

Exploring Posttraumatic Growth in Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse in Sri Lanka

Kartini Booso¹, Pavithra Godamunne²

Posttraumatic growth is a phenomenon that has been observed in survivors of traumatic events, following a period of conscious processing and coming to terms with the experience of trauma. It is defined as a perceived significant positive change experienced within the self, in how the survivor of trauma relates to self, to others, and to life in general. Posttraumatic Growth can occur following a range of traumas, including child sexual abuse. Understanding of the precursory factors to experience of posttraumatic growth has positive implications for caring for victims of trauma, as it allows to replicate these factors in care pathways for positive recovery outcomes. Child sexual abuse is a trauma with a high prevalence in Sri Lanka, and studies suggest that the care pathways have considerable room for improvement in bringing about recovery in the victims. With this intention, a retrospective, qualitative study was conducted with a heterogeneous sample of five adult survivors of child sexual abuse, who reported a self-perception of growth following their traumatic experience. The sample was recruited through a partnership with LEADS, a local NGO that provides care for survivors of child sexual abuse through advocacy initiatives and a residential therapeutic center. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, to understand how the participants perceived their growth following trauma, and to understand the factors that contributed towards this growth, as well as the factors that hindered this growth. The interviews, which were conducted in Sinhalese, were transcribed and subsequently analyzed using the Thematic Analysis method. Five main themes were identified in the collected data set. First, the participants described “Making Sense of Posttraumatic Outcomes”, where participants actively constructed meaning on their trauma, life and growth. A second theme emerged of “Development of Self”, where participants’ sense of self was strengthened. Participants also relayed the theme of “Changing Relationships Post-Trauma”, whereby their relationships impacted their growth, and the participants’ way of relating to others changed post-trauma. The theme “Socio-Demographic Influences to Growth”, drew insight on how factors such as socioeconomic status and education could mediate growth experiences. The final theme that emerged strongly was the “Need for Improved Care for Survivors”, which highlighted the poor standard of current care pathways, and the need to better support survivors by delivering effective interventions through competent staff. The identified themes of the study provide direct implications for clinical practice. Implications and recommendations for stakeholders include offering counseling and psychosocial support to all survivors, addressing the competence of staff that engage with survivors through the NCPA care pathway, and calls for a shift in policy – whereby larger budgetary allocations are made to improve care of child survivors, and to enforcing and upholding the guidelines for care of survivors. A need for further research is recognized on understanding posttraumatic growth, as well as in identifying effective interventions and therapeutic programs which could be beneficial for survivors.

Keywords: Posttraumatic Growth, Child Sexual Abuse, Sri Lanka; Resilience, Child Protection

¹ University of West London, London, United Kingdom; kartini.booso.1805@gmail.com

² Department of Medical Education, Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka