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Can a Devastating Shark Attack Really Lead to a Better Life?

By Melanie Greenberg
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In this 2011 article, psychologist Melanie Greenberg, Ph.D. discusses Bethany Hamilton's experience of losing her arm while surfing. According to Dr. Greenberg, the way Bethany dealt with this traumatic event is an example of what psychologists call "posttraumatic growth." As you read, make notes about the ways Bethany grew as a person.

[1] Tonight, a friend and I took our tween girls to see the movie *SoulSurfer* about Bethany Hamilton, a teenage Hawaiian girl whose left arm was bitten off by a 40-foot tiger shark on Halloween. The title comes from a term used to describe surfers who surf because it is their passion, not just because of the competitions. The movie was an inspirational story of a brave young woman who, with determination, family support, and religious faith, was able to return to surfing, eventually winning a world championship and becoming a professional surfer. Bethany's story was truly inspirational and is a fine example of what psychologists call posttraumatic growth - the ability to derive positive benefits from adversity.



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Although traumatic events, such as a shark bite, are painful and difficult, going through this experience may induce psychological maturity and a new appreciation of life.

Posttraumatic Growth

Both qualitative and quantitative research has shown that people report psychological growth and positive changes following even highly stressful events. Reports of growth are not just defensive attempts to present oneself to others in a positive light. Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, constructed and validated a questionnaire called the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) to assess five different aspects of growth. Below, I describe these aspects and how the concept is illustrated in Bethany's story.

Relating to Others

Researchers studying individuals experiencing a variety of losses, including accidents, war zone deployment, serious illness, and bereavement have found that social support and relationships with others following the event are key predictors of psychological recovery. In the SoulSurfer movie, Bethany's family rally around her and provide both emotional and practical support. In a touching scene, her dad finds a way to put a rope handle on a surfboard to help her stay on it when she paddles out to the waves. Bethany also received support from a Church youth leader, her best girlfriend, and a local boy. She received outpourings of support from people all over the world. Therefore, this trauma deepened Bethany's bonds with family and friends and gave her the opportunity to see how deeply people cared for her.

New Possibilities

Research on posttraumatic growth has also shown that the experience of trauma may lead people into new activities, lifestyles, and/or relationships that make life more meaningful or satisfying. Bethany went to Thailand with her Church youth group and used her surfing skills to help children affected by the Tsunami. Additionally, the heightened media exposure allowed her to become a spokesperson, providing hope and inspiration to other young people affected by trauma. According to the movie website, the real Bethany is working to raise awareness of eating disorders and body image issues in teens.

Personal Strength

- [5] Traumas can destroy self-esteem either because of the physical damage they cause, or because belief that the world is fair may lead the person to feel that they did something to deserve such victimization. One aspect of resilience, then, is reframing the event so as to restore self-esteem. Bethany's determination to remain a competitive surfer provided her with the opportunity to face and overcome difficult challenges, thereby reinforcing her strength and courage. In fact, the trauma allowed her to find personal and spiritual strength that she never knew she had until she was tested in this way.

Spiritual Change

Many people find meaning in trauma by seeing it as a spiritual message to change the direction of their life. Traumas can provide the impetus to give up drugs and alcohol and recommit to a healthy lifestyle. For example, ex-alcoholics may join Alcoholics Anonymous and see their spiritual purpose as helping others on the path to recovery. Bethany's family was religious prior to her accident, and she was actively involved with her Church. While she questioned how God could have meant this fate for her, she resolved these doubts by determining that her path was to help and inspire other people facing trauma. The accident, then, led to a deepening of her faith. Researcher Daniel McIntosh and colleagues, studying bereaved mothers, found that religion helped people to adjust to the trauma by providing a ready-made framework of meaning. Religion can also provide social ties and membership in a supportive and accepting community. These seemed to be important elements in Bethany's emotional recovery.

A New Appreciation of Life

People also report a greater appreciation of the life they have, following trauma. Bethany lost a huge amount of blood and came very close to dying. When people look death in the eye, they may realize how good it is just to be alive. Bethany's trip to Thailand was a turning point because she saw people worse off than her. She felt tremendous compassion for a woman who had lost her family, leading Bethany to appreciate the close bonds she had with her own family. When she learned to surf again with one arm, she experienced the joy of being able to do this. This part of the movie brought to mind psychologist Shelly Taylor's concept of "downward comparison." We can restore our self-esteem by comparing ourselves to people who are even worse off, or to hypothetical worse outcomes, such as dying or being unable to surf again. Relative to these imagined fates, our current situation seems fortunate.

In addition to the posttraumatic growth aspects, *Soul Surfer* also sent a powerful message that being beautiful and strong on the inside was more important than what you look like on the outside. Bethany expressed her concern that boys would not be attracted to her with one arm, yet at the end, she seemed to come to terms with the loss. She even rejected the idea of wearing a nonfunctional prosthetic arm just for appearances.

While not everybody who experiences trauma has the resources, abilities, and family support that Bethany had, this movie is a beautiful illustration of the human capacity to thrive, even in the face of devastating events.

[10] If you have experienced a traumatic event or a difficult childhood, it may help to:

- Think about the personal strength that you showed to survive these events. Even if you made some mistakes or did some things you regret, you did what you had to do to survive and that is something to be proud of.
- Think about the things that you have put in your life currently that make it meaningful, be it relationships, your work, your faith, or taking care of your family. Try to find everyday happiness in the life you have now.
- Think about what you have learned from going through difficulties, and about how you might use this knowledge to help yourself and other people or create something of value for the world.
- Know that growth and hope can coexist with grief and that there will be ups and downs when one or other emotion dominates.