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### A broader framework for exploring the influence of spiritual experience in the wake of stressful life events: examining connections between posttraumatic growth and psycho-spiritual transformation

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A broader framework for exploring the influence of spiritual experience in the wake of stressful life events: examining connections between posttraumatic growth and psycho-spiritual transformation

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The literature suggests that spiritual domains of experience may be influential to an individual's growth in the aftermath of stressful life events. This paper explores the role that spiritual experience might play in the process of posttraumatic growth by examining two quite different approaches to transformational growth: Lawrence Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi's posttraumatic growth model; and Stanislav and Christina Grof's framework of psycho-spiritual transformation. Both approaches are briefly outlined, compared and discussed. Some observations are made about their shared understanding of the human potential for growth and the significance of spiritual experience in the struggle to master distressing life events. A further hypothetical model is presented that marries the two approaches and offers the opportunity for individuals in the posttraumatic process and helping professionals to examine their experiences in a broader context.

**Keywords:** posttraumatic; psycho-spiritual; spirituality; transformation; transpersonal psychology

## Introduction

### *The relationship between posttraumatic growth, spirituality and religion*

There is an increasing interest in the phenomenon of perceived growth following highly stressful experiences. Personal growth is generally reported "by the majority of people experiencing even the most traumatic of events" (Park & Helgeson, 2006, p. 791) and commonly described in the teachings of philosophical, spiritual and religious traditions. It is also central to the work of humanistic-existential and transpersonal psychologists and educators such as Rogers (1961), Frankl (1963) and Maslow (1971), and more recently referred to by a number of terms which include "transformational coping" (Kobasa, 1979), "adversarial growth" (Linley & Joseph, 2004), "stress-related growth," "benefit finding" and "posttraumatic growth" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a).

While this paper is interested in responding to the literature that suggests that more might be done to understand the relationships between posttraumatic growth, spirituality and religion (Lancaster & Palframan, 2009), it is important to make a distinction between

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spiritual and religious experiences. While both have the capacity to deepen and provide qualitative benefits to individuals recovering from stressful and traumatic life events, they are often not differentiated in terms of affect. In their systematic review of the literature Shaw, Joseph, and Linley (2005) note that in the empirical research such a distinction has yet to be achieved. They recommend that more of a “fine grained analysis of the religious and spiritual variables associated with posttraumatic growth” might highlight the distinct contributions made by each and enable the examination and assessment of other dimensions of experience not considered so far (p. 7).

It is suggested that transpersonal psychology already provides a perspective from which to view spiritual growth and makes possible the distinction between it and religious experience. In addition, Lancaster and Palframan’s (2009) suggestion that new research might create conceptual frameworks that more closely describe pathways of posttraumatic growth in which spiritual factors have some influence, is also useful here. It is proposed that such frameworks might accommodate more comprehensively explanatory models that are both culturally or experientially rich with spirituality, or that have emerging spiritual content as a response to stressful experiences (Randal & Argyle, 2005). For example, a framework for understanding the transformative affects of “spiritual emergence” and “spiritual emergency” (Grof & Grof, 1989, 1990) might permit individuals to contextualise their posttraumatic “experiences in transpersonal terms and treatment” (Johnson & Friedman, 2008, p. 523). Thus, this paper proposes that transpersonal psychology’s explanation of psycho-spiritual transformation provides a useful lens through which to view posttraumatic growth.

### *Posttraumatic growth and spiritual emergence*

As research reveals spiritual experience to be a significantly influential domain in the growth process (Lancaster & Palframan, 2009), this paper will outline the blending of two quite different theoretical positions that ultimately share some very similar assumptions about the human potential for growth and the significance of spiritual experience in the context of highly distressing life events. In holding the general premise that human existence may be considerably altered by difficult life circumstances, both frameworks incorporate to a greater or lesser degree the understanding that in spiritual domains of experience, individuals and groups engage in compelling processes of personal reconstruction, re-evaluation and learning resulting in experiences of positive psychological change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Taku, Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2008) and, at a fundamental level, a more authentic understanding of their transforming relationships with self and other (Grof & Grof, 1989, 1990; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009). Considering these domains of personal growth from two psychological perspectives the paper will first examine those that Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) have called “spiritual change,” “spiritual development” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998) and “existential and spiritual change” (2008) detailed in their comprehensive theory of “posttraumatic growth” (PTG). PTG is a systematic approach to the study of the phenomenon of change experienced in the struggle that individuals and groups engage in the aftermath of crises (Tedeschi & Calhoun 1995, 1996, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, & 2008). Second, Grof and Grof’s (1989, 1990) concept of personal growth through transformational crises examines the relatively benign domain of spiritual growth in “spiritual emergence” and within that the more personally problematic experience of “spiritual emergency.” These important concepts are contextualised within Grof’s (1985, 1998, 2000) “holotropic,” or moving towards wholeness, framework

which broadly considers how individuals and groups are readied for and experience psycho-spiritual change.

Although it is understood that both approaches are based upon empirically and theoretically different foundations, the psychological and the psychodynamic, it is hoped that the blending of their ideas might be of particular use and interest to those who have some familiarity or sympathy with both (Calhoun, personal correspondence, 31 January 2009). What follows is a brief sketch of these two approaches and some of the principles, processes, tasks and outcomes that each position shares, followed by a brief discussion about their common characteristics. A hypothetical model of posttraumatic growth and psycho-spiritual transformation is presented which illuminates both approaches and offers the opportunity to further explore the significant relationship that exists between spirituality, transformation and growth in the wake of difficult life events.

### **Calhoun and Tedeschi's model of posttraumatic growth**

The third version of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004a) PTG model describes the systematic study of growth, directly attributing it to an individual's "struggle with the trauma" (p. 4) that arises from "highly challenging life events" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004, p. 99). They observe that personal experiences and responses to the psychological processes of growth are complex and that in the wake of traumatic events suffering may often go hand in hand (1995, 2008). They also suggest that while PTG is not uncommon, it is by no means inevitable in every case.

Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006) model (see Figure 1) envisions an individual, or group, in a sequential process: beginning with the "person pretrauma"; encountering a "seismic event" which disrupts the individual's assumptive world or sense of self; struggling with three broad "challenges" involving intense cognitive processing of content in fundamental schemas concerning "beliefs and goals," "management of emotional distress" and a restructuring of their life "narrative." At this point, struggling with these challenges, they might encounter and employ "automatic and intrusive" forms of "cognitive engagement" in a process of "rumination," a turning over in the mind, which may transfer into intentional acts of "self disclosure" such as writing and talking. In turn, these activities may support a "reduction of emotional distress," which enables the "management of automatic rumination" and allows "disengagement" from previously significant goals. This "more deliberate" rumination leads to a "schema change" process involving the rebuilding of a meaningful and coherent view of the self and the world and further "narrative development." In addition, a parallel process concerning two "sociocultural" categories – "distal" which represents broad cultural themes and "proximate" culture representing the smaller social networks and communities with whom the individual interacts, are considered in the context of the fuller process of PTG. Finally, when "posttraumatic growth" occurs, it is likely, but not necessary, that the outcomes are that "distress" may be more manageable and a new personal "narrative" is shaped alongside new understanding and "wisdom." Through this sense-making struggle the individual or group, may begin to view his or herself differently, adopt new priorities and gain a fresh and fuller appreciation of life.

### ***The domain of spiritual change***

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) describe five domains in which change can occur that correspond to measurable factors in their *Posttraumatic Growth Inventory* (PTGI, 1996).

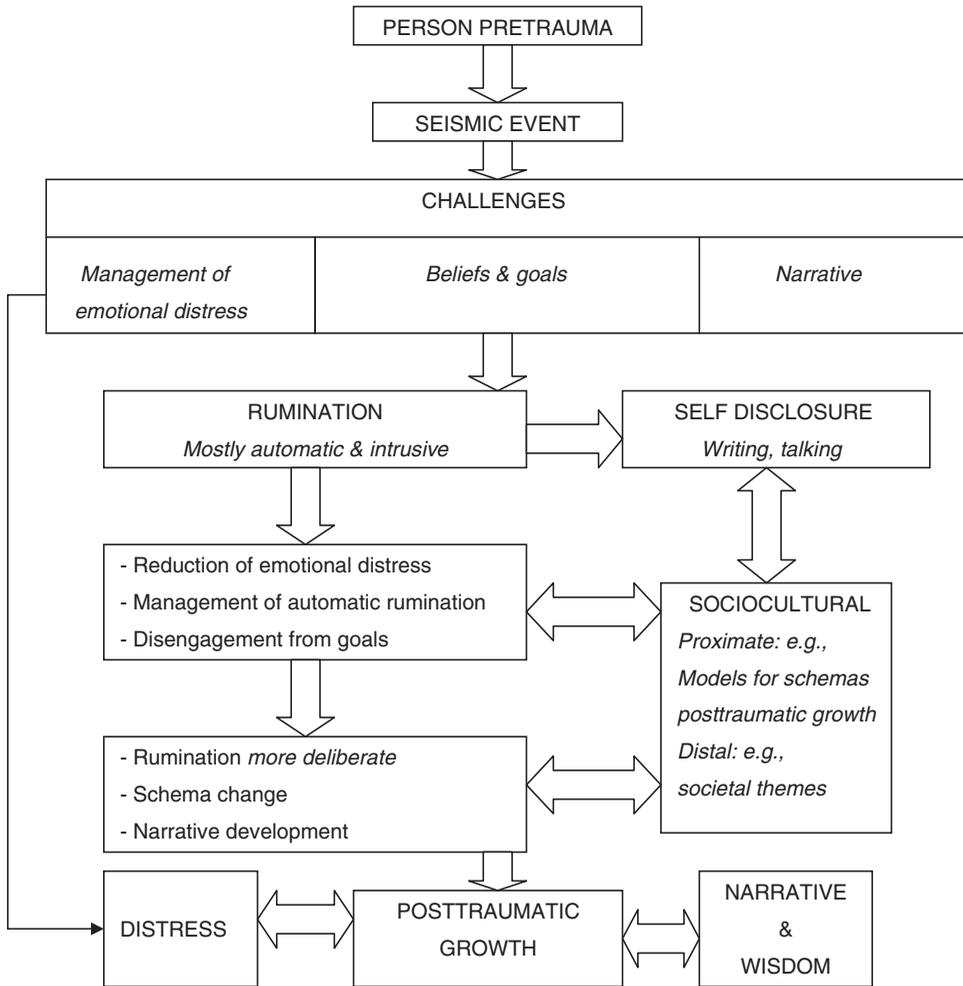


Figure 1. A comprehensive model of PTG by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006). Copyright Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (2006). Reprinted with permission.

All of these domains are of broad concern to this paper but the fourth, the spiritual or religious domain, in which individuals experience a deepening of their spiritual lives accompanied by significant revisions in worldview, and the fifth that describes an enhanced appreciation for life in general, share characteristics with Grof and Grof's (1989, 1990) explanation of spiritual emergence and emergency.

Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) emphasise that “the domain of spirituality is one in which individuals can experience significant posttraumatic growth” (p. 117) and that in the confrontation of existential questions individuals may struggle with personally painful realisations about death and mortality whose growth outcomes will affect other domains of change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). However, “spiritual change,” as a factor in the PTGI assessment tool, is only represented by two out of the possible 21 items: number 5, “A better understanding of spiritual matters” and number 18, “I have a stronger religious faith” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, p. 460). In the former item, spirituality is seen to be

experienced as “a greater sense of somehow being connected to something transcendent, in ways that were not possible before the struggle with trauma” (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998, p. 14). In the latter item, religion is more narrowly prescribed by “an organized group and shared beliefs” which explain and describe the “specific form the transcendent reality takes” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006, p. 106).

Subsequently, Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2006, 2008) research has placed greater emphasis on confrontation with existential questions rather than religion *per se*. They note that individuals reminded of their own mortality engage in existential considerations that “may lead to a more satisfactory set of answers to the questions about one’s purpose in life” (p. 34). In the process of psycho-spiritual transformation Grof and Grof (1990) have also noted that individuals inevitably address existential questions as they confront death of the self and suggest that this particular struggle is a “pivotal part of the transformation process and an integral component of most spiritual emergencies” (p. 57).

### **Grof’s framework of psycho-spiritual transformation**

#### *Spiritual emergence and spiritual emergency*

With the introduction of the new diagnostic category “Religious or Spiritual Problem” (Code V62.89) in the DSM-IV (APA, 1994), a greater understanding has developed among professionals that problematic religious or spiritual experiences are not necessarily the outcome of pathology. Here and elsewhere, transpersonal psychology offers the opportunity to broadly consider the affects of stressful events on an individual or group’s psycho-spiritual growth. Lancaster and Palframan (2009) describe it as a “constructive paradigm” from which to understand the self in transformation because it presents “a more holistic model of the self” and has “developed a large literature on the nature and function of spirituality beyond the context of traditional religion” (p. 260).

“Spiritual emergence” and “spiritual emergency” are the subject of Grof and Grof’s *Spiritual Emergency* (1989), and *The Stormy Search for Self* (1990), originating in Grof’s holotropic model of the psyche. First detailed in *Beyond the Brain* (1985), “Grof’s metaphysical position emphasises the fundamental realities of the psyche and of a universal consciousness that overlaps, but is not identical with, the material world” (Bray, 2008a, p. 81).

Johnson and Friedman (2008) describe “spiritual emergence” as the personal integration of spiritual and transpersonal experiences “to achieve expanded consciousness and maturity” and suggest that if those experiences produce a personal psychological crisis the outcome may be a “spiritual emergency” (p. 514). Grof and Grof have observed that these experiences can either be triggered by the psyche’s readiness to transform or by highly stressful emotional or physical events which can include bereavement and broken relationships or by excessive spiritual practice or use of medication. However, in spite of the negative connotation of the term “emergency,” these experiences have positive transformational outcomes when sensitively and intelligently supported to the conclusion of the individual’s process (Bragdon, 1988; Cortright, 1997; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009). Outcomes include a greater interest in living, improved health and personal satisfaction, an expanded worldview and a greater openness to spiritual experience. Grof and Grof suggest that successful integration of this personal process of development reduces aggression, leads to a higher tolerance of racial, political and religious differences, increases ecological awareness, and changes values and existential priorities. Importantly, as the psyche contains no boundaries and the contents present as a continuum of many dimensions and

levels, a psycho-spiritual transformation will be as uniquely different as the individual experiencing it.

From clinical studies with individuals in psycho-spiritual crises, exchanges with colleagues, and the study of relevant literatures, Grof (1996) has categorised 12 characteristically different forms of spiritual emergency in his typology, which include: peak experiences; past-life experiences; communication with spirit guides and channelling; near death experiences; possession states and alcoholism and drug addiction.

What follows is a summary of Grof's comprehensive framework of psycho-spiritual transformation (see Figure 2) which positions the benign unfolding of spiritual emergence, and the personal crises of spiritual emergency in a developmental model.

### *Three dimensions of consciousness – biographical, transpersonal and perinatal*

Grof (1985, 1998, 2000) theory suggests that the arousal of the unconscious plays a significant role in an individual's development and posttraumatic growth. His model recognises the existence of three dimensions of human consciousness that mediate the experience of spiritual emergence and have potential to come into play in the aftermath of trauma: a personal "biographical" dimension; a spiritual or "transpersonal" dimension and a fundamental biological and existential "perinatal" dimension. Typically, post trauma the individual draws upon the "biographical" materials from his or her life story to sustain, make meaning or change existing narratives. Grof's concept of an expanded psyche owes much to Jung's (1959) "collective unconscious," the mystical and philosophical traditions of the East and quantum physics. Consequently, he suggests that the consensus reality represented by biographical experiences may be extended by a second domain of experience which he calls the "transpersonal." In this state the individual may be subjected to intrusive undifferentiated spiritual, mythological and archetypal experiences.

Finally, Grof's model identifies and applies a third domain of consciousness which he has named the "perinatal." This aspect of personal psychology, Grof suggests, provides a link between the biographical and transpersonal domains enabling a level of universal consciousness ordinarily beyond the individual's reach. Grof (1985) describes this perinatal domain through four dynamic experiential patterns of the deep unconscious called the Basic Perinatal Matrices which correspond to the four consecutive periods of biological delivery in childbirth. He asserts that the foetus is conscious and that it collects memories of these events constellating around systems of condensed experience. Grof (1985, 1996, 2000) has demonstrated that disturbances and experiences at any stage of the intrauterine and birth processes may be reactivated by psychological trauma which prompts the unconscious to reveal events from this foundational memory system and reactivate and focus them through biographical, perinatal and transpersonal lenses. These events may be experienced as a gradual spiritual emergence of consciousness and well-being or as a more psychologically disorientating experience of spiritual emergency.

### *Challenges to awareness – the experience of spiritual emergency*

In the initial stages of spiritual emergence and emergency, Grof and Grof (1990) note that people may only briefly encounter heightened realms of experience, but that the frequency is commensurate with the individual's awareness, acceptance and understanding of their transforming levels of consciousness. As conscious and unconscious boundaries dissolve so

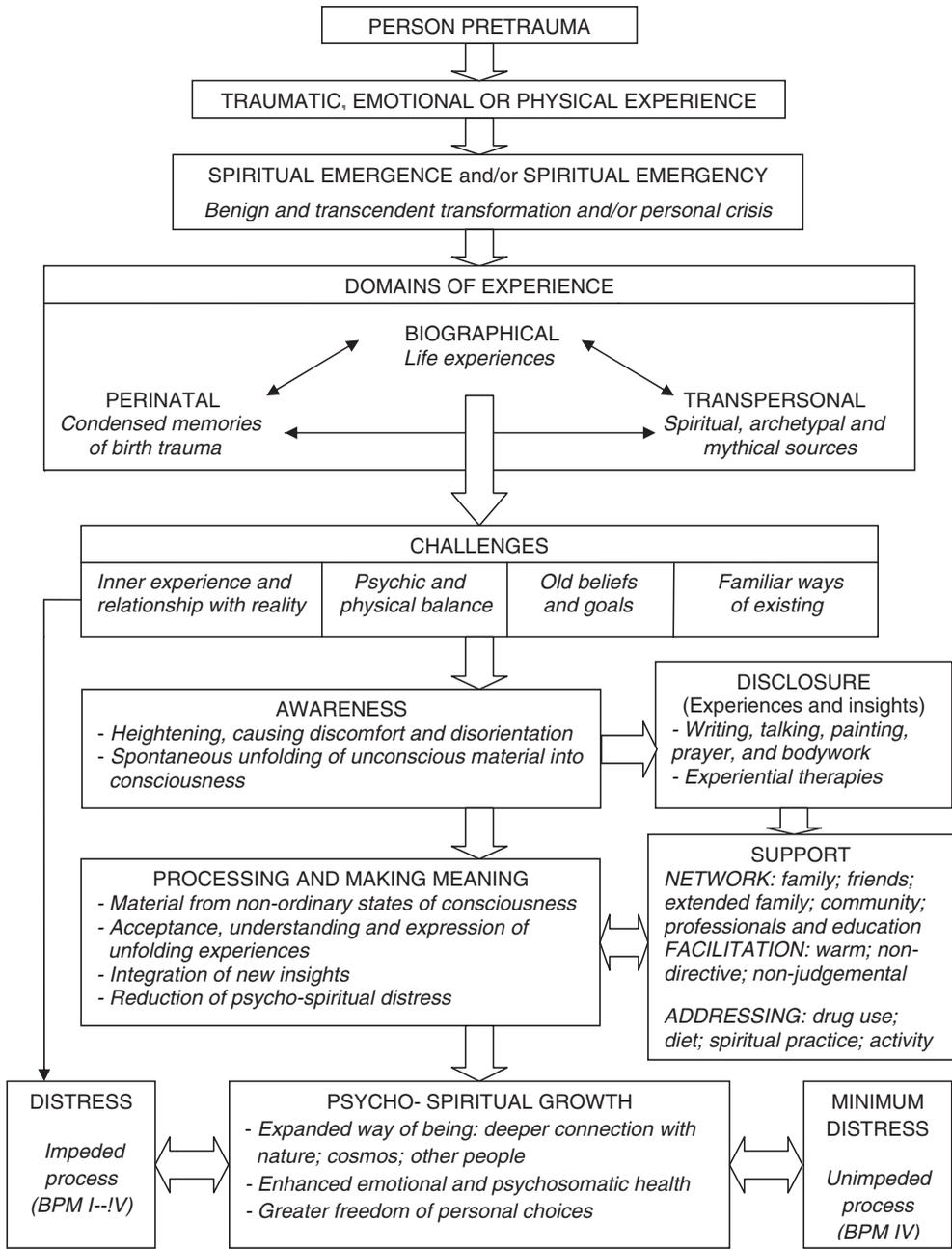


Figure 2. A hypothetical version of Grof's holotropic framework of psycho-spiritual growth.

does the individual's worldview disintegrate increasing emotional responses, physical stresses and pain. In an attempt to dissociate themselves from emerging memories, which are coloured by or contain some fear, individuals may become alienated from themselves. This sudden muddying of the consciousness makes it hard for an individual to

operate properly. Accordingly, individuals struggling with spiritual emergency are exposed to sudden inner experiences that: challenge old beliefs; confront ways of existing; alter relationships with reality; bring discomfort with a once familiar world; cause perceptual problems especially between inner and outer worlds; may physically generate forceful energies and spontaneous tremors and prompt the individual to want to disclose their experiences and insights. Mastery of these challenges to awareness is ultimately dependant upon an openness of experiential style and the ability to process, understand, make meaning and integrate these new experiences (Bray, 2008a; Johnson & Friedman, 2008; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009; Tedeschi et al., 1998). This leads to a reduction of psycho-spiritual distress, and an “expanded way of being that involves enhanced emotional and psychosomatic health, greater freedom of personal choices, and a sense of deeper connection with other people, nature, and the cosmos” (Grof & Grof, 1990, p. 34).

### **Towards a model of PTG and psycho-spiritual transformation**

In their assessment of posttraumatic change in religiosity and spirituality as a component of growth O’Rourke, Tallman, and Altmaier (2008) reviewed 12 instruments including the PTGI. Their findings overwhelmingly suggested the benefit of adding more items to measure spiritual or religious growth factors and to clarify and revise existing items in order to sufficiently capture change in these areas. Furthermore, Shaw et al. (2005) in their discussion about future research make a strong case for the use of a broader more inclusive use of the term “spirituality” which they regard as more important to the understanding of posttraumatic growth. They recommend that the existing PTGI subscale distinguishes “between religion and spirituality” suggesting that it is “probably wrong to combine these two elements” (p. 7).

It is suggested here that Calhoun and Tedeschi’s (2006) general model for personal growth resulting from trauma might usefully be expanded in synthesis with Grof and Grof’s (1989, 1990) understanding of the process of spiritual emergence and emergency in the context of Grof’s (1985, 1998, 2000) holotropic paradigm. They all share a number of principles, processes, tasks and outcomes that could form the foundation for an extension of the PTG model in at least two of its experiential domains.

Both positions draw upon and are underpinned by ancient writings and teachings of spiritual, religious and philosophical traditions. They have an appreciation of existential psychology and an understanding that individuals have a tendency towards to self-actualisation, and positive growth (Grof & Grof, 1989; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004a). Consequently, a common understanding of both theories is that human existence may be positively influenced and subsequently changed by difficult crises and that suffering is negotiated through “psychological or spiritual routes” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, p. 12). These routes which Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) have referred to as “thin places,” “where it is easier to encounter elements from other dimensions of life” (p. 16) lead to realms of transformative and growth experiences which Grof (1985) in his holotropic theory identifies as the “personal,” “transpersonal” and the “perinatal.”

Lancaster and Palframan’s (2009) preliminary process model of transformation provides an example of the way in which transpersonal theory of transformation can further our thinking about the affect of stressful life events on personal growth. As with Grof and Grof, their model shares some fundamental transpersonal principles about the way in which the psyche may reorganise itself and their suggestions that spirituality plays a significant and “supportive” role in “coping,” and that “openness” is an essential

ingredient of a successful process confirming Grof and Grof's observations that transformation and spirituality are symbiotically related in posttraumatic growth (p. 272).

Seen through the lens of transpersonal psychology, Figure 3 illustrates a hypothetically expanded version of Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006) model of PTG, and additions made to the original are highlighted in the text. This version is not offered as a replacement but as a vehicle for discussion and to demonstrate the possibilities of psycho-spiritual transformation and its potential for supporting the process of posttraumatic growth.

### *The struggle and the psyche*

Throughout their work, Calhoun and Tedeschi stress the importance and necessity of struggle with adversity. Both Grof and Grof (1989) and Calhoun and Tedeschi (1995) suggest that personal crises may be precipitated by challenges of unexpected, spontaneous and uncontrollable inner or outer events that leave insufficient time to prepare psychologically. Calhoun and Tedeschi emphasise the impact of "environmental demands," noting that there may be a minimum threshold that needs to be painfully crossed before the event will have enough "seismic power to produce the level of subjective disruption that is required for PTG" to occur (Tedeschi et al., 1998, pp. 215–216), while Grof (1990, 2000), mindful of the power of this experience, balances the influences of external events with the individual's "readiness" to transform. In view of the wide range of triggers, this readiness to make inner changes may in certain instances be more significant than the external stimuli. Another possibility is that the psychological trauma redirects the individual's usually outward oriented focus back into his or her inner world, a process Washburn (2003) calls regression in the service of transcendence. The work of Grof and Grof (1989, 1990) on spiritual emergency suggests that in this process of developmental adjustment the psyche temporarily and powerfully attracts and submerges the ego allowing an opening for the influx of non-ordinary materials, often with spiritual, mythical and archetypal content. Typical of the inverse logic of spiritual language, Grof and Grof (1990) suggest that, "what feels like total destruction of the ego is a broader, more encompassing sense of self" (p. 62).

### *Person pretrauma – personal crises and psychopathology*

It is established that each position accepts that stressful life events can force processes of personal reconstruction, re-evaluation and learning that results in the experience of positive psychological change. Also, that from these processes new material and insights impact upon the individual's philosophy of life challenging or nullifying pre-existing schemas, and that through cognitive processing and meaning-making a new construct of the life narrative and wider worldview are established.

However, both models suggest that the effectiveness of any growth outcome depends upon an individual's functioning pretrauma. The more "adequate" an individual's "pre-episode functioning" (Grof & Grof, 1990, p. 245) the more likelihood there will be of a satisfactory growth outcome (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Indeed, Tedeschi et al.'s, (1998) findings indicate a correlation between mental health and transformation suggesting "persons who experienced a modest degree of control over their lives are more likely to have transformative experiences" (p. 226).

In terms of psycho-spiritual transformation, Johnson and Friedman (2008) confirming the particular importance of assessing pre-episodic functioning, suggest that "If the history

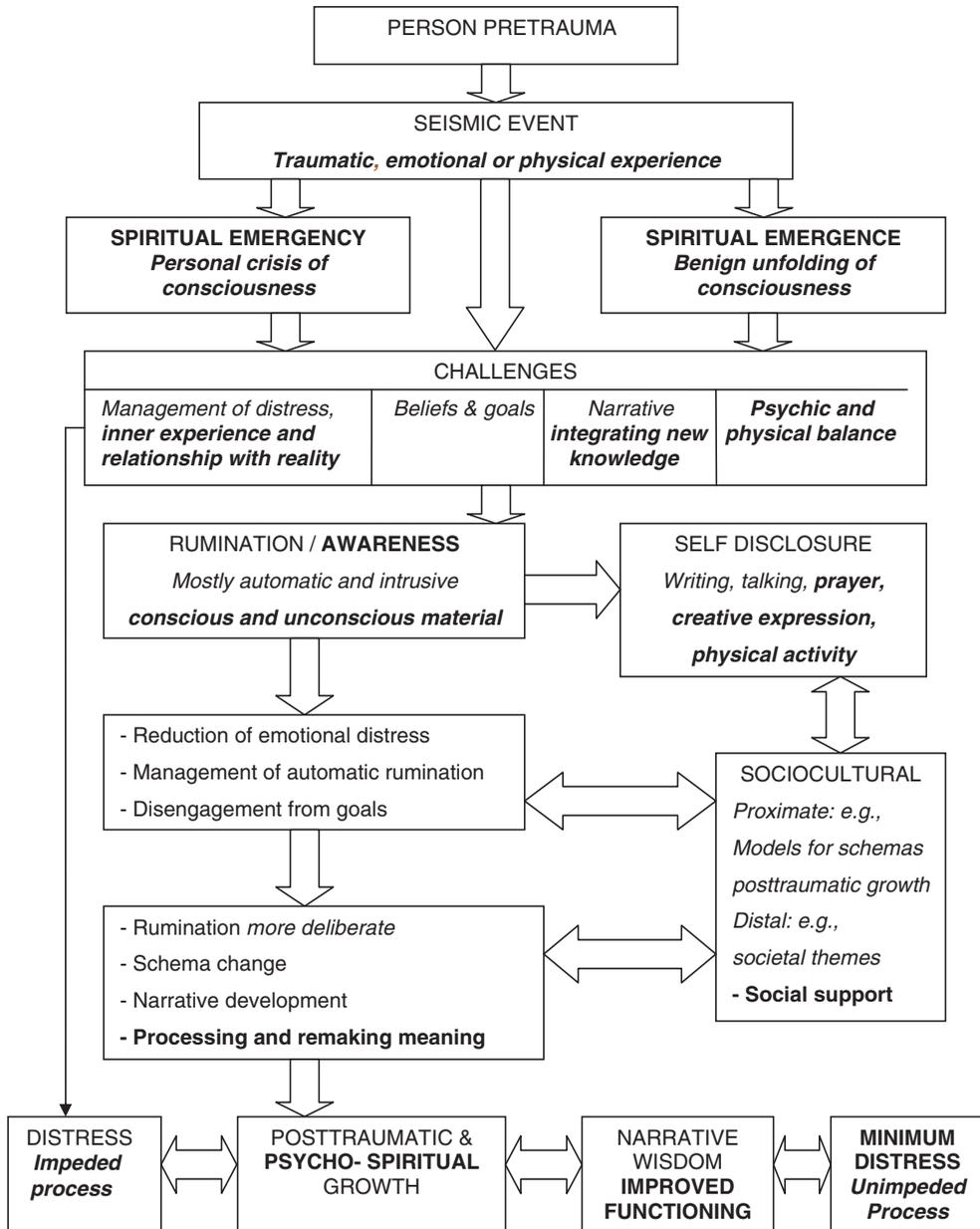


Figure 3. An expanded model of PTG and psycho-spiritual transformation.

demonstrates generally healthy social, psychological, spiritual, and sexual functioning, then the person’s current experience is viewed as psycho-spiritual and suggestive of a positive prognosis” (p. 515).

In the same way that Tedeschi et al. (1998) have been concerned to determine the presence of any relationship between neuroticism and PTG, so Grof and Grof (1990) have been at pains to differentiate between spiritual emergency and psychosis. As non-ordinary

states of consciousness cover a wide spectrum it can make differential diagnosis difficult. In diagnosing spiritual emergency, a full medical examination is necessary to establish if an individual's condition is caused by a recognisable organic source that requires medical attention rather than facilitation and information. Lukoff (1985), stressing good pre-episodic functioning, also suggests that the absence of psychotic episodes and the early emergence of symptoms prior to the experience are also positive predictors of spiritual emergency rather than psychosis. Johnson and Friedman (2008) note that if an individual's daily functioning is significantly hampered or overwhelmed by these experiences then he or she is "probably encountering a spiritual emergency" (p. 515). However, if he or she displays excitement and openness to exploring the experience and a need to share it with others, then it is more likely to be an experience of spiritual emergence.

In short, the struggle with stressful life events is not necessarily a predictor of psychopathological outcomes (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999) as "only a minority of people exposed to traumatic events develop long-standing psychiatric disorders" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004b, p. 58). However, the inclusion of "diagnoses" in this expanded model, rather than indicating an alternative route to growth, suggests, wherever possible, the importance of assessment of both pretrauma and trauma states.

### ***Overcoming challenges: tasks to be accomplished in the process of growth and predictors of a positive outcome***

What each position makes clear is that there are a number of tasks to accomplish in this process of growth and transformation. In the wake of stressful events, the individual is confronted with powerful forces of change, and the life, as it was, becomes difficult to maintain. In the struggle to reconcile themselves to the reality of shattered assumptive worlds, individuals engage in meaning-making activities that might include having to negotiate difficult existential and spiritual questions that permit the construction of a new and coherent life narrative. It is suggested that at the fundamental level of the psyche, individuals are challenged to rebalance themselves in order to relieve intense psychic and physical pain by the integration of this new knowledge and the incorporation of new behaviours, beliefs and goals.

In the initial stages of the process of responding to highly stressful experiences there can be unwanted, disruptive "automatic and intrusive" materials coming into consciousness from those spiritual and existential domains of experience that suddenly and sometimes frighteningly become accessible (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Grof, 2000). Grof and Grof's (1989) conceptualisation of crises as either a danger or opportunity for transformation is echoed in Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2008) comment that for some the struggle may lead to a "much less satisfactory place" while for others it represents "much more than spiritual recovery" experienced as a deeper and more satisfying understanding of place and purpose in the world (p. 35).

It is also generally accepted by both approaches that a positive outcome often relies upon the individual's experiential style, a positive context for the experience, an understanding and acceptance of the process and the availability of informed and consistent social support (Bray, 2008b; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009). Lancaster and Palframan (2009) have noted that clients may practice either "acceptance" or "avoidance coping," the latter allowing the "process to continue to a transforming stage" where openness to the experience has its fullest expression (p. 264). As one might expect, acceptance of an individual's reality and a respect for beliefs can positively assist

transformation and growth (Shaw et al., 2005). Grof and Grof (1990) suggest that a good indication of a positive outcome is the individual's ability to maintain and manage a qualitatively changed but intact intellect and memory throughout the process.

This may include a clear consciousness, good basic orientation and relatively unimpaired coordination alongside a readiness to accept help, and to cooperate, honour and trust in the basic rules of support. Clearly, the individuals' awareness of the intrapsychic nature of the process, a satisfactory ability to manage change between their inner and outer reality and owning the process are also important.

### ***Rumination – turning over in the mind***

Although “rumination” plays an important role in both theories, it is particularly emphasised in PTG as “predictive of improved functioning” (Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2000, p. 526). The process of rumination in PTG between phase 1 and phase 2 is described as automatic in the former, settling to deliberate processing in the latter phase (Tedeschi et al., 1998), which suggests that initially rumination may be driven by unconscious mechanisms regaining equilibrium. Grof and Grof's (1990) suggestion that the individual's openness to exploring the experience as a consistent factor in the successful negotiation of spiritual emergence and emergency is not only confirmed by Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004a) findings but reinforced in Lancaster and Palframan's (2009) recent study that identified an individual's “openness” to transformation as the core category in coping with stressful life events (pp. 264–265). They suggest that a willingness to “let go” accept the “transcendent” and understand the process of transformation as “gradual” enabled participants “to experience the true essence of spirituality in its natural and pure state” (p. 264). Without a willingness to surrender to the process of posttraumatic growth and transformation a satisfactory or enhanced outcome might be difficult to achieve.

Similarly, the approaches describe degrees of arousal and participation in the experience of growth. Grof and Grof distinguish between the benign and transcendent experience of “spiritual emergence” and the more complicated and sometimes painful experience of “spiritual emergency” while Tedeschi et al., (1998) describe “*more gradual* PTG” experiences where there “may be a need to ruminate... but less need to change other aspects of life that have been satisfactory” (p. 230), and a “chronic persistence of unabated intrusive rumination” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, p. 19) which may, it is suggested, reveal characteristics similar to those of spiritual emergency. Consequently, both approaches are concerned to distinguish between experiences in the aftermath of crises that are either manageable or overwhelming for the individual, between those that may require special support and intervention and those that do not. However, as these experiences become easier to negotiate, perhaps because they “have become more salient and less abstract,” they are able to facilitate the construction of new narratives that strengthen purpose and result in a life that is more full, satisfying and meaningful (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004b, p. 58).

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) have suggested that the content of ruminations would be “an appropriate area for further investigation” and that “future studies would fruitfully include a wide array of content” (p. 17). Grof's holotropic cartography of the psyche in its naming of different dimensions of experience and its typology of spiritual experiences might usefully provide a framework from which to explain those ruminations that have a content other than that suggested by the events of the trauma.

### ***Facilitation, social support and the impact of culture***

Nelson (2009) argues that the inclusion of spiritual and religious issues in therapy are “impossible to avoid; a multicultural necessity; a key aspect of the life of the client; a helpful resource to clients for managing their issues; and, a core client issue” (p. 491). Framed in this way it is perhaps not so surprising that the spiritual domain is one in which individuals “can experience significant posttraumatic growth” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, p.117).

Spiritual emergence and PTG are more than intellectual experiences. For those who encounter them they can be profoundly experiential requiring support which is genuine and congruent, non-judgemental and accepting, well-informed and confident about the terrain and empathic in its facilitation (Ankrah, 2002; Grof & Grof, 1989, 1990; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 1999, 2004b). Both approaches stress the importance of facilitating “cognitive processing” and “self-disclosure in supportive environments” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a, p. 11) and pay particular attention to the individual’s culture and beliefs. It is significant that a strong support network comprising family, friends and helping professionals who are able to define the experience as natural, positive, potentially healing, healthy or initiatory is considered one of the three protective factors for spiritual emergence not becoming spiritual emergency (Bragdon, 1988). Ideally, in this case, family, significant friends and helping professionals are regarded as equal partners in their support, and their open attitudes to spiritual emergence and their understanding of the effects on the individual are important factors in healing. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) describe the helper as an “expert companion” who facilitates the PTG process. In spiritual emergence, his helping professional has both a facilitative and an educative function which supports and when necessary steadies the individual’s forward momentum (Bray, 2008b). Recognising that most cultures regard spiritual belief as either desirable or necessary to health and well-being, Grof and Grof (1990) argue for a greater self-awareness in the field of mental health concerning the role that the spiritual dimension of existence plays in the lives and development of clients and helpers. Grof’s general view is that Western culture has sidelined spiritual experiences and that spiritual emergence and emergency go largely unidentified or misdiagnosed (Ankrah, 2002; Bray, 2008a).

While both approaches note the importance of the overall context, the individual’s experiential style, culture and beliefs, and his or her ability to integrate these experiences into everyday life, the psycho-spiritual model places as strong an emphasis on the need for helping professionals to examine their responses to dominant professional discourses regarding spirituality as they impact and shape engagement with clients and influence outcomes. As an example, Jang and LaMendola (2007) examined the relationship between spirituality and posttraumatic growth in a collectivist culture following an earthquake. They found that the workers who were most effective “in terms of their contribution to recovery and growth” were those who adapted their role to accommodate and engage with the survivors’ dominant cultural narratives, which in this case were predominantly expressed as spiritual beliefs (p. 314).

### ***Posttraumatic and psycho-spiritual growth outcomes***

Grof and Grof (1990) agree that the outcome of growth from highly painful experiences although not expected or sought for can often be a “more expanded way of being” (p. 34). Similarly, Tedeschi et al.(1998) suggest that “wisdom,” a form of learning, is achieved which “leads to an enhanced ability to utilize dialectical thinking in understanding life’s

vicissitudes” (p. 233). This represents for both models a level of growth that is “not simply a return to baseline – it is an experience of improvement that for some persons is deeply profound” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a, p. 4). Such experiences are to be valued as opportunities for a life-long process of development rather than limited to an outcome or goal of therapy (Taku et al., 2008). However, on a more cautious note, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004b, 2008) suggest that PTG may only constitute partial recovery as it does not necessarily alleviate coexistent distress. Grof and Grof (1989, 1990) advise that full growth will only occur if the process of transformation is permitted to freely follow its natural course.

## Conclusion

Those who survive stressful life events may need to explain their posttraumatic experiences in spiritual terms that are centrally positioned in a broader framework than is currently available. In their work on grief and posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) suggest that research “widen the focus of the lens” and develop “broader and more comprehensive models” (p. 36). Their positively focussed model of posttraumatic growth provides a valuable framework in which to explore further questions about the relationship between spirituality and growth in the wake of stressful life events. The individual’s struggle to engage in existential questions, meaning-making and the psychological negotiation of change is a challenge to researchers to more finely analyse the spiritual variables associated with posttraumatic growth within a more expansive framework of human development and experience. Transpersonal psychology with its emphasis on spirituality and healthy functioning provides a rich potential resource. It too has been concerned to generate more comprehensive models of human development and Grof’s holotropic approach to psycho-spiritual transformation identifies three important domains of spiritual experience in its rich framework.

As parallel processes of transformation and growth, the models of posttraumatic growth and psycho-spiritual transformation suggest alternative ways of viewing, defining, understanding and managing what is triggered by problematic and choiceless events. It is generally proposed here that established models of posttraumatic growth might usefully act as dynamic hosts around which other models of growth from traditions with allied assumptions but different empirical and theoretical foundations might constellate and *vice versa*. In areas where these paradigms overlap their combined contribution to the field may serve to answer questions about the nature of posttraumatic growth and create further ways to explore this significant area of research.

While it is accepted that additions to a current model should be testable and have clinical utility, blending of this kind might offer the knowledge and benefits of both paradigms, and assist and develop our understanding as researchers and professional helpers of the influence that spiritual dimensions of experience have on the posttraumatic growth processes. More importantly, it provides the opportunity for those who experience posttraumatic growth to understand and manage their experiences in a broader context.

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