Bereavement, Religion, and Posttraumatic Growth
A Matched Control Group Investigation
Jesse D. Malott, Tiffany E. Martinez, Charlotte E. Sandy, Joseph M. Currier
Fuller Theological Seminary

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, 2005). Personal growth following bereavement can take religious forms (Linley, 2005) and certain aspects of religiosity 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 (Priegner, 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).

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

Methods
Participants
- 123 participants experienced a violent loss; 123 participants experienced a non-violent loss; 123 participants experienced no losses
- Over 75% of participants reported a Christian affiliation; 12.1% reported no religious affiliation, and 5.3% reported other religious affiliation

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

Results
1. Bereavement was significantly associated with religiousness, PTG, and distress.
   - Bereaved individuals reported higher religiousness, PTG, and distress than non-bereaved individuals.
   - Bereaved individuals endorsed more forgiveness, p = .055 (non-violent), p = .053 (violent).
   - Bereaved individuals endorsed more positive life changes despite greater distress associated with the tragic experiences. This notion may confirm the explained variance in participants’ perceptions of PTG and psychological distress.

Discussion
Study findings supported the notion that bereavement can provide a context for a possible deepening of religiosity 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 perception 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 religiosity 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.

References

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

The research supports the importance of recognizing and supporting a person’s religiosity and spirituality in the bereavement process in a clinical setting.

It would also be noteworthy to 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.