

Post-Traumatic Growth

With the Support of Transpersonal Coaching

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Abstract

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) can be succinctly described as a transformation following trauma. This article explores how expanding one's perception, restoring connection with one's body, and updating one's trauma story can occur through the transpersonal coaching process, and how this may support PTG. While respecting the various causes and types of trauma, as well as the boundary between psychotherapy and traditional coaching, this article describes how the trauma-informed and client-centred methodology used in applied transpersonal coaching psychology may enhance the possibility of achieving and sustaining PTG.

Keywords

post-traumatic growth, transpersonal coaching psychology, open awareness, parts integration, embodiment

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Introduction

Psychological trauma might stem from a painful event and/or unmet attachment needs when we were children, or be passed on to us from previous generations where trauma was unhealed (Darwin, et al., 2023). However, it is broadly understood by trauma healing practitioners that our present-day experience of the trauma is determined by our current perception, a disconnection

from our body, and the story that we tell ourselves about what is wrong, painful or dangerous (e.g., Fisher, 2024; Levine, 2010; Mate, 2022; Porges, 2023; Villanueva, 2024). Expanding our perception, restoring the connection with our bodies, and updating our trauma stories, including our feelings, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and our self-concepts, is within the scope of transpersonal coaching. This article outlines how this expanding, restoring and re-storying can occur through the transpersonal coaching process and how this may aid post-traumatic growth.

The relationship between resilience and post-traumatic growth

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is described as a transformation following trauma (Collier, 2016). People who endure psychological struggle following adversity can often experience positive growth afterward, such as more meaning and purpose in life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

While PTG can be confused with resilience, the two are distinctly different. According to PTG researcher Kanako Taku (as cited in Collier, 2016), resiliency is the personal ability to bounce back from adversity to a resourceful state, while PTG refers to a person's healing and experiences of personal growth after a traumatic event. The experience of PTG involves a psychological struggle which possibly includes a mental health condition such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Resilience is nurtured through social resources, including support from family, friends, community and professionals who are trained to provide optimal support for cultivating resilience, as well as inner resources, such as self-compassion, growth mindset, including virtues such as patience, courage, humility (Germer, 2024).

This article aims to show how transpersonal coaching provides the support for both cultivating resilience, as well as the development of inner resources to move forward toward growth and flourishing.

To evaluate whether and to what extent someone has achieved growth after a trauma, psychologists use a variety of self-report scales. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) developed the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory, which looks for positive responses in five areas:

- Appreciation of life
- Relationships with others
- New possibilities in life
- Personal strength
- Spiritual change

Positive growth-oriented changes in the above five areas are common outcomes in transpersonal coaching, as is cultivating resilience (see the case-study reports in this volume and in previous volumes of the *Transpersonal Coaching Psychology Journal*, <https://iactm.org/tcpj>).

Working with trauma in coaching through a transpersonal lens

Transpersonal coaching uses a trauma-informed and client-centred methodology that provides clients with an opportunity to explore and restore their experience beyond the confines of the traumatised parts of their identity (Dängeli, 2023). In addition to understanding how psychological trauma might stem from a painful event and/or unmet attachment needs in childhood, transpersonal coaches also take into consideration intergenerational and ancestral trauma which have roots beyond the client's personal life experience.

Examples of ancestral trauma could include a history of slavery or persecution, famine, forced migration or displacement due to war or natural disaster; while intergenerational examples could include both these and traumatised behaviour patterns such as familial neglect and abuse passed down from one generation to the next (Reese et al., 2022). Intergenerational trauma may be characterised by a survivalist mindset focused on getting through life in the short-term and satisfying one's personal desires, rather than the nurturing required to live a meaningful life (Comas-Díaz, 2021). In transpersonal coaching, this phenomenon is referred to as 'tunnel awareness', a highly restricted and rigid state that compulsively focuses on what is wrong, painful or dangerous, while trying to avoid those experiences (Dängeli, 2020). The result can be a life of unproductive routines, unhealthy habits, or languishing, that leads to failure to thrive and flourish (Keyes, 2002). Unresolved trauma and tunnel awareness may also lead to burnout or an existential crisis (Smith, 2004).

In the Transpersonal Coaching Handbook approaches are described that provide clients with metacognitive and somatic skills that help them to disidentify from the parts of themselves that have been triggered into tunnel awareness (Dängeli, 2022). By accessing an expanded and more resourceful state, clients can begin to identify and integrate the traumatised parts of themselves with self-compassion and acceptance. This may promote the thriving and flourishing that are associated with PTG. Such an approach is introduced here under the themes of expanding, restoring and re-storying.

Expanding

Tedeschi states that the possibility of PTG may be enhanced if people understand that when trauma occurs, it can be a "possibility for themselves" and is a "fairly normal process" (as cited in Collier, 2016, para. 25). Transpersonal coaching involves helping clients to expand their awareness, which in turn supports them in perceiving possibilities that were previously imperceptible. Additionally, being non-pathologizing, transpersonal coaches support their clients to normalise the way they feel about the issue, which aids them in confronting it resourcefully.

Expanding perception is sometimes described as *opening the aperture of awareness* in transpersonal coaching. This involves shifting from tunnel awareness (fixation on what is wrong,

painful or dangerous) to open awareness – characterised by the following three qualities/lenses:

- *Introspection and interoception* – metacognitive awareness in which we can mindfully observe mental activities, emotions, bodily sensations and somatic experience.
- *Outrospection* – heightened awareness of others and the ways that we relate to them, which cultivates empathy and compassion.
- *Envirospection* – broad awareness of the space around us which connects us to everything in the environment and the cosmos (Dängeli, 2020).

Not only does open awareness include seeing through the trifocal lens outlined above, but it also involves the fundamental set of skills used by transpersonal coaches to hold a safe and compassionate space, while walking the client through a transformative passage – involving enquiry, empathic and generative listening (Nguyen, 2018; Scharmer, 2015), somatic awareness and opening (Haines, 2019), followed by helping the client to integrate their new, widened, and resourceful perspectives into the relevant areas of their life. This coaching approach begins with expanding perception, then focuses on restoring connection, and finally re-storying – the client updates their narrative to one that is in alignment with their authentic values.

Restoring and Re-storying

Restoring connection with the body and integrating traumatised parts of the psyche is a central aspect of transpersonal coaching. The trauma response causes parts of the psyche to split off – become disconnected from the traumatised person’s functional body-mind system in order for the rest of the system to continue functioning (Ruppert, 2018; Schwartz, 2021). Although initially this is an intelligent survival response, the disconnected parts need to be re-integrated for the person to heal and return to being fully functional (Levine, 2010). Failure to restore this disconnection typically results in the split off parts controlling the consciousness of the traumatised person (a characteristic of PTSD), causing them to relive the trauma and develop defence mechanisms that aim to avoid anything which might reactivate the trauma memory or emotion (Ruppert, 2018; Schwartz, 2021).

Disconnected parts can also reap havoc in a person’s life and cause them to act unfairly or destructively toward others and the environment. In his book *DisConnected* (2023), Steve Taylor explains that what we think of as ‘evil’ is related to this type of disconnection, resulting in a lack of empathy and a desire for power. Taylor (2023) provides historical accounts of influential leaders in organisations and governments who have been cruel and brutal – all of whom experienced trauma in their childhood. Taylor’s research (2023) implies that most, if not all, human violence and destruction is related to the tunnel awareness of trauma inflicted parts of the psyche that operate autonomously – disconnected from the authentic nature of the person.

Conversely, human ‘goodness’ – including qualities like compassion, altruism and justice are related to our sense of connection – the experience of inner alignment and wholeness. Since transpersonal coaching entails the integration of parts and expanding awareness, a common outcome for clients is that they tend to transcend their sense of separateness and attune to a deeper sense of connection. This is akin with the spiritual change aspect that Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) include in their Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory, which might therefore be considered fundamental for PTG to be sustainable. This spiritual/transpersonal orientation indicates that restoring connection may foster the type of resourcefulness and resilience that motivates clients to engage in healthy practices which nurture their continued integration of the fragmented parts of themselves with self-compassion and acceptance.

Another consequence of disconnected parts is the protective mechanism of dissociating from the body – to avoid feeling painful sensations and emotions (Levine, 2010). Although this might have been an intelligent survival response at the time of the traumatic event, it is essential that the person re-learns to feel safe in their body again, or else they will remain out of touch with the flowing sensation of aliveness within and between us – our sense of interconnectedness (Siegel, 2022). This disconnection from our bodies and each other is arguably an underlying cause of many addictions (Mate, 2022), as well as relationship conflicts and social issues (Haines, 2019; Schwartz, 2021).

The parts integration methods used in transpersonal coaching involve identifying parts through how they affect the client’s state and behaviour when triggered, or how they manifest as symptoms in the body. Parts can also show up for the client as physiological or energetic sensations, metaphorical images (e.g. the inner child, archetypal figures, symbols), elements of nature, or as intuitions. How parts come into existence and their characteristic functions, as well as how the ‘T Model’ can be used in transpersonal coaching to nurture the integration of disconnected parts, is covered in the ‘Trauma-Informed Coaching’ article (Dangeli, 2023).

Through the trifocal lens of open awareness, both client and coach can establish which parts are operating and the needs that those parts are trying to fulfil. This approach stabilises the client’s awareness both within and around the body through using a combination of conscious breathing and somatic sensing (described further below). Since this is not psychotherapy, the client is not asked to focus on a painful sensation, emotion, or memory; and in the case of the client being unable to feel emotion or recall what happened in their past, they are not asked to try to access that. Rather, the transpersonal coach’s role is to elicit the client’s intention for the session and then to hold a safe space for the client, supporting them to keep their consciousness anchored in the present moment, while exploring their triggered state and their unfolding experience through the lens of open awareness. This optimises the conditions (e.g., safety, trust, receptivity, co-regulation) for parts to emerge into consciousness and for the needs of those parts to be understood. Thereafter, the client establishes ways to address the part’s need (restoring) and to nurture its integration (re-storying). This transpersonal coaching process follows the SAFE protocol (see Figure 1.)

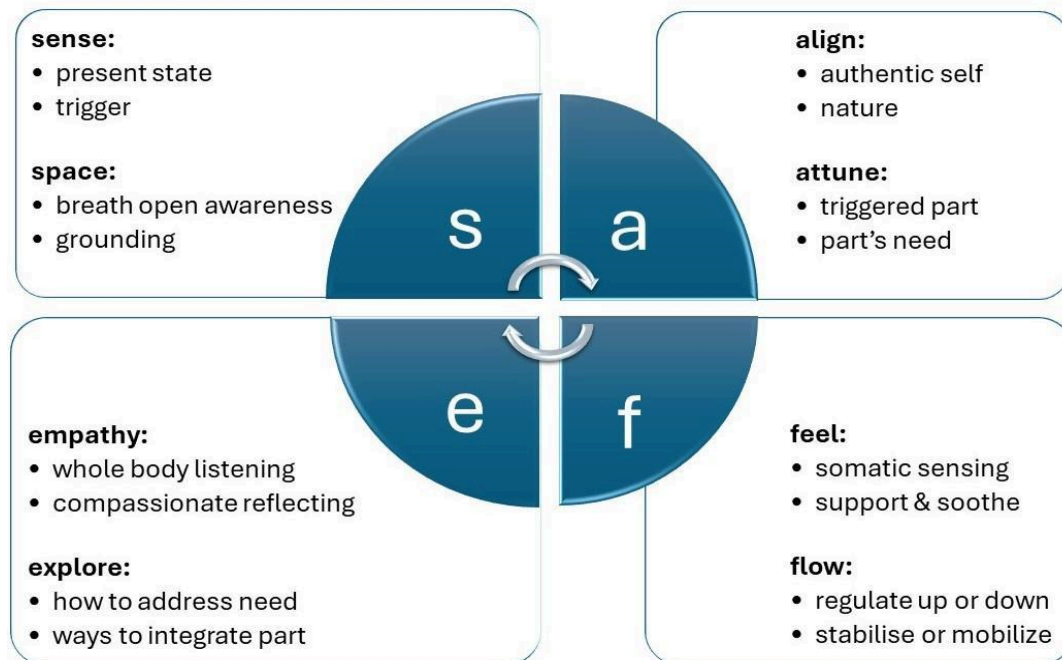


Figure 1. SAFE protocol, created by Jevon Dängeli

The SAFE protocol

In transpersonal coaching, co-creating the held space for the purpose of helping clients to feel safe in their body and in relationship with the coach is primary. To serve this function we can draw from the SAFE protocol, that not only supports clients to feel physiologically and psychologically safe, but also helps to harness the healing and transformative potential of safety through this transpersonal coaching approach. The four components of the SAFE protocol follow a sequence that begins with self-regulation and co-regulation (1), followed by self-exploration (2), leading to self-agency (3), while optimising the conditions for the potential of self-transformation (4).

The SAFE protocol is not only about creating a safe space for the client's process, although it is imperative that clients who have experienced trauma feel safe for their process to be optimal. According to Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2023), when the coach's presence broadcasts cues of safety, the client's state shifts toward health, growth, restoration and homeostasis. In transpersonal coaching we emphasise that clients should feel seen, heard, understood and supported by the coach, as this quality of empathy and attunement with the client fosters their sense of safety (Porges, 2023). Furthermore, Taylor (2024) and holistic practitioners also generally agree that physiological and psychological safety promotes a deeper sense of connection with the body, with other human beings and with nature, which in turn supports

healing. The SAFE protocol involves co-creating a safe and transformational container for the client. It utilises the medium of open awareness to optimise the conditions for the client to restore connection and to re-create their life story.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on all aspects of the SAFE protocol, it is noteworthy that it ties in with Julie Herman's (1997) three stages of trauma healing: (a) Safety, (b) Reprocessing, and (c) Integration. The transpersonal coaching approach – expanding, restoring and re-storying also align with these trauma healing stages. The potential of PTG may be enhanced when all three of these aspects are addressed. There is one key distinction to be noted here however between Herman's (1997) approach and transpersonal coaching. In Herman's model, the 'reprocessing' stage focuses on addressing what happened in the past, making it the task of psychotherapy. By comparison, 'restoring' in transpersonal coaching is focused on processing in the 'here and now', while acknowledging the roots of the issue, such as early life attachment issues or the existence of trauma wounds. Since Herman's 'integration' stage is within the remit of coaching and supports both the establishment and sustainability of PTG, I will discuss this briefly below.

For Herman (1997), integration focuses on reconnecting with people, meaningful activities, and other aspects of life. These are certainly significant aspects of integration, although in transpersonal coaching we also emphasise the importance of embodiment, which involves parts integration and fostering one's felt sense of connection. Porges (2023) refers to the trauma resolution as a complex journey of re-embodiment. He also suggests that conscious movement-based approaches to trauma care can help to prevent the person from shutting down or closing off – which although is a common defence mechanism that has benefits in certain life-threatening situations, it is also the mechanism that locks trauma in the body (2023). Therefore, the process of unlocking trauma in the body-mind system and enabling it to run its course, might be achievable with an embodiment practice that is tailored to the person's needs.

A key aspect of the transpersonal coach's role involves supporting clients to access and embody open awareness. In the case of PTG, transpersonal coaching not only promotes widening and deepening the client's perception of themselves and their reality, but also involves exploring ways to apply one's expanded awareness practically in everyday life. For this reason, clients are encouraged to engage regularly in a suitable embodiment practice following the coaching session(s).

Toward the end of each session, transpersonal coaches support clients to establish their own way of continuing to nurture the needs of the part(s) that surfaced in the session. Ideally, the client will commit to a daily practice of their own choice that they are already familiar with, or they will explore and commit to a new practice in service to their integration and embodiment. If the client is not familiar with any such practices, then the transpersonal coach may offer some

suggestions according to the client's objectives. One option is the embodiment practice described in Dängeli, 2023, (p. 13). Here I will provide another example with relevance to PTG: 'somatic sensing and integrative sense-making' (SSIS).

The following five-step example of SSIS instructions (created by the author) is for applying to oneself. It can be adapted for applying in groups, and there are many ways to modify it according to each individual's needs and physical ability. The SSIS practice has emerged through more than two decades of experimentation in the applied domain of transpersonal coaching psychology, involving Jumi (<https://jumi.live>) and related open awareness embodiment approaches (e.g., Dängeli, 2019).

1. **Centering and grounding** – Sit or stand without shoes, have an upright back, and feel the sensations in the soles of your feet in contact with the surface below. Then focus on the sensation of your breath as it moves in and out of your belly area.
2. **Somatic open awareness** – Engage in gentle and rhythmical meditative movements combined with conscious breathing for state regulation and fostering an expanded sense of self (e.g., Awarenessing, <https://jumi.live/awarenessing>).
3. **Somatic sensing** – Notice the entire volume of space that your whole body occupies. Then witness internally what is alive/present in your somatic experience, including bodily sensations, perceptions, emotions and thoughts.
4. **Sense-making** – Observe what is emerging/unfolding in your internal experience, identifying whatever seems significant or relevant regarding your current life circumstances or for healing, and then set the intention to nurture that.
5. **Integrating** – Commit to a process of embodied journaling of your core insight from the session, clarifying your response to the insight, and writing or sharing verbally your new/authentic story – who you are now and what is most important to you today.

This SSIS practice includes and integrates the three elements of transpersonal coaching (expanding, restoring and re-storying) that support the potential of PTG. Step one is for preparation, steps two and three comprise aspects of expanding, step four relates to restoring, and step five involves re-storying. There are also other embodiment practices, such as those described by Dana (2020), Haines (2019), Levine (2010), and Van der Kolk (2015). It is important that the facilitation of any embodiment practice for an individual or a group is guided by a trauma-informed practitioner.

Conclusion

In this article the potential value of transpersonal coaching toward PTG has been outlined. It should be noted that professional trauma work is typically within the remit of psychotherapy and that transpersonal coaching is not being recommended over psychotherapeutic care. However, this trauma-informed and client-centred coaching methodology may enhance the possibility of achieving and sustaining PTG through the process of expanding, restoring and re-storying, for which the SAFE protocol in conjunction with an embodiment practice may be beneficial.

Considering trauma recovery and healing from a transpersonal perspective means addressing trauma with an understanding of our collective inter-connection, as espoused by Thomas Hübl:

Neuroscience has shown that we have a co-regulated nervous system. This means that the state of our own nervous system influences and is greatly influenced by those around us. What is less well known is how each person's individual nervous system is part of the larger collective nervous system - including community, country, and on the grand scale, all of humanity. The health of this collective nervous system is dependent on all of our individual nervous systems. (Newsletter, 21 March 2024)

Transpersonal coaches can serve as beacons of co-regulation – working with individuals and groups in a manner that may support the health of our collective nervous system. A transpersonal approach to coaching may support the clients' resolution of trauma that is transmitted intergenerationally as well as during the present lifetime. Through the embodiment of open awareness and the integration of disconnected parts, individuals may experience profound shifts in consciousness, and a deeper sense of connection with themselves, others, the environment and the cosmos. Transpersonal coaching may therefore function as a catalyst for awakening one's healing potential and thereby help to foster post-traumatic growth.

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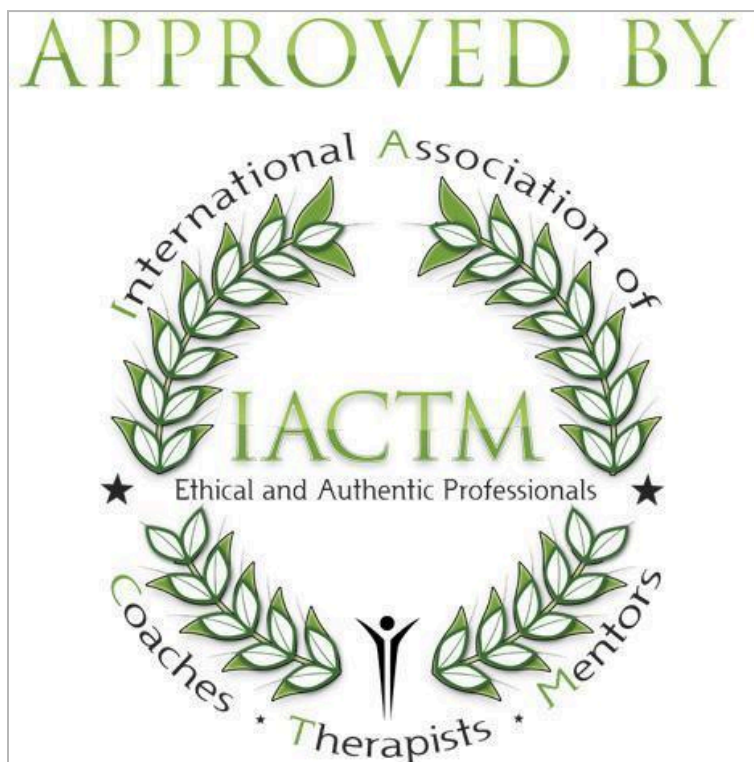


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- Investigating the usefulness of transpersonal interventions in coaching or therapy.
- Engaging in conversations to inspire and motivate a transpersonal vision among coaches and therapists.
- Introducing and discussing transpersonal models and processes that can be applied in coaching or therapy.
- Sharing ideas, knowledge, experiences and resources that are useful to transpersonal coaches or therapists.



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