

Resilience Expectations

A Source of Hope or Harm?

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The concept of resiliency remains theoretically contested, lacking a uniform or broadly accepted definition. Yet, dominant narratives continue to assert that adversity and trauma inevitably lead to strength and personal growth. A critical review of the literature on resiliency and posttraumatic growth reveals that discussions of resiliency, particularly in the context of military trauma and stress, often neglect the emotional complexities of these experiences. In suicide prevention and military mental health discourse, this omission may contribute to expectations of healing that could inadvertently cause harm rather than foster resilience. By acknowledging that the path from trauma to resilience is neither linear nor devoid of emotional distress, caregivers can promote realistic, improved outcomes for service members and their families.

From Nietzsche's famous aphorism, "Out of life's school of war—What does not destroy me, makes me stronger," to pop singer Kelly Clarkson's 2012 hit "Stronger (What Doesn't Kill You)," recurring messages are told that pain and suffering may hold transformative value.¹ These ideas often echo themes of finding a silver lining or following the narrative of biblical redemption, suggesting that enduring hardship can eventually lead to something good, even amidst trauma.

In one study that highlights how humans create meaning by crafting narrative identities, people are shown to naturally organize their experiences into stories, often emphasizing challenges, setbacks, and the ways they have overcome adversity.² One common theme another analysis identifies is the "redemption sequence," where negative experiences are reframed into opportunities for growth and positive outcomes.³ This idea resonates across cultures and is evident in many of the myths and stories told around the world.

Joseph Campbell popularized the framework of the hero's journey, or the monomyth, which outlines a recurring narrative structure: the protagonist receives a call to adventure, faces tests and trials, endures ordeals, embarks on the road back, and undergoes transformation.⁴ This journey serves as a metaphor for personal growth, resilience, and self-discovery.

There is growing recognition that resiliency plays a critical role in how individuals adapt to stressful life events. Resiliency serves as a protective factor against suicide by

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophise with the Hammer*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Viking, 1954), 467.

2. Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/>.

3. McAdams.

4. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

enabling individuals to effectively cope with adversity, reducing feelings of hopelessness and despair.⁵ Furthermore, resilient individuals typically possess stronger social support networks and problem-solving skills, factors associated with decreased suicidal ideation and behavior.⁶ While research on resilience dates back nearly a century, it gained significant momentum around the turn of the twenty-first century with the rise of positive psychology.⁷ The concept of “bouncing back” from adversity became a central focus in positive psychology.⁸

Various models have since emerged to address resilience in different contexts, including the sporting resiliency model for athletes, the resiliency wheel for educators, the adaptive capacity model for workplaces and organizations, and a resilience model tailored to the military context.⁹ The field of resiliency research has expanded due to both scientific inquiry and practical applications, crossing disciplines and offering hope and inspiration to those facing adversity. These efforts reflect an ongoing search for models to explain human resiliency in all aspects of life.

Despite widespread use of the term, a uniform definition of *resiliency* has yet to be broadly accepted. Through a critical review of the existing literature on resiliency and posttraumatic growth, this article argues that discussions of resiliency, particularly in the context of military trauma and stress, often neglect the emotional complexities that accompany these experiences. In suicide prevention and military mental health discourse, this omission may contribute to undue pressure for service members to bounce back from difficult experiences or challenging circumstances—expectations that could inadvertently cause harm rather than foster genuine resilience. By acknowledging that the path from trauma to resilience is neither linear nor devoid of extreme emotional distress—including, for some, a profound loss of hope for the future—military leaders and caregivers can promote more realistic and better outcomes for service members and their families.

5. Judith Johnson et al., “Resilience to Suicidality: The Buffering Hypothesis,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 31, no. 4 (2011), <https://doi.org/>.

6. R. D. Overall, K. J. Altrows, and B. L. Paulson, “Creating a Future: A Study of Resilience in Suicidal Female Adolescents,” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 84, no. 4 (2006), <https://psycnet.apa.org/>.

7. Martin E. P. Seligman and M. Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000), <https://doi.org/>.

8. Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (Atria Books, 2011).

9. Sahen Gupta and Paul Joseph McCarthy, “The Sporting Resiliency Model: A Systematic Review of Resilience in Sport Performers,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022), <https://doi.org/>; Nan Henderson and Mike Milstein, *Resiliency in Schools: Making It Happen for Students and Educators* (Corwin Press, 1996); Cynthia A. Lengnick-Hall, Tammy E. Beck, and Mark L. Lengnick-Hall, “Developing a Capacity for Organizational Resilience through Strategic Human Resource Management,” *Human Resource Management Review* 21, no. 3 (2011), <https://doi.org/>; and Steven M. Southwick et al., “Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/>.

Three Waves of Resiliency Models

The history of the study of resiliency helps to provide context for understanding the concept and for coming to a general consensus on the definition of the term itself. Resiliency inquiry is understood to have emerged in three distinct waves.¹⁰

Resilient Qualities (1970s–1990s)

The first wave, Resilient Qualities, focused on studying survivors, primarily children, living in high-risk situations and sought to answer the question, What characteristics are needed to thrive in the face of adversity? This produced a list of internal and external qualities of individuals who bounced back from setbacks. A foundational study examined children who thrived despite multiple risk factors, highlighting personal characteristics such as being female, robust, socially responsible, adaptive, tolerant, achievement-oriented, good communicators, and possessing strong self-esteem.¹¹

Similarly, a separate study of inner-city London youth identified resilient individuals as those with an easy temperament, a positive school climate, self-mastery, self-efficacy, planning skills, and warm, close relationships with adults.¹² Another significant contribution came from a study of children of parents diagnosed with schizophrenia, which found that those who became healthy adults shared qualities such as high expectations, a positive outlook, strong self-esteem, an internal locus of control, self-discipline, problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and a sense of humor.¹³ Other studies both within and after this wave generated additional lists of personal traits that enhanced resiliency. A more recent example comes from the field of positive psychology, which describes resilient qualities such as optimism, faith, self-determination, wisdom, excellence, and creativity.¹⁴ Overall, the first wave of resiliency inquiry helped identify assets and personal strengths of those who demonstrate resilience.

Resiliency Process (1990s–2000s)

The second wave of inquiry, the Resiliency Process, presents a simple linear model of resilient qualities as a function of conscious and unconscious choices.¹⁵ It focuses on the question, How are resilient qualities acquired? This resiliency model depicts a series of steps

10. Glenn E. Richardson, "The Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58, no. 3 (2002), <https://doi.org/>.

11. Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith, *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood* (Cornell University Press, 1992).

12. M. Rutter, "Resilience in the Face of Adversity: Protective Factors and Resistance to Psychiatric Disorder," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 147 (1985), <https://doi.org/>.

13. Norman Garmezy, "Resiliency and Vulnerability to Adverse Developmental Outcomes Associated with Poverty," *American Behavioral Scientist* 34, no. 4 (1991), <https://doi.org/>.

14. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology."

15. G. E. Richardson et al., "The Resiliency Model," *Health Education* 21, no. 6 (1990), <https://doi.org/>.

an individual completes to become resilient. Ideally, a person is in a state of biopsychospiritual homeostasis or has adapted physically, mentally, and spiritually to their circumstances. Yet, as life will bring, there are stressors, adversity, or life events that can threaten that homeostasis. Protective factors, such as those found in the first wave of resiliency inquiry, along with environmental and relational factors are used to address these life events. If protective factors are insufficient or stressors large enough, homeostasis is upset, and the person enters a phase of disruption. This model of resiliency then states that an individual has a choice in reintegrating from that disruption to come back to homeostasis. It acknowledges that lower functioning, to include dysfunctional reintegration, can occur, resulting in poorer outcomes compared to pre-adversity.

This model, however, also presents that growth can occur from adversity and disruption and can create resilient reintegration. This resilience from hardship helps to build protective factors that then help the person address future life events, making them more resilient. The Resiliency Process optimistically encourages disruptions as they can lead to insights and growth, or resiliency. Resilient reintegration states that individuals cannot only cope with disruption but can also grow and adapt through them.¹⁶

The second wave of resiliency inquiry includes the concept of innate resilience, which elicits some skepticism among scholars because it characterizes resilience as innate and static, ignores environmental and contextual factors, and thereby limits the potential for practical interventions aimed at improving resiliency.¹⁷ It asks the question, What and where is the energy source or motivation to reintegrate resiliently? One study uses the disciplines of philosophy, physics, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and theology to support the theory that humans have energy or resiliency.¹⁸ This theory states that there is a force within each individual that seeks self-actualization, altruism, wisdom, and harmony. This force is resiliency. The theory posits an innate self-righting mechanism that is the capacity for all humans to change and transform regardless of their risks.¹⁹ Although the emergence of this perspective coincided with the postmodern era, it fundamentally addresses humanity's innate ability to endure and thrive, which has roots in centuries-old philosophical discourse.

Resiliency as Systems-Based and Multilevel (2000s–present)

The third wave of resiliency inquiry, Resiliency as a Systems-Based and Multilevel Concept, expands beyond the individual to consider ecological, cultural, and systemic

16. Richardson.

17. Michael Ungar, "The Social Ecology of Resilience: Addressing Contextual and Cultural Ambiguity of a Nascent Construct," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 81, no. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/>; and Ann S. Masten, *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development* (The Guilford Press, 2014).

18. Ken Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul: Integrating Science and Religion* (Random House, 1998); and A. S. Masten, "Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development," *American Psychologist* 56, no. 3 (2001), <https://doi.org/>.

19. Werner and Smith, *Overcoming the Odds*; and Robert J. Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (Basic Books, 1995).

influences on resilience. Social networks, policies, and cultural context are key to fostering resilience. The social ecological model of resilience envisions resiliency as a series of nested circles with biological systems at the core and psychological systems, the social environment, the built environment, and the natural environment, respectively, representing the outer rings.²⁰ Together these overlap to represent the complex system of influences. The model helps operationalize resiliency in the context of social and physical ecologies for individuals who encounter significant amounts of stress.²¹

These waves of resiliency inquiry did not end when the new wave emerged; rather, they continued and evolved, influencing each other. Each wave expanded the understanding of resilience rather than replacing previous perspectives. Contemporary resilience research recognizes and often integrates the insights from all three waves, reflecting a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach. This is true for the military as well.

Resilience is a key concept in military doctrine, yet its definition and application vary across different branches and strategic documents. Department of the Air Force Instruction (DAFI) 90-5001, *Integrated Resilience*, emphasizes resilience as a proactive and holistic approach, integrating mental, physical, social, and spiritual well-being to sustain readiness.²² The Space Force, in particular, has challenged traditional definitions of resilience as merely bouncing back, instead promoting the concept of “bouncing forward” to reflect growth and adaptation in the face of adversity.²³ The Department of Defense’s 2024 *Strategy for Resilient and Healthy Defense Communities* further reinforces resilience as a critical component of force readiness, linking it directly to mental health and suicide prevention efforts.²⁴ Understanding resilience through a military lens is essential for leaders, as it informs both personal well-being and the ability to cultivate strength within their teams.

This article argues, however, that in an environment where strength and toughness are highly valued, service members may feel compelled to suppress struggles with mental health, stress, or trauma as military guidance and instruction put forth an expectation of resilience. While resilience is a crucial trait in military culture, the pressure to always appear resilient can have unintended negative consequences. Additionally, this expectation may be based on conflicting science.

20. Michael Ungar and Linda Theron, “Resilience and Mental Health: How Multisystemic Processes Contribute to Positive Outcomes,” *The Lancet Psychiatry* 7, no. 5 (2020), <https://www.thelancet.com/>.

21. Ungar, “Social Ecology.”

22. Department of the Air Force (DAF) Instruction 90-5001, *Integrated Resilience* (DAF, 23 July 2024), <https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/>.

23. *The Guardian Ideal* (US Space Force, 17 September 2021), 18, <https://www.resilience.af.mil/>.

24. M. J. Bates and S. V. Bowles, “Review of Well-being in the Context of Suicide Prevention and Resilience,” *NATO Research and Technology Organisation Meeting Proceedings* RTO-MP-HFM-205 (2011), <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

The Science Is Not So Clear

Resilience has been studied and defined as being a trait, an outcome, or a process. Research has suggested that there are different pathways to growth following adversity. In 1996, scholars introduced the concept of posttraumatic growth (PTG) to describe the positive changes individuals experience as a result of struggling with highly challenging events or trauma.²⁵ They conceptualized trauma not only as a potential source of psychological harm but also a potential catalyst for meaning and transformation. Some of the significant changes associated with posttraumatic growth include discovering personal strength and improved relationships characterized by deeper connections and empathy.²⁶ Posttraumatic growth has also been associated with a reevaluation of priorities and meaning in life; spiritual growth, including a stronger sense of purpose and existential insights; and a newfound appreciation of life, with heightened awareness of life's everyday joys.²⁷

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing body of research on the concept of resilience, accompanied by some confusion.²⁸ There is no uniform or widely accepted definition of resiliency, and its theoretical foundation remains controversial.²⁹ Is resilience a characteristic or personal quality, a process, or an outcome?³⁰ Other scholars argue that resilience is not an individual trait but rather a dynamic process involving interactions between the individual and their environment.³¹ Critics highlight issues such as ambiguous

25. R. G. Tedeschi and L. G. Calhoun, "The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the Positive Legacy of Trauma," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9, no. 3 (1996), <https://doi.org/>.

26. P. Alex Linley and Stephen Joseph, "Positive Change Following Trauma and Adversity: A Review," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 17, no. 1 (2005), <https://doi.org/>; C. L. Park and J. R. Fenster, "Stress-Related Growth: Predictors Of Occurrence and Correlates with Psychological Adjustment," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 23, no. 2 (2004), <https://psycnet.apa.org/>; R. G. Tedeschi and L. G. Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," *Psychological Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (2004), <https://www.jstor.org/>; and Xuan Wang et al., "Social Support, Posttraumatic Growth, and Prosocial Behaviors Among Adolescents Following a Flood: The Mediating Roles of Belief in a Just World and Empathy," *Current Psychology* 42 (2022), <https://doi.org/>.

27. Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth"; Kelli N. Triplett et al., "Posttraumatic Growth, Meaning in Life, and Life Satisfaction in Response to Trauma," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 4, no. 4 (2012), <https://doi.org/>; Park and Fenster, "Stress-Related Growth"; and Annick Shaw, Stephen Joseph, and P. Alex Linley, "Religion, Spirituality, and Posttraumatic Growth: A Systematic Review," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 8, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/>.

28. K. Kolar, "Resilience: Revisiting the Concept and its Utility for Social Research," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 9, no. 4 (2011), <https://doi.org/>.

29. Kolar; and Suniya S. Luthar, Dante Cicchetti, and Bronwyn Becker, "The Construct of Resilience: A Critical Evaluation and Guidelines for Future Work," *Child Development* 71, no. 3 (2003), <https://doi.org/>.

30. Nancy R. Ahern, Pamela Ark, and Jacqueline Byers, "Resilience and Coping Strategies in Adolescents," *Pediatric Nursing* 20 (2008), <https://doi.org/>.

31. M. Rutter, "Resilience, Competence, and Coping," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 31, no. 3 (2007), <https://psycnet.apa.org/>; and S. Masten and M. O. Wright, "Resilience over the Lifespan: Developmental Perspectives on Resistance, Recovery, and Transformation," in *Handbook of Adult Resilience*, ed. J. W. Reich, A. J. Zautra, and J. S. Hall (The Guilford Press, 2010).

definitions, heterogeneity in experiences of individuals identified as resilient, and concerns about the usefulness of resilience as a theoretical construct.³²

Additionally, many existing theories on PTG and resilience have received modest empirical investigation, and many suffer from a lack of credibility and reliability.³³ The research on posttraumatic growth often asks individuals to estimate how much they have changed in the positive as a result of their trauma. Yet retrospective self-reports of growth are frequently inaccurate, as individuals struggle to accurately recall what they were like before the traumatic event.³⁴ Further, participants are asked to attribute their perceived changes solely to the adverse life event. This involves complex mental processes, which can impact accuracy.³⁵ Personality psychologists have shown that actual pre-post change is often weakly correlated with individuals' self-perceptions of change over time.³⁶ Additionally, researchers have found that some individuals report personal growth when they are, in reality, struggling.³⁷ Discrepancies also arise when comparing self-reports of PTG with assessments from friends and family, which often do not align, raising questions about the validity and meaning of self-reported growth after trauma.³⁸ While change occurs after experiencing a traumatic event, it is not always quantifiable as growth.³⁹ This highlights the need for more nuanced and objective measures of posttraumatic change.

Case Studies

Another reason to question the empirical support for posttraumatic growth and resilience is that many studies have shown that when adversity strikes, people do not change significantly

32. Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker, "Construct of Resilience."

33. Jaye Wald et al., *Literature Review of Concepts: Psychological Resiliency* (Defence R & D Canada – Toronto, 2006), <https://apps.dtic.mil/>; and Eranda Jayawickreme and Frank J. Infurna, "Toward a More Credible Understanding of Post-Traumatic Growth," *Journal of Personality* 89, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/>.

34. Meghan Owenz and Blaine J. Fowers, "Perceived Post-Traumatic Growth May Not Reflect Actual Positive Change: A Short-Term Prospective Study of Relationship Dissolution," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36, no. 10 (2018), <https://doi.org/>.

35. J. D. Ford, H. Tennen, and D. Albert, "A Contrarian View of Growth Following Adversity," in *Trauma, Recovery, and Growth: Positive Psychological Perspectives on Posttraumatic Stress*, ed. S. Joseph and P. A. Linley (John Wiley, 2008).

36. J. H. Herbst et al., "Self-perceptions of Stability and Change in Personality at Midlife: The UNC Alumni Heart Study," *Assessment* 7, no. 4 (2000), <https://doi.org/>; and Richard W. Robins et al., "Do People Know How Their Personality Has Changed? Correlates of Perceived and Actual Personality Change in Young Adulthood," *Journal of Personality* 73, no. 2 (2005), <https://doi.org/>.

37. Iris M. Engelhard, Miriam J. J. Lommen, and Marit Sijbrandij, "Changing for Better or Worse? Post-traumatic Growth Reported by Soldiers Deployed to Iraq," *Clinical Psychological Science* 3, no. 5 (2014), <https://doi.org/>.

38. Vicki S. Helgeson, "Corroboration of Growth Following Breast Cancer: Ten Years Later," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 29, no. 5 (2010), <https://doi.org/>.

39. Patricia Frazier et al., "Does Self-Reported Posttraumatic Growth Reflect Genuine Positive Change?," *Psychological Science* 20, no. 7 (2009), <https://doi.org/>.

over time, or they may experience increased adversity as time progresses.⁴⁰ Additionally, some research suggests that PTG, or the expectation of growth after trauma, might have effects contrary to the positive outcomes often highlighted, challenging the optimistic narrative promoted by other studies.

A seminal 2009 study of 1,500 undergraduate students over eight weeks examined the experiences of 122 students who reported a traumatic event that caused high levels of distress. These students completed the standard posttraumatic growth inventory used to measure PTG.⁴¹ The study found that students who perceived growth were associated with increased distress from pre- to post-trauma. Moreover, perceived growth was not correlated with measures of actual growth or improvements in well-being.

A seven-year longitudinal study of 84 breast cancer survivors in Taiwan found that those who engaged in an illusory PTG coping process exhibited more anxiety and depressive symptoms, greater hopelessness/helplessness coping, and more anxious/preoccupation coping compared to those with constructive PTG.⁴² Constructive PTG reflects a realistic adaptation process that acknowledges the changes and impact of trauma; whereas, illusory PTG involves attempting to maintain psychological equilibrium through self-deceptive perceptions of positive changes. In other words, individuals with illusory PTG may act as if everything is fine, denying or suppressing their negative emotions while reporting perceived positive growth, which is associated with harmful long-term outcomes.

A longitudinal study specific to the military involved 479 Royal Netherlands Army infantry soldiers and assessed them four months before deploying to Iraq and again five months and 15 months post-deployment.⁴³ Soldiers who reported greater perceived growth from their experiences in Iraq at five months post-deployment exhibited more posttraumatic stress symptoms at 15 months post-deployment.

The implications of this last study are important, particularly because it occurs among military members. The tendency to emphasize the importance of self-growth in response to traumatic events may actually be counterproductive to a military member's well-being, leading to more harm than good. In this case certainly, what does not kill an individual does not necessarily make them stronger. In fact, the pressure to be stronger may be what actually kills.

40. Edward B. Davis et al., "Religious Meaning Making and Attachment in a Disaster Context: A Longitudinal Qualitative Study of Flood Survivors," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 14, no. 5 (2019), <https://doi.org/>; Robert Joseph Ursano and James Ray Rundell, "The Prisoner of War," *Military Medicine* 155, no. 4 (1990), <https://doi.org/>; Cristina A. Fernandez et al., "Assessing the Relationship Between Psychosocial Stressors and Psychiatric Resilience Among Chilean Disaster Survivors," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 217, no. 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/>; and Andrew Rakhshani and R. Michael Furr, "The Reciprocal Impacts of Adversity and Personality Traits: A Prospective Longitudinal Study of Growth, Change, and the Power of Personality," *Journal of Personality* 89, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/>.

41. Frazier et al., "Self-Reported."

42. Chih-Tao Cheng, Ging-Long Wang, and Samuel M. Y. Ho, "The Relationship Between Types of Posttraumatic Growth and Prospective Psychological Adjustment in Women with Breast Cancer: A Follow-up Study," *Psycho-Oncology* 29, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/>.

43. Engelhard, Lommen, and Sijbrandij, "Changing."

Posttraumatic Growth: A Cautionary Tale

Author and minister Norman Vincent Peale once stated that the reason why the world is full of problems is to help individuals grow strong enough to handle even greater challenges. He explained that the only way to make a man strong is through resistance, struggle, pain, frustration, and disappointment.⁴⁴ This “strong man trope” is prevalent in Euro-American culture and psychological research. Messages of posttraumatic growth and resilience often reinforce this narrative of triumphing over adversity. This is also true in military war stories or portraits of military heroes. While many individuals who experience genuine change after trauma tend to have better quality mental health outcomes, research suggests that merely perceiving change or faking it after an adverse event can lead to higher levels of mental distress.⁴⁵

The idea that people who experience trauma will ultimately benefit from it is compelling and is often promoted as a pathway to recovery. It suggests that suffering is necessary to become the best version of oneself. Some may argue that this model gives people hope and inspiration. Others question if it demands that people who are suffering not only have to survive the trauma but also must show evidence that they have come out stronger on the other side.⁴⁶ This pressure may interfere with an individual's efforts to seek help when they are not coping well or when they are losing hope.

Aligned with this idea, studies have found that self-reports of posttraumatic growth are often associated with avoidance coping, which involves engaging in behaviors such as procrastination to avoid stressors; denial coping, which entails refusing to accept the reality of a situation; and negative religious coping, which generally involves some struggle or conflict with finding meaning in life or with the idea of the divine.⁴⁷ Additionally, PTG does not relate to forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, or self-efficacy, but it is related to less psychological closure of the event.⁴⁸ The expectation of resilience after trauma may pressure those who are struggling to conceal their difficulties out of fear of being perceived as weak, broken, or lacking resilience.

44. Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking: A Practical Guide for Mastering the Problems of Everyday Living* (Touchstone, 1952).

45. Frazier et al., “Self-Reported.”

46. Shankar Vedantam, host, *Hidden Brain*, podcast, “Healing 2.0: What We Gain from Pain,” 6 November 2023, <https://hiddenbrain.org/>.

47. Adriel Boals and Keke L. Schuler, “Reducing Reports of Illusory Posttraumatic Growth: A Revised Version of the Stress-Related Growth Scale (SRGS-R),” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 10, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/>; M. M. Gerber, A. Boals, and D. Schuettler, “The Unique Contributions of Positive and Negative Religious Coping to Posttraumatic Growth and PTSD,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 3, no. 4 (2011), <https://doi.org/>; and Charlotte Henson, Didier Truchot, and Amy Canevello, “What Promotes Post-Traumatic Growth? A Systematic Review,” *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 5, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/>.

48. Darnell Schuettler and Adriel Boals, “The Path to Posttraumatic Growth Versus Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Contributions of Event Centrality and Coping,” *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 16, no. 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/>.

Fixing the Growth Illusion

The expectation of growth after suffering can intensify the burden for those already struggling. Trauma and suffering do not always result in growth, and when they do, the process rarely follows a predictable or linear path.⁴⁹ The pressure to appear “okay” or to demonstrate progress can exacerbate mental health challenges, increase suicidal thoughts, and diminish hope. Promoting the idea of growth after trauma may also compel individuals to claim growth they have not experienced, out of fear of being perceived as broken or ungrateful. Perpetuating the belief that trauma should leave one stronger or unchanged risks deepening pain and fostering isolation.

Imagine a service member grappling with the adverse effects of deployment. He struggles with sleep and appetite, finds it difficult to concentrate at work, and faces instability in his personal relationships. He has attended resilience training and internalized the message that hardship builds strength and “iron sharpens iron.”⁵⁰ Yet, as he observes others in his unit appearing to cope well, he begins to question himself. If resilience is expected, why is he struggling? He may start to believe that something is inherently wrong with him, that he is weak. This sense of inadequacy may lead him to withdraw, reluctant to admit his struggles for fear of being seen as lacking the strength to be resilient. After all, hard times are supposed to make him stronger. Yet, the emotional, cognitive, and social distress he experiences, combined with the pressure to grow from trauma, can deepen his isolation, a key risk factor for poor mental health outcomes and an increased risk of death by suicide.

DOD guidance on service member readiness and suicide prevention emphasizes fostering resilience to support the overall well-being of military personnel. While acknowledging the complexity of resilience, such guidance often adheres to the notion that trauma and suffering inherently lead to greater strength. A glance at the stories of resilience on the Air Force’s Integrated Resilience website reveals the hero’s journey narrative frequently applied to service members.⁵¹ While hope and the belief that resilience is possible are crucial, resilience is not simply about bouncing forward. It requires recognition of the challenges that come before growth can occur.

In stories and movies, the hero does not instantly move from the challenge to growth. The plot in the middle makes the story, and this is the reality for humans. Without the details of the struggle it is not a believable journey. A more nuanced approach to resilience must account for the struggles that precede recovery, rather than assuming strength is the inevitable, required outcome of hardship.

An alternative approach to the expectation of growth after trauma is to focus on the reality of cognitive and emotional responses to adversity.⁵² Instead of hoping for or expecting growth after disruption, acknowledging the pain and confusion of disruption

49. Jayawickreme and Infurna, “Post-Traumatic Growth.”

50. Prov. 27:17, New International Version.

51. DAF Integrated Resilience (website), accessed 12 March 2025, <https://www.resilience.af.mil/>.

52. Jayawickreme and Infurna, “Post-Traumatic Growth.”

is both more realistic and more humane. Trauma from certain tragedies, such as the death of a child or spouse or the realities of war, may never fully fade nor help bring about greater strength in an individual, and this is not a sign of weakness but a reflection of the human condition.

For some, simply returning to their pre-trauma state or having the will to live with the new posttraumatic state may be an aspirational goal. Normalizing the profound emotional and psychological pain of trauma may do more to support recovery than promoting expectations of growth. Recognizing that trauma challenges personal values, religious beliefs, emotional regulation, and persistent ruminations can help survivors understand that their responses are typical and valid. This understanding may also increase the willingness to seek help, especially when living for the future with their new reality seems hopeless.

Rather than emphasizing messages like “this is an opportunity to learn,” survivors might benefit more from reassurances such as “the pain you feel makes sense,” “others experience this, too,” and “what you’re going through is understandable.” These supportive messages can help individuals focus on their immediate needs and priorities, reducing the tendency to isolate themselves in their suffering or the shame of not growing from the pain. A military culture of resilience may reinforce messages that struggling makes one stronger, but resilience is not simply enduring hardship. Overemphasizing self-reliance and underemphasizing emotional struggles may cause service members to suppress distress, fearing that admitting difficulties is a sign of weakness rather than part of the resilience process.

The service member in the above scenario recalls only part of the biblical proverb, “As iron sharpens iron.” The other half, “so one person sharpens another,” underscores the importance of community and mutual support in fostering strength.⁵³ Importantly, this message affirms that humans are inherently vulnerable and require connection with others to thrive; they are not meant to cope and grow in isolation. Military leaders, caregivers, and helping agencies are key in this process toward resiliency. Research suggests that resilience is not simply about enduring hardship but also about facing disruptions, reflecting on them, and integrating them into one’s life narrative.⁵⁴ Such findings indicate that this process has a more profound impact on long-term well-being and agency than the expectation of resilience alone. By accepting life’s changes, including trauma, individuals can develop a sense of agency that enables them to preserve hope for a life worth living. ➤✱

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53. Prov. 27:17.

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