronger for it.

Becca and her husband experienced spiritual crises after their miscarriages and severe illness of their youngest daughter. They both struggled with the pain, examined their beliefs, and grew spiritually from the experience, and the combination of their independent and mutual growth led to a stronger relationship. This is a beautiful example of posttraumatic growth on a relationship level.

Overall, these co-researchers embraced vulnerability, accepted their emotions, and acted with intention to be the wife or mother that they wanted to be, which ultimately led to increased intimacy and warmth in their relationships. One commonality I noticed among the quotes above was the implication of choice. Becca chose to “*act in more alignment with my own integrity*”, Alex chose to embrace vulnerability instead of defensive anger, Cathy chose to be patient, compassionate, and apply boundaries, and Diane chose to have genuine conversations about mental health with her children. They chose to apply their learning and growth in their closest relationship, and act in accordance with who they wanted to be. They actively chose change.

New Possibilities

The new possibilities domain has many applications for my co-researchers because my co-researchers chose to change their lives in multiple ways. The recognition that life could be different, finding new interests, and pursuing new paths exists in all domains. As previously discussed, my co-researchers saw and pursued new possibilities in their relationships and for themselves. This section will focus on their career change and more importantly the reason they changed their career paths. Changing careers to a more compassionate profession was a participation criterion which indicated posttraumatic growth. The criterion was used in the design of this study to introduce an objective measure and lessen the presence of self-reporting bias. However, the reason they adjusted their career paths, including the desire to fulfill their sense of purpose, live more meaningfully, and help others in need was revealed during the interviews and is a valuable finding.

Fulfilling Purpose through Career. All co-researchers modified their careers after experiencing trauma to something more meaningful and related to their sense of purpose. Three co-researchers changed careers completely. Two of the co-researchers shifted directions within the same field. Alex and Becca started studying to become mental health professionals. Cathy shifted from being a bank teller to working on a distress line. Diane stayed in the same general career, but she moved to a practice that aligned more with her sense of purpose. Ed adapted his career to incorporate more spiritual guidance in his role as an adventure travel guide. All co-researchers made the change because they wanted to aid others in healing or growth. Helping others became a way they found purpose, meaning, and joy.

Alex pursued education to change her career, because of the strengths she gained, and her sense of purpose, as stated in a quote used previously: *I have decided to be in this profession, therapy, because I feel like I am not afraid to meet their pain.* Alex believed in her own coping abilities and strength, and she was no longer afraid of the negative effects her desired career might have on her.

Becca described the changes she was making to her career:

It was an irresistible, urge and believe that life could and should be different. That what I wanted to do with my energy was not being fulfilled in the current role that I was in... It matters more to me that I have a fierce drive for life and that I can ride this passion and that means more to me than a job that I just despise. It is just this underlying fierce belief that this life matters, and everyday matters. There is more work that I could be doing that is more in alignment with what I think I am actually here for that overrides any of that other stuff.

Becca was inspired by her spiritual learning and a newly found sense of purpose to aid others through a difficult time. Her dissatisfaction with her previous position caused her to change her priorities and to live in a way that fulfilled her sense of purpose.

Cathy also wanted to help people and changed her career path to reflect this new sense of purpose:

I have changed from wanting to do stuff to wanting to help other people... I feel a need to give back to society and I need to be a positive... play a positive role in society to give back to people in a concrete fashion, to help guide people, which is why I started volunteering at the distress line.

Cathy made large changes to her work by volunteering and eventually got a job in which she helped people find the resources they need to deal with challenges they face.

Diane wanted to prevent suicides and help others recover from suicide attempts or the loss of a loved one to suicide. *“Whenever I do a support group, or I do the conference for the council or I do a walk somewhere or whatever raise funds in terms suicide or get involved in something. I mean that is growth for me.”* Diane substantially increased the ways she helped others from support groups to fund raising. She got more involved and drastically aided the mental health awareness in her area.

Ed embarked on a new path by publishing a book, and he continued that journey by starting a second book:

In my work and in my life, I have been trying to connect to spirit in more consistent ways through my day. So that is how I see myself as a spiritual person. Right now, I'm working on a book that deals with adventure literacy because I

have this idea that people are going on adventures and having all kinds of events happen, but not really deepening their experience, because they're skipping the reflection piece.

Ed wanted to expand the meaning-making possibility of adventure travel and aid others on journeys of self-discovery.

Overall, the domain new possibilities in life described the new directions my co-researchers took in their lives after trauma. All co-researchers adjusted their career path in order to align with their purpose and ways in which they found meaning in life. All co-researchers' career adjustments led to a more compassionate position in which they could help others in need.

Appreciation of Life

All co-researchers gave the impression that they appreciated life more after their trauma than before their trauma. Their appreciation was noticeable in the way they described changing their priorities and living in the present.

A Change in Priorities. Changed priorities was a broad characteristic for my co-researchers. There is a large overlap between this theme and new possibilities, because changing their priorities led them to seek new possibilities to express those changes. Some were big changes like wanting a career that matched their sense of purpose and to help people. Others were smaller but significant, such as choosing vulnerability instead of anger in a fight with her husband or taking a breath before responding in anger towards her child. Both of these actions allowed the co-researcher to be the wife or mother they intended to be, instead of being reactionary. All co-researchers prioritized their

relationships, their purpose, and their personal growth, which are described in other sections.

Cathy took the year between her mother's diagnosis and death to be with her mom: *"When my mom was passing and be there to support her and be there for her."* Before her trauma experience shifted her priorities, Cathy likely would not have been as involved as she was and might have missed out on the incredible bonding time she had with her mother before she passed. After recovering from her childhood trauma, the death of her mother, and her growth, Cathy wanted to help others. *"I wanted to help people in situations like mine."* This change in priorities led to a change in her career path.

Becca prioritized her personal growth by filling her spare time with things that fill her soul: *"Reading, podcasts, just anything I can do to fill my spirit, and expand my brain, and I find those to be the most filling for my soul."* Becca made the choice to prioritize filling her spirit and expanding her mind.

Presence. Some co-researchers felt that after their trauma, they focused on being more present in life. The co-researchers found that being present allowed them to appreciate small moments in life more. Nature was helpful for two of the co-researchers to find presence.

Alex described how her *"focus was just to be present."* Alex went on to explain that she was *"just able to be more present, more present in life. Not avoiding, not leading a life that is avoiding."* She accomplished this presence through focusing on emotional acceptance:

It is just about being very present and learning how to be, BE, learning how to be with whatever is there, whatever emotion, whatever sensation. And just be with it in a friendly way. A nonjudgmental way. And when I studied this it was just amazing to see how just by being with it, it would transform on its own, on its own time. And there would be such a release or such a transformation.

Her use of this focusing technique extended beyond therapeutic settings and into her everyday life, such as appreciating her husband and children even during challenging moments.

Cathy also used time in nature to re-centre and enjoy the moment. *“We go camping. I love nature, so being by water is very therapeutic to me.”* Taking time by the water helped her re-centre and spend some time with her family.

Becca also described being more present, especially in nature:

I just really am trying to be more present in my day to day, and uhh live with more gratitude, umm live my true purpose and umm meaning and so I no longer try to... I try to spend my time and my day on ways that I find meaningful and that align with what I believe to be true about why I am here... So, I am just really trying to be more cognoscente. Getting out in nature, appreciating my moments in nature, but even on really cold days and stuff just taking the time to look out the window and watch the wind or watch animals, so nature is becoming a larger part of my practice.

Becca focused on being present and really appreciating moments in nature as part of her self-care routine; it was a way for her to re-centre and re-approach life with intention and integrity.

Overall, three co-researchers expressed a greater appreciation of life, which was shown in their change of priorities to be more present in their lives and relationships. This section overlaps with other sections because appreciation led to growth in other areas. After their trauma, these co-researchers valued aspects of their lives that they had previously taken for granted. They spent more time appreciating their relationships as well as the natural environment around them.

Spiritual and Existential Change

All co-researchers examined their beliefs about life, society, religion, God, meaning, suffering and purpose after their traumas. Their existential questioning led to changes in their judgments, beliefs, and understandings. The three most prevalent changes occurred in their judgments of mental health, their beliefs about religion and God, and their understandings of the function of trauma.

Mental Health Stigma. Three co-researchers changed their beliefs around mental health stigma. Specifically, they judged mental health challenges less, including changing their judgements about suicide. Alex had the most pronounced change to her opinion of mental health:

Well, I definitely saw suicide in a new light. I guess I did judge that before. Just the stigma of giving up... with my brother I just knew that that was his way of dealing and he tried, and he tried, and he tried... so there wasn't any judgement

towards that, I know a lot of people may judge suicide, but I didn't have any judgement.

After the suicide of her brother, Alex's judgement of suicide changed. She started to see suicide as the sad end of an exhausting journey of trying to get better, but not being able to.

Cathy's trauma and growth experience changed the way she viewed mental health:

So, it helped normalize things for me that you know what I do have these conditions unfortunately normal for a lot of people who have been through these experiences. So, it makes it just easier for me to accept it as just a part of who I am and not stigmatize not be stigmatized by it because I am very open about my mental health conditions because I don't want to be contributing to stigma.

Cathy's experience allowed her to accept her own mental health struggles, and to stigmatize mental health struggles less.

Diane also changed her views on mental health, suicide, and the how to help others who have been affected by those conditions:

I have grown a lot. My understanding of suicide is way more than it used, than I want it to be actually. But it is an interesting path because I think lots of people are helped by it... I think the way that I kind of thought about mental health. Again, it was something that was a stigma. And after my sister died, I was very ashamed. I was very embarrassed. I was very ashamed. I thought everyone was going to look at me and think there is the person whose sister you know, and it is

her fault and all that stuff. And so, my beliefs in terms of mental health have changed, and how you can help people have changed, what you can offer people, and you can be there for them and you can be supportive of them, but you can't make everybody believe what you believe.

Diane internalized the stigma surrounding her sister's suicide, but her recovery and growth process led to a dramatic change in releasing the shame and blame of her sister's death as well as how she relates to others in her life with mental health struggles. She is more compassionate and less judgemental toward people who have struggled with suicidal ideation, including her friend who killed herself.

Religion and God. Three co-researchers modified their beliefs about religion. This involved changing their view of religious institutions, examining their current religious beliefs, and purging unhelpful beliefs, and exploring other religions and the addition of new religious and spiritual beliefs. They expressed the importance of compassion in relating to others, the importance of having spiritual and religious beliefs and practices in their life and differentiating spiritual matters from religion.

As described in the two quotes below, clear articulation came from Alex, looking at turning points in her spiritual journey. The first is her experience with the twelve-step program:

Religious no. Spiritual definitely... I think one of the turning points was the twelve-step program. Where it is actually, this program for addiction actually asks you to find a higher power and I came into this you know into this twelve-step program you know very angry at God. He took away my dad without letting

us say goodbye, and I just remember cutting off from God a long time ago. Just my own relationship with God, because I grew up in a very nonreligious family, but I did have my own relationship with God. kind of. And then I just cut that off. I was just so mad as a 16-year-old. So as a 24-year-old when I came into this program and they are saying higher power I am like “uh oh” I hope this is not a religious group or something. Like I thought I would have trouble finding that. But to my huge surprise I discovered, I remember there was this one time I was on a train and they said you know the whole point of this twelve-step program is that when you get an urge to, you know, go for your addiction, instead of doing that you call up a friend, a peer from the group, or you pray if you do not have access. Back then we did not even have cellphones. There was no such thing. So, I find myself on a train and I had this huge wave of um. I guess I had this huge wave of emotion that I could not deal with so then came this huge wave of panic and wanting to eat. And obviously I was not near a payphone so I could not call anyone. So, I just remember praying to God. Going okay I will try that one. That was my Plan B in the twelve steps. So, I said I will try this, “God please please I am... please remove this huge you know need right now to go and binge.” And after I did that, the moment I did that, a huge peace washed over me. That was wild.

Alex described the twelve-step program as a path to her relationship with God and a beginning to further spiritual and religious exploration. The second turning point was her spiritual crisis after the death of her brother, which led her to India:

And then me and my husband had a beautiful house, our dream house, but that was not it. So, what is? there has to be something more than this. I could never ignore that. I can see other's ignoring it you know. It is fascinating for me to see you know my sister-in-law just letting them doing their life. And I am just like there is more how can you just be happy with that? I cannot. So that led me to India. Me and my husband, we take our babies there. Our kids to India. There we met a spiritual master teacher and umm it was so, it was so, yeah. Just meeting someone who was awakened to the whole more than just regular life and that was really inspiring. Just listening to the wise words of him. And I am really just also just very inspired by, you know, there is a few. So, there is a few of these you know spiritually awakened people who write so beautifully and just, you know, their words just always touch me to the fact that there is more. And that is just an ongoing, unfolding journey into me. I would say into my heart and soul and not out anymore. It is a journey within. The answer is more in, and it is definitely not out. It is in and for me it is becoming more and more softer with myself, becoming more at peace. Becoming more in my heart. And it is constant work, it is not like it happens on its own. It is constant work.

In her second turning point, Alex described how meeting a spiritual leader in India reinforced her spiritual understanding that peace that comes from within.

Becca grew up religious and still was, but her faith is much deeper, thoughtful, and spiritual as a result of her growth after her trauma experience:

I would more identify with the spiritual person. I would say there are different religions that I would align with, different principles, and that sort of thing. But I

do not subscribe to one in particular theology... I was raised in a Presbyterian church, and so that provided a framework for understanding life, but I would say more recently, I have expanded past that original framework that I had been given ... more recently in my life I have grown in my capacity to understand myself as a spiritual being... I mean, I still value Christianity in many ways, I still identify as being a Christian, but just knowing that there is such an expansion of meaning and perspective has tremendous... has helped me so much.

Becca's re-evaluation of her beliefs led to the purging of beliefs that did not help her and a strengthening of beliefs that did. Through her re-evaluation, she has expanded her spiritual perspective on both the world in general and herself.

Ed also had a spiritual and religious re-evaluation process after his trauma.

I would not say that I am religious. To me religion has too.... It is interesting, it seems that nature is trying to teach us that there's infinite possibilities. And I think the same is true with spirituality; there's infinite possibilities. And so, for people's experience of spirituality, those can be infinite. So, it could mean infinite possibilities with an afterlife. Infinite possibilities of what people feel or sense. And so, as I see a profound difference between religion and spirituality. Religion is 'this is what this is.' These are the boundaries, and this is what you must believe in. Whereas spirituality to me is like completely open, and it seems to me that, I will get dogmatic here, because religion has a lot of dogmas and things that don't actually make sense. Because somehow, along the way they adopt it, and nobody really knows why they are done. I used to be in a place where any word that was remotely connected to spirituality or religion, I had a lot of hate

for. Raised Catholic, totally traumatized, chiefly around the lack of acceptance, and a lot of abandonment, because I wasn't all the rules, but it did not fit. But now I can... I can say the word God and I know what it means to me and know that kind of religious definitions are the paternalistic judgmental picture of that. But I know that it ultimately means to me that there is a huge measure of mystery as to what this notion of God is and it is probably beyond our ability to understand, and it may be something more akin to, it infuses everything. So that was kind of a shift or a change in beliefs or ideas.

Ed connected with the infinite possibilities and openness of nature and spirituality. He had a difficult relationship with religion growing up, which has healed as part of his spiritual journey after his trauma. He has examined his beliefs about God, religion and spirituality and has combined beliefs from multiple faiths that resonated with him.

Trauma as a Teacher. During the interviews, one intriguing theme was that my co-researchers viewed their trauma as a significant influencing factor in their growth and the person that they are today. Cathy and Ed said it blatantly, while Diane, Alex and Becca hinted at it. They shared the perspective that the traumas they went through taught them valuable life lessons they may not have learned another way. Cathy described how her traumas influenced her growth:

So, there is a purpose. Like I'm not saying it's good that it happened. I'm not saying I am happy that it happened but there is a purpose to things and direction, and I wouldn't be where I am now doing what I'm doing. If it wasn't for that trauma. That's what set me on a path. Like all the different traumas that I went through. They are all pieces of the puzzle that set me on the path that I'm on

which I hope is a good place to be... I know better than to ever say that to someone who is going through a trauma. But I do believe that everything does happen for a reason and that there is reason to all of these things that occur to us and that we are meant to learn and grow from them. So that belief has helped me to grow spiritually and try to figure out more ways to give back as much as possible and keep continually looking at getting a master's in social work degree.

Cathy saw purpose in her experiences of trauma because they taught her and inspired her to do things to grow in ways she may not have otherwise.

Ed described the significance of his trauma experience with a similar theme:

This experience that we have we are often binary about it. We often think of good bad good bad good bad. But if you combine the conflict of the two and you see the result. That's that would be my description of my spiritual experiences. What I experienced through trauma I could keep in that binary world of these parts were good, these parts these parts were bad, but it is the whole conflict and wrestling with it and how it shaped me. And how... The end result. So, it's kind of like cold air and warm air in a storm. They mix and it's really turbulent. But the end result is rain and rain is the liquid of life and it makes things grow and puts out forest fires, and then all of these things. And so, it's helped me to start to see the end result. I have to be careful saying that I value the experience because it has shaped me. I have to be careful with that because there were other people that suffered, and I survived and so from their perspective what right do I have to say that. But I got my ass kicked, but I value that ass kicking... In some ways, I think that the whole experience with the avalanche was my mentor or the guy I was

working with. Yeah, and then sometimes a mentor can be a tormentor first and then through a fair bit of work and reframing and looking at things differently from a different perspective it becomes a mentor. Yeah, and I think that in part is what the larger journey is about.

Ed learned to have a different perspective and reframe his trauma experience, which led to a journey of existential wisdoms. Ed valued the lessons that his trauma and recovery taught him.

Both Cathy and Ed described how the traumatic events in their lives helped shape them into who they are today. They are also both very aware that this is not the case for everyone and would not share that wisdom with people suffering with trauma.

Ultimately, they both value the learning that came out of those terrible experiences.

Diane took a more compassionate perspective on how and what her experience with trauma taught her:

So, I think personally I have to believe that if we choose to, we can be supportive for someone else. We can take that grief, that pain, that sorrow and try and go OK you know what have I learned from that? What have I learned from that we need to pass it on? You know there were people that were there for me in my life, who helped me through some other stuff. I need to pass that on.

Diane saw the learning she got from her trauma as a valuable tool for helping others.

After her experiences with miscarriages and the illness of her daughter, Becca learned and grew through examining her religious beliefs and developed new beliefs about life and purpose.

I no longer ever believe that anything that happens is due to punishment at all. I do believe that we experience things in our lives to help us grow. And it is very much how we choose to perceive them and how we choose to move from them that matters most. It has nothing to do with... I struggle with the word 'deserves'. Sometimes people use that word and I struggle because I do not think anyone deserves any maltreatment... a morphing of what I believe to be true about the nature of existence, what I believe to be true about myself, my own purpose, my own meaning, what I'm doing here in this life... I just very much believe that as human beings we will experience pain and so it is very much what we choose to do with it that matters.

Becca's experience with trauma and tragedy taught her about living intentionally and her purpose. She developed wisdoms about the nature of beliefs, pain, and choice that she may not have learned without her experience.

After her experiences with trauma, Alex developed a new perspective on difficulty.

I think another new belief or new understanding of life is that you... it can be really painful, and you and it is ok. It is ok. Like difficulty is not bad. Yeah, and it is so different from the message you know from society. Who will do anything to avoid pain? Right try Advil. Like anything and it is not. I am still obviously learning that it is not like I am all enlightened you know bring on any difficulty. It is a life learning thing, but I have learned the beginnings of it.

Alex no longer perceived difficulty and pain as something to avoid. Instead, she developed the understanding that difficulty could be life's way of teaching lessons.

Overall, my co-researchers questioned and modified their beliefs about mental health, religion, and learning from their experience of trauma. They learned to judge mental health less. They re-evaluated and re-defined their beliefs about religion and spirituality. Most significantly, they changed their perspective on trauma and difficulty. All co-researchers learned that difficulty is not wholly bad and that traumas can be valuable teachers of life lessons.

The picture of growth that my co-researchers displayed included all five posttraumatic growth domains. They all developed a greater appreciation for life, by changing their priorities to reflect their sense of purpose and living more in the present. They developed better relationships with loved ones, particularly their spouses and children, but also friends and family. All co-researchers grew their personal strength to become more courageous and able to overcome challenges. Four co-researchers were even challenged with an additional trauma or tragedy and displayed resilience and better coping abilities. My co-researchers changed their career paths to reflect their sense of purpose and desire to help others. And last but definitely not least, my co-researchers re-evaluated, expanded, and established new spiritual beliefs including reduced mental health stigma, new beliefs about religion, and a new understanding that trauma can be a teacher. When put together all of these characteristics create a remarkable picture of the experience of posttraumatic growth.

The Process of Growth

This section explores the processes, and experiences that supported, inspired, and led to growth in my co-researchers. If we use the analogy of the garden, this section describes the sunlight, photosynthesis, and fertilizer my co-researchers used to grow their

beautiful gardens. This section has five themes: growth as a journey, growth as a series of choices, growth through existential questioning, growth through support, and growth through acceptance.

The process of growth was unique for all my co-researchers, some jumped into exploration quickly, others took years to start. The themes below are points of commonality amongst my co-researchers, they drew upon their growth process, and helped them grow.

Growth as a Continuous Journey

All co-researchers described their growth as a continuous journey. Their journeys involved years of work and change to achieve their growth.

Alex saw her growth as constant and continuous work spanning years:

I am not the person I was last year, and I am not the person I was two years ago. It has just been constant. I would say constant change...It is in and for me it is becoming more and more softer with myself, becoming more at peace. Becoming more in my heart. And it is constant work, it is not like it happens on its own. It is constant work.

Alex described how years of constant work led to become more at peace and softer with herself.

Becca saw her growth as “*a journey probably in action for at least 10 years.*”

Becca recognized that her growth was the result of ten or more years of active work. This recognition of the impact of her actions is essential to her continued growth.

When describing the role trauma played in her life, Cathy said, *“that trauma, that fear it created, is partially what set me on that spiritual journey... It is just not a great way to be set off on a journey. But it did set me off on a journey.”* Cathy viewed her trauma as the start of a spiritual journey.

When describing her growth, Diane said, *“it's just an ongoing process.”* Despite everything she had already accomplished, Diane still believed that there was more to grow and develop.

Ed claimed that he was still exploring and growing at the time of the interview:

It wasn't like the whole aha moment, just the door opened, and then I started exploring it. And that process of exploration continues to this day and I will probably continue till I die. But the door is open. Like OK this is something that I can use as a touchstone that will guide me through my journey and the growth continues to happen. Almost on a daily basis I have little aha's and it is about the most important thing was the door opened. It helped me see that this experience that we are having is part of a larger journey.

Ed described how an *“aha moment”* opened him up to a journey of exploration and growth that continued for years and could continue for the rest of his life.

Overall, my co-researchers viewed their growth as a journey, initiated by their trauma, that developed over years and would continue for longer.

Growth as a Series of Choices

The journey of personal growth for my co-researchers develops as a result of a series of major and minor choices working in tandem with each other. All major choices

were related to many smaller choices and their subsequent actions or inactions. To use an everyday example, if a person's major choice is to get fit, that choice is accompanied by many smaller choices, such as workouts, taking the stairs, and eating healthy meals. The process of growth followed a similar pattern in my co-researchers.

One major choice that all of my co-researchers made was the choice to live the purpose which they had clarified after their trauma. This major choice was accompanied by thousands of small choices, such as breathing mindfully, going for a walk, or buying a new book, as well as more substantial choices, such as participating in therapy, taking a class, or pursuing a new hobby. It is only in the accumulation of both smaller and more substantial choices with their accompanying actions and subsequent smaller growths that they obtained more substantial personal growth. To expand on the workout example of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), described in my literature review, as my co-researchers became "more fit," they could build upon that "fitness", and an activity that was previously too challenging for them became achievable.

All co-researchers made the choice to engage in healing and growth multiple times. They chose to try new things, to seek help, to improve their relationships, and to reflect upon meaning, amongst other things. Their growth was not an automatic process, but the accumulation of many intentional choices to heal and better themselves or their lives. Their choices included all realms of self: physical, mental, and spiritual, and included the release of unhelpful things, and the embrace of helpful things. They made choices about what to pursue and what to abstain from. Only the accumulation of their choices led to their current level of growth.

Ed described the importance of choice when healing and growing after trauma when he used an analogy to describe his growth:

It is how we choose to move from them that matters most. So, I use the metaphor of I am a mountain guide so I'm often helping people pack packs for different journeys that we go on and those... when we pack a pack for a journey in the mountains, we are careful with what we carry and we carry things, which sustain and protect us. And so, it is a process of deciphering after tragedy what elements we choose. You know for me that is what am I going to carry and one of them is a better understanding of courage. Another one is an understanding of acceptance. You know accepting that my life is what it is. And because it is what it is, I get to bring what I have learned into my interactions with people, and also myself. So yeah, it has been a journey of growth. So, courage, acceptance, being at peace with things and I think acceptance and peace are a bit different in that peace is kind of a greater measure of comfort. And you know we can accept something, but peace brings us to this different realm where we are perfectly comfortable incorporating it into who we are.

Ed chose to grow in the areas of courage, acceptance, and peace. He chose to apply the wisdoms he learned from his experience in his life.

Diane also talked about the importance of choice over the perception of her past:

Really what's it going to get you? You grow up a bitter person. So, you try to use that kind of as an example to... that's kind of where I got my strength too. You can become very very bitter about life. You really can. And then but what does that get you? It gets you a bitter life, a bitter life. So, I do not want to do that.

Drawing on the inspiration from her mother, Diane chose to not be bitter about her past, because she did not want to be a bitter person. This example shows the incredible power of choice over emotion and perception.

Alex made the choice to take a new approach to her marriage, after reading about a particular philosophy. She described her choice and reason to follow this new philosophy:

A successful relationship is death to the ego. It is not pleasant for the ego. And it is very pleasant for the heart. And I realized we were 18 years married, and we have been through our hell. So, I know that the other way did not work anymore. And it was either divorce or try the new way. Because I could see in them that, in the teachers, that they had... they were talking from experience. It was not just 'blah blah.' It was like ok they have done it. It does work. I am going to try this.

Alex made the choice to read the book, talk with the teachers, and follow the theories from the book in her interactions with her husband. Every time she chose to apply this theory to her marriage, she actively chose to prioritize her marriage and to grow in this area of her life.

In an earlier section, there was a quote in which Becca described how she would calm herself so that she could be the mother she wants to be with her children: *“to take that mindful pause, take a breath, and be able to relate with my children in a way that is healthier and more conducive to their growth.”* This part of the quote in particular showcases the active choice and steps she took to parent the way she thought was best for her children.

Cathy was less aware that she was making active choices based on values, but she did describe a value choice she made when she said, *“So my experience determined you know this is what I was lacking. So, it was really great that I had a nice clean house but you know this is more important.”* Cathy used her childhood experience to determine what was important to her and then chose to prioritize those aspects in her life.

This section only showcases a portion of the choices my co-researchers described making. They actively chose to heal, learn, and apply their new understandings in many areas to great impact on their lives.

Growth through Existential Questioning

Trauma initiated existential questioning for all my co-researchers. They explored their existential questions by reading books, going to conferences, taking classes, partaking in spiritual retreats, talking to others with similar experiences, and learning in therapy. All co-researchers also spent time reflecting on their purpose, what comes after death, and other existential matters.

Alex started questioning the concept of an afterlife after the death of her father when she was a teenager. *“Well, I just remember that “where is he?”, “where is he?” in the back of my mind. I just wanted to know where did he go? Knowing he was still around, but he was no longer on earth.”* Alex’s existential questioning was the beginning of a much longer spiritual search, that included different types of therapy, education, and spiritual experiences.

Becca’s traumas inspired existential and spiritual searching.

I just became obsessed with spirituality and spiritual growth and understanding God. But understanding God in a variety of contexts, not just within the Christian lens but you know outside of that. And umm... just this voracious appetite that I can't explain that sort of exploration into spirituality, and all the different... you know I looked at Buddhism and Taoism just kind of... I was just fascinated by all these different approaches to making sense of the world that we live in, and what it means to be a human being ... I am just fascinated by the meaning of life and how do we deal with this finite existence and that sort of thing.

Becca was fascinated by spirituality after her traumas and explored multiple avenues for exploration into finding meaning in life.

Diane explored the morality of suicide after the deaths of her sister and friend.

I think it changed in terms of my interest in mental health and what would drive people to do something like this, or that I also have to be respectful that even though... because I know in ASIST they ask you "is suicide wrong?" Do you think somebody should be talked out of suicide or whatever they ask those questions on the chart? And so personally yes, I think suicide is wrong, because it's so harmful to so many people.

Diane's experience with loved ones dying by suicide led to questioning the morality of suicide and ultimately led to her career interest and further involvement with suicide prevention and mental health awareness.

Ed really questioned his experiences and reflected upon their meaning using spiritual leaders as guides along his journey. One of the wisdoms he discovered was: "I

think that's really one of the key pieces of the human journey is to fully own who we are and everything that we've experienced and allow it to help us expand awareness and consciousness.” Ed questioned many aspects of life, humanity, and purpose along his journey, and came to many wisdoms.

Overall, my co-researchers actively engaged with their experience. They reflected, opened their minds to new possibilities, and sought answers both within themselves and from existential and spiritual sources, such as books, tarot cards, nature, and prayer. My co-researchers grew from their trauma experience because they did not shy away from tough questions, and instead actively engaged and reflected upon them.

Growth through Support

All co-researchers had experiences in which they felt supported and cared for by people in their lives. Each co-researcher also had moments in which they felt unsupported by people in their lives. All co-researchers were supported in therapy, by friends and family, with shared experience, through personal strength, and from spiritual sources.

Therapy. Three co-researchers explicitly mentioned participating in therapy, whether with a psychiatrist, psychologist, psychotherapist, or other trained practitioner. They mentioned feeling supported and validated by their therapist. The other two co-researchers didn't explicitly mention therapy, but alluded to therapeutic interactions, in group therapy or as part of another program. All co-researchers mentioned that validation was essential to the interaction helping them accept their past, trauma, and themselves. When asked what her first therapist did that helped her, Alex specifically mentioned feeling validated:

She was the first person that validated my childhood, validated all of my difficulty. Yeah. Cause it was also something that I did not really talk about to others you know. Therapists is a different experience in talking about that. And then after it is just the huge journey of healing.

Alex's experience with her first therapist gave her the validation and support to start her healing journey. Alex also mentioned that therapy gave her a place to talk about experiences that she would not have talked about with others, meaning that she felt safe enough for exploration and self-reflection.

Cathy spoke highly of her psychiatrist, who treated her for her obsessive-compulsive disorder:

She talked to me and listened. Those were very significant and something you know we know from the distress line, how important just listening is, and she just listened, and she heard me, and she believed me. She acknowledged what I have been through and normalized and validated my experiences.

Cathy's psychiatrist helped her feel validated and supported by listening to her and normalizing her experience. Her therapist also created a safe place where Cathy felt heard and could reflect and learn. These are simple techniques, but powerful, and very important to my co-researchers. Cathy felt therapy provided her with the coping skills necessary to function, heal, and eventually grow:

I was doing the work for my obsessive-compulsive disorder, which was really severe, (and I was) very fortunate with that mix of medications and cognitive behavioral therapy... going through basic CBT with me and helping me get

through that stuff has really helped me grow. Again, because it helped me grow as a person to get past because it made me very proud to get to a good place in my therapy.

Therapy helped Cathy overcome a significant psychological disorder, to the point that when I met her, she shook my hand freely. This progress showed significant personal strength and growth.

Ed found therapeutic experiences with non-traditional practitioners.

It helped me see that this experience that we are having is part of a larger journey. It is a component or a step in a larger journey that we know nothing about. And might be unique to each of us. And so, in these situations and these learning events and these connections to people like (his practitioner) have been another door that evoke... that is open to spirituality and understanding of a larger journey.

His therapeutic experiences helped him open up new perspectives on his trauma, which led to deeper understandings of himself and his journey.

Friends, Family, and Shared Experience. All of my co-researchers had supportive experiences with friends and family. One key way they found support was through shared experience. Sharing their experience with other people who had gone through something similar was important to all co-researchers. Traumas and tragedies have many ineffable qualities and trying to explain or get someone to understand can be exhausting or impossible. Consequently, knowing that someone had a similar experience gave my co-researchers an innate understanding that the person just “got it”. To help

illustrate the impact of shared experience, I will share a non-trauma related example from my own life. As a new parent, I struggled getting my child asleep and was constantly tired. When I mentioned this to my friends without children, they did not fully understand the impact of it on my life, and trying to explain it was exhausting, so I often did not even bother trying. Contrastingly, when I told other moms from my mom groups, there was instantaneous understanding and empathy, because most of them had been there too. Those moments were incredibly restorative and helped me not feel alone. Shared experience helped my co-researchers not feel alone.

Alex described how the funeral for her brother was a supportive, shared experience.

A small service. Just me, my husband, my four-year-old daughter, me pregnant, my mother came. And an old friend of my brothers came, a family friend, that was very sweet. That was also very supportive, just having all of them there. That was very supportive and beautiful.

This experience contrasted with the silence and distance she experienced after her father's death. Her brother's funeral allowed for an intimate, shared experience amongst her family and a close friend, which was helpful for Alex's grief process.

Becca described many supportive experiences after her child's illness.

So many supportive experiences. I mean friends, family, faith communities have rallied around us. My close friends. Umm I call them my tribe. You know both my partner and I have families of origin and they are supportive in the ways that they know how to be supportive. And that is not always in ways that can be received

meaningfully by us. So yeah, it is our chosen family. It is our tribe. They just rallied around us and just supported us. Umm yeah like faith leaders, we were involved in a pretty small church at that time. And that faith leader really helped lead us through that. We have been able to share our story just within our faith community and without... like outside of it as well and that has been tremendously helpful... We have met some amazing people, who have survived so many traumatic events and yeah so there have been incredible opportunities since that trauma.

Becca had some wonderfully supportive experiences from friends, family, and her community. Her faith community and friends really rallied around her and helped with the recovery from that experience. She had some mixed experiences with her in-laws; sometimes they could be supportive and helpful, but they could also be judgemental and hurtful.

Becca specifically described her husband's support as an essential part of her healing and growth journey. *"Just my husband and I like our relationship has provided tremendous support... His support has been tremendous, I could not do this without his support. I mean I could, but I am glad that I have his support"* Becca mentioned that her husband's support was very helpful, but not required for her growth journey, particularly for her continued education. This point describes her inner strength and belief in herself, but also acknowledgement that support made her journey easier.

Cathy described support from some friends. *"I had supportive friends. Some had traumas of their own. So just sharing the trauma with somebody."* Having friends that shared a similar experience helped Cathy feel less alone and supported.

Diane compared the contrasting experiences of support between the death of her sister and friend. Both deaths were suicides, but the responses of her friends were dramatically different.

It was really, really hurtful when someone said... when someone did not listen to me. So that was 36 years ago and then seven years ago, I lost my best friend to suicide and it was very different, very very different. Right away that day. I mean that day my friend called me and said that she went missing and she was found dead. And so right away we got together, we did it, the grieving thing. We went to her family's home, we went to the morgue, which is a horrible place to be. And we did all of that stuff, but we did it together like I was not holding that myself.

Diane found support instrumental to grieving the loss of her friend. Having support from friends and sharing her grief experience with them helped her not grieve alone. Compared to experience of isolation and shame that she had experienced after the suicide of her sister, Diane believed the shared experience with her friends was a healthier grief process.

Diane described how a friend inspired a major turning point in her grief process.

I was talking to him at once and he had to say you know 500 times "it's not your fault". And it took a really long time for him to get that through my head. I think once I did, that it was not my fault. Umm I think that was the turning point for me... I think acknowledging that it was not my fault and that there are people out there that will listen or hear your story and that "get it". Right. That has been very helpful.

One friend helped Diane let go of her ‘*shame and blame*’ around her sister’s death, which greatly contributed to her healing process and started her growth process.

When asked about people who have supported his journey, Ed described multiple people and an interesting perspective.

My mother is gone now, but I think my mother was really helpful. And then also (a friend) was umm... she helped me at the start of writing the book. Really encouraged me, and then I moved during the writing of the book... transporting myself out of western Canada to a completely different, well not a completely different culture, but a very different culture gave me the ability to see more clearly. We have to step back from things in order to see them. It gave me perspective yeah. My sister was supportive. Yes, so friends, family... kind of a mixture of friends, family, and some people in my industry. Very few but some... Which I think that in the long run was helpful because I think that if there is too many supports then we actually do not suffer enough. And we need to suffer in order to get sick of it. And then be like ‘this is up to me’. Like I really believe that. Like I think if there are too many supporters then we do not get to a place where... Because ultimately, it is our journey. Right and if we had too much external support then we might lose that idea because ultimately, we have to do the work, we have to do the reading, the reflection, the meditation, whatever it may be.

Ed shared a perspective that support was helpful, but he believes that too much could interfere with the suffering necessary for healing and growth.

Personal Strength. My co-researchers' personal strength is described best in the picture of growth section. I am referring to it here, because it is a significant source of strength my co-researchers drew on during their process of growth. As they grew their personal strengths, they became vital resources to additional growth.

Spiritual Support. All co-researchers had spiritual support. Some had spiritual experiences that helped guide them, gave them strength, or inspired insights.

Spiritual Strength. After the death of her brother, Alex felt a connection with the “*celestial*” through the baby in her belly, which deepened her spiritual growth after his death.

I would say magical because it had an other worldly element to it. I think that as the element of this other being that had still not made transition to this world, you know, there was one foot still in the celestial and with such a vibe of love and such a vibe of peace, such a vibe of acceptance.

Alex's connection to her unborn baby gave her a mystical support that helped her through the tragedy of her brother's death.

In one of Becca's worst moments, she experienced unexpected love and peace.

I just have this awful memory of the chopper lifting and my husband beside me collapsing to the ground and umm it was at that moment exactly that moment as he was crumbling that I just had this tremendous wash of peace come over me. Umm again that is a little hard to articulate, but umm I was just so calm, and it was just this wash of just unbelievable love.

Becca attributed the peace and love to spiritual interaction from her higher power. It gave her the strength to support her husband and drive to the hospital where her daughter was going. Becca believed that she may have been divinely prepared for the tragedy.

Yeah, I very much believe that I was being divinely prepared for that event by just becoming exposed to a wide variety of people's stories and other faith traditions. I mean I still value Christianity in many ways I still identify as being a Christian, but just knowing that there is such an expansion of meaning and perspective has tremendous... has helped me so much.

Becca believed her exploration into other religions and meaning prepared her strength to handle her daughter's illness.

Diane used the term “*divine intervention*” to describe the first steps taken that lead her down her current path. I don't know if she realized the significance of those words, but the path she has taken is one of the best descriptions I know of community compassion. Her path has helped thousands of people both directly and indirectly, who have been suicidal themselves, or who had a loved one die by suicide. Her actions have helped reduce mental health stigma in a county of hundreds of thousands of people and possibly saved countless lives.

Post-Death Connections. Three co-researchers had post-death connections with loved ones, which they felt aided their recovery and grief process.

Cathy's memories of her friend, who died during her teenage years inspired her to be kind and giving throughout her life.

My friend who died certainly helped me in my growth experience because she was so incredible... she was a really giving, really kind person right until the end, and as a child going through that I do not know how she was as strong as she was knowing that she was going to die. Not to say she did not have her moments, but still all in all, she was an exceptional person for that.

Cathy's continuing relationship with her friend through her memories helped guide Cathy's understanding of right and wrong, and her expression of compassion.

In her grief after her mother's death, Cathy had a moment of comfort from the beyond. *"It is hard to explain, but I could feel someone sitting on the edge of my bed and I just knew she was there"* When I asked how this made her feel, Cathy responded *"comforting"*.

After the suicide of her brother, Alex experienced an event that gave her a profound sense of connection to him.

So, this video came on and it is such a good video I knew it already, but I never saw... I saw it in a new light when it was on again. And it was so obvious to me that my brother was sending me this video to see. It was their most famous one. It is called Blind Melon. I can easily find it. And the video... the song is really good. You probably know it. It is quite famous. The story of ... the lead singer actually died too later, that is interesting ... but anyways he umm... the story in this video is of this little girl and she has this bee costume on, and she just does not fit in the world because everyone is wearing normal clothes and she is the only one with this bee costume on. and she is just looking confused going through life. And finally, at the end of the video she reaches this field where she sees so many other

people in bee costumes just like her and they are all just jumping up and down and celebrating because they found each other. And it was so clear that he was sending me that. Just like that he just could not connect his whole life and now he is found. So that was also really helpful. I do not know, something was influencing all of this, and I was in connection with my brother. I felt in connection with him.

This moment of spiritual transcendence gave Alex a deep understanding of her brother's death and a profound sense of peace, which was especially difficult to obtain with a suicide death.

Ed recounted a meeting with a spiritual healer in which she stated, "*you know there was a bunch of people in the room during your session and they want you to know that they are okay.*" When asked how this made him feel, he responded: "*it helped me see that this experience that we're having is part of a larger journey.*" This experience helped Ed release some survivor's guilt and heal from his trauma. It also helped inspire spiritual exploration and his search for purpose.

Overall, spiritual support and post-death connections helped my co-researchers to cope, heal, and grieve. Becca found the strength to get through a challenging time. Diane was inspired to help thousands of other people. Cathy was inspired to examine her priorities and decide how she wanted to live. Alex found new understanding and a profound sense of peace about her brother's suicide, whereas Ed's experience helped heal deep guilt and start his spiritual search. All of these are expressions of posttraumatic growth, meaning that post-death connections can aid in the development of posttraumatic growth.

Growth through Acceptance

All co-researchers developed greater acceptance as part of their growth journey. Acceptance was part of every domain of growth as both part of the picture and part of the process. Acceptance involved appreciation for their lives and embracing their loved ones rather than judging those people. It was acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses and following the new possibilities for their lives. Acceptance was acknowledging their beliefs and sense of purpose and living in a way that fulfilled both. I am emphasizing it as a process more than it is a picture, because of the importance of acceptance in the development of all domains. Acceptance was a foundational aspect of both their recovery and growth.

Acceptance did not happen the same way for any of the co-researchers; for some it was a light switch followed by a series of actions, for others it was a very slow growing process. Acceptance for all co-researchers included both external experiences and internal processes. The acceptance built upon itself in many areas, becoming deeper and more nuanced. By accepting their past, their trauma, and their emotions, my co-researchers started to accept themselves. Their acceptance of themselves and their acceptance of others were intertwined. Their acceptance of others was reflected in their careers and relationships. Their acceptance was related to openness, more specifically being open to self-reflection and support.

Acceptance of Self. All of my co-researchers developed greater self-acceptance after their trauma. They appreciated themselves and their gifts more.

When describing her experience in therapy and learning about trauma, Cathy said, *“So that was very helpful in helping me grow you know. Accepting where I am now and being in a better place for it.”* The relationship Cathy had with her therapist was a foundational element to her acceptance of herself, and eventually her husband, mother, father, brother, and son. Cathy’s self-reflection allowed her to judge herself less, and to accept herself and her loved ones more.

Ed’s experience after trauma helped him develop a deeper understanding of self-acceptance through self-reflection.

Deepen my own awareness of the situation and just accepting it... Acceptance of the event and self-acceptance kind of it is a little bit different in that it hearkens the idea of understanding that regardless of what happens we are always doing our best at that moment. We may judge ourselves with hindsight and by what we learned from the event. But when we are doing our best, we as humans we have blind spots and one of the things that I think about you know as a spiritual journey is one that we start to address our blind spots and we actually use those people... as a touchstone for that... and that's another kind of realm or piece of self-acceptance and also understanding that the self is something different than a mental construct we might have of ourselves.

Ed’s spiritual journey involved much self-reflection on his actions. He learned to judge less and learn more. Ultimately, Ed developed a deep wisdom regarding self-acceptance.

For Diane, self-acceptance was less the accumulation of wisdoms and more letting negative beliefs go that were not helping or potentially harming her. For a long time, Diane was not open to change; she was stuck. With the help of a kind colleague,

Diane let go of her “*shame and blame*”, accepted that her sister’s suicide was not her fault, and allowed herself to receive comfort, and grieve:

I think accepting... the thing I think was big was to know that it wasn't my fault, and I could grieve, and I could mourn... there are people out there that will listen or hear your story and that “get it”. Right. That has been very helpful.

The acceptance of her grief and process led her to profound wisdom “*wherever people are in their journey, that is where they are.*” Diane does not explicitly describe this acceptance as a spiritual journey but mentioned the influences of the golden rule and Gandhi’s quote “*be the change*”. Additionally, the result of her acceptance is a deeply rooted compassion for others, which is a profoundly spiritual outcome.

Becca uses “*surrender*” rather than acceptance. It is a very similar concept, but is far more spiritual and related to her faith in God:

I think the biggest word that I take away from my experience is surrender. Surrender a lot of the fear. Surrender a lot of the black and white thinking. Surrender a lot of this illusion of control. Just appreciate each moment for what it is, and do all I can in each moment, to live in a way that I believe is important.

Becca’s surrender represents a different aspect of acceptance. A significant component to her acceptance was spiritual; the spiritual task of letting “God be God” and consenting to the change God was guiding her towards. Surrendering control and trusting an unseen force to guide her in the right direction. Her surrender is more faith-filled. Like Diane, Becca gave up the beliefs that did not help and instead focused on the beliefs that made her life better.

For Alex, acceptance came from becoming open to and accepting help from other people and spiritual sources.

It is definitely just being open to not being alone. And being open to... there is so much help out there whether it is spiritual help, teachers, or people on the other side who have died. Or friends or, there is so much help. I think that is a fundamental difference because that changed because I grew up feeling so alone. I remember I used to have dreams as a teenager being the last person on earth and everyone died that kind of feeling where you are the only little ant in the whole cosmos and that has fundamentally changed. I have just become aware of the connectivity and the support that is out there, and again becoming open to that support. As a teenager I was very closed to that support... I think it has a lot to do with how sensitive you are. Because I feel like life is always throwing us signs, reaching out from the other side. It is just a matter of being open to it. Being sensitive to that dream or that music video or that you know... it is... yeah there is constant... a constant connectivity just about being more aware of that.

Alex became open to support from both other people and spiritual sources and developed acceptance for herself, her trauma, her spiritual self, and others.

Acceptance of Others. Acceptance of others was a characteristic for all co-researchers. For most, their acceptance of others was related to their acceptance of themselves.

Diane developed acceptance of herself and others: “*Growth I think is accepting people for who they are. Really trying to not fix it. Not trying to be everything to*

everybody because you can't. And just kind of accepting that I do have skills as well."

Diane healed some of the shame stemming from her childhood and suicide of her sister, which led to accepting herself and accepting others. In addition, people were really starting to listen to her and talk about the suicide supports available in her area, which expanded her acceptance of others.

Ed's experience and growth led him to be less judgemental and more understanding of others:

I have also learned to connect with my feminine side: tenacious, ardent, a different kind of strength, the ability to deal with pain, and you know that pain is a teacher, loving, giving, kind, generous. Yeah so, I think I have developed other aspects to my humanness, more compassion for others... In the past it would have been more judgment of others especially if they made mistakes. I have made mistakes that are just horrific. Yeah, that have a huge consequence, and so it helps me understand that others are just doing their best.

Ed's acceptance of his own mistakes helped him seek understanding and not judge when others make mistakes. During one of his talks in which he described some of the wisdoms he gained after his trauma, Ed received a question that triggered further reflection and wisdom about his relationship with another person:

The question that I got from the audience was "Do you ever think that... you know (the lead guide during the avalanche tragedy) has learned everything that he needs to and that his journey is different than yours". And that was really helpful for me because that may be the case and I cannot be the one to judge. And so, it is

those kinds of questions that I get and those kinds of that kind of exchange that kind of deepen my own awareness of the situation and just accepting it.

Ed was open to a hard question from his audience and allowed for the unknown. Rather than shutting the question down, or ignoring the possibility for growth and wisdom, he accepted this challenge and adapted his perception and understanding of another person. Ed's audience question is an example of the crucial connection between openness and acceptance.

Cathy learned to accept her father and described it as: *“So I've grown in learning to accept my father for who he is, and it doesn't mean I like it. But I understand... I do not expect more from him anymore. I know what to expect and I work with that.”* Cathy's acceptance of her father improved her relationship with her father, because she now has more realistic expectations and understanding, which reduced friction in their relationship.

Overall, all co-researchers developed acceptance for themselves and others, by building on previous acceptance. Accepting their past led to acceptance of themselves, which led to acceptance of others. Conversely, acceptance of others also led to increased acceptance of themselves. One theme I noticed was that acceptance appeared to be an overarching concept with different facets that grew upon itself. Other factors that helped my co-researchers grow were self-reflection and being open to support from both other people and spiritual sources.

Summary

The purpose of this thesis was to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of growth in the aftermath of trauma. What I discovered was that growth after trauma has multiple intermingling paths. One area of growth inspired and built upon another. The picture of their growth journeys included the ability to overcome challenges, deal with a second trauma or tragedy more effectively, better relationships with their loved ones, a career that is meaningful to them, and a desire to be present with life, and a change of their priorities to focus on what was meaningful to them. The process of growth for my co-researchers was a long and continuous journey that involved making many choices to better themselves through healing or growing. They actively chose to explore existential issues which led them to deep wisdoms about themselves and their place in the world. They sought support from professionals, friends, and spiritual sources. Additionally, they found acceptance of themselves, and of others. All of these processes intermingled, supported, and helped them find acceptance, which in turn helped them find additional support. Existential questioning helped them find new perspectives, acceptance, and support, which lead to deeper existential questioning. All of these were choices to better themselves, expand their lives, or understand the world around them.

Chapter 5: Discussion

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.” (Kübler-Ross, 1975)

My co-researchers have experienced suffering and found their way out of that despair. They appreciate life and live it with compassion and understanding for themselves and others. Each of my co-researchers has become a more beautiful person as a result of their posttraumatic growth journey. My research question was “what is the experience of growth after trauma?” I focused on factors that may have influenced my co-researchers’ growth such as supportive relationships, activities, and spirituality. What I found was an intermingling tapestry of experiences, which led to my co-researchers’ growth. They had supportive relationships with friends, family, partners, and professionals, which were aided by and helped develop acceptance. They developed strong spiritual beliefs through deep existential questioning. Growth in one area inspired growth in another, and this was a continuous cycle. One common interaction was after they found acceptance for their trauma and themselves, they extended that acceptance to others and their relationships improved. Personal strengths like courage and overcoming challenges greatly contributed to their pursuit of new possibilities in their life. Some of my co-researchers quit the job they found unfulfilling and chose to pursue a career with meaning. Without personal strength, and improved relationships with their spouses they

likely would not have been able to do activities that supported and expressed their growth, such as schooling, moving, or changing careers. Courage also contributed to spiritual and existential change because they were not afraid to engage in difficult soul searching or existential questioning, which in turn lead to deeper appreciation of life and relationships.

In this chapter, I will first give a brief overview of the posttraumatic growth characteristics each of my co-researchers displayed. In the course of the overview, I emphasize domains the co-researchers experienced growth, including some of the more significant examples. This section is a synthesis of the findings presented by person rather than theme, in order to highlight their personal growth experience.

Next, I will discuss the process of posttraumatic growth described by Tedeschi and colleagues (2018). While I agree with certain parts of their process, such as the importance of coping, self-analysis, rumination, and socio-cultural influences, I believe they are missing some key aspects of the process of growth after trauma. In particular, I will discuss ways their process does not fit with my co-researchers' experience of growth. The predominant aspect of growth that was present for my co-researchers, but not present in Tedeschi and colleagues' process, was the important role spirituality played in supporting, challenging, and guiding their growth experience.

When I was analyzing both my findings and reviewing the literature, I also discovered that religion and spirituality overlap and were not treated separately in the research, which confounds findings, especially for non-religious people. Consequently, I searched for and found a definition of spirituality that was based on human experience, which aided in further understanding the role spirituality plays in growth.

Following my identification of the importance of spirituality, this discussion will turn to further exploration of the role spirituality plays in trauma recovery and the growth process. I will describe spiritual growth, including the roles that existential questioning, struggle, support, acceptance, and choice play in the growth process, and then compare spiritual growth to posttraumatic growth.

Finally, I will outline the elements in the process of growth after trauma that emerged from my research into the experiences of growth described by my co-researchers. This process was influenced by the processes of growth described by Tedeschi and colleagues (2018), Lancaster and Palframan (2008), Burns (2020), Park (2013), and Bray (2011). There are two insights arising from this combination process. The first insight is that spirituality is everywhere, in every component of the growth process. The second insight is that the process of growth does not end; instead, it is a continuous ongoing cycle.

Summary of My Co-researchers' Growth

My co-researchers expressed different characteristics of posttraumatic growth.

Alex expressed characteristics in all five domains of posttraumatic growth. She developed many personal strengths, including overcoming challenges, empathetic strength, and coping with a second tragedy better. She developed better relationships with her husband and children, by embracing vulnerability, and gaining control of her emotions through acceptance. She explored new possibilities in her life including moving to new countries to pursue spiritual growth and purpose. She appreciated life more and aimed to be more present in it. She found considerable spiritual and existential change, in

her changed opinion of mental health, and her expanded religious beliefs. She saw her trauma experience as a teacher of values, purpose, and priorities rather than a negative on her life.

Becca expressed personal strengths, including empathetic strengths, and increased coping with a second tragedy. She also improved her parenting style and grew a stronger relationship with her husband. Becca sought a new career that matched her sense of purpose. Becca also developed her spiritual, existential, and religious beliefs, including losing beliefs that caused harm, and appreciating nature more.

Cathy developed her personal strength, specifically her courage and ability to overcome obsessive compulsive disorder. She also applied emotional awareness and acceptance which guided her relationships with her husband, son, brother, and father. Additionally, Cathy developed her spirituality, by reading books, engaging in spiritual practices, and discussing existential questions with spiritual leaders and friends. Cathy has developed a deep appreciation of life, specifically nature, after the death of her mother. Additionally, her existential questioning and spiritual searching led to finding her purpose and a need to help others, which she fulfilled with a new career assisting people in distress or trouble.

Diane utilized her newly developed courage to have difficult conversations about mental health with her children, which deepened their relationship. Diane reluctantly took on the challenging topic of suicide in her role as a social worker and developed that research into multiple support groups, councils, and conferences. She did this by reaching out of her comfort zone, finding support in colleagues, and getting the message of

normalizing mental health issues out into the public. Diane saw her spirituality and faith in God as essential to her personal strength.

Ed grew in the domains of personal strength, new possibilities, and spirituality after surviving an avalanche. He grew courage to overcome challenges, a new sense of purpose to help others grow, new perspectives on religion, and spiritual wisdom related to his trauma experience.

Not surprisingly, my co-researchers' growth aligns with the existing research on posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi *et al.*, 2018; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005; Montgomery, 2008; Chen *et al.*, 2015). They expressed growth in all domains, and with similar characteristics. Where my co-researchers differ from the Tedeschi and colleagues (2018) understanding is how they grew. Their process is not entirely opposing, rather my co-researchers' journey was more spiritual and less linear than that described by Tedeschi and Colleagues (2018).

The Process of Posttraumatic Growth.

The process of posttraumatic growth described in Tedeschi and colleagues' 2018 book starts with the person pre-trauma, including their core beliefs, culture, and individual differences. Next, the traumatic event occurs, sending the person down one of two paths: either the person's core beliefs are challenged leading to emotional distress and rumination, or their core beliefs remain intact, mitigating emotional distress and resulting in resilience in the face of trauma. Their acknowledgement of resilience on a posttraumatic growth process model seems out of place because resilience is generally understood as being different than posttraumatic growth. Resilience is one of several

possible outcomes from traumatic experience along with many other paths, including debilitating psychological disorder. A posttraumatic growth model should either focus solely on posttraumatic growth or include all possible paths.

According to the model, “Core beliefs must be threatened to trigger the posttraumatic growth process” (Tedeschi, et al., 2018, p.47). After the core beliefs have been threatened, the process moves to describe a series of diverging steps of rumination, distress and coping, further rumination, self-disclosure and self-analysis, and sociocultural influences. Their diagram has arrows connecting these boxes, but little is described in the text about how the different sections interact with and influence each other. In addition, the use of the term rumination for both intrusive and deliberate rumination is confusing and unnecessary. The term rumination is commonly associated with the intrusive and sometimes maladaptive thoughts that occur in posttraumatic stress disorder and depression (Taku, et al., 2009), so I believe a different term should be used for the deliberate, reflective, and helpful thought process.

Deliberate rumination is described as “trying to understand why or how the event happened and engaged in conscious, sometimes effortful, cognitive work to do so.” (Tedeschi, *et al.*, 2018, p.47) Deliberate rumination is something my co-researchers engaged in; however, for my co-researchers, every aspect of their conscious cognitive work seemed to include spirituality. Tedeschi and colleagues (2018) did point out the importance of this cognitive work in acceptance and making meaning, but they did not highlight the role spirituality plays in this process. In 2017, Tedeschi and Calhoun noticed a weakness in their spiritual change domain of the posttraumatic growth inventory. They increased the questions specific to spirituality and religion from two to

six. They made some changes for the better, but I would argue given my findings that they need to re-evaluate even further and expand their spiritual definition even further.

The final stage before growth in this posttraumatic growth model is acceptance. This particular step was a significant addition from the 2004 version of the model, but despite this there is little discussion of why it was added in their 2018 book. Acceptance for my co-researchers was essential and integral to their growth process. It was not a final stage by any means; rather, it was a beginning, middle, and end of different growth processes at multiple times.

Tedeschi and Colleagues' (2018) diagram has posttraumatic growth along with its domains as a final outcome. They do acknowledge that additional distress as well as wisdom can stem from this outcome, but their diagram implies a linear process instead of one that builds upon itself. This connection between the posttraumatic growth domains and process is probably one of my most significant findings. For my co-researchers, growth in one area assisted growth in another in an ongoing cyclical process that had no finite end.

Spirituality, Trauma, and Posttraumatic Growth

Spirituality's stress mitigating effects have been mentioned in many studies (Kick & McNitt, 2016; Zarzycka & Zietek, 2018; Krause & Pargament, 2018; Khursteed & Shahnawaz, 2020). However, there is limited understanding of the precise role spirituality plays in posttraumatic growth (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019). This apparent gap in the research was a large motivation for my research. The experience of my co-researchers expanded my opinion that spirituality was more integrated in the process of posttraumatic

growth than the research, particularly the research done by Tedeschi and Calhoun, had identified.

One of the main difficulties of parsing the effect of spirituality on posttraumatic growth was the deep connection between spirituality and religion. There was a very strong trend in posttraumatic growth research, including Tedeschi and Calhoun's research, to combine spirituality and religion as one theme. The term "religion and/or spirituality" is a very common one in the research. However, this is an unwise combination because while related, spirituality is a separate concept, and its distinction from religion is an important one for posttraumatic growth research.

There are some researchers who identified this distinction. "Spirituality is often mistakenly equated with religion but is in fact a far broader concept" (Rudolfson, Berggren, and Barbosa de Silva, 2014, p. 64). Parapully and colleagues' (2002) participants expressed their spirituality through faith in God, religious beliefs, belief in life after death, being thankful, utilizing religious traditions, continuing bonds with the loved ones who died, and utilizing religious traditions like prayer and rituals. Despite religion's influence in their spirituality, Parapully and colleagues' (2002) participants emphasized a difference between their religion and spirituality.

Most of the participants had a spirituality that was shaped by the religious traditions they follow. However, they took care to point out that spirituality was different from and went beyond an institutional allegiance to any particular religious tradition. They understood spirituality more as an attitude of mind and heart that nourished their spirit and emotions and influenced their behavior.

(Parapully et al., 2002, p. 50)

Parapully and colleagues' (2002) participants express their spirituality as being more personal and intimate.

In their review, Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015) mentioned finding conflicting information in the literature regarding religion and spirituality. Some authors argued that spirituality was at the core of religion, while others argue spirituality is a separate concept; spirituality can be expressed through religion but does not require religion to be expressed (Weathers, McCarthy & Coffey, 2015). Weathers, McCarthy, & Coffey (2015) found three commonalities to the definitions of spirituality they studied: multidimensionality, uniqueness, and “the understanding that spirituality is broader than religious beliefs or affiliation” (p. 15). It is important in posttraumatic growth research to define spirituality independently so spiritual growth is more accessible and understandable. In the next section, I discuss how the field of nursing has used the experience of both patients and professionals to develop an empirically founded definition of spirituality.

Spirituality in Nursing: A Human-Centered Perspective

The field of nursing responded to the need for a better understanding of spirituality for both patients and nurses. While religion and spirituality can be related, they are not the same and often exist separately. Nursing has a unique perspective on spirituality from other disciplines because it looked at spirituality from the perspective of the person (patient or professional), rather than looking at religion and trying to decipher out what spirituality might be. Nursing is a logical field to study spirituality in relation to trauma because both nurses and their patients encounter tragedies and traumas. Nursing

has researched spirituality empirically, found its common characteristics, and defined it as a unique entity.

In her 2011 meta-review, Pike found indecision, confusion, and uncertainty relating to spirituality. In her words, “Definitions of spiritual care vary, and the concept of spirituality in nursing is still under development” (Pike, 2011, p 743). She does discuss some important aspects that should be included in a definition of spirituality: patient’s concept, generality, and differentiating factors from religion and psychology. The patient’s understanding of spirituality is an important concept to maintain because a shared language is important to human connection (Pike, 2011). Spirituality is unique to each person, consequently any usable definition of spirituality needs to give space for that uniqueness. Pike (2011) also commented that spirituality is often combined or confounded with the concepts of religion and psychology, which presents an interesting challenge for nurses in whom they call to aid a patient with a spiritual crisis: clergy, or psychologist. While Pike did not explicitly define spirituality, her research found important aspects of spirituality that need to be accounted for in future research.

Rudolfson, Berggren, and Barbosa de Silva (2014) reviewed hundreds of studies on spirituality in nursing; they looked at spiritual experiences, values, and the positive impact spirituality can have in the field of nursing. They identified seven themes for spirituality in nursing: being part of a greater wholeness, togetherness - value based relationships, developing inner strength, ministering to patients, maintaining one’s sense of humanity, viewing life as a gift evokes desire to give back, and achieving closure – life goes on (Rudolfson, Berggren, and Barbosa de Silva, 2014). “Our study revealed that the spiritual factor makes the human being universal and enables her/him to manifest

her/himself in human love, which encompasses kindness, interest, responsiveness, understanding, and the joy of meeting other people.” (Rudolfson, Berggren, and Barbosa de Silva, 2014, p. 69.) Rudolfson, Berggren, and Barbosa de Silva (2014) also added to the understanding of spirituality as human experience and further described aspects that should be included in defining spirituality.

In 2015, Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey aimed to tackle the great ambiguity in defining spirituality with an empirical definition. Through their metanalysis, Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015) determined 3 main attributes of spirituality: connectedness, transcendence, and meaning in life. ‘Connectedness’ is defined as “a sense of relatedness to oneself, to others, to nature or to the world, and to a higher power, God or Supreme being” (Weathers, McCarthy, & Coffey, 2015, p.5). ‘Transcendence’ is “the capacity to change one’s outlook on a given situation and on life overall”; it is the ability to see beyond present limitations to either a life that could be, or to be aware of the good that still exists in their current situation (Weathers, McCarthy, & Coffey, 2015, p.13). ‘Meaning in life’ is an ineffable quality that is easy to identify when seen or heard, but definitions trying to encompass all components seem to fall short. Meaning in life is the name given to a person’s increased sense of purpose, or appreciation for life (Weathers, McCarthy, & Coffey, 2015). Metaphorically, they stop to smell the flowers and/or plant new flowers for others to smell later.

The themes in Rudolfson, Berggren, and Barbossa (2014) are parallel to the attributes found by Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015). The themes of togetherness-value-based relationships, ministering to patients, and being part of a greater wholeness are all forms of connectedness. Developing inner strength and maintaining one’s sense of

humanity are forms of transcendence. While viewing life as a gift evokes desire to give back and achieving closure - life goes on are forms of meaning in life. A good definition of spirituality should include all the above themes.

Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015) synthesized nine years of research on spirituality in nursing with the goal of coming up with an empirically founded definition that could be used in future research.

Spirituality is a way of being in the world in which a person feels a sense of connectedness to self, others, and/or a higher power or nature; a sense of meaning in life; and transcendence beyond self, everyday living, and suffering. (Weathers, McCarthy, & Coffey, 2015, p.15)

The above empirically founded definition includes the essential elements of spirituality in a way that does not rely on religion but allows for religion. It is clear, thematic, and accessible to other fields. As a result, this definition is the one that I have chosen as a touchstone in the interpretation and discussion of my findings. In the next two sections, I will be comparing this definition of spirituality and its attributes, to my co-researchers' experience and the domains of posttraumatic growth.

How does the Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015) definition of spirituality apply to my co-researchers? The Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015) definition of spirituality fits with the expression of spirituality in my co-researchers. Connectedness, transcendence, and meaning in life are attributes that help explain the expression of spirituality in both the picture and process of my co-researcher's experience

of growth after trauma. My co-researchers utilized and grew connectedness, transcendence, and meaning in life.

My co-researchers' connectedness was present in their relationships with themselves, loved ones, their higher power, and the world around them. "The experience of being in relationship with is an important component of spirituality, especially a relationship with God" (Clark & Olson, 2000, p.11). The most prevalent form of this connectedness was acceptance. My co-researchers' acceptance of themselves, others and the world were the most significant aspects of their experience after trauma. Their acceptance for others arose out of empathy and understanding.

My co-researchers also started to see their careers as a way to express their self-identified sense of purpose. They saw their growth as a continuous journey which indicated an understanding of the vastness of the world, and the possibilities that life can hold. Three co-researchers developed a sense of connectedness with their higher power and self through nature. They found more ways to be present in their lives and relationships by enjoying the simpler, more intimate moments more. Seeing their situation in a new light gave my co-researchers personal strength and acceptance of themselves, their trauma, situation, and their lives.

Meaning in life and their sense of purpose was a fundamental component of the courage and strength my co-researchers developed. My co-researchers all grew through existential questioning, finding, and living their purpose. Not only did they view themselves as stronger, but they saw their suffering as a significant contributor to their growth.

Meaning in life can apply to relationships with others, self, and their higher power. They chose where to spend their time and effort, mainly in ways that fulfilled their spirit. My co-researchers sought relationships that brought meaning to their lives, they sought friendship that filled their soul, and careers that filled their purpose. They approached relationships with their families with intention of who they wanted to be, the kind of mother, the kind of wife, and the kind of friend they wanted to be. They saw relationships as a way to bring meaning into their life by valuing those in front of them.

Ultimately, meaning in life is spiritual and existential change. All spiritual and existential change my co-researchers accomplished was because they changed their priorities, found their sense of purpose, and developed better relationships with their higher power, others, and self. They evaluated what was important in their life, what purpose they had for their time on earth, and what impact they wanted to have on the world around them. All wanted meaning, to help others and to make the world a better place.

This connection between spirituality and posttraumatic growth gives a new perspective to the presence and influence a person's spirituality has on their experience after trauma and the growth they could experience. All domains are influenced by one or more attributes of spirituality, indicating that posttraumatic growth is more heavily influenced by spirituality than previously understood, and research should look into this connection further.

How do Weathers, McCarthy and Coffey's findings on spirituality alter the understanding of posttraumatic growth? By comparing Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey's (2015) definition of spirituality to the domains of posttraumatic growth

identified by Tedeschi and colleagues (2018), we can arrive at a deeper understanding of the experience of growth after trauma. Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015) identified three main attributes of spirituality: connectedness, transcendence, and meaning in life. These attributes of spirituality are remarkably similar to the domains of posttraumatic growth. This similarity indicates the importance of spirituality in posttraumatic growth.

In the context of Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015), connectedness means having better relationships with themselves, others, their higher power, and the world. Connectedness has parallels to three domains of posttraumatic growth: relating to others, personal strength, and spiritual and existential change. Relating to others is the strongest point of comparison to connectedness because they both describe increased quality and importance of relationships with others. Connectedness also relates to the domain of personal strength because both involve greater relationships with oneself. Connectedness relates to spiritual and existential change because both involve an increase of connectedness with oneself, others, a higher power, and the world. Connectedness is both a process and an outcome.

For Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015), transcendence is “the capacity to change one’s outlook.” Transcendence is the foundation of the domain of appreciation of life. Transcendence is also associated with the domain of spiritual and existential change, because seeing a higher power with a new perspective is a large component of spiritual growth. Transcendence is different from posttraumatic growth domains because it is both a process and an outcome. Additionally, transcendence adds an element of spiritual wisdom and learning that is seen as an associated offshoot in the posttraumatic growth model (Tedeschi *et al.*, 2018), but not a key component.

Meaning in life is the most abstract of Weather, McCarthy, and Coffey's (2015) attributes, because it is an ineffable concept that describes the attribute without explicitly defining it. Meaning in life is associated with some of the domains of posttraumatic growth: appreciation in life, new possibilities, and spiritual and existential change. Taking the time to enjoy the smaller moments in life is an integral part of both the 'appreciation of life' domain of posttraumatic growth and the 'meaning in life' attribute of spirituality. Appreciation and meaning in life are parallel concepts that differ only in small ways. Appreciation in life is the expression of a person's understanding of their priorities and values that they place on life. Meaning in life also associates with the domain of new possibilities. Meaning in life exists in the search for new ways to live, particularly when people are finding or expressing new ways to live meaningfully or apply their sense of purpose in their life. Meaning in life is most significantly connected to spiritual and existential change, because meaning in life is the basis for a person's values, choices, and actions.

Overall, comparing the attributes of spirituality to the domains of posttraumatic growth showed the deep connection between spirituality and posttraumatic growth. Attributes of spirituality are present in all domains of posttraumatic growth, which indicates that the posttraumatic growth domains are interconnected with and influenced by spirituality more than is present in the current understanding. Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015) were reviewing studies that focused on nurses and patients and their understanding of spirituality. One thing these two groups have in common is the exposure to life changing and potentially traumatic events, either personally or vicariously. Consequently, it is very possible that the participants in the nursing studies have

posttraumatic growth. This could help explain the similarity and overlapping themes between the attributes of spirituality and the domains of posttraumatic growth. However, even if this is the case, the connection between spirituality and posttraumatic growth remains. In the following section, I explore the concept of spirituality and particularly the process of spiritual growth more deeply.

The Processes of Spiritual Growth

In the course of my investigation, I found three models of spiritual growth, which describe some of the essential processes of spiritual growth. The three models are Lancaster and Palframan's (2008) model of spiritual transformation, Bray's (2011) model of psycho-spiritual transformation, and Park's (2013) meaning making model. Each of these models focus on different aspects of growth, but all models describe ways spirituality inspires growth.

In a 2008 paper, Lancaster and Palframan explored the role of spirituality and self-transformation in coping with major life events. Spirituality provided a subtle, continuous support, and in the form of prayer and support from others (Lancaster & Palframan, 2008). "The role that spirituality plays within the coping and transformation process was seen to manifest as being subtle and unfolding and/or supportive." (Lancaster & Palframan, 2008, p. 1) Spirituality provided support through the transformation for their participants, just as it provided support through growth for my co-researchers (Lancaster & Palframan, 2008). They also emphasize the importance of actions in the process of transformation, similar to the importance of choices I found in my co-researchers (Lancaster & Palframan, 2008). Lancaster and Palframan (2008) used the term spiritual transformation, but it is analogous to spiritual growth. They developed

a model highlighting the circular process of transformation. “Transformation may be conceptualized as a process of continual movement into the unconscious, where the totality of the self is awakened, resulting in a reinterpretation of life purpose.” (Lancaster & Palframan, 2008, p. 1) Each part of their process of transformation connects to multiple other parts. Lancaster and Palframan’s findings align with my findings of intermingling growth processes.

Bray (2011) added the concept of spiritual emergency and spiritual emergence after the seismic event. The importance of these concepts was adding the aspect of human consciousness to the process of growth. Human consciousness is further emphasized by additions such as awareness, meaning, and creative expression (Bray, 2011). Bray emphasized the importance of deliberate cognitive processing, rather than only intrusive rumination. Intrusive rumination can be harmful, while deliberate cognitive processing can lead to understanding, and meaning, especially when people are receptive (Taku, et al., 2009).

The meaning making model focuses on two levels of meaning: global meaning, an individual’s general view of situations, and situational meaning, which is more understanding of specific instances (Park, 2013). Park (2013) states that spirituality affects all aspects of global meaning, including beliefs, guidelines for goals and deep sense of purpose, and general health, including mortality, cardiovascular functioning, and pain. Spirituality has direct effect on social support, sense of purpose, body satisfaction, positive affect, optimism, and self-regulation (Park, 2013).

These models highlight the different roles spirituality plays in growth. Spirituality supports a person’s growth by helping them be open to accepting change within

themselves and understanding of meaning in the world. The transforming potential of spirituality is most keenly understood through the transforming capacity of openness and meaning.

Spiritual Themes and Associated Processes that Lead to Growth

Spirituality and spiritual coping are some of the most significant predictors of growth (Shaw, Linley, and Park, 2005). Through my exploration of the process of spiritual growth, I have found three themes of spirituality strongly connected to growth: suffering, openness, and meaning making. There are additional spiritual themes that play a role in spiritual growth, but for the purposes of this discussion I will only focus on these three. Suffering is the theme most significantly connected to growth (Chittister, 2003; Burns, 2020). A predominant view of how suffering leads to growth is through the process of existential questioning (Montgomery, 2008). Openness, particularly to spiritual transformation, leads to acceptance, which, in turn, leads to healing and growth (Lancaster & Palframan, 2008). Meaning making leads to growth as a result of the application of small, active everyday choices based on purpose, intention, and engagement (Park, 2013). Each theme had a corresponding action that led to growth: for suffering, it is existential questioning; for openness, it is acceptance; and for meaning making, it is daily application. Below, I discuss each theme and its corresponding process.

Suffering and the Process of Existential Questioning. Suffering is the first step after trauma, so it may seem remarkable that suffering is essential to growth after trauma. “Some enduring distress from trauma can keep the focus on change and growth”

(Tedeschi, *et al.*, 2018, p. 43). The enduring distress and shattered beliefs after trauma open a person up to the possibility of incredible change. “Most of the world’s great religions including Christianity, Hinduism, and the Islamic faith view suffering as having an important positive role in our personal development, the development of wisdom, and in our relationship with a higher being.” (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005, p. 2). Spirituality is a guide that assists the process of turning suffering into growth.

“If no one can escape struggle, then it must serve some purpose in life. It is a function of the spirit. It is an organic part of the adventure of development that comes only through the soul-stretching process of struggle. No other dimension of life can possibly offer it because no other process in life requires so much so deeply of us. Struggle bores down into the deepest part of the human soul life cirrus tendrils, bringing new life, contravening old truisms. The problem is that struggle requires the most of us just when we expect it least.” (Chittister, 2003, p. 3)

The key aspect of struggle in growth has been emphasized by PTG researchers: “The traumatic events set in motion attempts to cope and that the struggle in the aftermath of the crisis, not the event itself, produces the posttraumatic growth.” (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Groleau, 2014, p. 506)

Suffering and Growth in Christian Scripture. In the New International Version of the Bible Romans 8:18-30 (New International Version, 2011) is a section titled “present suffering and future glory” This section contains two passages of particular value to the topic of posttraumatic growth. “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (New International Version,

2011, Romans 8:18) The passage continues to describe how God uses the Spirit to intercede and aid people with their suffering. My co-researchers suffered, analyzed their suffering, and used their spirituality to cope with and grow from their suffering. There was a relationship between my co-researcher's spirituality and growth that seem remarkably similar to how the Spirit helps in Romans 8:26 (New International Version, 2011) "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." My co-researchers' relationship with their spirituality led them on paths they would not have known or chosen without this relationship, and those paths ended up being the most beneficial. Romans 8:28 (New International Version, 2011, Romans 8:18) says "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who[a] have been called according to his purpose." In the footnotes, there is another translation of this passage from the original Greek that is especially important to a spiritual understanding of posttraumatic growth. "That in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good." (New International Version, 2011, Roman 8:28). This translation beautifully describes the interaction I witnessed in my co-researchers. It emphasizes the importance of personal agency and choice. My co-researchers are examples of working with their spirituality to bring out of their suffering what was good.

The book of Romans holds another passage that speaks even more specifically about the role suffering has in bringing about growth. "We boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy

Spirit, who has been given to us.” (New International Version, 2011, Romans 2:5) This passage suggests that suffering and hope are interconnected, especially in the spirit.

Chittister (2003) elaborated on this connection between suffering, hope, and transformation.

Struggle is a process of pitfalls and challenges, which if met, become hope... If struggle is the process of evolution from spiritual emptiness to spiritual wisdom, hope is a process as well. Hope, the response of the spiritual person to struggle, takes us from the risk of inner stagnation, or emotional despair, to a total transformation of life. Every stage of the process of struggle is a call to move from spiritual torpor to spiritual vitality. It is an invitation to live at an antipodal depth of soul, a higher level of meaning than the ordinary, the commonplace generally inspires...The spiritual task of life is to feed the hope that comes out of despair. Hope is not something to be found outside of us. It lies in the spiritual life we cultivate within. (Chittister, 2003, p.97-103)

A Balance between Suffering and Support Creates the Conditions for Growth.

In my co-researchers, suffering and support were opposing sides of a seesaw, when it came to their growth. Suffering was necessary to drive their exploration, and growth, while support was necessary to prevent the suffering from becoming overwhelming. Consciously or unconsciously, they knew of this balance. Ed expressed an awareness of the role of struggle in his growth.

There were many times where I felt like I didn't have enough support...I think that in the long run was helpful because I think that if there is too many supports then we actually don't suffer enough. And we need to suffer in order to get sick of it...

Because ultimately, it is our journey. Right and if we had too much external support then we might lose that idea because ultimately, we have to do the work, we have to do the reading, the reflection, the meditation, whatever it may be.

My co-researchers chose to obtain support that lessened their suffering, which made it constructive and beneficial instead of becoming stuck and bitter. Support from others lessened their suffering. Additionally, they sought challenge through new courses, books, or opportunities. For my co-researchers, there appeared to be a balancing effect between support and suffering. If either were too high, their growth stagnated. Like a workout, the suffering needs to be just hard enough to lead to growth, but not so hard that it debilitates.

Several survivors wondered how one could cope with a tragedy like murder without spirituality... Whereas for some participants spirituality acted as a buffer providing solace and support from the beginning, for most participants the support came only after they had gone through the dark-night of the soul,” (St John of the Cross, 1959) part of which was the experience of the total absence of the god who had seen them through many difficult moments earlier in their lives and rage and anger against God who could permit such a tragedy. However, beneath such disillusionment, rage, and horror, there was in these survivors a bedrock of faith that the tragedy shook but could not destroy. (Parapully *et al.*, 2002, p. 53)

The Process of Existential Questioning. The process of deeply questioning existential issues was fundamental to my co-researchers’ growth. Traumatic events and the struggle to cope with them can lead to significant changes in life priorities, an increased potential to appreciate life, and an increased embrace of spiritual and religious

issues (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2000; Chittister, 2003). Existential questioning involves looking at spiritual issues, and existential concepts like suffering, ethics, morality and meaning. Questions such as “How can a loving God allow suffering?” and “What is my purpose in this life?” One thought about how spiritual growth develops after a trauma is through engagement with existential questions surrounding life, death and purpose (Montgomery, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). Deeper engagement with questions of mortality caused by an increased threat of dying, such as moving from stage 3 cancer to stage 4, may help posttraumatic growth to blossom (Montgomery, 2008). Strength through suffering and existential re-evaluation have been identified as key factors in posttraumatic growth (Janoff-Bulman, 2004).

Existential questioning is also common after the loss of a loved one (Bonanno, 2009). Bereavement leads individuals to grapple with existential questions, regarding mortality, purpose, and supernatural experiences, such as seeing, hearing, or feeling the presence of deceased loved ones (Bonanno, 2009, Calhoun *et al.*, 2010, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). All of my co-researchers had bereavement as part of their experience after trauma, which influenced their growth pattern. Struggling with existential questions, spiritual doubt, purpose, and life priorities often arise out of trauma and may paradoxically lead to deeper faith (Cordova *et al.*, 2001; Montgomery, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013).

Existential questioning is similar to the processes of rumination described by Tedeschi and Colleagues (2018). “Deliberate rumination occurs when an individual is trying to understand why or how the event happened and engages in conscious, sometimes effortful, cognitive work to do so.” (Tedeschi *et al.*, 2018, p. 48) For my co-

researchers, this process of deliberate rumination was far more spiritual. My co-researchers asked themselves about their purpose of life, and how they wanted to spend their limited time on earth. They questioned whether it was permissible to be angry with God, where their loved one went, and whether it was morally acceptable to end your own life. They explored the purpose of suffering, the reason for death, and why a loving God would allow suffering. To further their exploration of these questions, my co-researchers sought conversations with spiritual and/or religious leaders, participated in therapy, read books, took classes, or attended seminars. These choices expanded their knowledge base and allowed them to further their thought process. Ultimately, through existential questioning, they found purpose.

My co-researchers found the intentions and values they wanted to guide their lives. They found who they wanted to be in their personal and professional lives and adjusted their behaviour accordingly. They made choices that contributed to their sense of purpose and how they wanted to live their life. Out of the suffering and pain of the trauma comes existential questions. The choice to engage in this challenging exploration, led to meaning for all of my co-researchers. Consequently, the first step in their growth process was the choice to explore their existential questions. Existential questioning led to acceptance, development of new beliefs, new understanding of others, new perspectives, and finding additional support.

Existential questioning allows spiritual lessons to be obtained from adversity. In 2020, Burns found that “adversity awakens people to the value of weakness and its role in spiritual growth.” (Burns, 2020, p 262) “God often uses trying times to take his disciples to new levels of growth they would not go to on their own...Learning how to lean into

weakness is a crucial component in the deepening spiritual journey.” (Burns 2020, p. 269 - 271) Burns (2020) continues in an explanation of how this deepening occurs:

Through crises, patterns of self-reliance fail and are exposed, awakening believers to the limits and fallenness of human life in such a way that they gain a greater appreciation for the role weakness plays in catalyzing dependence on God in everyday life leading to deeper spiritual maturity (Burns, 2020, p. 262).

My co-researchers also identified the role of weakness, I called this ‘emotional vulnerability’, in their growth process, particularly in the posttraumatic growth domains of relationships with others, personal strength, and spiritual and existential change. Alex described her process of choosing emotional vulnerability: *“It is in and for me it is becoming more and more softer with myself, becoming more at peace. Becoming more in my heart. And it is constant work; it is not like it happens on its own.”* My co-researchers’ journey of growth after trauma awakened them to the purpose of being emotionally vulnerable. Whether it is termed adversity or trauma, weakness or emotional vulnerability, there is a role of embracing one’s humanity in the face of uncontrolled events.

Openness and the Process of Acceptance. One concept important to the conceptualization of spirituality was openness. Lancaster and Palframan (2008) found that when their participants were open to the influence of others as well as their own relationship with a higher power, they were more able to accept their situation and undergo self-transformation (Lancaster & Palframan, 2008). Lancaster and Palframan (2008) theorized that “openness enables acceptance.” (p. 1) This finding relates to my

finding of the importance of acceptance in my co-researchers' growth process. I also found with my co-researchers that being open was essential to the acceptance of support from multiple sources, including spiritual sources.

Burns (2020) also identified openness as an essential aspect of spiritual growth. Particularly the openness to engage “tension as a catalyst of growth, in accepting and extending grace to others, and in partnering with God” (Burns, 2020, p. 262) His themes of openness are incredibly similar to some of my themes of posttraumatic growth. Existential questioning is the process of engaging with a difficult topic and the tension it might give. Accepting and extending grace to others is the same as my theme, acceptance of others. And partnering with God is similar to accepting spiritual support.

One major thing, I noticed reading these articles is that despite using different language and terminology, our findings were similar. This similarity suggests that my co-researchers' experience of growth after trauma is related to spiritual transformation. I focused on the acceptance part of the interaction in my research, Burns (2020) and Lancaster and Palframan (2008) focused on openness. Whether it is called openness or acceptance, there is a transformative effect to being open and accepting.

Acceptance was an important factor in my co-researchers' growth process. It facilitated other processes, such as accepting support. Openness leads to acceptance. Acceptance leads to recovery and health (Taylor, 2012). Acceptance also involves acknowledging their own limits and understanding what they can control and what they cannot. Acceptance of limitations can lead to knowledge of what can be changed, and what cannot be changed. Acceptance or surrender is important in Christian spirituality. Christ's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane is a key example of this. Acceptance

particularly the religious conceptualization of surrender is saying yes to God. Acceptance is a key concept within spirituality, for it brings an element of peace.

Openness needs to allow for acceptance of support, change, self, spirit, and world in order to influence growth or transformation, which are vital to spiritual transformation. “Letting go (i.e., acceptance of the situation) was evident from all participants as being an important action orientation towards transformation.” (Lancaster & Palframan, 2008, p. 1) Lancaster and Palframan (2008) did find that openness led to acceptance but chose to emphasize openness rather than acceptance. Both openness and acceptance appear important to growth, but acceptance might be more important to trauma recovery and growth. Lancaster and Palframan (2008) did not exclusively study people with traumas, but rather people experiencing a combination of traumas and difficult life situations, which could be a differentiating factor in their findings. People who have experienced trauma might need more acceptance in order to grow. Acceptance is a valuable tool against the shame and blame often associated with traumas. With acceptance from others, Diane began to accept herself and let go of the shame and blame related to her sister’s suicide. Openness may be a valuable tool in spiritual growth, but, arguably, the essential factor for post-traumatic growth is that openness leads to acceptance.

Meaning Making and the Process of Applying and Integrating Purpose into Daily Life. Meaning making influences growth after trauma through deliberate rumination or cognitive processing and meaning making (Park and Ai, 2006).

“Meaning making in the form of positive reappraisal led to increases in perceived growth and life meaning... Meaning making often involves spiritual methods. For example, survivors may try to reappraise their illness as an opportunity for

spiritual growth or come to see God's purpose in it. They may also actively question whether God has control in their lives or even whether God exists, often termed "negative religious coping" (Cummings & Pargament, 2010) ... Meanings made can be changes in spiritual appraisals of one's illness, such as seeing it as an opportunity to grow closer to God or to become more compassionate and patient." (Park, 2013, p.43-44)

Park (2013) found that meaning making involved shifts in belief or identity that are realistic and integrate their experience. Finding, accepting, and subsequently making meaning of my co-researchers' experience was essential in the process of growth after trauma and was greatly assisted by their spirituality. This process has been echoed by other PTG researchers: "Finding meaning was facilitated by their spirituality and religious beliefs, by seeing tragedy as part of the human condition, by their beliefs that every event has a purpose, and by reaching out in compassion." (Parapully *et al.*, 2002, p 46)

This spiritual theme is eloquently described by Frankl:

"If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete. The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity - even under the most difficult circumstances - to add a deeper meaning to his life... It is this spiritual freedom - which cannot be taken away - that makes life meaningful and purposeful." (Frankl, 1967, p. 67)

Frankl (1967) made a beautiful connection among meaning, suffering and purpose. A significant part of my co-researcher's growth process involved finding and applying meaning in their life. Having a sense of purpose inspired my co-researchers' behaviours that brought them closer to their purpose. My co-researchers let unhelpful beliefs go, chose vulnerability in their relationships, and pursued new activities in order to embody the person, partner, or parent they wanted to be. As they enacted their purpose, it became more robust, deeper, and stronger. This strong foundation of their purpose led to further growth.

This section covered the connection between the spiritual themes of suffering, openness and meaning making with their associated, growth-related actions. This is not an exhaustive list of spiritual themes associated with growth, nor the actions that aid the process. In the future, it would be valuable for researchers to consider additional themes, such as transcendence, gifts, or connectedness. These spiritual themes were tied together by facilitating processes.

Facilitating processes

As I analyzed my co-researchers' process of growth, I noticed the fundamental roles of active choice and continuous, cyclical application. This section covers the fundamental processes of active choice and the continuous nature of the cycle of growth.

Active Choice. Choice is the ultimate process that connects each theme to its associated action and eventual growth. My co-researchers made choices to engage, integrate, and explore. They did not make one overarching choice, rather they made a combination of many small everyday choices. Choice is a fundamental aspect in every

single part of the growth process. All my co-researchers made one significant choice: to accept help from others. They received help from professionals, loved ones, and their community. My co-researchers made choices to go to therapy, to communicate their needs, present what they have learned to groups, or to share their dreams with their loved ones. They made choices in the midst of suffering. They risked finding answers they did not want and losing long-held beliefs. My co-researchers did not expect their choices would lead to growth, rather they risked further suffering in hopes that good might come, but they were aware that if suffering came instead, they would have the strength to face it. Personal choice was a significant theme in the study on spirituality by Geertsma and Cummings (2004): “It wasn’t something out there doing something to me; it was me making a choice. (p.30) This perspective is consistent with my findings. Although my co-researchers did not explicitly use the word choice, I observed the conscious application of their purpose in a way that indicated a choice they had internally made. Ultimately, they made choices they thought would lead them to the life they wanted to live.

In his research of growth after adversity, Burns (2020) noticed his participants actively chose to develop an awareness of self, a trust in God, and apply their new beliefs in their daily lives:

Having experienced the extent of one’s blindness and the growth that came through pain, the interviewees could see no other pathway to growth except through an uncomfortable confrontation with weakness. They now actively challenge these tendencies by leaning into the ordinary moments of tension that arise. Examples included confessing sins, living with allergies or health issues, computer troubles, being vulnerable with someone, the small daily challenges of

married life or parenting, the challenges of singleness, the need to set boundaries, and various cross-cultural experiences where one feels a loss of control. Walking in weakness is living in awareness of the ways one hides and covers, attentive to the moments when one is tempted to self-sufficiency and responding by choosing weakness before God in small and simple ways. (Burns, 2020, p. 283- 284)

There are a few important things I take from Burns' (2020) research: Burn's participants confronted their own weakness, willingly embraced challenges in their lives and applied their changes in small ways in their daily lives. The importance of the role of choice was also present in grief work. "But there is a choice that we have the opportunity to make and remake, a choice that enables us to move appropriately and at our own pace through the active grieving process and achieve a life affirming outcome." (Neeld, 2003, p. 42) Neeld (2003) recommended using choice to apply meaning and purpose in our lives after a significant loss, which is exactly what my co-researchers did.

Frankl (1967) suggests that one may not be able to choose what is happening to them, but one can choose how they respond to that circumstance. Frankl (1967) "Man's Search for Meaning" is about one of the greatest atrocities to ever occur; none of the prisoners in the concentration camp chose to be there, but they chose how they felt about it and responded to it. My co-researchers had very different situations with considerably more freedoms, but the essence of their choice remained the same. My co-researchers could not choose to bring their loved one back, stop the car from crashing, or stop the avalanche. They could choose how they responded after the event happened. They could choose what meaning they allowed it to have in their lives, and they chose what types of people they wanted to become as a result.

Continuous, Cyclical Application. The domains of posttraumatic growth do not operate independently of each other, instead they interact and build upon each other. For example, increased personal strength allowed my co-researchers to explore new possibilities that may have been previously overlooked. Another example is that having increased appreciation of life allowed my co-researchers to appreciate their relationships more, which, in turn, improved them. Ultimately, my co-researchers' growth was a cyclical process of suffering, existential questioning, support, acceptance, and meaning making. All aspects related to one another and contributed to growth in another area. The growth process of my co-researchers was continuous, and ongoing. When referring to her growth experience, Becca stated "*this has been a journey probably in action for at least 10 years.*" This cycle of growth led them to become the beautiful people they are now and continue to grow into.

The cycle of growth included suffering, existential questioning, support, meaning making, and acceptance. Each aspect built on and strengthened growth in other areas. The choice to engage in very strenuous and complicated aspects of spiritual, moral, and self-exploration was essential to the process of existential questioning. For example, the existential question "what do I want my life to be?" led to exploring new possibilities, accepting when they needed help, learning new skills, finding a new career, and, eventually, experiencing a greater sense of purpose. In the course of their growth journey, my co-researchers encountered obstacles, and having the courage, creativity, and strategies to overcome those obstacles enabled them to go through the cycle of growth multiple times.

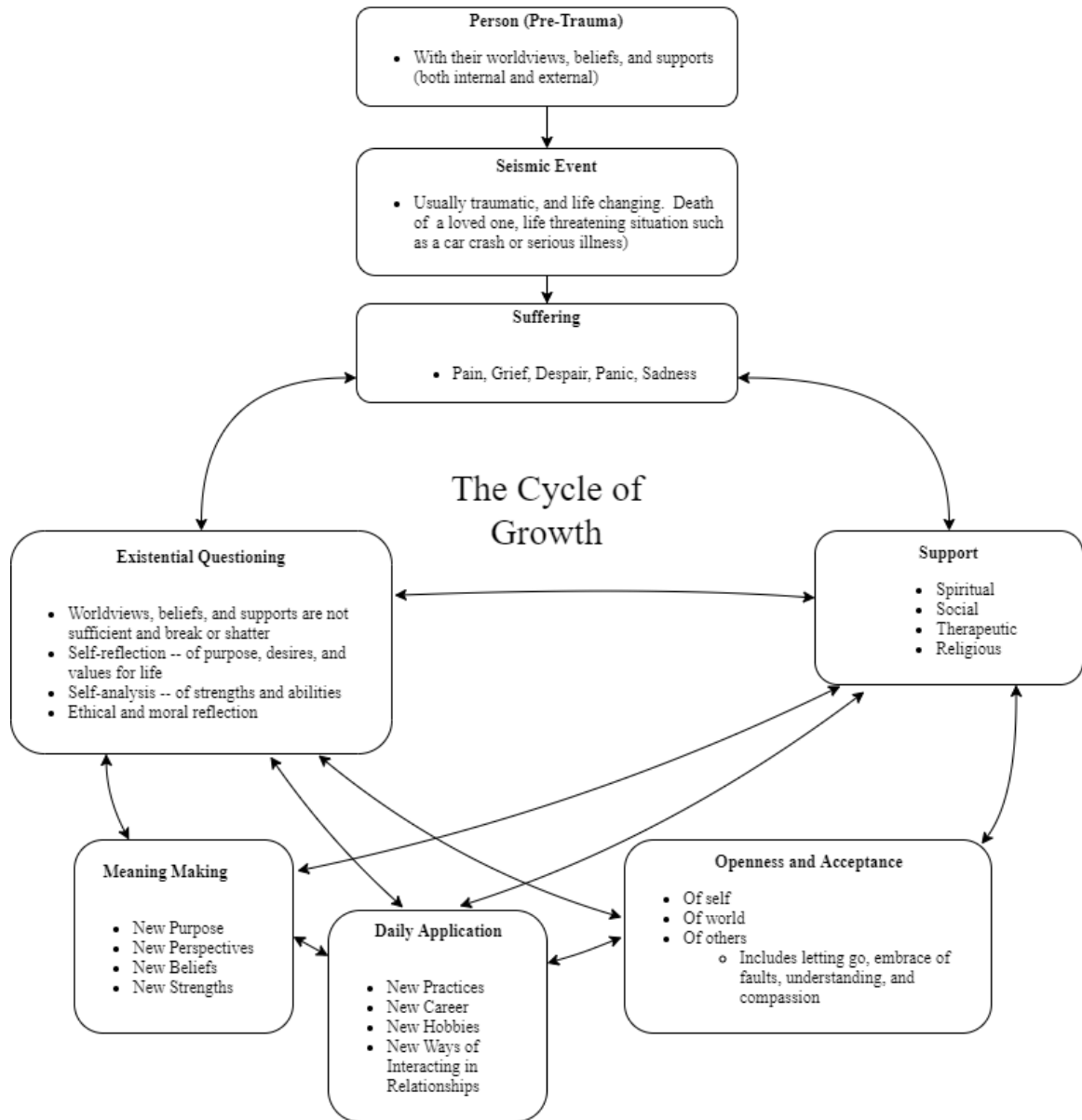
In the following section, I will present my interpretation of my co-researchers' journey of growing after trauma.

My Diagram

The process of growth starts with the person that existed before their trauma, including their beliefs, worldviews, and supports both internal (personal, emotional, spiritual) and external (friends, therapy, community, religion) that helped their existence before their trauma. The person then goes through a seismic event, usually traumatic, definitely life-changing, which leads to suffering. Sometimes the person's existing worldviews, beliefs, and supports are sufficient, and the person heals and returns to the person they were before the trauma. Sometimes the worldviews, beliefs, and supports are insufficient, the person continues to suffer for many years with a psychological disorder (PTSD, major depression, generalized anxiety etc.) (Van Ameringen *et al.*, 2008). However, sometimes suffering leads to growth.

The cycle of growth starts with suffering, but then continues to existential questioning, support, openness, and acceptance, meaning making and daily application. Each component is essential to growth, but each person takes a unique journey through the cycle. Every double-sided arrow within the cycle of growth represents a choice. The arrow to experience a seismic event, or to start suffering is not a choice. But within the cycle of growth a person chooses which direction to take. They can choose to obtain support, explore their existential questions, be open and accepting, or find meaning and apply it.

Figure 1.
The Process of Growth after Trauma



One item to note is that a person’s spirituality is part of every aspect of the growth cycle. Spirituality is fundamental to existential questioning, meaning making, and openness. It also has strong roots in support, acceptance, and daily application. Growth is not a passive process, my co-researchers worked hard to obtain it. It was a long complex

process, involving a thousand steps. All of my co-researchers described their growth journey as ongoing and continuous potentially all of their lives.

Summary

After doing the analysis on my co-researchers' interviews, I noticed that their experiences were remarkably similar to the domains of posttraumatic growth described by Tedeschi, Calhoun and other researchers. I also noticed that their process was different from the process of growth described by Tedeschi and Colleagues (2018). My co-researchers were describing their spirituality as being very personal, connected to religion, but just as Parapully's (2002) co-researchers described, their spirituality was separate from their religion, and that difference was very important. Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffey (2015) derived a definition of spirituality from human experience. In the posttraumatic growth literature spirituality was so connected to religion, but my co-researcher's descriptions did not fit this understanding. By comparing the Weathers, McCarthy, and Coffee (2015) definition to the domains of posttraumatic growth I gained a greater understanding of how spirituality affected my co-researchers' growth. My co-researchers' process of growth differed from current models of growth in three main ways; first their individual spirituality was integral in every stage of their growth process, second their growth was a continuous cyclical process, and thirdly their growth was based on active choice.

My co-researchers' individual spirituality was essential in all parts of their growth process. They explored their spirituality, and sought to deepen it by going to ashrams, experiencing life, or taking courses. Two co-researchers went on specific journeys to India and South America in order to explore their spirituality. More locally, all co-

researchers talked to ministers, spiritual leaders, and faithful friends. They read books on spiritual matters. But despite these outward measures a lot of it was self-analysis, they looked at their own beliefs and questioned them. Spirituality was not its own domain. It was part of every stage. Secondly, my co-researchers had a continuous process that built on itself. Each domain built upon another. Growth in one domain led to growth in another. The domains became an integral part of the process of growth for my co-researchers. Thirdly, my co-researchers actively chose to better themselves. They did not directly choose to grow. Instead, they chose to heal, to explore, to search, and to be vulnerable. They chose to apply new knowledge and philosophy in ways that led to their posttraumatic growth.

There are three main conclusions from this discussion. The first is that spirituality is fundamental to the process of growth, particularly the themes of existential questioning, meaning making, and openness. Spirituality also has strong roots in support, acceptance, and daily application. The second is that growth is a continuous, cyclical process that builds upon itself. The third is that active participation and the choice to better oneself is essential to the process of growth. These three aspects are ultimately what I found to be foundational characteristics and facilitators of my co-researchers' posttraumatic growth.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In this chapter, I will summarize the findings and discussion of this research. Then, I will give a brief statement of how the research has affected me and how it might influence my future practice as a psychotherapist. Additionally, I will discuss areas of potential future research and implications my research might have on research into posttraumatic growth. I will also discuss the implications my research may have on psychotherapeutic practice.

My research has added another voice to the growing number of researchers who claim spirituality has a significant role in posttraumatic growth (Burns, 2020; Khursheed & Shahnawaz, 2020; Krause & Pargament, 2018; Tedeschi *et al.*, 2017; Zarzycka & Zietek, 2018). Specifically, it emphasizes the importance of spirituality in the process of posttraumatic growth and indicates that future research should emphasize spirituality more.

Summary of Findings

After analyzing my co-researchers' experiences of growth, I divided their experience into two major categories: the picture of growth, and the process of growth. The picture of growth described the characteristics of posttraumatic growth that my co-researchers embodied in their interviews. Their characteristics of growth are similar to the domains of posttraumatic growth that Tedeschi and colleagues discuss in their 2018 book: personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities, appreciation of life, and spiritual and existential change. My research indicated that personal strength contained the themes of overcoming challenges, courage, empathetic strength, and increased coping ability. Relating to others involved emotional awareness, mindfulness, and vulnerability

in relationships. New possibilities included the theme fulfilling purpose through career. Appreciation of life included the themes change in priorities and presence. The final domain, spiritual and existential change includes the themes of mental health stigma, religion and God, and trauma as a teacher. The similarity between my co-researchers' experiences and the domains described by Tedeschi and colleagues (2018) gave me confidence that their experiences were posttraumatic growth and grew my understanding of the way posttraumatic growth manifests in human experience.

The process of growth describes how my co-researchers grew after their trauma. This section has five themes: growth is a journey, growth is a series of choices, growth through existential questioning, growth through support, and growth through acceptance. 'Growth is a continuous journey' described the ongoing cyclical process of my co-researchers' growth. 'Growth is a series of choices' described the importance of active involvement in their growth journey. They chose to let go, to accept, to embrace, and how to act in their relationships. 'Growth through existential questioning' described how they grew through questioning their experience. They questioned the role of suffering, the purpose of life, the meaning in their experience, the issues of morality, and the finality of death. They asked themselves and others these questions and gained deeper insights and wisdoms along the way. 'Growth through support' described the essential role support has in the process of growth. My co-researchers all had different forms of support, including therapy, family, and friends. Shared experience was important in my co-researchers' feeling of genuine support from their family and friends. My co-researchers developed an implicit empathy to others with similar experiences in their growth and recovery. My co-researchers' personal spirituality was another significant source of

support. They found guidance, strength, and insights from spiritual sources, including continuing bonds with deceased loved ones. “Growth through acceptance” described the importance of my co-researchers’ acceptance of their strengths, their weaknesses, their traumatic event, and the faults of other people.

There are three main things that come out of this deep exploration into my co-researcher’s experience. First, spirituality is essential to every domain of my co-researchers' growth. Their spirituality had elements that were based in religion but were far more personal and incorporated elements from many religions. At this point, I realized that the definition of spirituality used in posttraumatic growth was inadequate and went in search of one in accordance with my co-researchers’ descriptions. Weathers, McCarthy and Coffee (2015) reviewed a number of studies in the area of nursing and derived a definition of spirituality based on common themes, which they illustrated with excerpts from qualitative studies. Their definition of spirituality contains the concepts of meaning in life, connectedness, and transcendence. This definition of spirituality changed my understanding of what spirituality was in the context of posttraumatic growth. It highlighted the personal nature of my co-researchers’ spirituality and the importance of the intimate effect spirituality had on their growth journey. Their spirituality integrated in every part of their growth because it was intimately connected to who they were as people.

In my discussion, I focused on three spiritual themes and the role they play in the process of posttraumatic growth: suffering, openness, and meaning making. The spiritual theme of suffering is directly connected to the process of existential questioning. When their suffering led to existential questioning, my co-researchers found their purpose,

understood their beliefs more deeply, and increased awareness of their own limits. This process of existential questioning can use a person's relationship with God or the Holy Spirit to identify their life's one's purpose. While suffering can be helpful for growth, it can also overwhelm and become detrimental (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). My co-researchers accepted support from multiple sources, including spiritual sources including an ashram, a pastor, or spiritual group. The combination of suffering and support really helped my co-researchers grow. Support is a protective factor to the detrimental effects of trauma (Park & Ai, 2006). A person needs to suffer just enough to initiate existential questioning, and support helps to mitigate that suffering so that it stays within a healthy level. Just as too much suffering can be detrimental to growth, so can too much support. Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) workout metaphor describes the importance of having the right level of suffering in the growth process. My co-researcher Ed described this best when he said, *"I think that if there's too many supports then we actually don't suffer enough. And we need to suffer in order to get sick of it."*

The next spiritual theme discussed was openness. Openness is connected to the process of acceptance, and enables people to undergo self-transformation (Burns, 2020; Lancaster & Palframan, 2008). For my co-researchers, openness led to acceptance, which assisted both their recovery and growth. Meaning making is the last spiritual theme in the discussion. Meaning making is especially important to growth, because it is the understanding and application of one's life purpose. Through meaning making, purpose can be applied and integrated into daily life, it becomes a strong foundation for belief, purpose, and function (Park & Ai, 2006). My co-researchers applied their purpose,

meaning, and intention in small and large ways daily. This continuous application continuously builds and grows meaning until it has a strong, concrete reality.

This research has also highlighted elements that seem to connect and support the spiritual themes. The first one is active choice. Active choice does not mean they specifically chose to grow. My co-researchers chose to explore existential questioning, to embody and live out the meaning and purpose they saw in their suffering in their daily life, to find support when suffering was becoming too much, to be open to new experiences, and to accept help from others. There are so many choices they made, and so many actions that followed. Each choice and action became part of this beautiful tapestry of growth that they were weaving for themselves. The second process was the continuous, cyclical process. No theme or domain existed on its own; they all built upon, connected, and supported growth in other areas.

At the end of the discussion, I presented my diagram for the cycle of growth. The diagram highlights the spiritual themes of suffering, openness, and meaning making as well as their associated processes, existential questioning, support, application in life, and acceptance. This is a visual representation of the process of growth my co-researchers went through in their experience of growth after trauma.

Personal Statement

My thesis journey has affected my life on both a personal and professional level.

This research has affected my personal life in many ways. One of the most salient examples of the positive effect this research had on my life is my transition to motherhood. Being reminded of my co-researchers' strength and coping capacity gave

me the strength to face motherhood better. I reached out for support, such as joining a new mother's group, and accepting help from my mother. I followed my co-researchers lead in adapting to the change, using choice. I took risks I may not have otherwise, such as asking fellow mothers out for coffee, so I might make mom friends. I took the time to appreciate the precious life I was witnessing before me. I remembered my co-researchers' experience, how they took the time to pause and embody the mom they wanted it to be and did my best to apply their found wisdom when motherhood became challenging. I would remind myself that I could choose to behave like the compassionate, understanding mom I wanted to be, and often that was enough to change my mentality. When I was frustrated, I remembered Becca and Alex's experience, took a pause, and then reacted in a more intentional way. I also increased my self-compassion and understanding, I judged myself less for bad days and appreciated my good days more. There are many examples of how my co-researchers' experience and other wisdom from this research inspired beneficial action in my life, but my transition to motherhood was most affected by their wisdom.

This research also highlighted important aspects of psychotherapeutic practice that I will apply in my future interactions with clients. My co-researchers valued therapeutic interactions that helped them feel safe and validated. They really valued having that safe space to recover, grow, question, and learn. This research also showed me the importance of personal spirituality. In my future interactions with clients, I will aim to create a safe space for them to explore their beliefs, meaning and sense of purpose. I will be careful to not inflict my own spiritual views on them. I will allow them to

discuss those existential matters, to be a sounding board for their questions, and to create a place where they can be open and hopefully find acceptance.

For my own self-care as a psychotherapist, I will be mindful of my purpose, limits, and strengths. I will embrace the essential function of choice and continuous process in growth. I will remember that I have a choice in how I feel and how I respond to suffering. I will remember to let go of the things that are not helpful and are unlikely to help me become a better therapist. I will also allow myself to be changed by and learn from the suffering I witness in my clients. I will remember the importance of having meaning, intention, and purpose. I will reach out for support when needed, either through my own therapist, or trusted co-worker. Predominantly, this research has highlighted the importance of having purpose, support and personal spirituality when coping with traumatic circumstances.

Implications

The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of posttraumatic growth, which can aid researchers, clients, and practitioners. Spirituality was a fundamental part of my co-researchers' experience of growth after trauma. Spirituality can be integrated into psychotherapy for client recovery and practitioner self-care.

Future Research

When I started my thesis journey, the importance of spirituality in the process of posttraumatic growth seemed like a relatively untapped area of study. In the years it took to complete my thesis, other researchers had similar questions. In a paper published only

last year, Khursheed and Shahnawaz (2020) looked into the connections among trauma, spirituality, self-compassion, and posttraumatic growth in 80 parents of murdered children. They found that spirituality and self-compassion were instrumental in the process of posttraumatic growth (Khursheed & Shahnawaz, 2020). This paper is in line with the findings of my research, but they looked at the connection between posttraumatic growth and spirituality from a more quantitative perspective.

Other researchers have mentioned the need for a greater presence of spirituality in general healthcare. Askar and Magyar-Russell (2009) confirmed that spiritual or religious beliefs played an important role in recovery and found that survivors wished for more comfortable spiritual and/or religious discussion with their healthcare providers. Additional research should explore ways patients can have comfortable spiritual or religious discussion within their healthcare team. More specifically, research into techniques general healthcare providers can use to open the possibility of spiritual discussion with patients is needed. Additionally, there is room for more research into techniques specially trained practitioners, such as spiritual care practitioners, can use to deepen spiritual conversations. That would allow the spiritual care practitioner or client to better communicate those needs back to other members of the healthcare team.

There were several possible limitations to my study in regard to self-selection of the co-researchers. All five people who agreed to participate in the study knew that my degree was a masters of psychotherapy and spirituality and this could have biased their participation. Christiansen, Iverson, Ambrosi, and Elklit (2015) examined the self-growth bias in posttraumatic growth research and found that if the person only reports positive growth that growth is likely to be an illusion, whereas if the person reported both

negative and positive aspects, the growth was real. My co-researchers' focused on positive aspects, but included negative components also, indicating their growth is likely real.

All of my co-researchers experienced traumas with associated bereavement. As a consequence, the processes of bereavement would have affected their growth journey. Considering that a great number of traumas have a bereavement component to them this confounding variable is not problematic to my research. Future researchers could compare the process of growth after a trauma between people with and without bereavement. The possible impact bereavement has on the process of existential questioning would be especially interesting to study. For example, researchers could look into a possible difference in the role of existential questioning in those who lost a loved one in a car accident versus those who survived a car accident themselves.

Researchers may want to explore alternative triggers for the cycle of growth. For example, inquiring into the effect life changing positive events could have in triggering the growth process (Mangelsdorf, Eid, & Lehmann, 2018). My research led me to wonder whether vicarious trauma acts as a potential trigger for the cycle of growth, which could be a promising area for further research.

Additional research could look into the role specific spiritual themes have on growth. Acceptance, openness, suffering, meaning, existential questioning, transcendence, gifts, compassion, and connectedness are all spiritual themes that deserve more attention in posttraumatic growth research (Chittister, 2003; Park & Ai, 2006; Weathers, McCarthy & Coffey, 2015; Pargament, 2007, Lancaster & Palframan, 2008;

Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019). Cornett (1998) identified six fundamental existential questions that could be addressed in therapy:

(a) What is my meaning in life? b) What are the values that help me make decisions about the conduct and trajectory of my life? (c) Is death the meaning of life or is it simply the completion of it? (d) How do I understand the universe to be organized (cosmology)? (e) How do I make sense of suffering in the world? and (f) What do I believe happens after death?" (as cited in Geerstma and Cummings, 2004, p. 28-29)

There is a need for more research on the role these existential questions play in deepening or supporting the existential questioning process of posttraumatic growth. My findings include the themes of "empathetic strength" and "trauma as a teacher" which connect posttraumatic growth to compassion and spiritual wisdom, Infurna and Jayawickreme (2019) also noticed the connection between posttraumatic growth, compassion, and spiritual wisdom, and recommend that researchers explore the possibility of these traits contributing to the process of growth. Such research could lead practitioners to possible spiritual interventions to follow that would aid clients in their growth journeys. More studies need to be done to solidify and explore this link between spirituality and posttraumatic growth. Particularly, how spirituality aids generally in the process of posttraumatic growth, what specific spiritual themes are important to growth, and which aspects of spirituality can be supported by practitioners.

Psychotherapeutic Practice

The potential to use spirituality in psychotherapeutic practice is highlighted by my research. Spirituality has useful applications in the context of psychotherapy for the clients and the practitioner.

For the Client. Clients can greatly benefit from the inclusion and acceptance of spirituality in therapy. Psychotherapists can help clients explore their spirituality, paying particular focus on sources of spiritual support and strength. Acknowledging this for a therapist is an important step to potentially helping someone grow after trauma.

In order to work successfully with clients who have experienced a trauma and have the potential for posttraumatic growth, therapists need to be aware of the emotional and ethical responsibilities of this difficult situation. Tedeschi, Calhoun and Groleau (2014) recommend “clinicians broaden their clinical perspectives so that elements of posttraumatic growth, and the possibility of helping clients further develop it, are part of the general clinical perspective they employ.” (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Groleau, 2014, p. 510) “The empirical evidence indicates that posttraumatic growth is common but certainly not universal, and as clinicians, we should never have the expectation that every survivor will experience growth, or that it is a necessary outcome for trauma recovery.” (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Groleau, 2014, p. 506) They recommend clinicians listen for themes of posttraumatic growth, help the client to be aware of the themes present in their life, and encourage growth along these themes. However, they caution against discussing that suffering can lead to growth, especially if the trauma is recent or particularly painful, because it can be harmful (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Groleau, 2014). Most importantly,

clinicians should focus on empathy and helping the client cope effectively with their suffering (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Groleau, 2014; Joseph, 2015).

Part of helping a client recover and grow after trauma is to help them accept and find support in their spirituality. Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Groleau (2014) recommend three aspects to understanding the client's perspective regarding their trauma experience and potential growth: use the language the client uses, respect and be comfortable working with existential or spiritual matters and have tolerance for beliefs and illusions the clients may have that are psychologically beneficial and reduce harm. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) recommend using probes such as “to what extent do you see yourself as a spiritual or religious person?” or “to what extent has what you have been through led you to think about spiritual or religious matters?” to start conversations about spiritual, religious, or existential matters while remaining open to the possibility that they may not wish to speak of it (p. 127). This advice is helpful to psychotherapists, because it grounds the complicated relationship between spirituality and posttraumatic growth in a way that is easily applicable in aiding clients in a therapeutic setting.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) offer advice to practitioners about how to use their findings to aid people struggling with the aftermath of trauma. They recommend practitioners are open and honest about their ignorance to the specific spiritual/religious beliefs of their clients and ask their clients for help in understanding their beliefs. They suggest that an “expert companion” can provide support to spiritual, existential, and religious matters without expert knowledge in the specific traditions. For the purposes of therapy, the client’s beliefs, practices, and traditions that are important to them matter most. If the practitioner feels specific knowledge would be beneficial, Tedeschi and

Calhoun recommend reaching out to a local leader. They caution generalizing beliefs, because even churches of the same denomination can have different communities and priorities, making the experience of faith different between similar churches. The focus should always be on the client's experience and beliefs. They warn that clinicians should never abandon a client with which they have an established relationship because of differing beliefs. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) stated the willingness of the practitioner to learn about the client's beliefs and practices can build trust and mutual respect.

One of the hardest aspects of existential questioning for clients is the uncertainty, ambiguity and cognitive dissonance of beliefs that can occur. For example, believing God to be benevolent, but wondering why a benevolent God would allow suffering. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2013) recommend that practitioners help clients "tolerate the ambiguity for the time being and continue in the process" (p. 128) Practitioners need to allow for some distress but ensure that it is tolerable and a level the client can handle. Overwhelming suffering does not lead to growth, only pain, while suffering, at a level the client can cope with, is necessary for growth. "To help a client grow in the aftermath of tragedy, the clinician must help the client confront the ultimate and difficult questions about life. Paradoxically, the expert companion must also be respectful of the positive illusions that protect the client from extreme distress." (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2013, p. 135) Consequently, helping clients manage their suffering is essential for their healing and possible growth.

When working with clients who have the potential for growth, psychotherapists need to not only support the management of suffering but also the inclusion of it in the

client's narrative. Jenmorri (2006) explored the importance of spirituality in the reconstructing trauma narratives:

In therapy, constructing narratives which include hope, despair, possibility, fear, growth, struggle, and strength is a collaborative process. Developing stories based on strengths, hopes, dreams, references, and new possibilities can be an empowering experience for child and youth survivors. However, such stories may be particularly transformative when they make room for the presence of struggle, fear, and despair and the existential questions that arise in that landscape. (Jenmorri, 2006, p. 47)

The spiritual themes of struggle and hope can drive the existential questions that lead to growth. A psychotherapist can assist a client through the process of existential questioning by helping them integrate meaning and purpose from their traumatic event, reframing the client's perspective from a negative narrative into an empowering experience.

A client's spirituality can be integral in reframing their perspective. Pargament (2007) gave four reasons to "give spirituality a greater voice in psychotherapy" (p. 343). The first reason is that spirituality is part of the human experience. Second, spirituality contributes to both human strength and weakness. Third, a client's spirituality becomes part of their therapeutic journey anyway, so ignoring it does them no good. Fourth, spirituality research has developed to a point in which it can be integrated into psychotherapeutic practice.

Helping clients achieve greater spiritual integration in the course of psychotherapy is not a panacea; it does not lead to a life free of failure, longings,

or pain. It means confronting challenges as best we can, while recognizing our limits as human beings. Attempts to eliminate all suffering, experience all there is to experience, or refuse to see that every choice comes with loss are bound to fail. Integration means a life that is constructed as much around defeat and hurt as attainment and joy. This is certainly not a new idea, but spirituality at its best offers another perspective, a different way of viewing the world. (Pargament, 2007, p.345)

Ultimately, psychotherapists should consider integrating spirituality into their therapeutic interactions with clients. One method psychotherapists can use to integrate and foster spirituality that is religion neutral is through the use of art (Etton, Schultz and Bar-Sela, 2014). They should consider adopting an open inclusive approach that allows the client to be the expert of their own spirituality.

Psychotherapists should consider embracing spiritual exploration as a way to help their clients by providing an open, safe space. Johnson (2013) described the important components of spiritual therapeutic interactions:

The therapist's task is to listen for how client's talk about existential issues of meaning, values, mortality, and sense of self in the world... The goal is to be open to how clients define, experience, and access whatever helps them stay connected to their core values and the inner wisdom of their Real Self. Some clients will experience and access spirituality through traditional methods such as prayer and meditation, while others may connect to personal clarity through a variety of non-traditional ways. It shouldn't matter to therapists how their clients connect with

spirituality. What matters most is whether the spiritual practices are life-affirming and support personal integrity. (Johnson, 2013, p. 19-20)

Therapists should be extra cautious when discussing spirituality, to ensure they do not impose their own beliefs on the client. An open approach that allows the client to be the teacher is recommended to avoid this issue.

Overall, the advice to clinicians is to create an open safe place in which clients can discuss their trauma, integrates spirituality, and allows for the discovery of meaning and purpose that nurtures the possibility of reframing their perspective as an empowering experience,

For the Practitioner. The implications of this research not only apply to how practitioners help clients, but also how they integrate and cope with client's traumatic stories and the vicarious trauma that can result from them.

In their advice to clinicians, Tedeschi, Calhoun, and Groleau (2014) mention the personal transformative effect listening to clients' stories can have: "We learn lessons along with our clients and find that many of our colleagues can also identify this vicarious posttraumatic growth." (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Groleau, 2014, p. 514) They recommend a clinician listens to their client's experience as though the client has something to teach them and be open to the possibility of learning from the client. "Being open to the possibility of being changed oneself, as a result of listening to the story of the trauma and its aftermath, communicates the highest degree of respect for clients, and encourages them to see the value in their own experience." (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Groleau, 2014, p. 511)

A psychotherapist might consider gaining a greater understanding of their own spirituality, what spirituality is, and how to assess and foster spirituality in the clients who come to them after a traumatic experience. Understanding their personal spirituality is important for psychotherapists for multiple reasons including resisting inflicting their beliefs on a client, and a source of self-care and resilience in the face of vicarious trauma. The value of spirituality might be increasingly valuable for psychotherapists who help clients through trauma experiences:

Trauma therapy offers a challenge to the practitioner, prompting us to question our own meaning frameworks... Those who voluntarily engage empathetically with survivors to help them restore the aftermath of psychological trauma open themselves to deep personal transformation. This transformation includes personal growth, a deeper connection with both individuals and human experience, and a greater awareness of all aspects of life.” (Jenmorri, 2006, p. 41-48)

When the psychotherapist is hearing the stories of the client, they can experience vicarious trauma. Therefore, using their own personal spiritual framework may help psychotherapists cope with the vicarious trauma and potentially even experience growth.

In conclusion, by gaining a deeper understanding of my co-researchers' experience of growth after trauma, I learned some of what made them beautiful. Like the beautiful people mentioned in the quote by Elizabeth Kubler Ross (1975), my co-researchers have known loss, struggle, defeat, and suffering, but, during the process of healing, they explored the depths of their beliefs and values. My co-researchers used their spirituality to turn a negative experience into a positive. They found a purpose that

affected their everyday and spiritual lives. My co-researchers also used their own inner spirituality to understand the meaning in their daily lives and apply it to create a better world. They cultivated acceptance of themselves and others. Out of their trauma, they found beauty. My co-researchers cultivated the gardens in their hearts into something phenomenal; this cultivation was active, continuous, and involved a deep concern for both themselves and others. My co-researchers' experience with trauma inspired them to adjust their behaviour and create the world they wanted to live in.

In this research, I examined the question "what is the experience of growth in the aftermath of a traumatic event?" More specifically, I wanted to understand posttraumatic growth, and to explore the possible role spirituality has in the growth process. Ultimately, this research shows that a person's individual spirituality plays a significant role in their experience of growth after trauma. Both psychotherapeutic practitioners and researchers should consider finding ways to help clients cultivate and use their spirituality as a support throughout their healing journey.

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Appendix A: Co-researcher Letter of Invitation

I am asking you to be part of a study I am conducting for my Masters of Psychotherapy and Spirituality at St Stephen's College, Edmonton, Alberta. This letter tells you about the study and what being in this study would involve.

The Research Question

What I mainly want to know is "What is the experience of growth in the aftermath of a traumatic event?" I am interested in significant turning points in the healing journey of people like yourself. I will also ask you about the role that spirituality, faith, and religion may have played for you.

I want to speak with people who have experienced a trauma at least five years ago. For example, a trauma could be a cancer diagnosis, major sudden illness, the sudden death of someone close to you, a major accident or injury, or assault.

I am looking for people who feel that the experience led them to grow as a person, encouraged them to explore new life paths, or has given them an increased appreciation for life.

What will the study involve?

If you agree to be part of this study, you will meet with me for one 90-minute interview. The interview can be longer if needed. In our time together, I will ask you to reflect on moments, events, and interactions that were important for you in your recovery and growth journey. I am interested in any aspect you believe was influential to your growth.

A couple of weeks after the interview, I will send you a written copy of our interview. I will ask you to read it over to ensure that I understood you correctly and to correct any mistakes. Lastly, after I have drawn out the main themes, I will ask for a short meeting with you to see if you feel they are accurate.

During your participation as a co-researcher in this study, I will make every effort to protect your identity, personal wellbeing, and the privacy of the information you give. Your name will not appear in any published work. You can quit the study anytime you wish. If talking about your experience upsets you, I can refer you to a counsellor who will help you. If you are upset or disturbed by any actions of myself, I have given you names of people who will hear your complaint (See Co-researcher Consent Form).

I look forward to hearing from you. Please email at [REDACTED] or phone me at [REDACTED], so I can answer any questions, discuss details and set up a time for our interview. We will go over The Co-researcher Consent Form together when we meet.

Thank you for considering this request,

Victoria Garner

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

Appendix B: Co-researcher Consent Form

This letter explains the purpose of the study and outlines your involvement. Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study.

The Purpose of the Study

This study is part of my thesis requirement for the Masters of Psychotherapy and Spirituality Program at St Stephen's College, Edmonton, Alberta. The main question of the study is: "What is the experience of growth after trauma?" The goal of the study is to gain deeper understanding of the experience of posttraumatic growth, and the role spirituality, religion or faith might play.

The Responsibilities of the Co-researcher

You, as the co-researcher, will:

- Participate in one 90-minute interview, which can be extended if you feel you need more time. This interview will be audio recorded.
- Read over the transcription which will be emailed to you after the interview,
- Clarify and correct mistakes in the transcription
- Participate in a brief final interview after the analysis has been completed, in which you will be invited to offer feedback

Benefits and Risks of Participation

Benefits:

- To reflect, share and explore meaningful experiences from your past
- A possible increased understanding of yourself
- To participate in deepening the academic understanding of a new area of psychological research: posttraumatic growth

Risks:

- Even though my research will focus on the aftermath of the trauma and the recovery process and not the trauma itself, co-researchers may be negatively affected by the questions or remembering the trauma. To mitigate this negative effect, I will be asking for participants whose trauma occurred five or more years ago, as coping and healing often occurs over time. Additionally, I will ask co-researchers if they have access to a therapist whom they trust, or if not, co-researchers will be directed to a counselling agency that can help should any negative effects arise during or after the interviews.

Anonymity, Confidentiality and Privacy

- To protect your anonymity, you and I will choose an alternate name for you, which I will use in all written material, including the transcription, all notes, and the final thesis.

- For confidentiality and privacy, only I will have access to the audio files
- All documents that contain your real name will be stored in a locked cabinet
- All data and audio files will be stored on a password protected computer
- I will be assisted in the writing of this thesis by my thesis supervisor, Leslie Gardner, PhD, who will also be held to high standards of confidentiality
- All documents including notes will be destroyed 3 years after the completion of my thesis.

Complaints Process

- If you are upset by any of my actions over the course of this study and believe a formal complaint is warranted, then you may contact the MPS program chair, Ara Parker at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. If further action is warranted, the matter may be considered by St Stephen's college Research Ethics Committee.

Additional Information

- You, the co-researcher, have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time
- If interested, a final copy of my completed thesis can be made available to you
- In addition to the collected data being used for the completion of my thesis, I will also be using the data in a thesis presentation at my graduation.
- It is possible that the research may be published in a psychology journal, if this opportunity should arise, I will contact you to ask for your additional consent.

You may contact me, Victoria Garner, at any time throughout the study if there are questions or concerns at [REDACTED]. Additionally, you may contact my thesis supervisor, Leslie Gardner at [REDACTED].

I, _____, have read the above, understand my rights and responsibilities as a co-researcher and I agree to participate in this research study. I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

Co-researcher Name (printed): _____

Co-researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____

Primary Researcher Name (printed): _____

Primary Researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Question Guide

- 1) In what ways do you see growth in yourself? Please give any concrete examples.
- 2) Could you describe any significant moments or events related to your growth experience?
- 3) Could you describe significant people that contributed in some way to your growth experience?
- 4) What kind of supportive experiences did you have that helped you grow after your trauma?
- 5) Did you develop any new beliefs or values as a result of the trauma? If so, please describe.
- 6) Were any of your previous beliefs or values affected or changed in any way by the trauma? Could you tell me more about that?
- 7) To what extent do you see yourself as a spiritual or religious person?
- 8) To what extent has what you have been through led you to think about spiritual or religious matters?
- 9) In what way have any personal beliefs helped you through the trauma and afterward?