

SAFLEO Issue Brief Series #3

Spotlight on
**Post-Traumatic
Growth**
Among Law Enforcement
Officers

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What is post-traumatic growth (PTG)?

PTG is positive psychological change that occurs as the result of one's struggle with a highly challenging, stressful, and traumatic event. The presence of PTG can manifest itself in five domains: an increased appreciation for life, relating to others, new possibilities, an increased sense of personal strength, and spiritual growth.¹

Why does PTG matter for law enforcement?

Law enforcement officers deal with exposure to multiple traumatic events during the course of their career. While it is common to have psychological injuries as the result of this exposure to traumatic events, it is also possible for changes to occur within the officer that allow for greater personal growth and encourage introspection about what gives their life meaning.

How common is it?

PTG is highly variable and occurs in somewhere between 30 to 90 percent of individuals who have had traumatic experiences.²

What kind of traumatic experience allows for growth?

Traumatic experiences that are "shattering" and disrupt an individual's expectations and understanding of the world are the kinds of experiences that create changes that allow for growth. This might include any sudden and traumatic death, such as witnessing a shooting or having a close relationship with an individual who has died by suicide. PTG has been studied in a broad range of trauma survivors, from survivors of motor vehicle accidents to bombings and other terrorist events, such as the September 11, 2001, attacks.

1. Tedeschi, R. G. & Calhoun, L.G. (2004). The foundations of post-traumatic growth: New considerations. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15, pp. 93–102. doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_03.

2. Tedeschi, R.G. & Calhoun, L.G. (2006). Expert companions; Post-traumatic growth: Research and practice (pp. 291–310). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

● ● ● Post-Traumatic Growth Among Law Enforcement Officers

What kind of activities might help officers facilitate growth in the aftermath of a traumatic event?

Helping others not only heals the individual who is traumatized but promotes their growth. In one study, the level of involvement as a peer mentor consistently predicted positive growth outcomes for participants.

Proven strategies for the facilitation of PTG:

- Therapy, journaling, and art therapy
- Outdoor activities, including nature therapy and soaking up the sun
- Positive psychology exercises, such as the “three good things” writing exercise where an individual documents three good things from their day and why those things were good

Does PTG mean that the bereaved no longer has any traumatic symptoms?

Growth and distress are separate dimensions but are oftentimes co-occurring. Trauma survivors may have suicidal thoughts and feelings, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, and they can experience growth within the context of this distress.

What growth can people experience as a result of their exposure to trauma?

Officers can experience overall growth as well as growth in the five domains. These experiences of growth in the domains of relating to others and spiritual change become even more prominent as individuals age. There is also evidence that individuals will find new possibilities in life; personal strength; and appreciation of life (especially early on), which will eventually level off, only to increase later in their lives.

What is the most important factor in promoting growth?

In one study, four groups of trauma survivors were identified by their reasons for living. Those individuals who listed family as their only reason for living had the lowest PTG scores, whereas those who listed helping others had the highest PTG scores.³

3. Smith, S., Chase, A., Barker, K., Palmer, J., & Moore, M. (2017, April). Post-traumatic growth and reasons for living among suicide bereaved parents. Poster presented at American Association of Suicidology Annual Conference, Phoenix, AZ.



My Local Resources

Resources

- SAFLEO postvention guide
 - Primary care physician
 - Culturally competent clinician (in person or online)
 - Professionally led support group
 - Peer support group
 - Employee Assistance Program
 - Agency chaplain
 - Clergy
 - Supervisor
 - Human resources
 - Trusted colleagues
 - Friends or family members
 - Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Call 988
 - Crisis Text Line: Text "BLUE" to 741741

SUICIDE IS PREVENTABLE, AND IT STARTS WITH YOU!

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