



Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 30: Post Traumatic Growth

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Alex Clark discusses post-traumatic growth and gives some tips to move from struggle to strength.

Hello, I'm Alex Clark a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and project coordinator at the University of Kentucky's Center on Trauma and Children. Many people have experienced overwhelming stress, even traumatic stress, but paradoxically, most who experience trauma also grow and discover new and positive changes. In this Well@Work podcast, I'm going to talk with you about post-traumatic growth for professionals. Post-traumatic growth refers to the positive changes that people often report as a result of the struggle that occurs in the aftermath of traumatic events. This growth is a process that describes the experience of moving from struggle to strength, as negative experiences can spur positive changes even beyond our baseline functioning.

To illustrate this idea, consider the cases of Kate and Andrew. Both are young mental health professionals who have lived through the pandemic while working in the same organization. Prior to COVID, Kate would describe herself as a fairly resilient person. She was stressed during the early phases of COVID, but she's been able to bounce back and even forward as her core beliefs about herself and the world were not challenged. Andrew however, experienced the same distress and confusion, but continues to struggle to understand this terrible event and why it happened. Andrew has realized that although nothing good came from the pandemic, there are many things he can learn about himself and how he responds to COVID that might serve him well in the future. Now, here are some tips for us, like Andrew, to move from struggle to strength.

Tip number one: process the experience. Don't avoid, accept. You may have experienced something nearly intolerable, it makes sense that you would want to avoid the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, people, or places that remind you of that awful experience. Accepting and adjusting to the new reality will take time, it may also require professional support from a therapist. When you're ready, lean into your own experience of overcoming, find your strength, and explore new possibilities.

Tip number two: practice self-compassion. As accepting and adjusting to the new reality may take time, have compassion for yourself and be gracious. You may experience a growth of one domain, such as an appreciation for life, while feeling sluggish in another domain. Post-traumatic growth is a process, it doesn't have a manual, it is a set of experiences. Give yourself the space to experience this process as fully as possible without harsh judgment. Ask yourself what helps you to feel strong? How do you deal with intense emotional experiences? How can you connect with yourself, others, and the world to

overcome? Take a moment to reflect on what you may want to leave behind and what you want to add moving forward. And forgive yourself for not getting it right all the time.

Tip number three: find an expert companion. These can be friends, family members, or other professionals. How do you recognize an expert companion? They listen, they're curious, they offer compassionate feedback, and they stick with you. Take a moment to evaluate your relationships with those around you, where do you feel connected and supported? If you do not currently feel supported, now is a wonderful time to reach out.

Tip number four: notice what has changed. As you lean into the post-traumatic growth process, there will be changes. Are you aware of them? Take a moment to identify new and different experiences that follow from your growth. You are stronger, new possibilities are unfolding, connections to others are deeper and more meaningful, life is sweeter, spiritual or existential questions are slowly being answered. Post-traumatic growth means that COVID did not have the final word. Experience was the vehicle for harm, it also becomes the same vehicle for healing, growth, and development. So be patient, growth can't be forced and it can't be rushed. However, when you're ready, moving from struggle to strength is worth the effort. As Ernest Hemingway so eloquently wrote, "The world breaks everyone and afterward, many are strong in the broken places." For more ideas, check out our website in the video description and remember to stay Well@Work.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.