

The Surprising Benefit of Going Through Hard Times by Carolyn Gregoire

This excerpt is from the new book *Wired to Create: Unravelling the Mysteries of the Creative Mind*, by psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman and HuffPost Senior Writer Carolyn Gregoire.

One of Frida Kahlo's most famous self-portraits depicts her in a hospital bed connected by a web of red veins to floating objects that include a snail, a flower, bones, and a fetus. *Henry Ford Hospital*, the 1932 surrealist painting, is a powerful artistic rendering of Kahlo's second miscarriage.

Kahlo wrote in her diaries that the painting "carries with it the message of pain." The painter was known for channeling the experience of multiple miscarriages, childhood polio, and a number of other misfortunes into her iconic self-portraits, and a real understanding of her work requires some knowledge of the suffering that motivated it.

The phenomenon of art born from adversity can be seen not only in the lives of famous creators, but also in the lab. In the past 20 years, psychologists have begun studying post-traumatic growth, which has now been observed in more than 300 scientific studies.

The term post-traumatic growth was coined in the 1990s by psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun to describe instances of individuals who experienced profound transformation as they coped with various types of trauma and challenging life circumstances. Up to 70 percent of trauma survivors report some positive psychological growth, research has found.

Growth after trauma can take a number of different forms, including a greater appreciation for life, the identification of new possibilities for one's life, more satisfying interpersonal relationships, a richer spiritual life and a connection to something greater than oneself, and a sense of personal strength. A battle with cancer, for instance, can result in a renewed gratitude for one's family, while a near-death experience could be a catalyst for connecting with a more spiritual side of life. Psychologists have found that experiences of trauma also commonly lead to increased empathy and altruism, and a motivation to act for the benefit of others.

Life After Trauma

So how is it that out of suffering we can come to not only return to our baseline state but to deeply improve our lives? And why are some people crushed by trauma, while others thrive? Tedeschi and Calhoun explain that post-traumatic growth, in whatever form it takes, can be "an experience of improvement that is for some persons deeply profound."

The two University of North Carolina researchers created the most accepted model of

post-traumatic growth to date, which holds that people naturally develop and rely on a set of beliefs and assumptions that they've formed about the world, and in order for growth to occur after a trauma, the traumatic event must deeply challenge those beliefs. By Tedeschi and Calhoun's account, the way that trauma shatters our worldviews, beliefs, and identities is like an earthquake—even our most foundational structures of thought and belief crumble to pieces from the magnitude of the impact. We are shaken, almost literally, from our ordinary perception, and left to rebuild ourselves and our worlds. The more we are shaken, the more we must let go of our former selves and assumptions, and begin again from the ground up.

“A psychologically seismic event can severely shake, threaten, or reduce to rubble many of the schematic structures that have guided understanding, decision making, and meaningfulness,” they write.

The physical rebuilding of a city that takes place after an earthquake can be likened to the cognitive processing and restructuring that an individual experiences in the wake of a trauma. Once the most foundational structures of the self have been shaken, we are in a position to pursue new—and perhaps creative—opportunities.

The “rebuilding” process looks something like this: After a traumatic event, such as a serious illness or loss of a loved one, individuals intensely process the event—they're constantly thinking about what happened, and usually with strong emotional reactions.

It's important to note that sadness, grief, anger, and anxiety, of course, are common responses to trauma, and growth generally occurs alongside these challenging emotions—not in place of them. The process of growth can be seen as a way to adapt to extremely adverse circumstances and to gain an understanding of both the trauma and its negative psychological impact.

Rebuilding can be an incredibly challenging process. The work of growth requires detaching from and releasing deep-seated goals, identities, and assumptions, while also building up new goals, schemas, and meanings. It can be grueling, excruciating, and exhausting. But it can open the door to a new life. The trauma survivor begins to see herself as a thriver and revises her self-definition to accommodate her new strength and wisdom. She may reconstruct herself in a way that feels more authentic and true to her inner self and to her own unique path in life.

Creative Growth

Out of loss, there can be creative gain. Of course, it's important to note that trauma is neither necessary nor sufficient for creativity. Experiences of trauma in any form are tragic and psychologically devastating, no matter what type of creative growth occurs in their aftermath. These experiences can just as easily lead to long-term loss as gain. Indeed, loss and gain, suffering and growth, often co-occur.

Because adverse events force us to reexamine our beliefs and priorities, they can help us break out of habitual ways of thinking and thereby boost creativity, explains Marie Forgeard, a psychologist at McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School, who has done extensive research into post-traumatic growth and creativity.

“We're forced to reconsider things we took for granted, and we're forced to think about new things,” says Forgeard. “Adverse events can be so powerful that they force us to think about questions we never would have thought of otherwise.”

Creativity can even become a sort of coping mechanism after a difficult experience. Some people might find that the experience of adversity forces them to question their basic assumptions about the world and therefore to think more creatively. Others might find that they have a new (or renewed) motivation to spend time engaged in creative activities. And others who already had a strong interest in creative work may turn to creativity as the main way of rebuilding their lives.