



Bereavement, Religion, and Posttraumatic Growth

A Matched Control Group Investigation

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Introduction

An important teaching of many religious and philosophical traditions is that while grieving might entail a painful state of psychological distress, such experiences of suffering can also foster positive changes in one's life (Bemporad, 1987; Linley, 2003). Personal growth following bereavement can take religious forms (Linley, 2003) and certain aspects of religiousness might also prime individuals for posttraumatic growth (PTG; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005).

Research indicates the possibility of increased psychological distress in the process of grieving (Prigerson, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008). However, it is also indicated that bereavement often can lead to PTG if the loss incurs a challenging of one's assumptive worldviews (Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann, & Hanks, 2010). Further, it has been documented that violent types of loss result in higher levels of grief complication than natural types of loss (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006).



Therefore, we hypothesized:

1. Bereaved individuals would report higher religiousness, PTG, and distress than non-bereaved individuals.
2. People who experience violent losses would report more PTG and distress than those who experienced a natural loss.
3. Participants' bereavement status would have a unique impact on PTG.
4. Aspects of religiousness would positively correlate with PTG.

Abstract

This study examined the intersection between types of bereavement, religiousness, and PTG. When controlling for demographics and other study variables, bereavement status and religion factors significantly increased the explained variance in participants' perceptions of PTG and psychological distress.

Methods

Participants

- We selected 369 college students from a larger sample from a large southern research university and collected data electronically between 2006 and 2009.

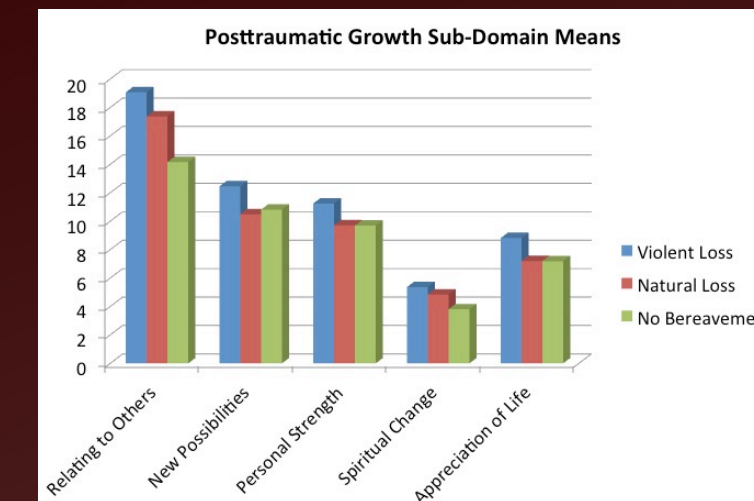
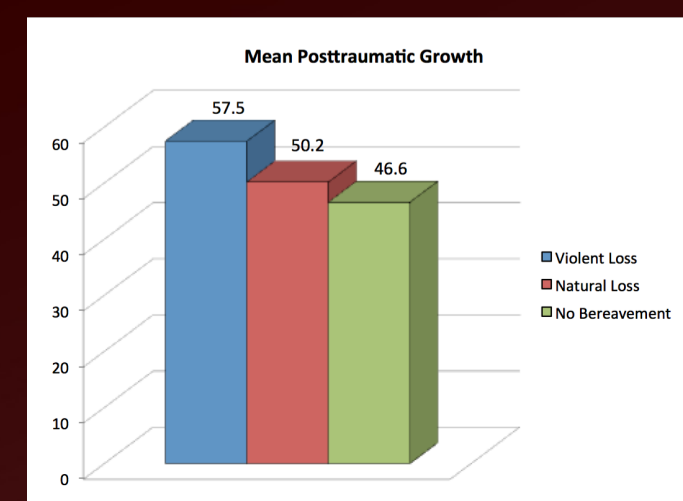
- Over 75% of participants reported a Christian affiliation, 12.1% reported no religious affiliation, and 5.5% reported other religious affiliation.
- 123 participants experienced a violent loss; 123 participants experienced a non-violent loss; 123 participants experienced no losses

Measures

1. **Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality** (BMMRS; Fetzer Institute/NIA, 1999)
 - i. Used to assess daily spiritual experiences, private religious practices, organizational religiousness, religious coping, forgiveness, and religious support
2. **Posttraumatic Growth Inventory** (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996)
 - i. Used to assess retrospective accounts of positive changes following a stressful life experience.
 - ii. 5 interrelated but distinct domains (relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life)
3. **Symptom Checklist-10** (SCL-10-R; Rosen et al., 2000)
 - i. Used to assess psychological distress

Results

1. **Bereavement was significantly associated with religiousness, PTG, and distress.**
 - i. The violent-loss group engaged in greater religious coping than the non-bereaved group, $p = .02$.
 - ii. Bereaved individuals endorsed more forgiveness, $p = .01$ (violent), $p = .055$ (non-violent).
 - iii. The natural loss group reported more daily spiritual experiences and organizational religiousness than non-bereaved individuals, $p = .02$ and $p = .001$, respectively.
 - iv. The natural loss group reported more religious support than both other groups, $p = .058$ and $p = .01$, respectively.
 - v. The violent loss group reported more PTG overall than the both groups and the natural loss group reported more PTG than the non-bereaved group (*see handout*).
 - vi. Violent loss and natural loss groups reported higher levels of distress than non-bereaved groups, $p = .002$ and $p = .053$.
2. **Religiousness was uniquely associated with both PTG and distress.**



Discussion

Study findings supported the notion that bereavement can provide a context for a possible deepening of religiousness and personal growth.

The violent loss group had more positive life changes despite greater distress associated with the tragic experiences. This notion may confirm the notion that PTG requires a significant challenge to previous worldview assumptions (Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann, & Hanks, 2010).

The research supports at the importance of recognizing and supporting a person's religiousness and spirituality in the bereavement process in a clinical setting.

It would also behoove clinicians to be aware of the possible positive outcomes of grief as well as allowing the space for the associated distress with various types of loss.

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