

Chapter # 3

THRIVING AFTER TRAUMA: UNCOVERING PATHWAYS TO POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN COVID-19 SURVIVORS

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 former patients have endured physical and psychological stress during infection, hospitalization, and recovery. Research indicates that some discharged patients experience Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) following adversity. This research aims to explore former patients' experiences within the post-acute period, in terms of positive long-term post-COVID effects and the role of coping resources in the recovery period. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from November 2022 to April 2023, involving 21 participants (57% female), mean age 64, residing in Romania, previously hospitalized for severe COVID-19. Thematic analysis identified four major themes: (1) Coping strategies - reframing the experience positively, break the recovery path into manageable actions, self-care, support seeking, and acceptance; (2) Inner Strengths - optimism, actively living life, determination, independence, and experience with hardship previously; (3) Changed Life Perspective - increased compassion, helping others, and valuing close relationships; (4) Gratitude - the awareness of personal wellbeing's value prompted gratitude and hope. Some participants described making concerted efforts to appreciate each new day, others increased prosocial and altruistic behaviors, while others conveyed gratitude. The findings underscore the factors that contributed to participants' PTG and provide unique insights into the pathways from medical adversity to enduring positive changes across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational domains.

Keywords: post-traumatic growth, COVID-19 survivors, positive changes, hospitalization, pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to high mortality rates and concerning long-term health risks worldwide (World Health Organization, 2024). The pandemic presented challenges in terms of uncertain health conditions, unreliable and confusing information, feelings of helplessness and fear, difficulties in coping, and a strong desire to return to normality (Alkhamees, Alrashed, Alzunaydi, Almohimeed, & Aljohani, 2020; Raihan, 2021; Suciú & Baban, 2024; Veazie et al., 2022). Former COVID-19 patients have endured physical and psychological stress during infection, hospitalization, and recovery (Del Rio, Collins, & Malani, 2020; Higgins, Sohaei, Diamandis, & Prassas, 2021; Pan et al., 2021).

Despite all this, some discharged COVID-19 patients managed to break through and achieve post-traumatic growth (PTG), showing a tendency to recover from the negative experience (Hyun et al., 2021). The concept of PTG has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly in the context of traumatic life events and adversities. PTG refers to the positive psychological changes that can occur because of an individual's struggle with highly challenging circumstances. It encompasses various domains, such as a greater appreciation for life, deeper personal relationships, heightened perception of personal

strength, identification of new possibilities, and spiritual or existential growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014).

The study of PTG in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is particularly important given the widespread and enduring impact of the virus. Although studies have explored psychiatric outcomes among COVID-19 survivors (Raihan, 2021; Veazie et al., 2022), few have examined PTG specifically, while using quantitative measures (Na, Tsai, Southwick & Pietrzak, 2021). In one study using a sample of 140 participants, self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, coping style tendency, and social support were the main correlates identified (Yan et al., 2021). Other studies indicate that some discharged patients exhibit growth (Qie & Onn, 2023; Hyun et al., 2021), demonstrating the possibility to thrive despite adversity, still, limited knowledge exists regarding the PTG experience after acute illness.

While quantitative data highlights the effects of COVID-19, qualitative methodologies are essential for a comprehensive exploration of survivors' experiences. This research will provide unique insights into positive change processes after trauma among COVID-19 survivors, while identifying potential targets for promoting PTG in patient populations facing significant health-related trauma. Understanding positive psychological outcomes post-hospitalization can guide recovery-oriented interventions for survivors.

The aim of the present research is to explore former severe COVID-19 patients' experiences in the post-acute period, in terms of positive long-term effects, the role of personal traits and coping resources during recovery. Recognizing these potential influencers can guide more effective psychological intervention strategies following public health disasters.

2. DESIGN AND METHOD

2.1. Study Design

To address the research aims we conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured one-on-one telephone interviews. We included participants who had been (a) hospitalized for severe COVID-19, and who were (b) adults (+18 years).

Participants were recruited via social media, specifically through posts on Instagram and Facebook, as well as through snowball sampling and physician referrals. Snowball sampling involved requesting each participant to recommend others who might be interested in the study. Additionally, collaborating physicians contacted former patients and, with their consent, referred them to us as potential participants. Instagram and Facebook were selected due to their broad and diverse user bases, which align with the demographics relevant to this study. A purposive sample of former Romanian COVID-19 patients (N = 21) was recruited. To minimize risk of bias, we included participants from different regions and hospitals.

2.2. Data Collection & Analysis

A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore participants' perspectives on the COVID-19 experience, covering the period before, during, and after the illness. The interview guide encompassed open-ended questions that explored illness experience, perceptions of the COVID-19 illness, difficulties, coping strategies, personal features, and positive changes. Following each interview, participants were invited to share additional reflections through a final open-ended question. Some of the main questions were:

What were your experiences with COVID-19 illness?

What were your thoughts and feelings in the period after hospital discharge?

Has anything changed for you and your life after you survived severe COVID-19?

If yes, what?

What have you learned from this experience?

What helps you in coping with the long-term consequences of the disease?

Interviews were conducted from November 2022 to April 2023 with an average duration of 40 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

We used an inductive approach for the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Our data analysis team included a senior researcher, which guided our decision to perform the analysis without qualitative software. Following our analysis strategy, we extracted and analyzed information from interview transcripts pertinent to the research aims. We focused on excerpts that revealed (a) participants' experiences during the acute phase of their COVID-19 illness, (b) their perceptions and understandings of the illness over time, (c) the challenges and coping strategies they employed throughout their recovery journey, (d) any positive psychological changes or growth they experienced as a result of their ordeal, and (e) the role of personal traits, resources, and support systems in facilitating their recovery and growth. These excerpts were compiled into a comprehensive document, which then underwent an in-depth coding process conducted by our research team.

Oral informed consent was obtained prior to all interviews, numbers were assigned to participants to protect confidentiality, and presented all results anonymously.

3. RESULTS

Interviews were conducted with 21 participants, with a mean age of 64, all residing in Romania (see Table 1). The medium stay in hospital was 17 days, with 24% of participants having been hospitalized in an Intensive Care Unit. At the time of the interviews, all were discharged.

Table 1.
Characteristics of study participants.

Category	N	Mean (SD) or %
Gender (%)		
Male	9	42.9
Female	12	57.1
Other	0	0
Age		
Mean age	21	64.48 (SD=12.85)
Marital Status (%)		
Single	2	9.6
Married/ living with partner	13	61.9
Divorced	1	4.7
Widow	5	23.8
Education (%)		
Less than Highschool	5	23.8
Highschool	10	47.7
Higher Education	6	28.5

Four main themes were identified from the qualitative analysis: (1) Coping strategies; (2) Inner Strengths; (3) Changed Life Perspective; (4) Gratitude. The main themes are described below, accompanied by illustrative quotes.

3.1. Coping Strategies

The participants used a range of coping strategies to deal with the short, medium, and long-term effects of COVID-19, and they managed the various challenges of recovering from this potentially life-threatening illness, post-COVID challenges and further grow from it.

Appraisal-focused coping strategies were evident for some of the participants. Some used logical analysis when faced with the symptoms onset and then when it worsened, breaking the recovery process into smaller, more manageable gradual actions to rebuild functioning, such as walking to the window, and over time walking longer distances outside. Some participants sought to reframe the experience in a positive light, focusing on being grateful for still breathing and surviving rather than lingering fatigue or weakness, and using the experience to further cope with difficulties. As some participants stated:

"Nobody's life is perfect. You can make it good, or you can make it bad. It depends on you whether you make it good or make it bad. It's up to what you do."(P.20)

"Many times, when I have tougher days at work or in general, I think about my experience with Covid, and I tell myself - Look, it could have been worse, and that gives me the energy to keep going."(P.4)

Many participants engaged in problem-focused strategies like seeking information from doctors or other former patients, about COVID-19 symptoms and recovery actions. Self-care activities like improving diet, exercising within limits, and seeking medical care for persisting symptoms were also utilized. Participants identified alternative rewards to provide a sense of satisfaction despite ongoing limitations. Some focused on achievable tasks like getting dressed or washing a few dishes and emphasized the importance of not dwelling on limitations but finding modified ways to keep living life through adapted activities. Building knowledge, taking practical incremental steps, self-care, and finding other achievable activities helped participants in making tangible improvements during the difficult and often slow recovery process. As one participant described:

"What helped me was to go see the doctor. It's good to stay at home for two or three days, and take some cold medicine, but after that, if you see that it's still the same or getting worse, you need to seek out for medical advice otherwise you won't get better." (P.21)

"I have at work a lot of colleagues with whom I have lunch during the break, we go out for name day celebrations, we go out on other days, we attend events together. Somehow, I managed to form a group that gets me out of my numbness. Even though I'm no longer with my ex-girlfriend, whom I broke up after illness, I had them to go out, walks, talks. I'm trying to enjoy my friends and these moments more. And sports. It helps me a lot." (P.6)

Participants also used emotion-focused coping strategies such as maintaining hope that they would eventually fully recover, or talking to family members, friends, or other survivors about difficult feelings such as fear or sadness. Support and connection from family were emphasized, whether in the form of daily phone calls, having meals brought, or help with chores after discharge. As one participant described:

"I believe that family is an important factor to have by your side in challenging situations, communication within the family has helped me primarily, everyone being attentive, including siblings."(P.3)

3.2. Inner Strengths

Participants revealed a range of inner strengths and personal resources enabling them to confront the challenges posed by COVID-19 in a constructive manner. Optimism was frequently mentioned, as many described themselves as naturally optimistic people who believed they would recover even during difficult points. This positive attitude motivated health behaviours during illness and recovery, provided motivation to keep fighting. As some participants described:

"I am quite spirited, yet also quite well-behaved, and obedient when I'm unwell. I do as I'm told and follow what I believe is right. I've always fought in life, not only with the virus."(P.20)

"The character makes the difference, I think it's your own state of being, your character as a person who helps you to overcome or not."(P.3)

"I am the most optimistic person you will ever see."(P.4)

A heightened sense of actively living life was evident for some of the participants. Constant busyness reflected an aversion to idleness and a preference for purposeful existence. They perceived the illness as something requiring work to actively regain normalcy.

"I am used to be physically active daily. After 15 days in hospital, I couldn't wait to go out and do some activity, so I did all that was in my power just to get well and go home." (P.4)

Some demonstrated profound trust in their ability to handle unexpected challenges. Characterized by perseverance, conscientiousness, and determination, they insisted on completing tasks despite difficulties, working diligently to accomplish goals of getting a little bit better daily, focusing on themselves, leaving in those moments the existence of the loved ones on a second plane. Some individuals also described drawing strength from their past life experiences surviving adversity, from wars to serious surgeries, revealing a high level of confidence. Self-reliance and independence were important for some participants in caring for themselves. As one participant describes:

"I believe that the old life experiences have helped me. I've been through a lot of life-and-death experiences. If you have hope, you take them as life offers them to you. Dangers? I've been close to them, so I'm not scared of death. I've always had hope that I'll get better, that I won't die. So, I've treated all life experiences in the same way."(P.12)

Overall, optimism, actively living life, determination, independence, and experience with hardship helped many participants endure this difficult illness.

3.3. Changed Life Perspective

For many participants, confronting the possibility of mortality during severe COVID-19 sparked a reconsideration of one's way of looking at the relationships, with a sense of moral purpose and motivation to extend altruism, empathy, and greater compassion, a greater sense of care and helping behaviours, and a sense of closeness with others. While struggling with adversity, their ability to understand and shoulder the burden of others became amplified. This moral growth was often translated into action. As some participants stated:

"I have learned that people need more attention. And if there was something I could do to make it better, I must make it. I started to think that we can die so easily, and it's important for something to remain after us."(P.20)

"We have a 40-years old lady upstairs on the first floor, she has no one, and she broke her ankle. We brought her food cooked from our home, and shopping, without asking her any money, for weeks. This experience made me try to become somewhat better." (P.17)

The same confrontation proved transformative also for some of the closest survivors' relationships. The fragility of existence urged several participants towards solidifying bonds with loved ones and disengaging from other ones. As one participant described:

"Following this experience, I understood how vulnerable we can be in the face of things we do not know and, in general, how vulnerable we can be. I've learned to appreciate life more, cherish my loved ones, and cultivate greater tolerance. I've always been the type to lend a helping hand, and that hasn't changed, but I've become more discerning about the people I choose to help. I now navigate my life with a more pragmatic approach and with the focus on the loved ones." (P.3)

"What I have learned is: Live today as if it were your last, live in the moment. This experience changed me. Definitely. I am a different person. I think differently because if you are not sought out in difficult times, then you truly start to form ideas about life. Family is the priority, that's it, and health. When you are young, you don't understand what health and other things mean, you don't give it importance, but as you get older, you start to believe that you really must live each day one at a time. The first thing I did was select the people who surrounded me before, and I made a sort of selection. The ones who called me, the ones who asked about me, and the ones who didn't." (P.1)

3.4. Gratitude

The COVID-19 experience markedly heightened awareness of personal wellbeing's value and prompted gratitude and hope for many survivors. Their awareness of personal health following illness, led to greater gratitude and appreciation for life and health. A tendency to try to greet each morning with a conscious effort to be more present and thankful, appreciate each day, and appreciate the health status was noticed. As one participant described:

"In tough times, you truly form some ideas about life. Priority is family, because that's it, and health. About life, it's really like we often read - Live today as if it were the last, seize the moment. At a young age, you don't give it much thought, but as you grow older, you start to appreciate and believe that days should be lived like that, one by one."(P.1)

Survivors' ongoing health appreciation and commitment was evident through continuously adapting to post-illness limitations and preventative attitudes. They emphasized regular check-ups and preventive measures. As one survivor stated, they had never taken their health so seriously, diligently seeing doctors and caring for their wellbeing. As one participant described:

"I was engaging in health check-ups even before, but now going through what I went through, if something doesn't feel right, I take action immediately to seek a doctor."(P.21)

A renewed sense of faith surfaced in the narratives of some participants. As they attributed meaning to their experiences, survivors conveyed gratitude to God for their health, for overcoming the illness, for their loved ones, or for the doctor healing them. Faith and prayer fostered trust, provided encouragement, and instilled a positive belief in favourable outcomes.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its profound impact on physical and mental health, represented a significant traumatic event for many individuals, particularly those who were hospitalized with severe cases. The COVID-19 illness experience represented a highly stressful and traumatic event for survivors. Coping with physical, mental, and emotional effects also caused significant difficulties. Thematic analysis has shown the role of coping

strategies and inner strengths, while highlighting the positive changes that emerged from the experience.

One notable contribution of this study is the identification of specific coping strategies and inner strengths that facilitated PTG among COVID-19 survivors. The use of diverse coping strategies, along with inner strengths like optimism, actively living life, strengths from past experiences, allowed participants to adjust to the trauma of COVID-19. Inner resources such as determination and independence, or trust in their personal ability to handle difficulties facilitated perseverance in health-related behaviours and played a crucial role in fostering a constructive approach to coping with the trauma. Appraisal, problem, and emotion-focused coping aided practical improvement and emotional processing. These coping strategies and personal strengths enabled survivors to confront the trauma in a constructive manner. The findings are consistent with the broader literature on PTG, which suggests that individuals who experience traumatic events can often experience positive psychological growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) and that following a stressor, adaptive coping strategies and inner strengths contribute to PTG (Qie & Onn, 2023; Yan et al., 2021). Some of the participants in this study demonstrated remarkable capacity for growth, despite the challenges they faced.

Moreover, the study highlights the profound changes in life perspective that many participants experienced because of their confrontation with mortality. Following the illness, the confrontation with mortality sparked deep introspection for many participants. This existential pondering led to changed perspectives, including increased compassion, altruism, prosocial behaviours, and valuing of relationships. Priorities were realigned with the new insights, specifically more on the loved ones, helping others, and purposeful living. Gratitude and faith were also heightened, with participants thanking and appreciating health, life, doctors and medicines, and everyday moments more after trauma. These shifts: relating to others with increased compassion and gratitude, establishing new priorities, and appreciating life more deeply, coupled with increased awareness of life's fragility and the desire to lead a more purposeful existence, exemplify the core tenets of PTG. These findings align with previous research that has identified shifts in priorities, appreciation for life, and enhanced interpersonal relationships as key outcomes of PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun; Yan et al., 2021). Other research found that religiosity was predictive for PTG in a nurse sample in Hong-Kong (Yeung et al., 2022) and values and committed actions to be related with PTG (Landi et al., 2022).

4.1. Future Directions

This research contributes to a better understanding of the experience of COVID-19, its positive effects, and strategies for adjusting with the new life and health status while thriving after trauma. It provides valuable insights into the PTG experiences of severe COVID-19 survivors, highlighting that despite COVID-19's challenges, positive change is possible through coping, inner strengths, and intentionally forging new perspectives while moving forward. The findings underscore the human capacity for resilience and growth in the face of adversity and offer guidance for healthcare professionals and policymakers in developing interventions to support holistic recovery and facilitate PTG among individuals impacted by public health crises or other traumatic events. Supporting survivors in processing trauma, leveraging strengths, and cultivating gratitude, compassion, and purpose may facilitate thriving. Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on PTG and expands our understanding of the psychological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of this study have practical implications for healthcare professionals, policymakers, and support organizations working with individuals affected by the COVID-19 pandemic or other traumatic events. By recognizing the potential for PTG and the factors that facilitate it, healthcare providers can adopt a more holistic approach to patient care, addressing not only physical recovery but also psychological and emotional well-being. Incorporating evidence-based strategies for promoting coping mechanisms, strengthening personal resources, and cultivating personal resources can be integrated into post-hospitalization rehabilitation programs and support services.

Furthermore, the insights gained from this research can inform the development of psychosocial interventions and support groups specifically designed to foster PTG among individuals impacted by traumatic health events or public health crises. Such interventions could focus on techniques for cognitive reframing, emotion regulation, and meaning making, as well as promoting factors like optimism, determination, and social support networks. By empowering individuals to find positive meaning and growth in the aftermath of adversity, these interventions can contribute to improved mental health outcomes and overall well-being.

In addition to practical applications, this study contributes to the broader academic discourse on PTG and the psychological impact of traumatic events. The themes identified in this study—Coping Strategies, Inner Strengths, Changed Life Perspective, and Gratitude—suggest potential sub-dimensions of growth that could uniquely complement existing measures of post-traumatic growth (PTG), such as the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). The PTGI captures broad dimensions of growth, including relationships with others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. While our themes align with elements of these dimensions, they also reflect unique aspects of growth emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic context, underscoring the multifaceted nature of growth following health crises. Future research could operationalize these themes as measurable sub-dimensions, enhancing the PTG scale's relevance in health-related trauma contexts.

Future research could explore the long-term trajectories of PTG among COVID-19 survivors, as well as potential cultural and socioeconomic factors that influence the manifestation and facilitation of PTG. Longitudinal studies and cross-cultural comparisons could further enrich the understanding of this phenomenon and inform tailored interventions for diverse populations.

4.2. Limitations

Some of the limitations of the study came from the nature of the study. Conducting interviews at a single time point after the COVID-19 experience could have led to imperfect recollection of decision-making processes and associated factors during the recovery journey. It is worth noting also that the participants in this study were all from Romania, and cultural factors may have influenced their experiences and perceptions of PTG. Future research could explore potential cultural differences in the manifestation and facilitation of PTG, as well as the role of societal and community support systems in promoting positive psychological growth following traumatic events. Finally, while telephone interviews facilitated increased participation, they may have precluded the observation of nonverbal cues that could have been captured through in-person interactions. Conversely, this remote approach might have reduced the pressure for socially desirable responses.

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The study was conducted in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendment and approved by The Ethical Committee of the Institute for Population and Human Studies Bulgarian Academy of Science (PD-2-140/15.08.22). Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. The datasets used and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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