

What is Post Traumatic Growth?

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The *Answering The Call* report produced by Beyond Blue found that around ten per cent of emergency services responders are impacted by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or post-traumatic stress symptoms in any twelve-month period. Many others will experience a range of impacts due to complex traumatic incidents. It is essential that the issue of post traumatic injuries is taken seriously with appropriate, evidence based treatment options and supports provided to all emergency services responders. It is equally important that proactive steps are taken to mitigate the risk of post-traumatic stress to the greatest extent possible.

Whilst there is much focus on PTSD, the reality is that many emergency service responders experience personal growth from these experiences. The *Answering The Call* report found that, 'many employees and volunteers have good mental health and well-being. More than half of all employees and two in three volunteers reported high levels of resilience' (Beyond Blue, 2018). Despite what some people believe (either consciously or unconsciously), it is not inevitable that because a person works in emergency services, that they will experience post-traumatic stress disorder.

This fact sheet provides an overview of Post-traumatic Growth (PTG) and includes the experiences of some of our Tasmanian emergency service responders.

A positive psychological change in the wake of struggling with highly challenging life circumstances. (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)

PTG is based on the idea that suffering has transformative power which can come with a new understanding of life, relationships, money, success, and health.



Kintsugi art is a wonderful metaphor for Posttraumatic Growth. Broken objects when repaired take on new beauty and strength not otherwise achievable.

Concept by Kimberley De Dekker, Psychologist –
EMDR Interest Group Retreat Presentation 2022.

How do I know if I have it?

PTG is sometimes regarded as synonymous with 'resilience', however the two concepts describe quite different experiences.

Associate Professor Kanako Taku, associate professor of psychology at Oakland University states that,

"Resiliency is the personal attribute or ability to bounce back, PTG on the other hand, refers to what can happen when someone who has difficulty bouncing back experiences a traumatic event that challenges his or her core beliefs, endures psychological struggle (even a mental illness such as post-traumatic stress disorder), and then ultimately finds a sense of personal growth. It's a process that takes a lot of time, energy, and struggle."
(Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2006)

In the aftermath of a gruesome scene, police officer Susan*

described, "For me to succumb to something that I had seen or done at an incident, would mean that I became another victim of the offender. I decided at that point in time that that would never happen. I then applied it to every difficult job going forward".

*Name changed.

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PTG is a concept that can be measured. Tesdeschi & Calhoun developed the *Post Traumatic Growth Inventory* https://results.wa.gov/sites/default/files/WendyFraser_Oct28_HANDOUT.pdf which can be accessed online for free, via Wellbeing Support Psychology Services or My Pulse.

What does PTG look like for a police officer?

Experienced Police officer Richard* attended the suicide of an older male in the earlier stage of his career and was deeply affected by the plight of the man for whom no family members could be located. Richard described initially feeling saddened and asking himself, *"What's the point of it all if you live your life and end up like that?"*

Richard subsequently described learning a lot about himself, potential triggers, strategies for making sure he didn't 'personalise' jobs he attended. Richard made a conscious decision to view the future in a way that was characterised by gratitude and the positive psychology principles of **PERMA**.

P – positive emotion

E – engagement

R – (positive) relationships

M – meaning

A – accomplishments/achievement

*Name changed.

What does PTG look like:

- Increased appreciation for life in general
- More meaningful interpersonal relationships
- Increased sense of personal strength
- Changed priorities/new possibilities
- Richer existential and spiritual life.

Wellbeing Check meetings provide an opportunity to talk about the good and not so good of working in areas often defined as 'high risk' due to the exposure to traumatic incidents/material. What is evident from these meetings is that many emergency service responders have found ways to not only manage such work, but to develop PTG. Some of the defining features or recurring themes for these members are:

- Having interests/passions/hobbies outside of emergency services work.
- Having friends/relationships with people who aren't emergency services workers.
- Having a healthy lifestyle (in regard to eating, sleeping, exercise, accessing support and creativity).
- Having regular breaks from emergency services work (taking scheduled leave, ADOs).

What does PTG look like for a firefighter?

TFS Firefighter Glen* talks about reaching a point after attending multiple critical incidents where his *"bucket overflowed"*. Deeply concerned about what other people would think and confidentiality, he initially declined support stating, *"I don't need it"*. Eventually, Glen was encouraged by a CISM peer to seek the support of a CISM psychologist who told him he was *"doing well to remain upright"* and was having normal reactions to abnormal events.

Glen described a positive experience with the psychologist that has resulted in PTG characterised by:

- A lot less worry.
- Knowledge of what is 'normal' and what is not.
- How to have 'circuit breakers' in place for times of elevated stress.
- When to seek extra support.
- The beauty in simple things such as walking his dog.
- Greater appreciation of the relationships in his life.
- How to remain grounded and mindful.

*Name changed.

“Bad would have been an understatement in describing what I lived through – but now, I recognise that what I lived through has given me all that I have. It has given me my partner, my children, the job I have and the privilege of finding purpose in assisting others in mitigating the impact of the extraordinary work they have put their hand up to do.”

How can I encourage the development of PTG?

"It is important to note that in most people, PTG occurs without professional intervention."
(Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, Calhoun, 2018)

While PTG is often seen as a natural process that occurs following a traumatic event, it may also be facilitated by intentional efforts to promote and develop psychological capital. For example, interventions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, stress reduction techniques, and mindfulness practices have been shown to support PTG by helping individuals cope with stress and build the pillars of psychological capital; Hope, Efficacy, Resilience and Optimism (HERO).

What does PTG look like for a volunteer firefighter with military experience?

Dave* quotes William Shakespeare,
"Nothing is either good or bad – but thinking makes it so" and reflects, "bad would have been an understatement in describing what I lived through – but now, I recognise that what I lived through has given me all that I have. It has given me my partner, my children, the job I have and the privilege of finding purpose in assisting others in mitigating the impact of the extraordinary work they have put their hand up to do."

After reading and researching, Dave came across an equation that resonated for him:

ABC + V and Ownership

A stands for the **activating** event, which is the traumatic event that has occurred

B stands for the person's **beliefs** or thoughts about the event, which can be either positive or negative

C stands for the **consequences** of these thoughts, which can include emotional distress, physical symptoms, or behavioural reactions.

V stands for **values** – what made the trauma affect me so much and importantly, what values I want to display and how I want to live for the rest of my life. A values based approach promotes a sense of purpose, meaning and motivation.

Ownership – the past, the present, the future... you can't live in three places at once – I had to pick one. I had to take ownership of where I was at – there was no point blaming others or blaming decisions that were made at the time, or the organisation I worked for. I decided to live in the present. Yes, I could blame certain individuals, decisions that were made at the time and the organisation I worked for in relation to the traumatic incident.

*Name changed.

One of the most important factors that contribute to PTG is social support. People who have strong social connections, including family and friends, community organisations, or support groups are often better equipped to cope with the aftermath of a traumatic event. They may have someone to lean on for emotional support and practical assistance. Moreover, social support can offer a sense of belonging and meaning, which contributes to PTG by fostering a sense of purpose beyond oneself.

Another essential component of PTG is one's ability to find and create meaning in the aftermath of adversity. Many people who have experienced traumatic events have reported finding meaning in the experience itself. This may involve a newfound sense of empathy with others who have endured similar hardships or a desire to make a difference in the world through volunteer work or advocacy.

What does PTG look like for an SES volunteer?

SES volunteer Nina* had many years of operational experience, including road crash rescue and attending many fatalities. Although sometimes experiencing some disturbed sleep after an incident, Nina would always 'bounce back'. That was until she was involved in a serious vehicle crash herself. Nina experienced significant injuries and had a long recovery.

Nina stated that the experience completely changed her perspective on life. To Nina, PTG means:

- Being grateful every day to be alive, to be able to make choices and improve yourself.
- Life is too short to not be happy.
- A newfound ability to turn negatives into positives.
- Taking a chance and putting yourself out there.
- Pursuing your dreams and not putting things off.
- Having a 'bucket list' and actively pursuing those things.
- Embracing the amazing feeling of achieving goals.
- A new attitude to work/life balance.
- Making sure to monitor physical and mental health.

Nina described her new perspective including the ability to *"adapt and be flexible"* instead of having to plan everything. Also, an attitude of living every day like it could be your last and trying to find a positive in every situation.

*Name changed.

“Choose where you want to be, don't live in the past.”

PTG is highly correlated with:

- Social support (friends, family, Wellbeing Support)
- Acceptance (owning your story)
- Spirituality (not necessarily religion)
- Optimism, extraversion, openness

What does PTG look like for an Ambulance Tasmania paramedic?

Intensive Care Paramedic Dwayne* accumulated over thirty years of experience with Ambulance Tasmania in a range of roles and was exposed to many stressful incidents. Dwayne, like many First Responders refers to “having a bucket” which sometimes “overflows”. Dwayne described feeling that on a few occasions, his “bucket” was “kicked over, spilling everything”. Despite this, Dwayne stated that, for the most part of his career he had declined offers of support due to thinking, “it wasn’t for me”. Dwayne confesses, “deep

down I knew I suffered from PTSD”, however, it was difficult to admit due to fear of what it would mean for his career, how others would see him, his family and the world as he knew it.

Dwayne sought help and his PTG is characterised by significant gratitude:

- To his wife and son, for their encouragement to seek help.
- To a caring colleague/friend for support throughout his recovery.
- To Wellbeing Support for support and treatment that changed his view of himself and the world around him.

Additionally, Dwayne felt that his spirituality and affinity with the natural environment had been restored, his interpersonal relationships with his family had improved and he now enjoys social activities with his mates. He is looking forward to the future with a positive perspective and continues to make a meaningful contribution through his work.

*Name changed.

Emergency service work can be challenging and can impact the lives of emergency service responders. PTG demonstrates that the impact may be positive as people experience personal growth and transformation in the aftermath of adversity. This factsheet provides a broad understanding of PTG and describes the experiences of a number of Tasmania's emergency service responders. Their stories serve to demonstrate that traumatic incidents can have a positive impact.

Please talk with a Wellbeing Support staff member if you would like to know more about PTG.

REFERENCES

- Beyond Blue Ltd. (2018). *Answering the call* national survey, National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services - Final report.
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“PTG has resulted in me having significant gratitude for my family and friends”



Wellbeing Support 24 hour: 6173 2873

CISM 24 hour: 0427 181 207

AT Peer Support: 6166 1994

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GET HELP NOW

You can access a range of confidential services, which are designed specifically for the Tasmanian emergency services community from Wellbeing Support.

24 Hour Wellbeing Support: **6173 2873** • wellbeing@dpfem.tas.gov.au

Ambulance Tasmania Peer Support: **6166 1994**

CISM: **0427 181 207** • manager@cism.tas.gov.au

Further information is available at mypulse.com.au

Printed fact sheets are available from wellbeing@dpfem.tas.gov.au

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