How to Foster Post-Traumatic Growth

The Critical Role of Connection in Post-Traumatic Growth

with Sue Johnson, EdD; Kelly McGonigal, PhD; Joan Borysenko, PhD; and Ruth Buczynski, PhD

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Dr. Buczynski: Here’s a question - why are some people better able than others to grow after trauma?

According to Doctor Sue Johnson, it comes down to this one important factor.

And as Sue explains, this can be the very thing that gets them through the trauma itself.

Dr. Johnson: I think the research is very clear. Clinical experience is very clear. If you're going to go into post-traumatic growth, it really, really is dependent on the quality of your relationships.

To grow from trauma, you have to be able to go past that trauma to the point where you can do what securely attached people do when they deal with trauma, which is to use the greatest resource we have — *their connection with other people* — to start to trust themselves and the world again.

It's completely about relationships.

I'm trying to remember the research now. There's actually some new research. My head's in my clinical stuff, so I can't remember all the research. But there's some research that says, with anxiety and with trauma, you can do a lot of things to help people cope better – but really, in the end, if you don't address the ability to connect interpersonally, they relapse. They can go so far, but no further. You have to take that recovery and turn it into being able to connect with other people.

That's particularly relevant and particularly hard if the trauma has been a violation by an attachment figure.

If you were raped by your father, then what I'm talking about is particularly difficult. It's more difficult than if you were in a car accident and, okay, a driver drove into you, but somebody you loved didn't totally betray you when you were vulnerable. So, this can be more or less difficult.

Dr. Buczynski: This is an important distinction that Sue made about the nature of the trauma.

Yes, strong interpersonal relationships can be very important in fostering post-traumatic growth.
But when an attachment figure has contributed to the trauma, it can be extremely difficult for a client to trust anyone again.

We’ll get more into attachment figures as perpetrators a little later in the program.

But right now, let’s look at relationships when the attachment figure is not the perpetrator.

Sue’s colleague in Israel – Dr. Mario Mikka-lencer – did a study on prisoners of war.

These were people who had spent up to four years in solitary confinement, in complete darkness and surrounded by filth and terror.

I mean, unimaginable terror.

But here’s the interesting part - when some of these prisoners were released, they actually ended up doing really well in life.

So Mario would ask these people one question: What made the difference?

**Dr. Johnson:** The answer is always the same. The answer was my connection with other people.

Men would say things like, "When I was in prison, I would close my eyes, and I would see my wife's face, and I would concentrate so hard, I would feel like she was in the cell with me. And I would imagine reaching out and touching her. And I would hear her voice, and I'd think about the times we had together. And I'd talk to her. I'd say, 'I'm not going to die in this cell. I'm coming back to you, and I believe you'll be waiting for me.'"

They use that as a resource in the trauma. Then when they come out, the wife is there and will come in and help them with all this fear and overwhelm.

Post-traumatic growth is about the security of your attachment going into the trauma – how easy this is for you to turn back and find someone to trust. It's more difficult if you don't trust people at all, if you're being traumatized by those you come close to.

But even then, it's about your ability to reconnect with others and use others as a safe-haven, secure base so that when you do get overwhelmed...
You don't cure trauma. You move it from right here to over there in your life, so it doesn't define who you are and the rest of your life. But when the trauma comes through again, you can reach for the person you feel safest with and say, "It's come for me."

And you trust that that person will turn and help you. You're not alone with it. That makes all the difference in the world, all the difference in the world.

There's also stuff about immediate survivors after 9/11. More securely attached folks did much better - did much better. They did much more post-traumatic growth. They were more resilient. They didn't have depression, anxiety.

Securely attached folks did much better after 9/11 than people who said, "No, I don't want to confide in other people. I don't believe in turning to other people," or the people who said, "Well, I try to talk to people all the time, but they don't really want to listen to me, so I get angry."

The people who said, "Yeah. I can. I go to my grandmother, and I talk to her, and I confided to her, and she held me, and I have that image of being held."

This is basic to who we are. Even the Dalai Lama, who does six hours of solitary meditation every day and who we see as this incredibly resilient person – if you listen to him talk about how he deals with his rage and his fear and all the things that have happened to him and his people, he doesn't say, "I sit and meditate," he says, "I feel my mother's love here. I feel my mother's love." And he pats his chest.

I've seen him do this three times. "I feel my mother's love, and that calms me down. And I tell my monks, when things get too hard and anger and fear come from you, yell, Mother."

He doesn't tell his monks to go sit alone and meditate. It's interesting. He tells his monks go to a place inside you where you have this secure connection with other people.

I think it's clear that that's what creates post-traumatic growth. Of course, sometimes, for some people, unfortunately, that comes down to the therapist – because people don't have other people in their lives, or they come from such deprived backgrounds that the other people in their lives are insanely dangerous.

> "You help that person reach for you and take in your caring."

So sometimes you are the first safe person, and you help that person reach for you and take in your caring. You're moving them into not just coping with trauma, but healing as much as you can from trauma.
Dr. Buczynski: Strong relationships can often be the critical key for determining how much our clients experience growth after trauma.

What’s particularly striking here is that the attachment figure doesn’t have to be physically present for a person to benefit from the relationship.

This was true in the examples Sue gave us of the prisoners of war and the Dalai Lama.

It’s also important to remember that it’s the secure connection that matters here – these relationships don’t always have to follow traditional roles.

To better explain this, let’s visit now with Dr. Kelly McGonigal.

Dr. McGonigal: When I think about attachment security, looking at the literature, we know that particularly as people get older, the most important attachment figures often are no longer former attachment figures like parents or even partners, but often they are animals and something related to religious faith. And I wanted to put those out there.

Think about helping people connect to the powerful benefits of feeling securely attached. Consider whether those two things are present in a person's life or could be. We certainly know that there are many programs dedicated to helping people recover from trauma that provide animals and that the attachment that develops between the animal and the person who has survived this trauma becomes a kind of secure attachment that is profoundly healing. But also, think about prayer or faith as an opportunity to explore being able to connect to secure attachment.

And I wanted to just share some research highlights looking at — again, particularly as people age — how important this attachment relationship to some sort of faith or to God, to some sense of something bigger than yourself. Research has shown that some kind of positive religious attachment, where you feel held by something bigger than yourself — or having a relationship with something bigger than yourself — is associated with hope. And we know hope is one of the most powerful predictors of resilience and being able to recover from trauma or post-traumatic growth, as well as self-compassion.

People who have a sense of attachment to God or faith are more likely to experience self-compassion, which, again, we know is a big predictor of post-traumatic growth and to
resilience.

I think about how one might encourage this if the seeds of it are present. We know that meditative prayer is the type of religious activity that is most associated with fostering feelings of secure attachment. And what it might mean to maybe ask someone, *So do you meditate or pray? Is that part of your life?* to see if they might be relevant and to talk about that as a practice — either meditative prayer itself or meditation or whatever form of prayer feels most natural as something to truly rely on and build a relationship to.

**Dr. Buczynski:** If a client prays or feels a sense of attachment to God or something larger than themselves, they might experience secure attachment through this relationship.

Now, Kelly also mentioned how helpful animals can be for someone healing from trauma.

You see, attachment figures don’t have to be human. And when an animal might not be the right fit, Dr. Joan Borysenko has another strategy.

**Dr. Borysenko:** I’m thinking of a client of mine who was incested as a child and then raped – not once, but *several times* as an adult, and really had no trust in other human beings.

> “The idea that we always have to have a relationship with human beings is not always the case.”

She was very functional in certain dimensions, completely dysfunctional in others – particularly any kind of relationships with adults. She actually related well to children.

But, the idea that we always have to have a relationship with human beings is not always the case. So, I want to remind people, first of all, of Ellen Langer’s great study in mindfulness, Ellen being a professor of psychology at Harvard.

She gave people a *plant* to relate to. She went into a nursing home, and everybody there got a plant. But half the people had to develop a relationship with the plant — stick their finger in it. *Does my plant need water? Does it need a little food? Do I need to turn it to reach toward the light?* . . . And the other group in the nursing home all got plants, but the staff cared for them.

Long story short – the group who had to form a relationship with their own plant lived, on average, a year longer, and on every physiological and functional measure, did significantly better.

So, for me, I’ve done that. I’ve said, *What kind of plant do you like?* And they would develop a relationship with a plant. For other people, it might be a pet. Maybe they love a canary or a cat or a dog. And for some
people, it is a tremendous step forward just to commit to developing a relationship with an animal.

In terms of the client who I began with, she had a very interesting relationship that developed. The place for her that felt most calming, the place where she felt she could let down and be herself was by the ocean. She just loved the ocean, and she had a tremendous sensitivity to the sound of the surf, to the changing light, to the changing seasons. And I thought, I wonder if she could capitalize on her relationship to nature.

We discussed her going down to the beach and sketching. And she had no idea that she had any artistic talent. And in fact, she developed into a pretty amazing artist. And she would go and sketch the ocean in all its myriad moods.

And that, to her, was a place where she could reach in and find connection and calmness. So, I think any place that we can connect with life itself, any place, any kind of being — from plants to animals to the whole of nature itself — are really wonderful resources.

**Dr. Buczynski:** When our clients struggle with interpersonal relationships, it can helpful to know how to guide them toward connections that can be both meaningful and healing.

As Sue, Kelly, and Joan laid out, some of those resilience-building relationships can be with animals, God or faith, and nature.

Now, this sense of connection can be vital.

And it’s one of the three elements that Bill O’Hanlon says is essential for true post-traumatic growth.

We created a special bonus to give you more on Bill’s take on this idea. You can find it in the bonus section.

Be sure to take a look.

Now, earlier in the program, we touched on the idea that clients will sometimes blame themselves for the way their body responded to trauma.

We looked at the neurobiology of the body’s response and how to help clients understand its reaction.

So often this kind of self-judgment is woven into the way they talk about their traumatic experience.

In the next module, we’ll look at one shift that can help your clients break free from blame and move toward growth. I’ll see you then.