**Experts in post-traumatic growth say devastating events can make you stronger.**

At 16, my nephew Kent—a funny, hard-working Indiana farm kid—was taken by a wildfire-fast leukemia. The cancer spread with such ferocity, he died within 24 hours of being diagnosed, and probably, the doctors speculated, mere months from the time it took hold. In those boggy, quicksand weeks that followed, as we rummaged numbly for explanations—How was he able to run a five-minute mile in track just two weeks before? Why didn’t we know?—other disturbing questions looped nervously through my mind: How will my sister, Pam, survive? Will she ever be the same?

Now, nearly 14 years later, Pam is not the same. She’s stronger, more sure of herself, more open to new experiences. Not that she hasn’t struggled. For years she was struck by disorienting panic attacks, and some days she’s still stopped in her tracks by grief. Even so, she has used her sadness as a springboard. The year after Kent died, she and her husband held a 5K race in his honor, and in total, they’ve raised more than $450,000 for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

Watching Pam’s evolution has been deeply moving, and as it turns out, there’s a name for it. “Post-traumatic growth, or PTG, goes beyond bouncing back from adversity,” explains Richard Tedeschi, PhD, distinguished chair of the Boulder Crest Institute for Posttraumatic Growth. “It’s when someone who has experienced a terrible accident or loss—a seismic event for the person’s belief system—changes for the better in fundamental, sometimes dramatic, ways. It’s a turning point in their narratives. As a result, they often find inner strength, value their relationships more, appreciate life more, or become passionate about helping other people or causes.”

The idea of recovering—or even thriving—after adversity is particularly hopeful now, when so many have been through so much: isolation, illness, grief, job loss, financial ruin. Many of us are worried about how, or if, we’ll recover. Science suggests we will. “Many people are resilient. They’re able to cope and carry on, no matter what you throw at them,” says Isaac Galatzer-Levy, PhD, adjunct assistant professor of psychiatry at New York University Grossman School of Medicine. In 2018, he and his colleagues published a review of 54 studies of people who’d experienced events like a serious car accident or Hurricane Katrina, and found that roughly two-thirds were able to process the ordeal and continue on with their lives without lasting emotional or psychological damage.

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More intense trials can be a catalyst for the more profound transformations that characterize PTG, and substantial evidence shows that they occur in a range of harrowing circumstances. In the past year alone, researchers have documented PTG in longtime paraplegics, students attending a college where a mass murder occurred, and survivors of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. “When your sense of safety, well-being, and identity is challenged and you have to rethink who you are and what you want, that’s when growth happens,” says Thalida Em Arpawong, PhD, assistant professor of research at the University of Southern California School of Gerontology and Keck School of Medicine’s Resilience Lab. The process is painful and requires courage, says Meg Jay, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia and author of *Supernormal: The Untold Story of Adversity and Resilience.* She points to a seminal long-term cultural study of children in Kauai, some of whom endured traumatic events—which put them at risk for everything from poor health to homelessness. “Yet one-third of those kids did as well as, or better than, peers raised in stable homes,” she says. “The resilient kids were active problem solvers who made plans and set goals—and they were determined. Their prevailing mindset was, This isn’t going to ruin my life,” says Jay.

A similar resoluteness has historically helped Black women remain hardy in the face of trauma, says Inger Burnett-Zeigler, PhD, associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. However, she points out that strength alone doesn’t offer comprehensive protection.

“We strong Black women have traditionally coped by avoiding our feelings, which can lead to unhealthy behaviors, like overscheduling and eating too much,” she says. “The pandemic has tested Black women more than most people in the U.S. But it is also pushing more Black women to be more vulnerable, acknowledge their feelings, and ask for help, whether it’s from friends, family, a spiritual adviser, or a therapist. That’s important because social support is vital for coping with trauma.”

Friends and family who are good listeners can help you make sense of your experience and find larger meaning in it, explains Tedeschi. And their comfort and encouragement may shield you from negative outcomes like anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

During the 2003 SARS outbreak in Hong Kong, rates of depression, emotional disorders, and suicide increased. The psychological toll was particularly high among those who’d been hospitalized with the illness. Still, when researchers interviewed 997 survivors at six, 12, and 18 months after hospitalization, they found that 35 percent were able to bounce back and carry on. One of the defining assets those adaptable people shared was strong social support.

Research over the past decade has revealed a number of other resilience-enhancing habits. Adopting them, says Arpawong, can provide emotional ballast during unsettling times and increase the likelihood of emerging from challenges, including the pandemic, feeling centered.

For instance, studies in people with cancer have found that expressive writing can promote resilience by helping people identify and embrace the range of what they’re feeling and even reframe their experience to see some positives, she says. Likewise, cultivating a “yes, and” approach, which recognizes difficulty and suffering but also acknowledges the good things in life, can be psychologically protective, says Karen Reivich, PhD, director of the Resilience and Positive Psychology Training Programs at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. “You can feel terrible about all the people who have suffered from Covid-19 and outraged by politics and also take joy in a new hobby or the extra time you get to spend with your kids,” she says. “It’s about feeding your brain the emotional nutrients it needs to stay healthy and hardy in times of distress,” Reivich says. “Gratitude, curiosity, contentment, and love broaden our thinking and fortify our resources.”

When you’re coping with trauma, it’s natural to have gloom-filled days that might involve unhealthy amounts of TV, or tears, or Pinot Gris. “We call that ‘coping ugly,’ and it’s not all bad,” says Galatzer-Levy. There’s no right way to get through trauma, and even “ugly” activities may have benefits. “If a little extra binge-watching or drinking helps you forge on, that works, too, so long as it doesn’t start interfering with your ability to function,” he says.

While it’s tempting to seek a formula for promoting resilience, PTG doesn’t arise from a single trait or a single action a person does or doesn’t take. “It’s a human phenomenon we may never be able to neatly explain,” Jay says. “I’ve worked with hundreds of people who’ve been through trauma, and many feel they’ve become stronger, wiser, and more empathetic. No one wishes for adversity, but afterward, life can feel more purposeful and more precious.”