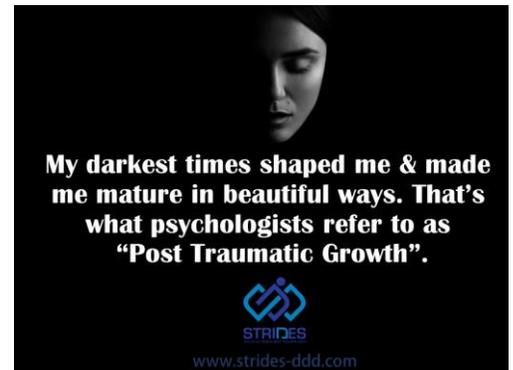


## *“Trauma & Post Traumatic Growth (Hopefully) Of The COVID-19 Outbreak”*

*By Dania Dbaibo Darwish – May, 2020*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I witnessed people’s emotions wreak havoc and exert a mental health concern alongside the medical threat just like the consequences of “Ebola virus pandemic” during earlier times. Most people experienced a variety of negative emotions including being traumatized; and a shared kind of trauma prevailed. There’s certainly a downside to this stressful situation, but eventually there’s good in the bad, just like any other life experience. Many would, hopefully, undergo what is known as “post traumatic growth”.



So what specifically is “**trauma**”? It’s a fact of life that we’re all prone to being traumatized to different degrees and by different life events. What characterizes traumatic events is a sense of fear and unpredictability leading us to feel our life is under threat. These events can be painful and carry with them negative experiences that makes one’s sense of normalcy greatly diminished for a while. They overwhelm our nervous system as we try to process what’s going on. The experience can impair our attempts at coping with what’s happening; consequently, leads to a variety of unwelcomed emotions like grief, sadness, anxiety, panic, depression, despair, etc... Traumas can be sudden losses of people we love to death or divorce, losing a job, abuse in different ways, assault, natural disasters, facing major illness, or this pandemic we’re currently facing. While some people hold on well during crisis, others require more time to adapt and heal. Another group would need more professional support to kick start the healing process. Those who are more vulnerable than others to remain stuck are mainly those who have previous experience with anxiety and depression, those with previous unresolved traumas, and those with current vulnerability like financial instability or lack of social support.

This pandemic is triggering a **shared trauma** because the entire population is experiencing a collective comparable negative major life event. Most people are experiencing similar fears for their health and that of their loved ones. With all eyes set on the whole world facing the same problem, it’s a sign of high alert because of its magnitude. Most share the same disruption to their previous life on both personal and professional levels. There are shared losses of different sorts besides the shared uncertainty about when all of this will end, shared unpredictability, and similar confusion. It is a collective vulnerability where almost everyone feels in the same boat of threatened humanity. **Vicarious trauma** is, also, at play especially while people are closely monitoring the global and local news, with heightened anxiety becoming contagious.

Despite all of this, many people will eventually experience “**Post Traumatic Growth**” though. While it’s true that traumatic events can lead to serious mental health problems, focusing on just the downside of traumas can do us injustice. There are countless instances where eventually, people come out of traumatic events transformed to being a little bit wiser, considerably stronger, and perhaps a better version of themselves. A trauma makes us question so many things about ourselves, about others, and about life in general. It can shake us to the core; and we need to put in a lot of effort to make sense of things. Traumatic experiences are not fun at the time, but we can grow out of them in different ways.

“Post Traumatic Growth” may be in the form of realizations, transformations, and/or changes in our beliefs, understanding, or priorities that come after struggling with the adversity. Researchers estimate that half to two-thirds of people who experience traumatic events also experience some growth in different areas. We may not experience these changes as we’re going through the hardship, but we know we’ve healed once we give that experience a new positive meaning no matter how horrific that life event was. This could be in different ways:

- a) **Wisdom and maturity:** There’s a different perspective on other little negative events. They’re viewed as much trivial in comparison to other biggies. Being dramatic over little stuff becomes something in the past. For life threatening traumas, more appreciation for life and living emerges.
- b) **Strength and Resilience:** Some look back at what happened and realize that they did demonstrate a lot of strength through that struggle. Whatever happened passed and they managed to cope in different ways. These times helped them become resilient and added to their reservoir of “know how” to manage future challenges.
- c) **Forming deeper social connections:** In times of crisis, people reach out to others (and others reach out to them). Social support is paramount in navigating hard times. We form a different kind of bond with that supportive circle.
- d) **Pain is utilized a motivator to action:** Some would make of what happened a motivating force to help, later on, those facing similar struggles. Like for instance, those who overcome addiction, health issues, abuse, accidents, etc...., become engaged in, or become strong advocates of causes that support those who share the same predicament. A different more refined sense of living for a purpose emerges.
- e) **Letting go and forgiveness:** Some may grow once they let go of the bitterness surrounding what happened. They do some forgiveness work if other people were involved. It’s deciding not to be bothered anymore by that stressful event. This can be a lengthy process sometimes.
- f) **New possibilities:** Some would even find new possibilities in the form of new interests, a new career, or major life shifts that they would never have thought possible before.
- g) **Spiritual growth:** Finally, post trauma, growth may be in the form of spiritual or religious awakenings whereby these areas suddenly become stronger and appreciated more intensely.

It is the meaning we attach to events that either makes us powerful or weak; and we often gravitate to know, understand, and make sense of what happens. I can’t stress enough the need to talk about your feelings when you’re under stress to those who can support you. It helps you better process things and is very helpful in shifting to a new more empowering narrative about the traumatic event. Talking about it helps you move beyond the pain. During this pandemic, and during any other stressful situation, I encourage you to consider answering these questions:

1. What can I learn here? (list as many as you can)
2. How do these learnings make me want to be, or act in the future?
3. What’s the good in this bad situation?

Don’t rush to giving answers, or force your growth. The answers may not always come readily. Each of us will grow at his/her own pace. Just give it all the time it needs. It may continue to be work in progress for some time before you come to terms with what happened. Lucky are the ones who eventually find a

new better meaning for their struggle. For these, trauma is not the end. It's the beginning in many new ways.

After this lockdown is over, perhaps we can start appreciating the little things more. The freedom to go out, our being healthy, the presence of our family and supporting friends. After this lockdown is over, I wonder how many of us will change in a good way and which kind of our previous "normal" will we then reject!

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