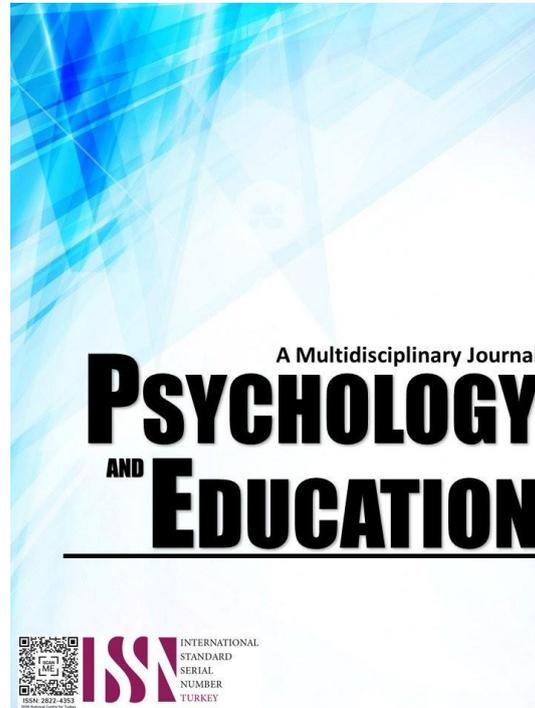


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Posttraumatic Growth Among Grieving Parents after a Traumatic Loss in Bataan, Philippines

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Abstract

The unexpected death of a child is an unimaginable experience for a parent. However, recent studies have shown that growth can still be experienced. This study aimed to convey the lived experience of posttraumatic growth (PTG) among the grieving parents who traumatically lost their child in the province of Bataan. From the number of available participants, this study screened 25 parents. This study utilized two psychological tests to select parents who are experiencing grieving and PTG. From this, the researchers were left with eleven grieving parents who were invited for a semi-structured interview. Through phenomenological data analysis, four themes emerged. Perceived personal improvement has three sub-themes such as parental modification, self-discovery, valuing, and personal strength. Meanwhile, relationship enhancement has five sub-themes, namely: getting support; experiencing reconciliation; closer relationships; valuing relationships; and sharing insights. Two sub-themes were found for spiritual flourishing, such as stronger faith and establishing ministry. Then an optimistic attitude is composed of five sub-themes: a hopeful future, bringing memories, gratitude emphasis, leaving a legacy, and existential change. The findings of the study can remind mental health practitioners that positive changes can still be experienced by grieving parents.

Keywords: *descriptive phenomenology, grieving, parents, posttraumatic growth and traumatic loss*

Introduction

Parents' encounter with the death of a child is an inevitable part of life. Some are expected, such as when a parent expects the imminent death of a loved one. Some, however, are unready or unprepared. There are situations when it may be deemed traumatic, particularly when it occurs unexpectedly and is accompanied by a tragic event. Traumatic loss occurs when a person dies unexpectedly or because of an accident, suicide, or violence (Henry, 2017). As of the moment, a vast number of studies have highlighted the negative impacts of traumatic death and grief on parents. The child loss can result in negative psychological responses: rage, heightened worry, melancholy, guilt, hopelessness, and indifference (Lee et al., 2017); escalation of depressive symptoms (Rogers, Floyd, Seltzer, & Hong, 2008); mental instability, a lack of meaning (Breen, 2006); posttraumatic stress reactions (Rafael, 2006); outraged, seeking answers for the unexpected loss (Brysiewicz, 2007); anxiety (Buchi et al., 2007), and complicated grief (Zetumer et al., 2015). There is a high chance of hospitalization due to affective disorders such as clinical depression, bipolar disorder, or anxiety, especially among mothers (Jiong et al., 2005). Furthermore, it has an impact on the physical well-being of the parents by causing them to have poorer physical health (Li, Hansen, Bo Mortensen, & Olsen, 2002; Costa et al., 2017). Grieving parents also have been found to encounter problems with their

social relationships (Costa et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2008). The grieving parents' finances are also affected negatively (Costa et al., 2017).

Emerging research focuses on the question of whether or not positive change occurs in the aftermath of loss. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) conducted empirical research on the positive effects of a traumatic event and coined the term "posttraumatic growth." It is a broad term that refers to the beneficial effects of coping with a traumatic life event's aftermath (Tedeschi & Kimer, 2005). It manifests itself broadly in five domains: perceived changes in self, improved relationships, altered priorities, altered life philosophy/increased existential awareness, and enhanced spiritual activities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Posttraumatic growth in the context of bereavement research has been applied (Calhoun, Tedeschi, Cann, & Hanks, 2010). Calhoun and colleagues (2010) were quick to point out that identifying PTG does not indicate that suffering is eradicated. Usually, positive and negative experiences frequently co-occur. PTG is worth investigating because it illuminates the positive side of survivors' experiences. It focuses on the survivor's resilience, growth, and positive transformation in the aftermath of such traumatic loss. However, this is not a universally shared experience among trauma survivors. The goal of this study was to start filling in the gaps of holistic grieving by describing the parents' positive experiences, which were missing in different studies (Zetumer et al., 2015; Rogers et al., 2008; Jiong et al.,

2005 Glad et al.; Mitchel et al., 2009).

The researchers chose to focus on grieving parents because they are the ones who are most directly impacted by the death of a child. The purpose of this study is to use qualitative inquiry to develop a lens that vividly describes the essence of the parents' construct in Bataan, Philippines. More precisely, this study seeks to address the central question, "How do grieving parents perceive and experience positive changes following their child's traumatic death?" In essence, this study can help grieving parents review their holistic journey of grieving. As well as a reminder for the mental health professionals that positive transformations are possible among grieving parents.

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Methodology

The Descriptive Phenomenological Design enables the researcher to preserve the "voice" of the participants without abstracting their perspective through analysis (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003 as cited by Meyers, 2019). It was utilized to understand the essence of posttraumatic growth among the participants.

Participants

The focus of the study is the 11 parents from the province of Bataan who lost a child by suicide, homicide, or vehicular accident. Their ages were between 30 and 60, while their children's age range at their death was 5 to 30 years old and occurred during the years of 2018 through 2020. The parents are still mourning the loss. Thus, the score in TRIG is at least 52 (state of grieving) to determine that they are still grieving in the span of 6 months to 2 years. Moreover, at least a score of 60 in PTGI, which has a qualitative interpretation of moderate positive change. Meanwhile, parents who were taking psychotropic medications, receiving psychological services such as psychotherapy, counseling, or participating in any support group were excluded from participating.

Instruments

The first instrument, dubbed the robotfoto, is used to ascertain the characteristics of the selections. To assess parents' PTG, the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996) was used. It has a 0.71 test-retest reliability among grieving parents (Yilmaz & Zarah 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun 1996). Meanwhile, it has a reliability of 0.96 when translated into Filipino. The Texas Revised Inventory of Grief (TRIG) was published by Faschingbauer (1987). In bereaved parents, TRIG has an internal consistency of 0.86 (Martineková & Klatt, 2017). To aid in comprehension, the instrument was translated into Filipino, the participants' native tongue. It has an accuracy of $\alpha = 0.88$. An interview guide was used to get to the heart of the participants' experiences with PTG after the traumatic loss of a child.

Procedure

With the support of the Local Government Unit, the researchers utilized snowball sampling. Following that, informed consent was obtained from identified participants to respond to the questionnaires. Then, using the PTGI and TRIG, the level of grieving and PTG of 25 parents were determined. This resulted in the qualification of 12 participants who obtained the requisite mean scores in TRIG and PTGI. Additionally, an informed consent form for an interview was provided. Once participants accepted, interviews were planned according to their preferred time and location. The interviews took place over a four-month period between the fourth quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. The interviews were done in private, open settings, such as the participants' terraces, farms, or other preferred venues. The researchers followed the minimum health standards as mandated by the national government to ensure the safety of the participants. The duration of each in-depth interview was between 60 and 90 minutes. An electronic voice recording device was used to capture the parents' exact verbalizations. Additionally, throughout the interview, the typical 'note and pen' manner of writing down noteworthy observations (Alase, 2017).

Ethical Consideration

The study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the University of Sto. Tomas-Graduate School.

Data Analysis

The study used Colaizzi's (1978, as quoted by Sosha, 2012) seven-step phenomenological data analysis technique. Initially, twenty grieving parents' recorded interviews were transcribed. The researchers reviewed each transcript numerous times to familiarize themselves with it and to ensure that the response was clear. Then they extracted the key statements about PTG from each transcript. Each statement was recorded on a separate sheet, along with its page and line number. Following that, the researchers went over all of the major statements again to figure out what they meant. The generated meanings were then sorted and grouped into categories, sub-themes, and themes. The findings were then included in detailed explanations of PTG. The findings were then pared down by removing duplicate, erroneous, or overstated descriptions from the general structure. Finally, the findings were given back to the parents to check if they really were inclined to their lived experiences. The selection's verbalizations were translated from Filipino to English by an English-language expert to assure greater understanding for the readers.

Results

Four themes with 15 sub-themes emerged after a thorough analysis.

Perceived Personal Improvement

Though the loss is not desirable, the grieving parents' lives perceive personal improvement. The traumatic event resulted in parental insights, self-realizations, and shifts in personal strength. Three sub-themes emerged: parental modification, self-discovery, and personal strength.

Parental Modification

Parenting is not an easy task for parents who are grieving. It's a matter of juggling a job and childrearing. They acknowledged their shortcomings and recognized that changes needed to be made in their parenting. Their child's traumatic death has taught them not to repeat those parenting missteps. As mentioned by two parents,

We should engage in a conversation with our children. We should ask what the problem is. Ask them what happened at school, what happened to a classmate. We should ask all the details of their whereabouts. Questions like "Are you okay in your room? because we can't really tell what's on our children's minds. (Parent 5)



You should love your children equally. Do not make them feel that you love one more than the others. (Parent 3)

Self-discovery

For some parents, the most difficult phase of the grieving process is the first few weeks. Some of them have suicidal thoughts in order to end the excruciating pain they are in. After a year, however, several of them reported recognizing that they are strong and capable of overcoming the most difficult stage of grief. One parent reported being more understanding of others. As some parents pointed out:

I've always thought that I was weak, but I am strong. That's what I discovered about myself. I am strong. I am brave. Because I don't let my problems defeat me. (Parent 9)

I noticed that I became more understanding with my son. I also noticed that I became considerate of other people, especially the people who love me. My friends, my family members. (Parent 11)

Personal Strength

Some grieving parents stress the necessity of internalizing personal strength. They think that one's strength should be aimed towards and for oneself. After all, it is they who will assist themselves in coping with the negative consequences of loss. As two of the parents put it,

I became brave and strong because only you can help yourself. The people around you are just there to support you. (Parent 1)

I embraced and I accepted all the trials in my life because I knew he gave it to me to overcome it. (Parent 6)

Relationship Enhancement

Most parents in this category said their relationships with their partners, children, other family members, and friends had improved. Amid their grief, a better relationship made difficult things bearable for them. This theme is composed of five sub-themes.

Getting Support

Overcoming the negative impacts of a tragic loss on their own is tough. Their interactions with family and friends assist them in getting through the day. The daily assistance they get, in the form of material things and moral support, aids them in their long-term recovery from the loss. As mentioned by the parents,

After the incident, our neighbors and my husband's friends became kind to us. I'm thankful for their support. They gave us food and financial assistance. (Parent 8)

He always tells me that our son is at peace. When I cry, he always tells me that it's natural that we cry for our son who died. But for him to be truly at peace, we need to accept it. (Parent 2)

Experiencing Reconciliation

Miscommunication among family members, especially the parents' siblings or extended relatives, is an obvious example of family disruption following a loss. As a result, unpleasant feelings, hurtful words, and aggravation of the anguish linked with the loss resulted. With time, however, it leads to reconciliation, which is compelled by mutual affection and care. As one of the parents put it:

I used to have doubts about them. But when it happened, that's when I felt that I was really loved. They gave me support, and I realize it now. There were issues that they did not look after my child. Now I'm sure I was wrong. They did not leave. They did not neglect my child. My family and I are okay now. They are my family until the end. (Parent 1)

Closer Relationships

The grieving parents reported feeling more connected to their remaining children and partners. They were able to enjoy simple things in life that they had previously been unable to do. They will not be able to move forward if they continue to dwell on their loss. The love and time spent with the family made them comfortable amid their grief. According to one of the parents,

We are fine. We always talk, one thing that I didn't use to do with my children and my wife. We spend a lot of time together. I wouldn't joke around my children before, but now I do it like I am their friend. That's what I learned I should have done to keep our close relationship. (Parent 2)

Make me feel what I can't feel. Because I used to be far away, I can't let them feel the things I need to let them feel. Now, I became closer to my children by eating together, watching together, and chatting. (Parent 1)

Valuing Relationships

Another takeaway from the traumatic event was to cherish the individuals they cared about while they were still living. They understand that their family and



friends will not be there permanently, and they do not want to miss out on the opportunity to prioritize them and express their love, particularly through deeds. As mentioned by parents:

As long as we are with our loved ones, let's show how much we love them. Also, I realized that material things don't matter the most. Rather, what are the good things you've done for people? (Parent 3)

Someone hired me for a stay-in job. I said, "I can't because my other children are studying, and I need to help them with their modules. Then she replied, "They are old enough to take care of themselves." They are in grades 9 and 10. I answered, "Now my priority is my children. If I accept the job that you are offering, I will earn money, but I need to neglect them". I don't want that to happen. (Parent 4)

Sharing Insights

The distress of losing a child in a traumatic way is truly unimaginable, and no parent wants to go through it. Despite this, the grieving parents gained valuable life lessons from their loss. These lessons, especially those centered on parenting, were shared with other parents and young people. These noble acts gave them a sense of purpose in ensuring that this did not happen to other families, especially in preventing suicide. As uttered by the parents:

That is quite different, really. That is why I told other youth in our area because my son had friends there. I tell them, "Don't resent your parents if you are being reprimanded. They just love you, that's why." I constantly tell this to all the young people in our place. They may opt to forget their parents, but parents will not forget their children. (Parent 2)

To the parents, whether their children are rebellious or whatever, guide and love them. Be fair to your children despite their mistakes because once they are gone, you will miss them too. (Parent 3)

Spiritual Flourishing

Even if things are incomprehensible to the grieving parents as a result of their child's sudden and tragic death, this does not prevent them from having a deeper spiritual experience with a higher being. They found spiritual support, solace, peace, and understanding. This theme is broken down into two sub-themes.

Stronger Faith

The majority of grieving parents reported an increase in their faith. They strengthened their faith as a result of the loss, despite several questions about "why."

They may not grasp it now, but they are aware that it has a meaning that will be revealed in the future. Apart from their family, their faith aids them in surviving the tragic loss's insurmountable bad repercussions. As mentioned by the parents,

My husband and I are the same. We don't think too much; instead, we pray to God. We don't blame him for everything. We will one day lose our lives and be bound to Him because our lives were created by Him. Let's just pray to God and be good to others, not just to ourselves. (Parent 5)

It's like when I close my eyes, all I can see is his face (referring to the deceased child). So I begged God for help, 'Lord, help me because I still have a child. If I lose my mind, what will I do?' So I need to be resilient. The time when you depart from God will be the time you'll break down. (Parent 2)

Establishing Ministry

The grieving parents' faith is not merely a subjective spiritual experience but a conviction that must be acted upon. Several of them preferred to devote their time and abilities in serving the higher being. Some of them also thought that their service to a higher being was the same as their dead child's will.

My son is an altar server in our church. After he passed away, I served there as a lector. I want to serve God like my son did. (Parent 8)

If you need to proclaim the words of God to others, do it now. Do what you have to do as long as it is for the good of your neighbors. Share with your neighbor what you have. (Parent 2)

Optimistic Attitude

Unexpected child death has a detrimental effect on parents' worldviews, even more so when the traumatic event occurred recently. However, as they positively accommodate their grieving process, they become more appreciative, optimistic, and hopeful. This theme generated five sub-themes.

Hopeful Future

The grieving parents see their future as wasted and miserable during the first few months after the bereavement. With the passage of time, some of them were able to shift their mindset. Despite the setback, the future can be bright and wonderful. According to one of the parents:

I see my future as bright and happy. So that I can make

my daughter finish her studies. I can also teach her how to be brave and strong in life. To get along with people well. (Parent 8)

I hope we will meet one day. There is hope in the future, that we can be together again. (Parent 10)

Bringing Memories

It is natural for parents who have lost a child to remember them while they are still alive. Some parents believe that memories have great power. To the point where it can make them happy and whole again, despite the fact that they are no longer in the flesh, their memories can suffice for a joyful life. According to parents,

What really matters is the good memories. Even if it was just the two of us, we would still be complete because of the good memories with them. We can still be happy. (Parent 8)

I'm just thinking about the good memories we had in this house. The good memories of my son. (Parent 5)

Gratitude Emphasis

Rather than dwelling on the pain of not being with them, few parents reflect on the years spent with their children and express gratitude. Whether or not their child is still alive, their love for them endures. They will not, in essence, be forgotten. As one of the parents mentioned,

Free yourself from unpleasant thoughts. When you think about it, you'll feel the grief. You are not giving your child the peace that he or she wants. Every time I remember my child, I feel the longing. But in my mind, I say, "Anak, thank you for the 22 years you spent with us. I hope you are happy in your place now. We will never forget you. We love you so much." (Parent 2)

Leaving a Legacy

Remembering their child positively by friends and other family members caused them to have an outlook that their children lived a worthwhile life. The good words and praises centered on their children, starting from the wake to the present time, reminding them that they were good people. It gives parents comfort to know that they are not the only ones who remember their child. They may no longer be alive, but their legacy lives on. One of the parents had stated:

I saw how good our relationship was with other people. The last night of my son's wake was full of attendees. Many sympathized, such as my son's friends

and acquaintances. I don't know them, but they know us. In our town, he was known to be very kind. (Parent 2)

My friends also commented on Facebook that they miss my son. He always pays respect every time they see them, and he always smiles. Their messages about how nice my son is making me strong. (Parent 8)

Existential Change

Prior to this, the grieving parents did not place a higher value on life. The traumatic loss taught them to value life and not take it for granted. Their learning in terms of existence taught them to regard each day as more than ordinary and as significant. As some parents have mentioned,

I will only be in this world for a few years, why don't I enjoy my life with my family. I don't need money. I don't need a job. All I need is my family. It's not that you don't need money, but it's because no amount of money can buy you a family. (Parent 9)

As long as we are living, let us enjoy our lives. If you want to go to the beach, then go for it. It is forbidden to get sick. You also need to protect yourself because it will only happen once. Not two or three more times. You only live once, so it needs to be appreciated. (Parent 10)

Discussion

This is the first study to look at PTG in Filipino bereaved parents. It backs up and expands on the concept of PTG by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995). The clusters of themes of valuing relationships, closer relationships, getting support, and reconciliation are all consistent with the domain of closer relationships. Furthermore, it is undeniable that relationships improved, which aided them in coping with the negative effects of loss (Jayasinghe, 2017; Breen & O'Connor, 2011; Lee et al., 2017). The domain of spiritual development is linked to the cluster of subthemes of a stronger faith and establishing a ministry. The grieving parents grow in their faith in God and even live to serve (Rezaei et al., 2017; Henry, 2017; Bray, 2013). The grieving parents maintained their faith by praying, participating in church activities, attending online services, and carrying out their ministry. Besides, their spirituality makes them incapable of making sense of death, and they must look to someone larger than themselves. Finally, the subtheme of existential change may overlap with increased life appreciation.

Positive thinking was evident in the grieving journey of the parents, especially after a year. PTG is believed to entail a process of disassembling and reconstructing one's internal world (Akhtar, 2017). It entails the traumatic loss's cognitive restructuring or reprocessing that can lead to an optimistic attitude. The majority of grieving parents reported having an entirely negative attitude during the first few weeks following the loss. Through reprocessing of their situation, it leads to an optimistic attitude and lessens their overwhelming negative emotions. The clusters of themes, hopeful future, recalling memories, and gratitude emphasis are all cognitive functions that can be explained by the emergence of distinct domains of PTG. This study suggests that clinicians and other professionals can assist grieving parents in nurturing their optimistic future expectations by strengthening their positive accommodation. Meanwhile, bringing memories can be associated with a variety of rituals that support grieving parents in navigating their emotions, particularly during special occasions. It was also suggested that people practice gratitude in the face of loss. It can help mental health professionals point people toward cognitive therapy or other methods that focus on the mind.

Another important finding of the study is that a child who has passed away leaves a legacy. Lee (2017) suggests that clinicians and other experts may be able to assist parents and other family members in leaving a positive legacy. Operating rituals and commemoration activities can be nurtured by focusing on the legacy of the deceased child. This will support the grieving person in making sense of the situation and remembering their loved ones as wonderful people who previously shared their lives. Also, these sub-themes are important to be explored by other researchers.

Despite their differences in terms of their child's traumatic death, the grieving parents expressed similar sentiments about parenting. First, they acknowledged flaws in their child-rearing practices. They also admit that the traumatic event could have been avoided if their parenting had been better in the past. It is followed by modifications such as proper communication, prioritizing their child by not working the majority of the time, being friends with their child, being a good listener, equal love and attention, and consistency with parenting. Also, the parents have discovered a new purpose in sharing their insights with their co-parents, friends of their deceased child, and other youth (Ross et al., 2018). More specifically, this is related to the term "commitment pattern" (Dansart, 2016). The survivors are reclaiming their lives by

dedicating themselves to a cause that promotes insights and learning opportunities for others. On the contrary, it contradicts Peters et al.'s (2016) research, which found that traumatic survivors, particularly those who died by suicide, feel pressured to remain silent about their loved ones' deaths due to stigma and a sense of being a burden to others' discomfort.

Additionally, this study extends the adverse effects of grief from the studies of Zetumer et al., 2015; Rogers et al., 2008; Jiong et al., 2005; Glad et al., 2006; Mitchel et al., 2009. The grieving parents exhibited positive reactions consistent with those observed in the studies of Lee et al. (2017), Martineková and Klatt (2017), and Moore et al. (2017). Though other research confirms this, it is critical to understand how PTG begins. Is it true that grieving parents' PTG occurred in two years, or is it already established in their personalities before the traumatic loss? Several studies indicate that PTG is largely steady over time, with some individuals seeing gains and others experiencing declines (Collier, 2016). Furthermore, while it is entirely up to the survivor whether they will change or not, the evidence points to general stability, as well as corroboration by others (Tedeshi and Calhoun, 1996). We can assume that the parents in the study who were grieving had PTG before the painful loss and chose to bring it up.

The study established that all parents exhibit both similar and disparate forms of PTG. It is critical to remember that positive changes do not guarantee that they will not experience negative consequences of the traumatic loss. The PTG of the grieving parents was not a direct result of the trauma, but rather a result of their struggle with the reality of the loss, which also determined the extent to which positive changes occurred (Lee et al., 2017). Additionally, the traumatic death of a child should not be viewed as a positive and desirable occurrence. Grieving parents described the traumatic loss as one of the worst things that had ever happened to them. While this is an unavoidable event, it should not have occurred.

This study discusses the concept of posttraumatic growth, which refers to the positive changes and benefits that result from dealing with a traumatic event. It's important in guidance and counseling because it's based on the idea that working with trauma survivors and helping them grow after a traumatic event may be more empowering and helpful. This recent study on PTG following traumatic loss provided detailed accounts of grieving parents' lived experiences. It does, however, come with a limit. The nature of tragic deaths, including suicide, homicide,

murder, and vehicular accidents. The way of death is more diverse than uniform. In other words, grieving mothers' experiences might differ from one another. As a result, we strongly encourage future researchers to look into traumatic loss individually. While the fourth theme may be associated with the process of posttraumatic growth, it still emphasizes the construct's overall outcome. As a result, longitudinal research is necessary to document these processes of posttraumatic growth (Lee, 2017).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to capture the essence of PTG through the eyes of grieving parents who had experienced the traumatic death of a child in Bataan's municipalities. Additionally, it sought to provide in-depth and precise information on this particular occurrence through the use of the qualitative method. Four themes with 15 clusters of themes were developed. This will assist the grieving parents by reminding them of the positive aspect of their grieving journey. As well as a reminder to mental health professionals that PTG is possible in spite of the traumatic loss. It will serve as additional knowledge in the fields of psychotraumatology, thanatology, positive psychology, and suicidology in the Philippines. Indeed, this paper proves that a survivor can experience favorable changes even in the most traumatic events of human experience.

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