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# Damaged? Not Me: Women's Lived Experience of Growth Following Multiple Traumas

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Damaged? Not Me: Women's Lived Experience of Growth  
Following Multiple Traumas

by

Katerina Renny

A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

Posttraumatic growth has been found to develop following a wide variety of adverse life events. This study utilizes Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to lend an understanding to women's lived experiences of growth following multiple trauma experiences, as little is known about the positive growth outcomes following multiple hardships. Nine women who have experienced complex multiple traumas were interviewed about their posttraumatic growth. The findings revealed five main growth facilitating processes as being important catalysts to the development of growth within these women's lives, as well as identified five main areas of growth. Growth facilitating processes included: (1) belief in growth potential, (2) growth as a conscious purposeful process, (3) aligning with hope and spirituality, (4) positive role models and supportive others, and (5) knowledge and skill development. The experiences of growth consisted of: (1) a compassionate self, (2) a better self, (3) an empowered self, (4) moving forward in preferred directions, and (5) aligning with gratitude. This study shows that women's lived experiences of growth following multiple traumas are similar to the findings of previous posttraumatic growth research with single type traumas. The findings challenge the stigma of being forever damaged after multiple trauma experiences.

## **Preface**

While counselling women over the past 12 years, I have borne witness to many women's stories of trauma and growth. I am always in awe of women's ability to overcome multiple traumas, and have seen first hand how some women not just survive, but thrive and flourish after unimaginable hardships. I have noticed that for many women, it's as if their trauma experience fuels a process of transformation, a process of growth, new self discovery, sense of meaningfulness, and newfound appreciation for life and all the little things in it. The scope and intention of this thesis was to lend greater understanding of women's lived experience of posttraumatic growth. Although it is critical to not minimize the pain and turmoil that trauma experiences have on women's lives, it is also vital that we notice and give voice to growth after hardship, a phenomenon that I have witnessed first hand on many occasions.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Dedication**

Dedicated to Rudy, my best friend.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There are many known negative impacts of multiple ongoing trauma experiences, however the field of trauma research has also begun focusing on the positive outcomes that arise out of adversity. Posttraumatic growth is described as positive changes that go beyond a person's ability to just resist and not be damaged by highly traumatic events, and includes a process of qualitative changes in functioning that involves movement beyond pre-trauma levels of adaptation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Growth experiences have been found to include such effects as increased appreciation of life and priorities, positive changes in meaningfulness, closeness, and intimacy of relationships, increased sense of personal strength, an identification of new possibilities for one's life, and spiritual and existential growth experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1999, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Women have been found to report more posttraumatic growth than men following trauma (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Vishnevsky, Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Demakis, 2010; Weiss, 2002), and posttraumatic growth has been found to be present among women who have experienced a wide range of trauma events including intimate partner violence, sexual and physical assault, childhood abuse, breast cancer, and homelessness (Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2006; Grubaugh and Resick, 2007; Hefferon, Greal, & Mutrie, 2010; Vishnevsky et. al., 2010; Woodward & Joseph, 2003).

The large majority of research on posttraumatic growth has focused on exploring positive changes following single type trauma events. Little is known about the personal lived experiences of growth among women with histories of multiple trauma experiences. Women who have experienced multiple traumas in their lives are often viewed by society and health care professionals as being damaged, or significantly negatively affected for the rest of their lives.

This research challenges the damaged stigma discourse by exploring and highlighting the lived experience of growth in the lives of nine women who have experienced multiple significant and complex life traumas.

This research study lends understanding to women's experiences of growth after multiple traumas and was guided by the research question of: *What are women's lived experiences of growth after multiple traumas?* Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used to examine the experiences of growth within these women's lives. IPA is embedded within a theoretical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology, idiography, and symbolic interactionism (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is interpretive in nature, is used to explore individuals' personal experiences and their perceptions and meanings within contexts of social interactions (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The findings of this study provide a phenomenological understanding of the women's personal perceptions or accounts of growth following multiple trauma experiences, as well as some of the main growth facilitating processes that were catalysts for the women's growth experiences.

## **Overview of Chapters**

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature including an overview of trauma conceptualization, trauma prevalence, the known negative impacts of trauma, and delineates the significance of complex trauma experiences. This is followed by an overview of the influence of positive psychology on trauma research, and a brief historical review of the factors that led to the recent focus on examining positive outcomes following hardship. Next, I provide a succinct overview of posttraumatic growth as defined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996; 2004), and highlight how posttraumatic growth differs from other concepts such as resilience, hardiness, or optimism within the literature. This chapter concludes with a comprehensive review of the

theoretical model of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) as well as a review of other models and theories of growth that have developed to explain the phenomena of positive life changes following adversity.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in this study. I begin by discussing the research paradigm and theoretical foundations of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (including hermeneutics, phenomenology, ideology, and symbolic interactionism), and explore the theoretical influences of philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Schleiermacher on the development of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. This chapter then provides a detailed description of the method for data collection including recruitment and screening, sample size, and the procedure for data analysis. I conclude with a discussion of the factors that contributed to the quality and trustworthiness of this study, as well as a discussion of my own reflexivity in relation to this research, providing both introspective and intersubjective reflection.

The findings of this study are presented in Chapter 4. This chapter begins by first outlining the sample demographics, and by providing a detailed summary of the various multiple traumas experienced by the nine women interviewed. Next, the results of the analysis are presented. The findings revealed five master themes of growth facilitating processes that contributed to the development of growth in the women's lives (including: a belief in growth potential, growth as a conscious purposeful process, hope and spirituality, positive role models and supportive others, and knowledge and skill development); as well as five master themes of growth following multiple traumas (specifically growth as: the development of a compassionate self, a better self, an empowered self, moving forward in preferred directions, and aligning with gratitude). These 10 master themes are presented along with several subthemes that emerged

from the analysis. In this chapter, I include the detailed narratives and individual voices of the women in support of the identified themes, and strive to immerse the reader in the in-depth lived experience of growth. It is clear that the findings reveal a detailed and complex lived experience of women's growth following multiple traumas.

The final chapter provides a discussion that integrates the findings with the current posttraumatic growth literature. In the discussion, I compare the findings to previously identified domains of growth, explore the holistic nature of the lived growth experience, discuss and explore the coexistence of negative effects and positive growth, and highlight the ongoing and multidimensional nature of the growth experience. By identifying the difference between complex traumas and single trauma events, I question the potential need and benefit of redefining posttraumatic growth within complex trauma experiences. I next engage in a discussion of the difference between posttraumatic growth and complex trauma recovery in general. This discussion leads to a conceptualization of the five growth-facilitating processes as being similar to recovery processes within the literature.

Within this chapter, the discussion is further integrated with social cognitive theory's view of the various modes of agency, as well as with current knowledge of the role of the brain and affective regulation systems involved in trauma recovery. In consultation with the posttraumatic growth literature, I provide a detailed discussion of the five master themes of growth-facilitating processes, and the five master themes of the lived experience of growth following multiple traumas. I posit that the five growth facilitating processes were critical elements within these women's lives that helped the women effectively utilize their positive emotion systems (i.e., achieving and soothing), and helped the women tap into their brain's full potential, ultimately creating fertile ground for growth to flourish. I conclude the chapter with a

brief discussion on the promotion of growth within therapeutic settings, and the limitations of this study.

### **Importance of this Study**

This study appears to be the first of its kind to explore the lived experience of posttraumatic growth in the lives of women who have experienced multiple traumas. The findings reveal that the experience of posttraumatic growth, although idiographic to each woman, are similar to the findings of previous posttraumatic growth research with single type traumas. This study adds to gender-specific research, and brings greater awareness around how women with multiple traumas develop and experience posttraumatic growth. The study further helps to reduce and challenge the stigma of “being damaged” after multiple traumatic experiences, thus adding to the positive psychology discipline and future research endeavours in this field. This research will help strengthen assessment and treatment interventions by bringing greater awareness to clinicians of the importance of exploring areas of growth following multiple traumas when working with women. The comprehensive findings provide insight into several important processes or catalysts that the women identified as being instrumental in promoting their growth, as well as highlight the meaning and lived experience of growth for these women. This study has shown that women with multiple complex trauma experiences are not automatically sentenced to lifelong negative impacts of trauma, and instead, are capable of experiencing positive growth over and above just survival.



## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Trauma Background

Decades of trauma research has informed psychology and related disciplines on the effects of trauma on the lives of individuals. The vast majority of this research has focused on understanding the many negative impacts of trauma. Such a focus has argumentally been essential in helping to guide the development of effective interventions to help individuals recover and overcome negative trauma impacts. However, in the last two decades there has been an increased systematic research focus on many of the positive outcomes arising from the struggle with highly stressful and traumatic events.

**Trauma conceptualization.** Trauma has been defined and conceptualized as being both an event and a reaction to the event. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) has defined trauma events as extreme stressors which involve exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence, by either: directly experiencing the traumatic event, witnessing the event in person as it occurred to others, learning that the event occurred to a close family member or friend, or through experiencing repeated exposure to aversive details of the trauma event (APA, 2013). Examples of traumatic events include exposure to war, threatened or actual physical assault (i.e., childhood physical abuse, physical attack, mugging, and robbery), threatened or actual sexual violence (i.e., noncontact sexual abuse, abusive sexual contact, forced sexual penetration, alcohol/drug-facilitated sexual penetration, sexual trafficking), being kidnapped or taken hostage, terrorist attack, natural or human-made disasters, and severe motor vehicle accidents (APA, 2013; Herman, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, & Nelson, 1995).

In defining trauma, it is critical to note that the individual's emotional response as well as their subjective appraisal of the event plays an integral component. This is why hearing of the harm or death of a loved one can be as traumatic as directly experiencing a trauma event. There are many variable expressions of clinical distress following exposure to adverse events. Common response to trauma events often involves intense emotions, such as fear, helplessness, or horror, as well as other clinical presentations such as anhedonic or dysphoric mood states or negative cognitions (i.e., persistent negative beliefs about oneself, others, or the world, or distorted thoughts about the cause or consequences of the traumatic events that lead to blaming oneself or others; APA, 2013). Specifically, Janoff-Bulman (1992) noted that it is how the event is understood and appraised by the individual that ultimately determines whether it will be traumatic or not. In their research on posttraumatic growth, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) incorporate Janoff-Bulman's (1992) work in their definition of trauma and define trauma as "circumstances that significantly challenge or invalidate important components of the individual's assumptive world" (p. 3). Tedeschi and Calhoun use the terms trauma, crisis, highly stressful events, and other similar terms interchangeably (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Circumstances and events in individuals' lives are seen as traumatic when they significantly challenge the adaptive resources of the individual and pose a significant challenge to the individual's ways of understanding the world and their place within it (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

**Women and trauma prevalence.** The prevalence of trauma exposure among women is high. A national prevalence study of over 4,000 women residing in the United States revealed lifetime exposure rates of any type of traumatic event to be at 69% for women (Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dransky, Saunders, & Best, 1993). Finding from the National Comorbidity Survey

reported women's lifetime prevalence of trauma exposure to be 51.2% for reporting at least one traumatic event (Kessler, et. al., 1995). The National Violence Against Women Survey revealed that more than half (52%) of all women indicate a past history of physical assault victimization at some point in their lives, 18% of respondents reported a completed or attempted rape, and 25% reported physical or sexual violence victimization within a previous intimate relationship (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Green et al. (2000) found that 65% of 2,507 female college students reported at least one traumatic event, and their findings indicated that most women who have experienced one trauma have in fact experienced others. A recent study by the Australian National Surveys of Mental Health and Wellbeing observed that prevalence estimates of trauma exposure increased significantly for women from 49.5% to 73.8% between 1997 to 2007 (Mills et al., 2011). This study indicated that previous epidemiological surveys might have underestimated the prevalence of trauma and stressful life events among women due to the use of less comprehensive assessment measures.

**Women, trauma, and known negative impacts.** Over the last several decades, the large majority of trauma research has focused on understanding the negative impacts of trauma and negative responses in persons exposed to highly stressful and traumatic events are well documented. Trauma exposure can result in significant impacts on women's health and well-being. The development of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or acute stress disorder (ASD) are two possible outcomes of exposure. Posttraumatic stress symptoms or common responses to trauma include intrusive re-experiencing of the trauma (i.e., nightmares, flashbacks), avoidance (i.e., emotional numbing or efforts to avoid trauma related stimuli), negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event (i.e., inability to remember important aspects of the event, negative beliefs, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the

event, persistent negative emotional states), and symptoms of marked alterations in arousal (i.e., heightened startle response, sleep disturbances, irritable behaviour and angry outbursts; [DSM-5] APA, 2013). Tolin and Foa (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of gender trauma research over the past 25 years, and results show that although women have lower rates of overall trauma exposure than men, they tend to experience a lifetime prevalence rate of PTSD that is twice that of men. For example, the National Comorbidity Study revealed the lifetime prevalence rate of PTSD to be 10.4% for women compared to 5% for men (Kessler, et. al., 1995). One contributing factor to this difference may be due to the fact that women, more frequently than men, experience traumas that are highly upsetting and are known to be associated with a high probability to PTSD, including interpersonal traumas such as rape, sexual molestation, physical attack, being threatened with a weapon, and childhood physical abuse (Kessler, et. al., 1995; Tolin & Foa, 2006). Women are also more likely to report multiple incidents of abuse (Green et al., 2000).

It has been found that women tend to experience greater distress during traumatic events and greater peritraumatic dissociation; this gender difference in cognitive and emotional response may (in addition to trauma type) contribute to the greater prevalence of PTSD among women (Rimmo, Aberg, & Fredrikson, 2005; Tolin & Foa, 2006). Gender differences have also been found in terms of trauma symptomology; specifically women tend to report more internalizing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints, as well as higher levels of dissociation following traumatic events (Tolin & Foa, 2006). The negative sequelae of traumatic events have been shown to contribute to lower self-esteem, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, poorer health outcomes, an increased sense of vulnerability, and substance use (Brand, 2003; Kessler, Davis, & Kendler, 1997; Sacks, McKendrick, & Banks, 2008).

**Women and complex trauma.** Herman (1992) was the first to use the term *Complex PTSD* to highlight the significant impacts that prolonged repeated trauma has on an individual's symptomatic manifestation. According to Herman, symptoms of prolonged repeated traumas include alterations in: (a) regulation of affective impulses, (b) attention and consciousness, (c) self-perception, (d) perception of perpetrator, (e) relationship with others, (f) systems of meaning, and (g) somatization and medical problems. Briere and Spinazzola (2005) define complex trauma as trauma experiences with an early onset (i.e., childhood abuse and neglect), multiple traumas (i.e., repeated victimization, battering), or prolonged traumatic exposure. Trauma research has shown that exposure to complex trauma often results in a wide range of symptom clusters including: (a) altered self-capacities and negative self perceptions, (b) cognitive disturbances such as low-self esteem, self-blame, helplessness, hopelessness, expectations of rejection and loss, and overestimates of danger, (c) mood disturbances such as anxiety, depression, anger, or aggression, (d) an overdeveloped avoidance response including dissociation, substance abuse, and other tension reducing behaviours such as compulsive sexual behaviour, self mutilation and suicidality, and (e) somatoform distress (Briere & Spinazzola, 2005). Because women experience higher rates of childhood sexual abuse (range from 15% to 33% compared to 13% to 16% in men), are at greater risk of enduring interpersonal traumas, and often experience multiple and repeated instances of abuse (Green et al., 2000; Kessler, et. al., 1995; Polusny & Follette, 1995; Tolin & Foa, 2006), they in turn have higher incidents of complex trauma and are at greater risk for experiencing its negative impacts.

### **The Transformative Effects of Trauma: A Focus On the Positive**

The known negative impacts of trauma provide only half of the story. Recent trauma research has begun to seek to understand the many positive outcomes of trauma. Working

through highly traumatic and challenging experiences, has for some women, been a deeply transformative and powerful experience which has helped them develop and grow in many valued and positive ways.

**Positive psychology.** The field of positive psychology has had a recent strong influence within trauma research. Patterson (2009) highlighted that “Positive psychology is a deliberate correction to the focus of psychology on problems. Positive psychology does not deny the difficulties that people may experience but does suggest that sole attention to disorder leads to an incomplete view of the human condition” (p. 3). Positive psychology does not ignore or dismiss the real problems that people experience, it complements and extends the problem-focused psychology that has dominated the discipline for many decades (Patterson, 2008). Positive psychology is “the “scientific” study of what makes life worth living” (Patterson, 2008, p. XXIII).

For thousands of years, ancient philosophers and religious leaders have discussed and pondered such aspects of human existence as character virtues, happiness, and good society. Diener (2009) identified several pioneer social and humanistic psychologists who have worked in the field of positive psychology over the last century of psychology’s development and evolution. These pioneers included (a) Don Clifton’s work on human strengths, (b) George Vaillant’s research on effective coping, (c) Shelley Taylor who studies health, (d) Jane Piliavin’s work on helping and volunteerism, (e) Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who studied flow and creativity; along with humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers and the works of Viktor Frankl (Diener, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, it was not until 1998 when Martin E. P. Seligman, during his tenure as President of the American Psychological Association, along with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Christopher Peterson, challenged

psychologists working on human strengths and positive attributes to come together to form a positive psychology network (Christopher, Richardson, & Slife, 2008; Diener, 2009). Positive psychology, as envisioned by Seligman, had three primary goals: (1) to delineate and measure positive traits that approach universality (traits that transcend the influences of culture and politics) and provide insight into human strengths, civic virtues, and the *good life*; (2) to promote positive experiences and emotions; and (3) to create positive communities that both promote and embody these positive human strengths and experiences (Christopher et al., 2008). As a discipline, positive psychology is concerned with studying what is good or positive in life, and explores such human aspects as positive emotions, strengths of character, positive health, resilience, happiness and well-being, creativity, optimism, self-determination, self-efficacy, compassion, forgiveness, empathy, altruism, love, benefit finding, and growth (Lopez & Snyder, 2009). In short, positive psychology research focuses on studying the human capacities for positive change and growth, as well as experiences like flourishing, flow, and subjective well-being..

**Growth after hardship.** The field of trauma research is increasingly focusing its attention to the positive outcomes arising out of adversity. The current interest in positive psychology has contributed to this focus on the positive changes that can occur after trauma experiences. Although there are many well-known and documented effects of trauma, not all women who experience trauma develop serious problems, and recent literature has begun to highlight the transformative power that trauma experiences can have for some individuals.

Within the literature, several scholars have traced the human experience of growth or positive changes following difficult life struggles within a broad array of historical literary works (i.e., Shakespeare, Proust, Dickinson, and Kingfisher) and in ancient and contemporary religious

and philosophical traditions including that of Buddhists, Christians, Greeks, Hebrews, Hindus, and Muslims (see Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998; Sheikh, 2008). Although the idea of positive changes after hardship is not a novel one, according to Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006), a vast array of disciplines spanning psychology, counselling, social work, and psychiatry have increasingly begun focusing attention on positive outcomes of trauma. Tedeschi, Park and Calhoun (1998), and Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) have noted that early seminal stress and coping studies with trauma victims, seriously ill individuals, and difficult life events began to highlight that positive changes co-occurred with negative impacts in the aftermath of highly stressful life events. Although these early studies pre-dated the positive psychology movement, they, along with the work of humanistic psychologists, were instrumental in setting the stage for the development of positive psychology and its deliberate focus on the good in life. The authors also noted that work and research in philosophy and existential psychology, by such pioneers as Frankl, Heidegger, May, and Yalom, have long recognized that growth and meaning can develop from trauma and suffering.

Within the literature, positive changes after hardships have been referred to as *thriving* (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Saakvitne et al., 1998), *benefit finding* (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Antoni et al., 2001; Lechner, Tennen, & Affleck, 2009; McMillen, Zuravin, & Rideout, 1995; Tennen, Affleck, Urrows, Higgins, & Mendola, 1992; Tomich & Helgeson, 2004), *stress-related growth* (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), *adversarial growth* (Joseph et al., 2005; Linley & Joseph, 2004), *flourishing* (Ryff & Singer, 1998), and *posttraumatic growth* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Specifically, O’Leary and Ickovics (1995) defined *thriving* as “the effective mobilization of individual and social resources in response to risk or threat...where thriving represents something more than a return to equilibrium...[and where] challenge can provide the impetus for



growth and greater well-being” (p. 122). Affleck and Tennen (1996) defined *benefit finding* as adaptive beliefs about the benefits and consequences from adversity. Park et al. (1996) identified *stress related growth* as stress related positive outcomes, and Linley & Joseph (2004) defined *adversarial growth* as positive changes following the struggle with adversity. And *flourishing*, has been identified as positive human health that goes beyond an absence of illness (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

### **Posttraumatic Growth: An Overview**

Posttraumatic growth has been defined as “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Posttraumatic growth involves movement beyond pre-trauma levels of adaptation. Posttraumatic growth describes experiences where individuals’ development within some areas surpasses what was present before the hardship.

Tedeschi et al. (1998; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004) argued, however, that this is not to say that inevitable growth following trauma should replace the widespread assumptions that traumas often result in negative psychological impacts. Individuals who experience posttraumatic growth have not necessarily escaped the serious negative impacts of the trauma. Instead the authors maintained that personal distress and growth often coexist, and proposed that it is through the coping with the losses and the struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma, that some individuals develop a new level of meaning, a changed philosophical stance, increased wisdom, renewed purpose, redefined sense of self, or changed relationships with the world and others.

Posttraumatic growth represents a paradoxical phenomenon (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, Tedeschi et al., 1998) in that from the loss and pain of trauma,

growth and gain may emerge. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) noted that the presence of growth does not however necessarily signal an end to the pain or distress related to the trauma, and the experience of growth is not accompanied by a view that the trauma was desirable. The good or positive arising from the events, not the events themselves, are often valued and seen as desirable. Paradoxically, growth experiences often coincide with an increased sense of vulnerability (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999).

Tedeschi and Calhoun have been studying the phenomena of posttraumatic growth since the early 1980's (Tedeschi, et al., 1998). It was not until 1996, that they first introduced the term *posttraumatic growth* when they outlined the development of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995, 1996) empirical work on posttraumatic growth sparked a newfound interest and empirical research in this area over the last two decades. Prior to the new surge of research, "the experience of growth in the aftermath of crisis has been viewed as primarily defensive or illusory" (Tedeschi, et. al., 1998, p. vii).

In their early work based primarily on qualitative research findings, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) identified three main domains within posttraumatic growth: changes in perception of self, changes in interpersonal relationships, and changes in philosophies of life. According to the authors, changes in perceptions of self often include an increased confidence in self-reliance and a sense of personal strength, alongside a recognition and appreciation of one's vulnerability, sensitivity, and emotional experience. Changed sense of relationship with others often coincided with increase self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness within one's significant relationships, and experiences of greater compassion, empathy, and effort in relationships. And lastly, a changed philosophy of life included such aspects of experiencing a

change in life's priorities, a new appreciation for life, newfound meaning, or changed or strengthened spiritual beliefs.

In 1996, Tedeschi and Calhoun's attempt to quantify the experience of posttraumatic growth subsequently led to the identification of five domains of posttraumatic growth through factor analysis and the development of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), a 21-item scale that measured different areas of posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). The five domains included: (a) an increased appreciation of life and a changed sense of priorities, (b) closer, more meaningful and more intimate relationships with others, (c) a general sense of increased personal strength, (d) identification of new possibilities for one's life, and (e) spiritual growth.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) noted that an increase appreciation of life often includes a greater appreciation of the smaller or simpler aspects of life, a changed sense of what is important, along with a sense of being lucky. An experience of deeper and more meaningful relationships can include a newfound appreciation for and effort within existing relationships, as well as greater empathy and compassion for others who have experienced similar traumas or adverse life events. Through trauma experiences, a greater recognition of personal strength, the third domain of growth, is also common. Tedeschi and Calhoun note that this experience often paradoxically coincides with an increased sense of being vulnerable, or an increased knowing that bad things can and do happen. The identification of new possibilities for one's life can include the desire and possibility to take a new or preferred path in life (i.e., a new career, new commitments in life, engaging in life in different and preferred ways). Spiritual and existential growth is often seen as developing stronger or new connections to spiritual or religious beliefs, as well as a greater engagement with fundamental existential questions such as "what is the

meaning of my life?”, “who am I?”, “what is death?”, “is there a God?” etc. (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). To date, these domains appears to be highly consistent in both quantitative studies (partly due to the use of multidimensional measures such as the PTGI), but also in qualitative and descriptive studies (Sheikh, 2008).

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) have noted that reports of growth experiences after traumatic events outnumber reports of psychiatric disorder. They stated that recent research indicates that the phenomena of posttraumatic growth is more prevalent than the phenomena of posttraumatic stress. Linley and Joseph’s (2004) comprehensive review of 39 empirical studies on positive changes following adversity indicated that posttraumatic growth ranges widely in samples of individuals who have experienced trauma, from 3% in a sample of bereaved persons to 98% in a sample of women with breast cancer. Posttraumatic growth within the literature has been found in individuals who have experienced a wide variety of different types of adversity including interpersonal abuse or neglect (i.e., sexual assault, sexual abuse, childhood neglect), interpersonal loss (i.e., bereavement, divorce, death of a child, death of a spouse/partner, loved one diagnosed with physical or mental disability), health traumas (i.e., cancer, heart attack, arthritis, HIV, chronic illness), natural or environmental disasters (i.e., floods, house fires, tornadoes, plane crashes), war (i.e., military combat, refugee experiences), and other adverse life events (see Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004; McMillen & Fisher, 1998; Park, et al., 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Posttraumatic growth has been noted in both males and females (e.g., Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Polatinsky & Esprey, 2000; Weiss, 2002) and across the lifespan (e.g., Bellizzi, 2004). Individuals possessing a wide variety of cultural identities and from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds (i.e., Israelis, Palestinians, Germans, Latinos, Australian populations,

Chinese, Japanese, American and British populations) have been found to experience the phenomena of growth following adversity (see Weiss & Berger, 2010). Posttraumatic growth appears to be independent from the passage of time, with studies revealing that growth can occur from two weeks to eight years following a traumatic event (Linely & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

### **Personality Characteristics and Their Relationship with Posttraumatic Growth**

As noted earlier, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995, 2004) have made a distinction between posttraumatic growth and related concepts such as resilience, hardiness, optimism, or sense of coherence, internal locus of control, self-efficacy, and the ‘big five’ personality factors. They have however recognized that these personality characteristics are critical to effective coping when faced with highly challenging events and they identified several of these characteristics as contributing to posttraumatic growth.

**Resilience.** In making a distinction between posttraumatic growth and resilience, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) identified posttraumatic growth as being transformative, and proposed that resilience is not. They define resilience as the “ability to go on with life after hardship and adversity” (p. 4). In their early writing on posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) suggested that resilient individuals may be less likely to experience posttraumatic growth because they are less likely to struggle with highly challenging circumstances, a needed condition to in the development of posttraumatic growth. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) emphasized that they possess a complex view of the relationship between posttraumatic growth and resilience. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) highlighted that a certain amount of coping abilities or managing of the event (i.e., resilience) is needed for individuals to cognitively process the event to facilitate posttraumatic growth. They also identified personal

strength and the development of new schemas that promote *resistance* to future traumas as being outcome factors of posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Janoff-Bulman (2006) postulated what she called “preparedness” as being another aspect of posttraumatic growth, the ability of transformed assumptive worlds, or schemas, to resist subsequent traumas. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) proposed that this “preparedness” was similar to resilience, or the ability to bounce back or to resist the negative effects of traumatic events.

Lepore and Revenson (2006) have provided an overview of current knowledge and research on resilience and proposed a useful conceptualization of resilience that includes posttraumatic growth as one form or aspect of resilience. Lepore and Revenson (2006) noted that the large majority of resilience research has focused on childhood psychopathology and trying to explain why many children who grow up in neglectful or unhealthy, chaotic environments, or possess personal mental or physical vulnerabilities, develop into well-functioning and healthy adults. They outlined that early resilience studies identified children as having both risk and protective factors that were found to be orthogonal and dynamic, where protective factors are seen as compensating for the negative effects of risk factors.

Lepore and Revenson (2006) noted the resiliency literature has outlined a wide variety of definitions and models of resilience. They identified that many scholars have defined resilience as “a propensity toward positive (or non-pathological) developmental outcomes under high-risk conditions” (p. 27). However, Lepore and Revenson argued that no single definition of resilience has fully captured this construct. Through their review of the literature and their exploration around the relationship between resilience and posttraumatic growth, Lepore and Revenson have outlined a broad conceptualization of resilience. Specifically, they conceptualized resilience as including three distinct yet related facets: *recovery*, *resistance*, and *reconfiguration*. Recovery,

according to the authors, is an aspect of resilience that highlights and captures an individual's ability to resume their normal (or pre-stressor) level of functioning after experiencing significant traumas or stressors. This definition of recovery finds its roots in early stress literature which sees optimal adaptation as a process of returning to homeostasis, often referred to as the *normative adaptation pattern* (Lepore & Revenson, 2006).

Lepore and Revenson (2006) noted that resistance, the second facet of resilience, speaks to an individual's ability to resist and not be negatively affected by traumatic or challenging events, in that the individual exhibits normal functioning before, during, and after the event. According to Lepore and Revenson (2006), this facet and conceptualization of resilience has been controversial among psychologists. They noted that several researchers (i.e., Bonanno, 2004; Wortman & Silver, 1989) have highlighted this controversy in their work, noting psychology's tendency to pathologize this type of response to stressors as being a form of defense mechanism because it does not align with prevailing psychological theories.

In their conceptualization, Lepore and Revenson (2006) identified reconfiguration as the third form of resilience. Reconfiguration is seen as an individual's ability, when faced with traumatic circumstances, to change and become more resistant to future stressors, stronger, and more resourceful. According to Lepore and Revenson, this understanding aligns with Walsh's (1998) conceptualization of resilience. "Individuals may exhibit this type of resilience when they are able to reconfigure their cognitions, beliefs, and behaviours in a manner that allows them to adapt to traumatic experiences and, possibly, withstand future traumas" (p. 27). Lepore and Revenson, noted that this form of resilience has been described as *assimilation* or *accommodation* in cognitive-processing theories.

Importantly, Lepore and Revenson (2006) proposed that posttraumatic growth is one possible outcome of reconfiguration processes; in other words posttraumatic growth is included within reconfiguration resilience. They noted that both posttraumatic growth and reconfiguration resilience are distinct from resistance and recovery resilience, in that they include important transformations that go beyond simply maintaining or returning to normal. However, they argued that posttraumatic growth refers only to “positive elements of transformation, [whereas] reconfiguration might include changes that can be both positive or negative ” (p. 27). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006), however, upheld that according to their conceptualization, posttraumatic growth should maintain a clear distinction from resilience, arguing that resilience was never defined as transformative or reformative.

**Hardiness.** Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995; 2004) also make a distinction between hardiness and posttraumatic growth. They noted Kobasa’s (1979) definition of hardiness to consist of a constellation of personality traits that enable people to resist stress. These traits include having a stronger commitment to self, an attitude of control and vigorousness towards the environment, a sense of meaningfulness, and an internal locus of control. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) these traits generate a sense of challenge in response to life events. Individuals “high in hardiness are curious and active, believe they can influence events, and expect life to present with challenges that can be met with personal development.” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 4). The personality variable of hardiness has been found to be associated with posttraumatic growth within the literature (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

**Optimism.** Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) highlighted some of the work by Scheier and Carver (i.e., 1985) in defining and discussing optimism. Optimism is the maintenance of hope and the expectation of positive outcomes to events (Scheier & Carver, 1985. Tedeschi and



Calhoun (1995) noted that optimists tend to use active and problem focused coping strategies, and they tend to focus on how events will turn out versus who controls them or how well they can perform acts. Optimism has been associated with effective coping and positive health outcomes (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010), and findings have shown that those who were more optimistic tended to report more growth than those with less optimism (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

**Sense of coherence.** According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), Antonovsky described people possessing a sense of coherence as being in the best position to respond well to stress. The authors noted that Antonovsky identified a sense of coherence as including three components: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. Comprehensibility refers to an individual's belief that events (positive or negative) will make cognitive sense, be orderly, and explainable. Manageability refers to an individual's belief that they have the necessary resources (internal and external) at their disposal to manage or cope with events. Meaningfulness refers to a belief that challenges in life are worthy of investment and engagement and that meaning can be found even in difficult or undesirable events. Sense of coherence, has of yet, not been found to be associated with posttraumatic growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

**Internal locus of control.** In reviewing the locus of control literature, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) noted that individuals with an internal locus of control perceive themselves as affecting the outcome of events, whereas those with an external locus of control perceive events and their outcomes to be the actions of other people, chance, or fate. They stated that an external locus of control is related to Seligman's concept of learned helplessness, or a perception that there is no relationship between their actions and the outcome of an event, leading to a belief that there is no escape and feelings of helplessness. Individuals with an internal locus of control, in

comparison possess a belief that their actions will affect the event outcome and hence are more apt to engage in active, purposeful action. Tedeschi and Calhoun highlighted however that unexpected traumatic events may be more significantly difficult to cope with when individuals have extreme beliefs about their own abilities to control events, versus those who possess moderate levels of internal locus of control.

**Self-efficacy.** Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) noted that Bandura described self-efficacy as the perception that one can perform tasks to deal with events or prospective situations. Bandura (1982) proposed that individuals avoid tasks that exceed their perceived competencies, and in contrast will exert greater effort to master challenges in which they have a strong sense of self-efficacy. Within the literature, the personality variable of self-efficacy has been found to be positively associated with growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

**The ‘big five’ personality factors.** Costa and McCrae (1986) have identified five primary personality components, including neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) noted that growth appears to be related especially to the personality traits of extroversion and openness, as these traits are connected to an individual’s tendency to be active, curious, open to experiences, and a tendency to connect with others. They identified agreeableness and conscientiousness as being moderately related to growth, and neuroticism as being unrelated to growth.

### **The Complex Balance Between Coping and Growth**

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995, 2004) posit that the struggle with the trauma is what is crucial for posttraumatic growth to occur; hence they conceptualized a delicate balance between effective coping and the experience of growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun have identified the above personality characteristics and coping strategies as playing a significant role to successful coping

when faced with traumatic or highly stressful circumstances. The above personality and coping variables each contribute both individually and in interrelated ways to enhance an individual's coping abilities. Tedeschi and Calhoun summarized their view of the relationship between posttraumatic growth and the above personality and coping variables as a curvilinear relationship, where those with a *moderate* degree of coping capability (those possessing a moderate degree of the above personality and coping variables) would be the most likely to develop posttraumatic growth. Individuals with a low degree of coping capacity (possessing a low degree of the above variables) would experience mainly negative responses to trauma, and those with high degree of coping capacity (possessing a high degree of the above variables) would be unaffected by the trauma experience, and hence too be less likely to develop posttraumatic growth.

### **Posttraumatic Growth Theoretical Model**

Posttraumatic growth is seen both as a process and an outcome (Tedeschi, et al., 1998). Posttraumatic growth develops out of cognitive processes that are initiated in an attempt to cope with life traumas or “seismic events”, which have challenged current schemas, assumptions, and life plans (Tedeschi et al., 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Earlier on in their work, Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) provided a general overview of what they believed was the process of posttraumatic growth. In 2004, drawing both from empirical work and their experience, they outlined a comprehensive conceptual model of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), and two years later they expanded on this model and updated the model schematic (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

Their model of posttraumatic growth captures several key elements that contribute to growth experiences, including: (a) the characteristics of the person and the challenging

circumstances, (b) management of emotional distress, (c) rumination, (d) self-disclosure, (e) proximate and distal sociocultural influences, (f) narrative development, and (g) life wisdom.

According to this model:

1. Each individual possesses his or her own idiosyncratic personality characteristics, assumptive views of the world and themselves in it, coping abilities, and influences of socioeconomic factors.
2. A trauma event profoundly challenges an individual's fundamental beliefs, schemas, and goals, as well as their ability to manage emotional distress, and profoundly affects the individual's life narrative.
3. This impact subsequently leads to intense *cognitive processing* in the form of *rumination* in an attempt to manage distressing emotions and challenged assumptions/life narratives. During the early stages, this rumination is mostly automatic and intrusive.
4. As part of a coping strategy, an individual may then seek to reduce emotional distress by means of self-disclosure (i.e., talking, writing, praying) and seeking social support within both proximal social systems (i.e., family, workplace, church group) and/or distal sociocultural variables (i.e., government organizations, educational systems).  
Socioeconomic variables influence the type of coping supports available to the person.
5. This leads to a reduction in emotional distress, greater management of automatic rumination, and a disengagement from goals.
6. Rumination becomes more deliberate, and provides opportunities for new schema and narrative development
7. This process leads to the development of posttraumatic growth, of general wisdom about life, and the development and modification of the individual's life narrative.

**Rumination.** The cognitive processing is deemed to be central to the development of posttraumatic growth and positive change. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, 2006) noted that although this process may reduce some distress, a certain degree of psychological distress often does coexist, and may be necessary not only to set the process of growth in motion, but also to fuel the cognitive processing cycle. They identified rumination as a vital component in the process of posttraumatic growth, and defined rumination as being synonymous with *cognitive processing*, or to ‘turn over in the mind’, repeated thinking (such as trying to make sense of, problem solving, reminiscence, anticipation, searching for how the trauma has created positive changes). Tedeschi and Calhoun noted that their conceptualization of rumination adheres to Martin and Tesser’s (1996) broad conceptualization, and aligns with Janoff-Bulman’s (1992, 2006) work with trauma survivors and the major cognitive tasks with which survivors are confronted. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) noted that rumination is not necessarily intrusive or negative, although it may be more automatic and intrusive directly following the traumatic experience. In their model of posttraumatic growth, rumination becomes more deliberate and purposeful throughout the process. “The content of this more deliberate, reflective ruminative process tends to be the repair, restructuring, or rebuilding of the individual’s general way of understanding the world” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006, p. 10). It is this deliberate type of processing that is involved in producing posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 2006). Calhoun & Tedeschi (2006) noted that posttraumatic growth appears to be more likely when individuals ruminate on a variety of content, first trying to enhance their comprehensibility of the event, then figuring out ways to manage and cope with the circumstance, and finally engaging in more reflective thinking and searching for meaningfulness.

Janoff-Bulman (2006) delineated the cognitive processing necessary in the process of posttraumatic growth. Trauma events, according to Janoff-Bulman, significantly challenge or shatter an individual's fundamental assumptions (or schemas) of the world and of himself or herself. Specifically, traumatic life events shatter their inner most fundamental assumptions related to their sense of safety and security. Janoff-Bulman noted that "the coping task confronting the trauma victim is nothing short of overwhelming" (p. 86), one that required the individual over time to reconstruct a new viable and comfortable inner world, one that acknowledges the reality of the victim's traumatic experience, yet not being "wholly defined by anxiety and vulnerability" (p. 86). If survivors are unable to rebuild a more comfortable set of assumptions, they may struggle with chronic posttraumatic stress. Janoff-Bulman highlighted that in the process of re-developing a new assumptive world, the immediate terror of the event often involves perceptions of randomness, uncontrollability, meaninglessness, malevolence, and threat. The survivor's immediate tendency is to overgeneralize from his or her traumatic experience and embrace the negative assumptions implied by the experience, as well as to experience emotional numbing as a way to reduce intense fear and anxiety. The key to successful coping is for the individual to begin to move from the initial overgeneralized negative assumptions to a more complex and holistic assumptive world, one that accounts for the negative experience while simultaneously providing a more positive view of themselves and the world.

Janoff-Bulman (2006) noted that humans are motivated to survive and adapt, and despite the terror, the event must be acknowledged and worked on. The initial, more intrusive nonvolitional rumination begins this process, and the trauma is confronted in limited doses.

And over time – it may be weeks, months, or even years for some – there is movement from nonvolitional confrontation with the traumatic experience to volitional

confrontations, from avoidance to approach. The automatic work of numbing and intrusive thoughts abates, and the survivor intentionally and willingly confronts the traumatic experience. As with the automatic processes, such volitional cognitive processing is also in the service of adaptive schema change and is likely to facilitate successful coping. (Janoff-Bulman, 2006, pp. 87)

She highlighted that some form of emotional regulation aids in this process and further facilitates approach rather than avoidance. Over time the individual is confronted with new information from daily life, which too needs to be assimilated into their assumptive world. The cognitive coping process is long, but eventually the traumatic event is successfully incorporated into the assumptive world without wholly defining the inner world. Through this cognitive processing, the individual often discovers new personal strength and possibilities through newly recognized coping skills and resources (Janoff-Bulman, 2006), aspects of posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, 2006; Tedeschi et al., 1998). Janoff-Bulman (2006) also indicated that this cognitive process includes a search for meaning, first *meaning as comprehensibility* (making sense of the event), next *meaning as significance* (questions of value and significance in their own lives). According to Janoff-Bulman, it is the search for meaning of significance that aids in the development of other aspects of posttraumatic growth such as appreciation of life, relating to others, and spiritual growth. According to her “all these stem from a newfound recognition of the preciousness of human existence” (p. 890).

According to Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006), the degree of posttraumatic growth reported is related to the amount of rumination (or thinking about) the elements related to the traumatic event. In their review on posttraumatic growth Linley and Joseph (2004) noted that several studies have reported a greater amount of growth in individuals who identified high levels of

traumatic stress. These studies support the assertion that in order for posttraumatic growth to occur, the individual must experience a significant threat to their assumptive world (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Janoff-Bulman, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). Rumination involves the giving up of certain goals and basic assumptions, while at the same time building new schemas, goals, and meanings (Janoff-Bulman, 2006), a process which is aided by self disclosure in supportive and accepting social environments (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

**Self-disclosure and social support.** Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) identified self-disclosure and social support as being an important part of the process of posttraumatic growth. Self-disclosure and seeking social support are helpful coping strategies that in turn facilitate opportunities for cognitive rumination. Posttraumatic growth is theorized to be influenced by the interplay of rumination characteristics, disclosure factors, and the influences of distal and proximal cultural factors (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) highlight that posttraumatic growth occurs within and is influenced by an individual's cultural factors. They identified two broad cultural domains: *distal* and *proximate*. According to Calhoun and Tedeschi, these domains are similar to ecological psychology's identification of microsystems, ecosystems, and macrosystems of influence on human development, such as Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework and Erikson's Psychosocial Framework. Distal cultural elements include broader cultural influences found in the larger society such as socio-political contexts, social norms, economic contexts; while the proximal cultural elements represents the smaller communities and social networks of people with whom an individual interacts. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) posited that broader or distal cultural themes can influence an individual's response to trauma, highlighting for instance that North American culture may provide "already existing frameworks that include religious themes and



perhaps themes of optimism and self-reliance” (p. 12) which may influence an individual’s experience of posttraumatic growth. According to Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) “the individual’s proximate cultural influences may provide a more direct avenue for evaluation how the process of posttraumatic growth may occur” (p. 12). Specifically, they identified the individual’s *primary reference group* (those whom the individual has regular interactions with or whom they share certain attitudes or assumptions with) as being a critical influence.

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) identified three elements of the primary reference group as being particularly important including: (1) the responses of important others to disclosures related to the trauma, primarily their responses to the individuals intimations or direct articulations about growth, (2) the degree to which the individual’s ruminations around the trauma are congruent (in context and degree) with the kinds of thoughts important others have about the individual’s situation and responses, and (3) the presence of models of posttraumatic growth. They noted that posttraumatic growth is more likely when disclosures are met with accepting or affirming responses by significant others, when an individual is able to engage in disclosures that contain themes of growth, and when growth themes are part of the proximate cultures narratives related to traumatic response.

**Wisdom and new life narrative.** Within the theoretical model, the process leads to the development of posttraumatic growth, of general wisdom about life, and the development and modification of the individual’s life narrative. People who experience posttraumatic growth also show an increase in life wisdom (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 1998), or “the ability to balance reflection and action, weight the knowns and unknowns of life, be better able to accept some of the paradoxes of life, and to more openly and satisfactorily address the fundamental questions of human existence” (Calhoun & Tedeschi,

1999, p. 21). The struggle with traumatic events can lead to a revised life story or life narrative that people have for thinking about their lives. This new life narrative includes new assumptive world schemas, a new sense of identity or changes in the individual's self understanding of "who am I?" and "what is my story?", and often includes a before and after the trauma narrative (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

### **Other Theories of Growth**

Others in the field have also developed theories and models to explain the phenomena of growth following trauma, although Tedeschi and Calhoun's model has been the most studied and utilized in the literature over the past decade. Other models include Life Crises and Personal Growth (Schaefer & Moos, 1992), Transformational Coping (Aldwin, 1994), Resilience and Thriving (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995), The Organismic Valuing Theory of Growth through Adversity (Joseph & Linley, 2005, 2008), and Christopher's Bio-Psycho-Sociocultural Evolutionary Theoretical Framework (2004).

**Life crisis and personal growth.** Schaefer and Moos (1992) acknowledged that personal growth can be facilitated through the disruption that crisis creates and through the subsequent reorganization that occurs after the event. They outlined a conceptual framework of Life Crisis and Personal Growth for understanding the process of this growth development. According to their framework, the *personal system* (comprising of their sociodemographic characteristics and personal resources such as cognitive ability, health status, motivation, and self-efficacy) and the *environmental system* (comprising of the individuals relationships with significant others, and their financial, home, and community living situations) jointly affect both the likelihood and characteristics of a *life crisis*. Within the model, the life crisis, environmental, and personal factors shape the individual's appraisal and *coping responses* (which include appraisal-focused

coping, problem-focused coping, and emotion-focuses coping) and affect the likelihood of positive outcome and personal growth.

**Transformational coping.** In her work and review of the stress and coping literature, Aldwin (1994) introduced the term transformational coping and argued for increased attention to how people grow, change, and develop throughout the lifespan in the face of crisis, losses, and adversity, including posttraumatic stress. Aldwin maintained that coping with trauma events can serve either a homeostatic function, or may be transformational by resulting in either positive or negative change, and advocated for a comprehensive model that accounted for both negative and positive changes following adversity. Aldwin highlighted several models in the psychological literature to help to elucidate how opposite effects (i.e., positive and negative changes) can arise from the same stimulus (i.e., stressful events), including: (a) the *independence of positive and negative affect*, where individuals may simultaneously experience both positive and negative affect, (b) the *opponent process model*, which states that a strong negative affective state is invariably followed by a strong positive affective state and visa versa, and (c) *deviation amplification and chaos theory*, which postulate how small changes (either positive or negative) within a system (individuals) can become amplified and ever-increasingly significant, as well as account for chance events and change over time. Aldwin posited that personal characteristics (including intelligence, flexibility, determination, willingness to take personal risks, hardiness, sense of coherence, and optimism) both increase the likelihood of using problem focused coping style and the likelihood that one will experience positive transformational change.

**Resilience and thriving.** O’Leary and Ickovics (1995) outlined a model of Resilience and Thriving. According to their model, there are three possible outcomes following trauma: survival, recovery, and thriving. Survival is conceptualized as those individuals who never regain

their previous level of functioning following trauma. Recovery refers to those individual who regain homeostasis and return to their previous level of functioning. And thriving refers to the ability to go beyond the original level of psychosocial functioning, to grow vigorously and flourish either behaviourally, emotionally, or cognitively. O’Leary and Ickovics postulated that thriving is dependent on the individual actively confronting the trauma (although this confrontation may not be intentional or within awareness), as well as the availability of individual resources (including personality characteristics such as hardiness, optimism, sense of coherence, and sense of humor; effective cognitive coping methods; reliance on faith; and search for meaningfulness) and social resources (i.e., social support networks, and community, social, and spiritual resources).

**The organismic valuing theory of growth through adversity.** Joseph and Linley (2005, 2008) posit that individuals are intrinsically motivated to rebuilding their assumptive world in a direction consistent to their innate tendency toward actualization. Their theory incorporates a psychosocial framework, is grounded in the person-centered theoretical position that individuals are intrinsically motivated towards growth, and provides a detailed account of the relationships between appraisal process, personality, and assumptive worlds. According to their model, and in line with Janoff-Bulman’s (1992, 2006) conceptualizations, the individual possesses assumptive world beliefs prior to the trigger (trauma) event. The trauma event shatters these pre-existing assumptive world beliefs and creates posttraumatic stress that needs to be worked through. The individual then moves through cycles of appraisals, emotional states, and coping (with various psychosocial factors influencing this cognitive-emotional processing). Joseph and Linley outlined three possible cognitive outcomes of this processing, similar to the three trajectories proposed in Aldwin’s (1994) transformational coping model. Either the trauma

related information can be *assimilated* with the individual's existing models of the world, or must be *accommodated*, which requires the individual to change their worldviews either in a positive or negative direction.

Joseph and Linley (2008) noted that when trauma experiences are *assimilated*, this leads the individual to a return to pre-trauma worldviews or their baseline assumptions, despite evidence to the contrary. This, according to Joseph and Linley, requires the individual to use more rigid defenses as their means of coping (i.e., blaming self for the trauma) and subsequently leaves the individual more vulnerable to re-traumatization and to future development of posttraumatic stress. If the trauma information is accommodated in a negative direction (i.e., new worldview that bad things happen to me, the world is unsafe), this can lead to depressogenic reactions (i.e., hopelessness and helplessness). While positive accommodations may lead to new beliefs about self and the world (i.e., newfound strength, appreciation of life/others, living life in the here and now). In short, accommodation of new trauma information manifests either as some form of psychopathology or as some form of posttraumatic growth.

The fundamental premise of the organismic valuing theory is that individuals are intrinsically motivated towards positive accommodation. This is seen as a universal human tendency both following trauma and throughout life in general. Joseph and Linley (2008) noted that circumstances and environments may distort, impede, or restrict this tendency, and they highlight that positive accommodation is facilitated within supportive social environments and by malleable personality schemas that are open to revision. Within their model, the three cognitive processing outcomes are developmental and continuous, where processing of new event-related information is ongoing throughout the lifespan. And individuals are seen as

possessing a multi-faceted self-structure, where different facets of the self-structure can be accommodated positively, accommodated negatively, or assimilated.

**A bio-psycho-sociocultural evolutionary theoretical framework.** Christopher (2004) offered a bio-psycho-sociocultural evolutionary theoretical framework that highlighted growth as a normal ongoing outcome of traumatic stress. His framework offers a comprehensive multidimensional explanation for growth outcomes following traumatic stress responses, for which he cites evolutionary and biological evidence. Specifically, Christopher posits seven interconnected theoretical conclusions:

- (1) Stress is best understood as the primary pre-rational form of biopsychological feedback regarding the individual's relationship with its environment;
- (2) The normal outcome of traumatic stress is growth rather than pathology;
- (3) Most psychopathology is a function of the maladaptive modulation of the stress response;
- (4) Whether stress produces an adaptive or maladaptive outcome, it always leaves the individual transformed on a biological as well as psychological level;
- (5) The general biological process underlying psychological and social responses to stress is universal, but the specific dynamics is always a function of the unique sociocultural environment and psychological make up of the individual;
- (6) Stable psychopathological symptoms are often associated with changing biopathological conditions; and
- (7) Rationality is humanity's evolutionarily newest and most sophisticated stress-reduction behavioral mechanism. (Christopher, 2004, pp. 92).

Christopher's bio-psycho-sociocultural evolutionary framework highlights growth as a normative, adaptive, ongoing, developmental outcome of the human stress response.

### **Posttraumatic Growth Within the Literature**

Linley and Joseph's (2004) review of the literature on growth following adversity, confirmed that of the big five, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were all positively associated with growth, while neuroticism was negatively associated. Personality variables of self-efficacy and self-esteem were associated to growth, as were hardiness and optimism. Problem-focused coping (Armeli, Gunthert, & Colon, 2001), acceptance (Schulz & Mohamed, 2004), positive reinterpretation (Sears, Stanton, & Danoff-Berg, 2003; Widows, Jacobson, Booth-Jones, & Fields, 2005), and positive religious coping (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998) have been found to be positively associated with growth. Cognitive coping methods such as social comparison, compartmentalization, and finding meaning in negative events have also been suggested to increase the likelihood of growth following trauma (O'Leary, Alday, & Ickovics, 1998). Social support seeking (Stanton, Bower, & Low, 2006) and social support satisfaction (not social support in general) has also been found to be associated with growth (Park, et al., 1996).

Joseph and Linley's (2004) review identified that studies exploring socioeconomic variables in relation to posttraumatic growth have produced mixed results. Posttraumatic growth has been found to be associated with higher levels of education and income, and has been reported more highly among younger adults. However, Linley and Joseph noted that these findings are still inconclusive due to potential confounds in age effects and with other psychosocial variables.

Results investigating the type of trauma and whether intrusive characteristics of the traumatic event are related to posttraumatic growth have also been inconclusive. In their review, Linley and Joseph (2004) identified only three studies that explored the effects on posttraumatic growth by trauma type, two of which reported non-significant findings and one can be explained

by the samples' proximity to the event. Several writers in the field (i.e., Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 2006, Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) have asserted that it is more likely, much like with posttraumatic stress, that it is the individual's appraisal and subjective experience of the event (i.e., helplessness, perceptions of controllability, life threat, personal resources) which influences posttraumatic growth, rather than the event itself.

Developmental paths to PTG have also been studied. Schuettler and Boals (2011) examined the different paths to the development of either PTSD or PTG. Their results indicated that event centrality, problem-focused coping, and positive perspective of the event were best predictors of PTG. Greater peritraumatic distress in victims of violence has also been found to enable PTG after substantial time has elapsed since the trauma event (Kunst, 2010).

**Women specific research.** Within the literature, some work has been done in investigating posttraumatic growth specifically in women with trauma experiences. A meta-analysis of 70 studies revealed that women report more posttraumatic growth than men and that women's report of growth increased incrementally with the age of participants (Vishnevsky et al., 2010). Cobb et al. (2006) found that survivors of intimate partner violence experienced average levels of posttraumatic growth. Their results further indicated that women with higher levels of abuse reported greater positive changes in appreciation for life; that posttraumatic growth was higher in women who have left the abusive relationship (resolved the trauma), as well as for women who had a role model of growth. The results also indicated that women experienced posttraumatic growth independently from depressive symptoms (Cobb et al., 2006). In a sample of homeless women with high levels of trauma exposure, Stump and Smith (2008) found that levels of posttraumatic growth were comparable to that of less traumatized populations, however, their results indicated that active substance abuse, avoidance coping skills,



and greater PTSD symptomatology impeded PTG. Grubaugh and Resick (2007) found levels of posttraumatic growth in treatment-seeking female sexual and physical assault victims to be present and comparable to other samples. The results of their study found that PTG, symptoms of depression, and PTSD coexisted and were independent of each other.

### **A Call for an Understanding of Women's Growth Following Multiple Adversities**

The majority of current research has focused on exploring growth following single trauma events. Although some work has been done in the area of posttraumatic growth specific to women and trauma experience, no study to my knowledge has explored the lived experience of growth in the lives of women who have endured complex and multiple traumas. Since the development of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), the vast majority of research appears to be quantitative in nature. Some researchers have used qualitative methodologies to begin to lend an understanding to growth after trauma experiences. For example, Woodward and Joseph (2003) used thematic analysis to identify key turning points that helped to facilitate posttraumatic growth among people who have experienced childhood abuse, and Hefferon, Grealy, and Mutrie (2010) used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to broaden the understanding of posttraumatic growth among female breast cancer survivors. In my review of the published literature, I did not come across studies that utilized Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to explore and lend an understanding to posttraumatic growth in women with multiple trauma experiences. How do women who have experienced multiple life traumas make sense of growth after trauma? What meaning do they ascribe to their growth following multiple traumas? What are their personal perceptions or accounts of growth? These are some of the rich questions that other studies on posttraumatic growth have failed to explore.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In this research, I examine women's lived experience of growth following multiple trauma experiences. Specifically, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2008) is used to examine women's narratives of growth following multiple life traumas and to gain a rich understanding of this growth phenomenon. This research is guided by the research question: *"What are women's lived experiences of growth following multiple traumas?"* Utilization of an IPA methodology allows me to explore in detail how women make sense of their personal and social world, the meaning they ascribe to this growth, and how according to their understanding, growth after multiple traumas develops and influences their lives.

### **Research Paradigm and Theoretical Foundations**

Both the research question and aim of the study adheres to a qualitative research design and are well suited to utilizing an IPA research methodology. In terms of a methodology of inquiry into posttraumatic growth, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) advocate for the use of either quantitative or qualitative methods. They noted that qualitative methods contribute to providing rich descriptive detail and a deep understanding into the transformative power of growth in individual's lives, while quantitative methods can inform and add important findings to the findings of qualitative works. Qualitative methods have the potential for the discovery of new areas of growth. Calhoun and Tedeschi noted that due to their training and professional preferences, they tend to prefer qualitative methodologies that clearly specify repeatable steps in the process of analysis and attend to issues of reliability and validity, or trustworthiness.

IPA was chosen as the research methodology for this study as I am interested in gaining a rich understanding of women's experience of growth following multiple traumas. The aim of IPA is "to explore in detail participants' personal lived experience and how participants make

sense of that personal experience” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). IPA was developed by Jonathan Smith in 1995 to allow for rigorous exploration of idiographic experiences and social cognitions (Smith, Hareé, & Van Langenhove, 1995), and offers practical and accessible guidelines for conducting research using this approach (Smith, 2004). IPA involves detailed examination of an individual’s lived experience, is interested in seeking meaning, and is interested in understanding an individual’s personal perception (Smith & Osborn, 2008). However, IPA is also interpretive in nature and acknowledges the central and interpretive role of the analyst or researcher in making sense of that experience (Smith, 2004). IPA employs a dynamic process between the researcher and participant, where the researcher is actively trying to get as close as possible to the participant’s world. However, an IPA methodology acknowledges that a true, direct, or complete understanding of a participant’s world is not possible because of the researchers own conceptions, which complicate the process (Smith, 1996; Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Epistemologically, IPA research embraces the relativity and multiplicity of truth, and IPA researchers would agree that this truth involves a meaning making account of experience verses a factual objective truth (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Hence, IPA research rejects a positivist paradigm. Specifically, IPA is embedded within a theoretical framework of *hermeneutic phenomenology*, *idiography*, and *symbolic interactionism* (Smith, 1996). IPA is *phenomenological* in that it is interested in exploring human lived experience from an individual’s personal perception; it is interpretive and therefore informed by *hermeneutics* or the theory of interpretation; it is *idiographic* or committed to a detailed examination of a particular case; and is informed by *symbolic interactionism* which advocates for the exploration of individual’s meaning-making within social science research (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009).

**Phenomenology.** IPA is informed by phenomenology as developed from Husserl's philosophy (Smith, 1996). Phenomenology can be broadly described as being concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event, versus an attempt to construct an objective statement of the object or event (Smith, 1996). Phenomenologists are interested in thinking about what the experience of being human is like and how we might come to understand what our experiences of that world are like (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) highlighted the major influences of leading phenomenological philosophers, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre on IPA's epistemological and theoretical foundations.

**Husserl's influence.** For Husserl, phenomenology is the careful examination of human experience based on the founding principle that "experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and in its own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). It is interested in finding a way to come to know an individual's *own* experience, so that they could identify the *essential qualities* of that experience. Husserl reasoned that if this could be done, then these essential features would *transcend* the particular circumstances and illuminate a given experience for others (Smith et al., 2009).

Husserl posited that phenomenological inquiry focuses on what is experienced in the *consciousness* of an individual, and argued that any inquiry needs to go back to the experiential content of consciousness (what he referred to as *the thing*; Smith et al., 2009). He argued that we should attempt to focus on each and every particular thing in its own right, by stepping outside of our everyday experience (our *natural attitude*), and instead adopt an *phenomenological attitude* which requires reflexivity, or the focusing inwards towards *our own perceptions* of objects/events (a reflection on our own psychic life). This reflection, according to Husserl, allows subjective experiences of which we become conscious to *appear*, hence called

*phenomena* meaning to show or appear, or the *consciousness-of* or *appearance-of* specific things. In other words, we are being phenomenological when we stop busily engaging in the activities of the world and instead reflect on what is happening within our own consciousness (i.e., thinking, feeling, seeing, remembering, wishing etc.; Smith et al., 2009). Husserl used the term *intentionality* to highlight the “relationship between the process occurring in consciousness, and the object of attention for that process...[therefore], experience or consciousness is always consciousness *of* something” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13).

In his reasoning, Husserl alluded to the various obstacles that get in the way of attempting to understand one’s conscious lived experience (i.e., our tendency to seek order out of chaos, thus leading to pre-existing categorization; our predilection towards the familiar or taken-for-granted world). He developed a phenomenological process or method which included: (1) needing to *bracket* or put to one side the taken-for-granted world in order to concentrate on our perceptions or experience of that world, and (2) undergoing a series of *reductions* or different ways of thinking about or reasoning about the phenomena, including *eidetic reduction* and *transcendental reduction* (Smith et al., 2009). Eidetic reduction attempts to get at the essence of an object or experience, or to establish the essential features of something (i.e., what is growth-ness, or the essential features of our conscious experience of growth?). Transcendental reduction looks at the nature of consciousness itself – or what is the thing that makes possible our consciousness of anything at all (Smith et al., 2009). As a philosopher, Husserl did not provide researchers with detailed steps involved in eidetic reduction, however, his phenomenological process provided a conceptual and philosophical framework to help guide phenomenological research.

Husserl viewed science as second-order knowledge system, one that was dependent upon the first-order personal experience, and was critical of science's positivist knowledge claims. He argued that an essential precursor to any scientific account needed to include an all-encompassing and rigorous phenomenological account, and that scientific constructs needed to be bracketed so as not to act as screens from lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. noted that Husserl's work and writings have helped IPA researchers to pay particular attention to: the process of reflection, the attentive and systematic examination of lived experience (the content of consciousness), and the importance of bracketing when conducting IPA research. They go on to say that "while Husserl was concerned to find the essence of experience, IPA has the more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences for particular people" (p. 16).

***Heidegger's influence.*** Heidegger's approach to phenomenology highlights a divergence from Husserl's descriptive and transcendental project (or the nature of consciousness) towards the beginnings of the hermeneutic and existential emphasis in phenomenological philosophy (Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, Heidegger posited that knowledge was not possible without an interpretive stance, a stance that is grounded in the world of things, people, relationships, and language. Smith et al. noted that whereas Husserl was concerned with individual process such as awareness, perception, and consciousness, Heidegger was more concerned with the ontological question of existence itself, specifically the conceptual basis of existence from a *worldly* perspective. Heidegger's phenomenology is concerned with meaning and how the world, relationships, and activities 'that appear to us' create meaning, as we engage in projects in the world. In his book *Being and Time* (1927/1962) Heidegger attempted to analyse and lend understanding to how human beings go about their interpretive sense-making (Ashworth, 2008).

Heidegger uses the term *Dasein* (meaning there-being) to describe the unique quality of ‘human being’, which implies that we are ‘always being in the world’, as well as a degree of reflexive awareness. Two concepts are central within Heidegger’s phenomenology, (a) the view of the person as permanently being a worldly ‘*person-in-context*’, and (b) the idea of *intersubjectivity* (Smith et al., 2009). According to Heidegger’s person-in-context, *Dasein* is always found in a pre-existing world of people, language, things, and culture, and as such meaning cannot be detached from this. Intersubjectivity refers to our relatedness-to-the-world which Heidegger proposed was what facilitates our ability to make sense of and communicate with others. According to Smith et al. (2009), three key ideas from Heidegger’s work have influenced IPA. First that human beings are perceived as being ‘thrown into’ a world of objects, relationships, contexts, and language. Second, that our being-in-the-world is always: perspectival or stems from a certain perspective, temporal or located somewhere in time, and is always in relation to something. And third, and as a consequence of the first two positions, the interpretation of people’s meaning-making is central to phenomenological inquiry and research.

***Merleau-Ponty’s influence.*** Like Husserl and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty also adopted a being-in-the-world stance in understanding our lived experience, but he aligned more with Heidegger’s commitment to a more contextualized phenomenology, and like Heidegger, he emphasised both the situated and interpretive quality of our knowledge about the world (Smith et al., 2009). In particular, Merleau-Ponty emphasized human mechanisms of perception and judgement, and argued that all of our knowledge of the world is gained from our own particular point of view. He posited that as humans, our sense of self is holistic and as such, we see ourselves as being different from everything else in the world. Taking this position, Merleau-Ponty focused on the *embodied* nature of our relationship to the world and how this leads to our

own individual perspective of the world (Smith et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty used the term *body-subject*, to capture the notion that the body provides us with a means of communicating with the world (through touch, sound, smell, etc.). Hence, our bodies are no longer being seen as mere objects in the world, but instead as our communicating agents (Smith et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty reasoned that our perceptions of the ‘other’ always develops from our own embodied and subjective perspective, and as such our relations to others always begin from a position of difference. Smith et al., highlighted this position by noting that “while we can observe and experience empathy for another, ultimately we can never share entirely the other’s experience, because their experience belongs to their own embodied position in the world...the intentional quality and meaning of the ‘mineness’ and ‘aboutness’ of an experience are always personal to the body-subject” (p. 19). IPA researchers have adopted Merleau-Ponty’s view that the body shapes our knowing of the world, and have placed this view of ‘lived experience of being a body-in-the-world’ as a central and critical component in seeking to understand ones experience (Smith et al., 2009).

***Sartre’s influence.*** Sartre’s existential phenomenology stressed the developmental and process-oriented aspects of human beings. Smith et al., (2009) noted that Sartre’s famous expression *existence comes from essence* “indicates that we are always becoming ourselves, and that the self is not a pre-existing unity to be discovered, rather an ongoing project to be unfurled” (p. 19). In other words, we are always in the process of becoming. Sartre’s work also extended Heidegger’s notion of worldliness by developing it within the context of personal and social relationships. Sartre emphasized that our conceived experiences are contingent upon both the presence, and absence, of our relationships to other people (Smith et al., 2009). He introduced the concept of *nothingness*, and in his writing he highlighted how the absence of



things/relationships are just as important as the present of them in defining who we are and how we see the world. Sartre amplified how our projects in the world inevitably lead us to encounters with others in the world, and that our perceptions of the world are largely shaped by the presence (or absence) of others who are also engaged in their own projects (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. noted that Sartre's writings have also provided researchers in phenomenological psychology a glimpse into what phenomenological analysis of the human condition can look like, as Sartre, in his book *Being and Nothingness*, captures many vivid passages and examples of how our encounters with others (or the absence of them) impact our perceptions and lived experiences.

**Summary.** According to Smith et al. (2009) Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, the leading figures in phenomenological philosophy and are acknowledged as contributing significant and specific theoretical ideas that have influenced the development of IPA. Husserl highlighted the importance and benefits of a focus on experience and its perception through reflexive consciousness. Heidegger called attention to knowledge and experience as being grounded in the world of things, people, relationships, and cultures; and amplified that knowledge is only possible from a worldly perspective and with an interpretive stance. Merleau-Ponty emphasized human mechanisms of perception and judgement as arising from an individual's embodied and particular point of view, where knowing another's embodied and subjective experience was not fully possible. And Sartre amplified our thinking about the ongoing process of becoming, as well as the influence of personal and social relationships in defining how we see the world and ourselves within it. "Thus, through the work of these writers, we have come to see that the complex understanding of 'experience' invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21).

**Hermeneutics.** Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. IPA acknowledges that interpretation is needed in our attempts to understand other people's relationships to the world, and this major theoretical underpinning of IPA comes from hermeneutics (Smith, 2007; Smith et al. 2009). Originally, hermeneutics provided a philosophical underpinning to an attempt at interpretation of biblical texts and later guided interpretation of a wider breath of historical documents and literary works (Smith et al., 2009). The three main hermeneutic theorists include Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer.

***Schleiermacher's hermeneutics.*** According to Smith (2007), Schleiermacher offered a broad and holistic view of the interpretive process and saw interpretation as a dual process that involved understanding both the writer as well as the text (Smith, 2007). Schleiermacher referred to this dual process as *grammatical* interpretation (which was concerned with language, or the exact or objective textual meaning), and *psychological* interpretation (which was concerned with the individuality of the author or speaker; Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith (2007), this train of thought is helpful and it has influenced IPA, in that when reading an interview transcript, one is trying to both "make sense of the words used but...also trying to make sense of the person who has said those words" (p. 5). Schleiermacher also contended that interpretation was an art that required an understanding of the writer, the text, as well as the wider context in which the text was originally written (Smith et al., 2009). He proposed that a comprehensive analysis by another can lead to a better and deeper understanding of meaning and content than even what the 'utterer' could have of himself (Smith, 2007, Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) identify this train of thought as an important consideration for IPA research. Specifically they highlighted that the interpretive analyst or researcher utilizing IPA's systematic, detailed, and thorough process can produce added value or a greater depth of

understanding through both the forming of new connections that emerge in larger data sets and through dialogue with psychological theory.

***Heidegger's hermeneutics.*** Heidegger was instrumental in bringing together phenomenology and hermeneutics in what is now referred to as hermeneutic phenomenology, or the interpretation of lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). Ashworth (2008) noted that according to Heidegger, true description of experience is not possible and interpretation is inevitable and inherently needed; he saw human beings as hermeneutic or as interpreters in the world. Smith et al. (2009) noted “lived time and engagement in the world are primary features of Heidegger’s account of Dasein...[but according to Heidegger] our access to such things is always through interpretation” (p. 23). According to Smith et al., in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927/1962), Heidegger explored the etymological definition of phenomenology and denoted that word originates from Greek *phenomenon* (meaning to show or appear) and *logos* (meaning discourse, meaning, or judgement). Smith et al. amplified the importance of these definitions in Heidegger’s perspective. First they noted that ‘appearance’ had a dual quality for Heidegger – specifically, that the things that appear to us in our experiences have both a certain visible meaning for us (which may or may not be deceptive), as well as a certain concealed and hidden meaning. Thus, according to Smith et al. Heidegger saw phenomenology as being concerned with examining both the latent or disguised experience as it comes into appearance, as well as the manifest experience as it appears on the surface (as this is integrally connected to the deeper latent form). Whereas phenomena is concerned with the perceptual (to analyse the thing itself as it appears), logos is concerned primarily with the analytical (the aspect that helps us make sense of the appearing; Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) wrote:

The primary aim is to examine ‘the thing itself’ as it appears to show itself to us.

Heidegger writes about this as though this happens almost spontaneously. However, the analytical thinking required by the *logos* aspect then helps us to facilitate, and grasp this showing. So the phenomenon appears, but the phenomenologist can facilitate this, and then make sense of that appearing. (p. 24)

Hermeneutic phenomenology is thus seeking after a meaning which both may be latently hidden in the mode of appearing and that which is evident on the surface. According to Smith et al. (2009) Heidegger noted that interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless capturing of something; instead it is always founded upon a fore-conception or on our prior experiences, assumptions, perceptions etc. - “as we cannot help but look at any new stimulus in the light of [our] own prior experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 25). Smith et al. noted that the fore-structure of our understanding is always there and can present an obstacle to interpretation. They argued that in IPA, the priority should be given to the new object versus to one’s preconceptions, and also point out that encounters with new things can in turn lend greater understanding to our own fore-structures, which they noted as often an overlooked aspect of interpretation. “For example, when encountering a new text, I don’t necessarily know which part of my fore-structure is relevant. Having engaged with the text, I may be in a better position to know what my preconceptions were” (Smith et. al., p. 25). Smith et al. highlighted the importance of bracketing in the interpretive of qualitative data and identified bracketing a critical part of reflective practice, recognizing it as “a cyclical process and as something which can only be partially achieved” (p. 25).

***Gadamer’s hermeneutics.*** In his writing, Gadamer emphasized the importance of history and tradition on the interpretive process, and wrote of interpretation as being a dialogue between

past and present (Smith et al., 2009). Smith (2007) noted that Gadamer was critical of several of Schleiermacher's positions: in particular, Schleiermacher's notion of psychological interpretation. According to Smith (2007) Gadamer argued that when reading a text one is concerned with the meaning of the material and not with the intentions of the writer; and he was "skeptical of the possibility of recreating the intention of the author because of the historical gap" (p. 5).

Smith et al. (2009) indicated that Gadamer, however, aligned with Heidegger's hermeneutics on many accounts, and his writing echoed many aspects of thought outlined by Heidegger, including: (a) the complex relationship between the fore-structure and the new object, (b) the importance of putting one's preconceptions in the background when doing interpretation, (c) the acknowledgment that the interpretation can itself help one know what their own preconceptions are, (d) viewing interpretation as a dynamic, ongoing, and multi-faceted process, where: "the phenomenon, the thing itself, influences the interpretation which in turn can influence the fore-structure, which can then itself influence the interpretation" (p. 26), and (e) the importance of allowing the new stimulus to speak in its own voice, while simultaneously acknowledging the influence of preconceptions (Smith et al., 2009).

**Summary.** IPA is an interpretive phenomenological research approach and as such hermeneutics offers important theoretical underpinnings for IPA. Specifically, Smith et al. (2009) noted Heidegger's explicit ascription of phenomenology as a hermeneutic enterprise as a significant contribution to phenomenological research and to IPA's development. "Following Heidegger, IPA is concerned with examining how a phenomenon appears, and the analyst is implicated in facilitating and making sense of this appearance" (p. 28). Both Heidegger and Gadamer provided good descriptions and understanding into the relationship between the fore-

understanding and the new appearing phenomenon. Subsequently, this understanding provides important insight that helps to guide the IPA process. According to Smith (2007), Schleiermacher's influence on IPA includes interpretation as a dual process of making sense of the words, while also making sense of the person; and that the IPA analytic process can add a greater depth of understanding than what might otherwise be possible.

**The hermeneutic circle.** Smith et al. (2009) identify the hermeneutic circle as the most resonant idea in hermeneutic theory, and identified it as a useful way to think about method in IPA research. The hermeneutic circle identifies interpretation as a dynamic and inherently circulatory process that involves exploring the relationship between the parts and the whole. Specifically, Smith et al. wrote: “to understand any given part, you look at the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts” (p. 28). They outlined that ‘the part’ and ‘the whole’ can be represented by a number of relationships, for example: a single word [part] and the sentence in which the word is embedded [whole]; the interview [part] and the research project [whole]; or the single episode [part] and the complete life [whole]. As an example, the authors highlight that a word only becomes clear when it is considered in the context of a whole sentence, and circularly the meaning of the sentence is dependent upon the cumulative meaning of the words. Or alternatively, a single life episode adds to one's understanding of their life when considered as a whole, and one's understanding of their life can lead to a changed meaning or new understanding of the single episode, which again can impact one's interpretation of their life as a whole.

Although IPA outlines a step-by-step approach to the analysis, a key tenant in IPA research is that the process of analysis is recursive, where interpretation moves back and forth between different ways of thinking about the data. In other words we are continually shifting our

relationship with the data through a hermeneutic circle, as we enter the analysis or interpretation at various different levels, looking at various parts and various wholes, each of which offer different perspectives and simultaneously contribute the whole-part coherence of the text (Smith et al., 2009). Smith (2007) noted that one of the most attractive parts “of the hermeneutic circle is it speaks to a non-linear style of analysis, and to the possibility of constantly digging deeper with one’s interpretation...of course, one has to balance this with a large dose of pragmatism [as] the final interpretation may never be reached as the circle could theoretically go on forever (p. 5).

**Another hermeneutic circle in the research process.** Smith (2007) indicated that there was another important hermeneutic circle within the research process, one that relates to the ongoing and circular relationship between the researcher and the participant and their lived experience (or the object of interpretation). This hermeneutic circle is best captured by the following passage:

I start where I am at one point on the circle, caught up in my concerns, influenced by my preconceptions, shaped by my experience and expertise. In moving from this position, I attempt to either bracket or at least acknowledge my own preconceptions before I go to an encounter with a research participant at the other side of the circle. Whatever my previous concerns or positions, I have moved from the point where I am the focus to one where the participant is the focus as I attend closely to the participant’s story, facilitate the participant uncovering his/her experience. This requires an intense attentiveness to and engagement with the participant as he/she speaks. ... Having concluded the conversation, I continue the journey round the circle back to where I started. So I return home to analyse the material I collected from the perspective I started from, influenced by my own conceptions and experience. However I am also irretrievably changed

because of the encounter with the new, my participant and his/her account. Then I engage in moving round a virtual mini-circle, where, in my home location, I mentally take on again a conversation with my participant, as I rehear his/her story, ask questions of it, try to make sense of it. Indeed the various actions inherent in the hermeneutic circle between part and whole...take place in this cognitive space at home base. Moreover, I may later even choose to go round the research circle again, to literally revisit the participant and engage in another conversation with them about my interpretation – to have a literal interpretive dialogue about my virtual interpretive dialogue (p. 6)

**Other hermeneutic philosophical positions influencing IPA.** IPA employs a *double hermeneutic* or two-step interpretation process, which involves: (a) participants making sense and meaning of their lived experiences, and (b) the researcher attempting to make sense of the participant's perceived sense of their world experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). As such, the researcher is seen as having a dual role as both being like and unlike the participant.

He/she is employing the same mental and personal skills and capacities as the participant with whom he/she shares a fundamental property – that of being a human being. At the same time, the researcher employs those skills more self-consciously and systematically. As such, the researcher's sense making is second order; he/she only has access to the participant's experience through the participant's own account of it. (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3)

Smith et al. (2009) describe how both Heidegger and Schleiermacher wrote of *intersubjectivity* to describe this shared relatedness that we have as human being. Intersubjectivity describes the overlapping and relational nature of our engagement with the world and with others (Smith et al.,



2009). Although we are unique individuals, “there is a possibility [at the same time] of bridging the divide between selves because we are all at the same time part of a larger whole, a collectivity that allows the possibility of mutual understanding” (Smith, 2007, p. 5). Smith and Osborn (2008) highlighted that attempting to understand a participant’s world involves two aspects of interpretation, an *empathic hermeneutic* and a *questioning hermeneutic*. An empathic hermeneutic involves seeking to understand the point of view of the participant in the sense of identifying or empathizing with it. In other words, it is an attempt at adopting an insider’s perspective, to stand in their shoes and see from their point of view (Smith et al., 2009). The *questioning hermeneutic* involves seeking to understand by asking critical questions in an attempt to try to make sense of the other person’s experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This stance involves more a standing-alongside-the-participant position, and an attempt to look at them from different angles (Smith et al., 2009). Both of these two different interpretive stances are possible and often present within IPA. Although the degree of emphasis on each can vary, allowing for both aspects of inquiry leads to a richer analysis and a greater understanding of the individual’s world (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**Idiography.** Idiography is the third major influence on IPA. Idiography is concerned with the particular, with the individual, and is affiliated with the concern for understanding meanings (Smith et al., 1995). IPA “wants to know in detail what the experience for *this* person is like, what sense *this* particular person is making of what is happening to them’ (Smith et. al, 2009, p. 3) Versus making general claims at the group or population level, IPA locates any generalizations within the particular and develops them more cautiously (Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, IPA incorporates inductive reasoning as there is a movement from single cases to more general statements, however one must still be able to retrieve particular claims for any

individual involved from the general claims made (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). IPA's concern with the particular is evident by an attention to detail in the depth of analysis, as well as attention to how particular individuals make sense of or perceive particular experiential phenomena in their lives within particular contexts. Particular phenomenological experiences of individuals are complex, and as already discussed, are embedded within uniquely embodied, situated, and perspectival positions, as well as within worldly and relational phenomenon.

**Symbolic interactionism.** Smith and Osborn (2008) noted that IPA has also been influenced by and has as some its core foundation ideas that resonate from symbolic interactionism. According to the authors, symbolic interactionism developed as a unique American social psychological perspective with its roots in early pragmatics. Symbolic interactionism holds that: (a) the meanings individuals ascribe should be of central concern to social scientists, (b) interpretation is needed to obtain meanings, and (c) meanings occur (and are made sense of) in social interactions within both personal and social worlds (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

### **Method for Data Collection**

**Recruitment.** IPA utilizes purposeful-selected and carefully-situated samples (Smith et al., 2009). After receiving ethics approval for this study from the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board, purposeful sampling was used to recruit women who identified themselves as having experienced growth following multiple (2 or more) trauma experiences. I began recruiting women through a distribution of research recruitment posters (see Appendix A) placed at various locations providing services or resources to women throughout Calgary. Specifically, posters were placed at Women in Need Resource Centers and stores, the medical clinic and resource center at Calgary Urban Project Society (CUPS), Sheldon Churmir,

the Kerby Centre, YWCA Resource Centre, Northeast Women's Clinic, Calgary Immigrant's Women's Association, and Community Resource Centers throughout Calgary. I personally met with several program directors and supervisors at the various locations to inform them of the study and provided them with a one-paged summary of the study (see Appendix B).

**Screening.** I conducted a brief screening telephone interview with all interested participants (see Appendix C) to ensure fit for the study. In order to participate women had to be 18 years of age or older, have experienced multiple traumas in their lives, have experienced what they would subjectively identify as growth following these experiences, and be willing to participate in a 1-2 hour interview to share their personal experience of this growth. For this study, a broad definition of trauma was used in adherence to the trauma conceptualization outlined in Chapter 2. The women were provided with various potential trauma examples during the screening interview such as: childhood abuse or neglect, interpersonal violence or victimization, death of a loved one, accident, a diagnosis of a life threatening illness, or other highly stressful events that were subjectively identified by the woman as traumatic. Potential participants were informed that *multiple traumas* referred to experiencing two or more of the aforementioned traumas. A broad definition of growth was also used in this study. During the screening, the women were informed that: "Growth is defined broadly and is determined by your subjective experience of growth. Generally it may be described as self-perceived positive changes" (see Appendix C).

**Sample size.** Due to IPA's idiographic focus on the particular, IPA research utilizes relatively small sample sizes. Participation in this study was voluntary based on informed consent (see Informed Consent Form, Appendix D); and in order to allow for a detailed interpretive account of growth and to allow for adequate exploration of themes and lived

experiences, nine women were recruited in this study. Two women responded to the poster at the Northeast Women's Clinic, three from the medical centre at CUPS, one from the Kerby Centre, one from the Heart of the North Community Resource Centre, one from the Southwest Communities Resource Centre, and one woman contacted me after hearing about the study through word of mouth.

I conducted screening interviews with three other women who responded to the recruitment posters (two from the Sheldon Churmir, and one from the Village Square Community Resource Centre). These women however were not included in the study for various reasons: one woman changed her mind, and the other two women identified themselves as not having yet experienced growth following their traumas.

**Semi-structured interview.** As a qualitative research approach, IPA adheres to an inductive methodology, which employs broad research questions, and open-ended interviews that allow for the collection of expansive data. IPA methodology advocates for the use of semi-structured interviews as the exemplary method of data collection to explore participants' lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As such, a semi-structured interview was developed and used to collect participants' experiences of growth (see Appendix E). The interview schedule provided a guide to my conversation with the women. The interview adhered to the IPA tradition which embraces a conversational and collaborative interviewing style, attempts to establish rapport with the participant, allows for flexibility in the ordering of questions and areas of exploration, and encourages participants to speak about their growth with as little prompting as possible (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Sixteen questions were prepared in the interview schedule and were reviewed by my program supervisor prior to utilization. I was careful to ensure that the questions were open and

non-leading, and allowed participants to deeply describe their experiences, and offered space to enter, as much as possible, the participant's psychological and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Each question included several prompts to use as needed. Prompts are framed more explicitly than the initial open-ended questions and are used when the initial question is insufficient to elicit an in-depth response, either because the issue is a complex one or the question is too general for the particular participant (Smith et al., 2009).

The interview locations were negotiated with the participants and held at mutually agreed upon locations. Specifically, I met with three women at their homes and with 6 women at my downtown office where I work. The interviews varied in length from 41 minutes to 1 hour and 51 minutes, with a mean interview time of 1 hour and 15 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded. As per informed consent (see Appendix D), all participants picked pseudonyms that were used in lieu of their names to identify their audio-recording (and subsequent transcriptions).

Due to technical problems, one interview recording (pseudonym *Puerto Morelos*) did not save, and was, as a result, not available for subsequent transcription. Instead, after consultation with my research supervisor and agreement from Puerto Morelos, notes from the interview were emailed to this participant for member check and feedback. These documented notes were used for the analysis in lieu of an interview transcript for this participant.

**Compensation.** Participants were compensated for their time by receiving a 25-dollar Superstore gift card. Compensation was provided at the start of each interview and participants were informed that they could retain their compensation even in the event that they should change their mind and decide to withdraw from the interview or study.

**Transcription.** IPA requires verbatim record of the data collection event (Smith & Osborn's, 2008). A hired transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement as per ethics

approval completed transcriptions for 6 of the interviews, and I, the primary researcher completed transcriptions for 2 interviews. To maintain participant confidentiality and as agreed, the transcriber was provided with only the participants pseudonyms. As noted above, member-checked interview notes were used for Puerto Morelos in lieu of an interview transcript. All other interviews were transcribed verbatim, however the prosodic aspects (i.e., length of pauses, non-verbal utterances) of the recordings were not included in the transcriptions. Smith et al., (2009) noted, “because analysis in IPA aims primarily to interpret the meaning of the content of the participant’s account, it does not require a particular detailed transcription of the prosodic aspects of the recordings” (p. 74).

### **Procedure for Data Analysis**

IPA adheres to a strong idiographic approach in terms of its sample size, depth of interview data collected and depth of analysis. Smith et al. (2009) indicated that a single method for working with the data has not been prescribed within the existing literature on IPA analysis. To help guide my analysis, I utilized guidelines for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis as outlined in Smith and Osborn’s (2008) and Smith et al. (2009). As guided by my research question, the focus of my analysis was to explore how my participants make sense and ascribe meaning to their experience of growth following multiple trauma experiences. Smith et al. stated that IPA analysis is characterised by a common set of *processes*, including moving from the descriptive to the interpretive, and from the particular to the shared; as well as a common set of principles, including a focus on personal meaning making in particular contexts, and a commitment to understanding the participants point of view or personal perspective.

Generally, as per the epitomes outlined in the various hermeneutic circles, analysis consists of an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith et al., 2009). Analysis starts with a detailed

examination of one case until some closure (or Gestalt) is reached, then analysis moves to a detailed analysis of the second case, and so on. It is only until all cases have undergone their own detailed analysis that a case-by-case cross analysis is conducted in IPA in order to explore convergence and divergence of themes across cases (Smith, 2004; Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). Smith (2004) indicated that in practice, the research process incorporates an interplay between induction and deduction, however in IPA the inductive stance is in the foreground. As an inductive and flexible research methodology, IPA's techniques allow for the emerging of unanticipated themes and topics both during the interview as well as in the process of analysis. Detailed and flexible engagements with the individual participants as well as with the interview data facilitate this (Smith, 2004).

I utilized the following stages and process in my analysis of the interview data.

**Stage one: reading and re-reading.** I began the process of analysis by first immersing myself into the data, case by case. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), I started with the first most anticipatorily complex case (based on interview length and the amount of descriptive detail within the interview). I began by initially reading the transcript while simultaneously listening to the audio-recording of the interview. At this stage, my intention was to re-familiarize myself with the particular participant and with our conversation that had occurred previously; to help make this conversation and interview the dominant stimulus in my conscious awareness. I tried to adapt a state of mindfulness, focusing on the details of participant's words and story. When I became aware of my own conceptions and fore-structures, I worked to move them into the background of my consciousness and re-focused on the participant, their words and the their story. Having read and heard the interview one time, I next re-read the interview again a second time to further facilitate my familiarizing with the text.

**Stage two: initial noting.** I next proceeded by reading the transcript a third time while simultaneously I began to both underline text that stood out to me as significant, as well as to make exploratory notes in the margins. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), I used a free-flow of consciousness to help guide my initial notes, by simply writing down anything that seemed to ‘appear’ in my mind, such as: my preliminary impressions, any associations and connections I found myself wondering about, descriptive core comments that emerged from the data, questions I found myself wondering about, possible meanings related to the content, possible objects of concern or relevance to the participant (i.e., things, others, issues, values, beliefs, strategies, acts, places etc. that appeared to be significant to them), comments or impressions I had related to the participants language or tone, and any similarities, differences, or contradictions that I noticed.

As suggested by Smith et al., (2009) I used different coloured pens to help categories my notes under three broad areas. The first category focused on descriptive comments, which included such things as key word or phrases, key objects, events, timelines, and experiences. Descriptive comments, as noted by Smith et al., are taken at face value and are used to highlight the objects which structure the participant’s lived experiences or thoughts. Second, I noted any linguistic comments in a different color. Linguistic comments included anything related to the use of language (i.e., specific or significant words used by the participant, metaphors, change in tone or mood, repetition in speech, significant pauses, laughter etc.). And lastly, I used a third colour to capture any conceptual comments I had made. Smith et al. outlined conceptual comments as the more interpretive comments and are often based on your own personal reflection. Conceptual comments often comprise of a move away from the participant’s explicit claims, and towards questions related to reflections about such things as: the participant’s understanding, the meaning of the experience/statement, commonalities and differences within



the content, possible feelings/perceptions/beliefs on the part of the participant. My conceptual comments very much possessed a strong hermeneutic essence, as they captured my interpretations, impressions, and wonderings related to the data. According to Smith et al., conceptual interpretations may move away from the original text of the participant, as long as they have been inspired by the participant's words and through the engagement with the data. This second stage allowed me to immerse myself into the participant's lived world and produced a lengthy and detailed commentary of notes.

**Stage three: developing emergent themes.** Next I began to reduce that content of the transcript and initial notes by mapping the interrelationships, connections, and patterns between the exploratory notes. I did this by writing down (on the opposite left hand side of the transcript) any themes that emerged from my notes (which were on right hand side), with the participant text located in between the two. In thinking about and deciding on the themes, I contemplated both the text of focus, as well as my understanding and knowledge related to the interview as a whole (utilizing the hermeneutic circle as my conceptual guide). Smith et al. (2009) indicated that emergent themes should be particular enough to be grounded in the text, as well as be abstract enough to be conceptual; noting that emergent themes should possess of feeling of capturing and reflecting a particular understanding. They also highlighted that emergent themes should reflect both the 'I' (my interpretations) as well as the 'P' (my participants particular lived experience), and thus need to represent a collaborative product and bring together a range of understanding relating to both. I used this as a guide when developing and documenting my emergent themes.

**Stage four: searching for connections across emergent themes.** Next I focused on charting and mapping how the emergent themes fit together. I began by copying all of the

emergent themes onto a sheet of paper and by exploring and noting connections between them. I looked for similarities among the themes and grouped them together. In making my groupings I used Smith's et al. (2009) various suggestions for looking for patterns and connections among emergent themes, including: (a) abstraction: creating a list of related themes under one heading that now creates a new super-ordinate theme, (b) subsumption: giving an emergent theme superordinate status under which other emergent themes are captured, (c) polarization: grouping together any emergent themes that might represent an oppositional relationship to other themes within the analysis, (d) contextualization: grouping themes according to their contextual or narrative elements by attending to such things as cultural, narrative, or temporal themes, (e) numeration: documenting the frequency with which a theme is supported (as *one* possible indication of this theme's relative importance or relevance to the participant), and (f) function: examining themes for their specific function (or interplay of meanings) within the transcript. As I worked I kept notes during this stage of analysis documenting how I was making the connections between themes.

Next I organized my work within this stage into a table representing the organized/connected themes for the participant. The table included the theme clusters, the transcript page and line number that the theme aligned with, along with key words/phrases from the transcript that supported the theme.

**Stage five: move to the next case.** I then repeated and completed the above detailed process of analysis of each idiographic case for all of the other participants I had interviewed. In keeping with IPA idiographic commitment, it is important to focus on each additional case independently and exclusively from the others. This requires, as much as possible, consciously bracketing the themes and interpretations made from the other cases so as not to influence the

analysis of the next individual case (Smith et al., 2009). In my analysis of each case, I was actively cognizant of the importance of this, and allowed myself to delve into each new case with curiosity while embracing, what I would identify as a ‘not-knowing position’ (a skill I feel I have developed through my narrative therapy training; White, 2007). This awareness and position, as well as my commitment to IPA’s rigorous process, allowed many new themes to appear in my analysis of all nine cases.

**Stage six: looking for patterns across cases.** Once all of the nine cases had undergone their own individual analysis, I worked to compare and look for patterns across all cases. I did this by closely examining the summary tables for each participant, then laid all of the summary tables out and looked across them. I again used many of the suggestion outlined by Smith et al. (2009) for looking for patterns and connections among themes (i.e., abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function). In addition, at this stage, I allowed the analysis to move towards a more theoretical level, looking for shared higher-order concepts among the cases. In the process of developing my final themes, I also kept in mind issues of saturation, and the richness of particular passages, as well as utilized the principles of the hermeneutic circle by paying attention to both theoretical convergence (whole) and issues of idiosyncrasy (parts) in determining fit of themes (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). In other words, I ensured that the close reading of text parts supported the whole, and that the whole (final themes and overall Gestalt of the analysis) illuminated and supported the parts (the specific text, experiences, and meanings of women’s growth). I discarded or reanalysed any themes that may not represent a strong grounding within the transcribe text and lived experiences of the women. To complete this stage of analysis, I created a final table representing the higher-order themes and the overall findings in this study.

## **Trustworthiness: Quality and Validity**

Evaluating the quality and validity of research involves exploring how well the research has been carried out and whether the results are useful and trustworthy (Yardley, 2008). Smith et al. (2009) advocate for the use of Yardley's (2000, 2008) general guidelines for assessing the quality of IPA research. Yardley outlined four main criteria, including: *sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance*. Sensitivity to context includes such aspect of the research process as embedding the research within a relevant context of theory and empirical literature, sensitivity to socio-cultural factors and participants' perspectives, and ethical issues. In this research, I have provided a breadth of theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to posttraumatic growth, as well as the epistemological and philosophical foundations of IPA. Aligning with IPA's foundations, participant's perspectives and lived experience of growth are a primary focus. Ethical issues have been considered, ethics approval has been received, and participation was based on informed consent.

Commitment and rigour refers to the thoroughness of data collection, analysis, and reporting of results (Yardley, 2000). Within this study, several steps were taken to help ensure the quality of the data and results. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit women who identified growth following multiple traumas, a screening interview was used to help ensure participant fit for the study, all interviews were audiotaped (with the exception of Puerto Morelos), all interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' lived experiences, and participants were provided with two opportunities provide feedback (member-check) in both the data collection and analysis process. All participants were given two weeks to review a copy of their transcribed interviews and provide any feedback on how well the transcript fits with their understanding of what was talked about in the interview. All participants were also given two

weeks to review and check their emergent themes once analysis of their transcript had been completed. The data analysis maintained a strong commitment to rigour through active, prolonged engagement and immersion with the data, and a commitment to completeness of the interpretation (Yardley, 2008). And the analysis of the data was reviewed by my supervisor (triangulation by researcher), in order to help enhance the dependability of this study, and to assess and increase the consistency of results.

Coherence and transparency refers to “the clarity and cogency – and hence the rhetorical power or persuasiveness – of the description and argumentation” (Yardley, 2000, p. 222). According to Yardley, coherence also refers to the fit between the research question, and the philosophical perspective, the method, and analysis undertaken. I believe the research question was well suited to an IPA study as outlined in this methodology chapter. Transparency has been demonstrated at various points within this research by providing a detailed description of: (a) the purpose and aim of study, (b) the method of recruitment, data collection and interview process, (c) the analysis of the data, as well as (d) a detailed account and presentation of the results. This transparency of clearly outlining how the study was conducted, including rationale and explanation of decisions made, adds to the credibility of the study and increases its potential for confirmability by other researcher (Vivar, 2007). Transparency was also demonstrated through the engagement in reflective practice on the part of the researcher (outlined below). Credibility and coherence are further demonstrated when reporting the finding of this study through the linking of complete participant quotes to support the interpretations. To further increase the credibility and validity of this study, disconfirming instances (or data that did not fit the themes or patterns identified) are also discussed in detail with participant’s quotes (Yardley, 2008).

Lastly, all participants received detailed summary of the findings for their review and information.

According to Yardley (2008) “the decisive criterion by which any piece of research must be judged is, arguably, its impact and importance” (p. 223). Impact and importance refers to the study’s usefulness and its ultimate value to others, as well as the study’s theoretical worth. Yardley denoted that theoretical worth is especially of primary importance in qualitative research, and is deemed when a study “draws on empirical material to present a novel, challenging perspective, which opens up new ways to understanding a topic” (p. 223). In addition to practical and theoretical worth, a study’s impact and importance can be evaluated by its socio-cultural impact, serve some social purpose or have some social effect (i.e., challenge current discourses or elucidate unhelpful social-cultural processes leading to social or political changes).

Ultimately this study’s impact, importance, theoretical, and socio-cultural worth will best be evaluated and seen over time through the dissemination and ongoing discussion of the findings. However, an important objective of this research is to add to gender-specific research and in particular bring greater awareness around how women with multiple traumas experience and develop growth (or perceived positive changes) as a result of their difficult experiences. The findings of this study are anticipated to have practical importance by bringing greater awareness to clinicians of the importance of exploring areas of growth following significant traumas when working with women, and by providing insight into women’s lived experiences this growth. This awareness and knowledge is anticipated to be useful in informing and strengthening both clinical assessment and treatment interventions. Ultimately, it is hoped that this study will have socio-cultural impact by helping to reduce and challenge stigma of “being damaged” after multiple trauma experiences, thus adding to the positive psychology discipline and future research endeavours in this field. The

dissemination of the findings are believed to further be valuable and impactful specifically to other women with multiple trauma experiences by raising their awareness of this growth phenomenon in others, facilitating reflection pertaining to possible growth in their lives, inspiring hope, and further challenging the “being damaged” discourse.

### **Reflectivity**

According to Finlay and Gound (2003), reflexivity in social psychological research requires critical self-reflection and awareness on how the researcher’s own background, assumptions, positioning, and behaviour impact the research process. As mine is a phenomenological study of women’s growth following multiple trauma experiences, it is imperative that I strive towards what Finlay (2008) identified as a *phenomenological psychological attitude*, which describes the delicate process of attempting to find a balance between retaining a certain sense of wonder and openness to the world (and the lived experience of another), while simultaneously and reflexively restraining my pre-understandings. Throughout my research, I have strived to be mindful of this ongoing process, which Finlay denotes as a dance between reduction (or entering into the unknown subjective realm of another) and reflexivity (awareness of self and one’s influence within the research).

**Introspection.** Transparency related to self is important in qualitative research (Finlay, 2003). As I reflect on my own lived experiences to date, I am aware that I, personally, have not experienced what I would identify as multiple traumas in my own life, and as such I do not hold a direct intersubjectivity specific to this human experience. However, my encountering of multiple trauma experiences and the growth that can occur following such experiences stems from my work as an addictions counsellor over the past 13 years. My own lived experience as a counsellor has influenced my choice of research, as well as the development of several fundamental beliefs that I hold about human beings. In working with women I have been

privileged to hear and witness many stories of positive growth and change following significant difficulties and traumas. My experiencing of this in my work with others has led me to want to know more about this growth after significant trauma and the meaning it holds for others. This pre-experience of witnessing growth in women, ultimately influences my listening-for and interpretation of growth in this study (even though I attempt to move my pre-experiences aside and enter with openness to the lived experiences of my study participants).

As I reflect introspectively, I am aware that I hold several deep and fundamental beliefs about the nature of human beings, and that these deep seeded beliefs (my own pre-understandings) have unavoidably influence many aspects of this research, including my research question, choice of methodology, selection, and my analysis and interpretation of the data. Specifically, I believe that: (a) all human beings have a natural tendency to want to move towards health and growth, (b) that humans are creative, competent, possess numerous individual strengths, and are resilient by nature, and (c) that change and growth are inevitable, that humans are always in a constant state of change, flux, and movement. These beliefs have ultimately guided my research question and study as a whole. It led me towards conducting positive psychological research, as I wanted to learn more about ‘growth’ believing it to be a fundamental part of humanness. These positively held perceptions of human beings have again influenced my analysis and interpretation of the data, influencing a looking-for or listening-for growth in my interpretations of the data. In addition, I also hold a central belief that humans have a unique ability and capacity for awareness and self-evaluation, and that they are the experts into their own lives. This belief has influenced my choice of methodology, specifically moving me towards a method that adopts phenomenology and is interested in how one comes to understand their lived experience in the world, their own meaning-making. I concur with Heidegger’s



position and IPA hermeneutic foundations that it is not possible to understand ones lived-experience and meaning-making without interpretation.

It is also important to be transparent about my own interests in this study. I am intrinsically motivated towards this research because I believe that the findings may be helpful to my own ongoing and future counselling work with woman. Specifically, I hold a position that this research may help me have greater understanding into the growth process, which may help me (and others through the dissemination of results) to facilitate this growth phenomenon when working with other women with multiple traumas within the counselling relationship.

**Intersubjective reflection.** Intersubjective reflection is another important level of reflective practice that involves reflecting on the nature of the relationship between researcher and participant, and on the self-in-relation-to-others (Finlay, 2003). As mine can be classified as potentially feminist research (in that it is women gender-specific), I was mindful and attentive to feminist principles pertaining to power and privilege in my interactions with participants. In particular, I viewed both myself and the women that I interviewed as collaborators in this research, and attempted to develop an intimate partnership when conducting the interviews versus assuming a detached approach (Dowling, 2006). This stance of collaboration, I believe was facilitated by some of the counselling skills I have developed over the years and by my strong commitment to collaboration within my current and previous counselling relationships. Although many counselling skills are transferable and important within the research interview (i.e., empathy, reflection, clarifying etc.; Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2009), when interviewing the women in this study, I was mindful to not step into a counselling role.

As IPA attempts to adopt an insider's perspective, during the interviews I consciously embraced a stance of curiosity and worked to position myself in a place of not-knowing (Smith

& Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009; White, 2007), attempting instead to collaboratively discover the women's perceived meaning of growth. My intention of this stance was to move to the background my own preconceptions or fore-understandings, and to allow the participant's voice and their perceived experiences to take centre stage in our conversation. In my participating in the conversations with participants, I endeavoured to facilitate both an empathic hermeneutic through my reflections as well as a questioning hermeneutic through my questions, probing, and my ongoing attempts to seek clarification (influenced by my own interpretations and perceptions) to develop a depth of understanding. This, I believe allowed me to be a collaborative co-explorer, while being conscious of my intentions to try as much as possible to step inside the women's perceptual and experiential worlds.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

Smith (2004) contended that an essential skill in writing IPA findings is in ensuring that the reader is immersed in both the shared themes that have emerged from the analysis of all interviews, as well as the detailed narratives and individual voices of the women who have participated in this study. As I outline my findings, I am aware of my sincere intention to honour the lived experiences of the women I have interviewed, to capture and give privilege to their individual accounts of growth after significant and multiple traumas and hardships, and to provide an in-depth glimpse into their lived worlds.

### **Demographics**

The age of the nine women in this study ranged from 24 years to 63 years with the mean age being 43 years. Through the interviews it became evident that the women possessed varied cultural backgrounds. Specifically, five of the women (Rebecca, Penny, Marly, Melissa, and Puerto Morelos; pseudonyms) identified themselves as Canadian born Caucasians, Lady was born in Africa but identified as Indian descent, Jessie was Aboriginal, Stargazer was born in Romania, and Pippa was Canadian-born but identified as possessing a multicultural heritage composing of Portuguese, Polish, and Jewish descent. All of the women have lived in Canada for the majority of their lives, and identified themselves as Canadians.

### **Traumas and Hardships Experienced**

All of the women identified experiencing multiple hardships and traumas throughout their lives. The number of traumas experienced by the women ranged from 6 to 16. Specifically, three of the women (Marly, Pippa, and Puerto Morelos) identified experiencing six different traumatic events, Jessie identified as experiencing eight, Stargazer identified as experienced nine, Lady identified as experiencing 10, Penny and Melissa identified as experiencing 12 each, and

Rebecca identified as experiencing 16 significant hardships. Table 1 outlines the various traumatic lived events that the women identified as experiencing. This table is divided into three sections: childhood traumas, traumas and hardships in adolescence and adulthood, and other identified significant stressors.

Table 1

*Types of Multiple Trauma Experiences*

Participant	Jes	Reb	Pip	Star	Lad	Pen	Mel	Mar	PM
Age (years)	30	54	31	44	58	35	26	63	48
<b>Childhood Traumas</b>									
<b><i>Trauma Type</i></b>									
1. Addiction in the Family	✓								✓
2. Childhood Bullying			✓			✓		✓	
3. Childhood Illness, accident		✓							
4. Childhood Physical and Emotional Abuse					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Childhood Poverty		✓							
6. Childhood Sexual Assault/Abuse (single episode)				✓		✓			
7. Childhood Sexual Molestation (continuous, ongoing)	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
8. Conflict/Tension in Primary Household			✓						
9. Distant Unaffectionate Relationship with Primary Parent/Caregiver	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	
10. Invalidation of Abuse by Primary Caregiver					✓	✓	✓		
11. Negative School Experience	✓					✓		✓	
12. Parental Divorce				✓		✓			
13. Parental Mental Illness							✓		
14. Parental Suicide									✓
15. Sexual Abuse or Assault of Loved Ones		✓ (4x)			✓				
16. Witnessing									

Interpersonal Violence ✓ ✓ ✓

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**Traumas and Hardships in Adolescence and Adulthood**

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17. Abandonment by Significant Other (Partner, Family)	✓		✓	✓		
18. Abortion			✓		✓	
19. Bullied in the Workplace						✓
20. Car Accident - Significant				✓		
21. Child and Family Service Involvement – Apprehension of Child(ren)	✓					✓
22. Child with Disabilities			✓			
23. Contact with Abuser	✓					
24. Dangerous Occupations (Sex trade, female taxi diver, masseuse, escort)	✓					✓
25. Death of a Significant Loved One	✓	✓				
26. Death of Child				✓		
27. Homelessness			✓			✓
28. House Fire	✓					
29. Interpersonal Violence/Abuse in Relationships (Physical, Emotional/Mental, Sexual, Financial)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
30. Kidnapped – Unlawful Confinement						✓
31. Life Threatening Diagnosis - Cancer	✓					
32. Miscarriage		✓				
33. Ongoing Medical Condition/Illness	✓					✓
34. Separation from Loved One	✓					
35. Sexual Assault (single episode)	✓ (2x)		✓ (2x)		✓	✓

36. Sign. Stress due to Legal Investigations/charges	✓ (3x)				
37. Substance Addiction - self	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Other Identified Significant Stressors</b>					
38. Adoption of Child					✓
39. Expulsion Of Indiana and Pakistani Minority from Uganda				✓	
40. Obesity	✓				
41. Refugee Camp			✓		
44. Significant Stresses due to Lack of Supports		✓			
42. Unexpected Loss of Employment			✓	✓	

Note. Jes = Jessie; Reb = Rebecca; Pip = Pippa; Star = Stargazer; Lad = Lady; Pen = Penny; Mel = Melissa; Mar = Marly; PM = Puerto Morelos

**Childhood traumas.** All of the nine women reported experiencing significant childhood traumas. Six experienced ongoing and continuous childhood sexual molestation, and another experienced a one-time childhood sexual assault. Five of the women experienced physical and emotional abuse in the home. Five of the women identified as experiencing distant and unaffectionate relationships with primary care givers. Three experienced invalidation of their abuse by their primary caregivers, and all three identified this invalidation as being a significantly traumatic and difficult childhood event. Three experienced significant childhood bullying and three identified as having significantly negative and difficult school experiences. Three reported witnessing interpersonal violence in the home, and two reported witnessing or learning about the sexual abuse of another family member(s) in the home. Other childhood traumas and hardships included having a parent with mental illness, witnessing parental suicide, experiencing the devastating and negative effects of addiction in the home, parental divorce, and significant childhood poverty.

**Traumas and hardships in adolescence and adulthood.** All of the women also experienced numerous and varied traumas that continued into their adolescence and adulthood. Five of the nine women experienced interpersonal violence and abuse within their relationships. In all cases this abuse was continuous and ongoing throughout the duration of the partnered relationship, and included physical, emotional/mental, sexual, and/or financial abuse. Five of the women reported experiencing substance abuse issues in their lifetime, and these women identified their addictions as significantly and negatively contributing to their lives, and as opening the door to other trauma experiences (i.e., sexual assault, high risk and chaotic lifestyles). It is important to note however that all five women reported being in recovery, and as such, were no longer abusing substances at the time of this study. Four of the nine women experienced one or more sexual assault(s), and three experienced abandonment by a significant other (partner or family member).

Two women identified having an abortion as a traumatic and difficult experience, with one reporting having a miscarriage, one reporting the death of her child, and two reporting the investigation and apprehension of their child(ren) as significantly stressful events in their lives. Two women shared experiencing the death of a loved one, two reported experiencing homelessness, and two shared struggling with an ongoing medical condition. Other identified hardships and traumas included: surviving a severe car accident, raising a child with disabilities, experiencing a house fire, being diagnosed with cancer, being kidnapped and unlawfully confined, having contact with an abuser, separation from loved ones, stress due to legal investigation and charges, experiencing significant bullying in the workplace, and involvement in dangerous occupations (including working in the sex trade, as a masseuse or escort, and working as a female taxi driver).

**Other identified significant stressors.** Six of the nine interviewed women also reported experiencing several events in their lives that they identified as “stressful events”. These events were expressed as being difficult yet as not being as significantly “traumatic” as the other lived experiences listed above. Although less traumatic, I have included these stressors in the findings, as excluding them, I believe, would have not accurately reflected the true lived experiences of the women in this study. The decision to include these stressful events is also supported by Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) definition of trauma, specifically being any circumstance that challenges the adaptive resources and the important components of the individual’s assumptive world, which the women in this study would say these events did.

These stressful events included: an unexpected loss of employment experienced by two of the women, needing to leave Uganda as a child due to the expulsion of Indian and Pakistani minority by president Idi Amin, living in a refugee camp prior to coming to Canada, putting a son up for an open adoption, struggling with obesity, and experiencing significant stressors during times of transition due to not having adequate social supports.

### **Growth Facilitating Processes and the Lived Experience of Posttraumatic Growth**

The analysis of the data provided insight into two main domains related to the lived experience of growth following multiple traumas. Specifically, the findings informed five main growth promoting catalysts that contributed to the development of growth in these women’s lives, and revealed five main areas of growth following multiple traumas. As such, the findings are presented within two main sections: growth facilitating processes and agents, and the lived experience of growth following multiple traumas. Table 2 offers a summary of the 10 master themes and their subthemes that were revealed through the analysis of the interview data.

Table 2



Summary of Master Themes and Sub-Themes

<b>Growth Facilitating Processes/Agents</b>				
Belief in Growth Potential Following Hardship	Growth as a Conscious Purposeful Process	Hope and Spirituality	Positive Role Models and Supportive Others	Knowledge and Skill Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A Fundamental Belief</i></li> <li>• <i>Lived Experiences Support this Belief</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ongoing Purposeful Process</i></li> <li>• <i>A Holistic Multi-Dimensional Process</i></li> <li>• <i>A Conscious Knowing that the Trauma Was Not OK</i></li> <li>• <i>Cognitive Processing, Making Sense, and Raising Awareness</i></li> <li>• <i>Self as Cycle Breaking Agent</i></li> <li>• <i>Consciously Tapping into Agency and Ability</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Aligning with Hope and Visualizing a Better Future</i></li> <li>• <i>Tapping into Faith and Spiritual Beliefs</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Friendships and Supportive Others</i></li> <li>• <i>Role Models</i></li> <li>• <i>Spiritual Community Supports</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Professional Therapy Supports</i></li> <li>• <i>Reading and Self-Help</i></li> </ul>
<b>Lived Experience of Growth</b>				
Growth as the Development of a Compassionate Self	Growth as a Better Self	Growth as an Empowered Self	Growth as Moving Forward in Preferred Directions	Growth as Aligning with Gratitude
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Love, Caring, and Compassion</i></li> <li>• <i>Greater Understanding and Empathy</i></li> <li>• <i>Altruism and Giving Back</i></li> <li>• <i>Seeing the Good in Others</i></li> <li>• <i>Sense of Community and Interconnectedness</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Changed Positive Self Identity</i></li> <li>• <i>Increased Self Awareness</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Possessing Strength</i></li> <li>• <i>Aligning with Overcoming Abilities</i></li> <li>• <i>Assertive Self and Healthy Boundaries</i></li> <li>• <i>Moving Away from Fear</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Setting and Accomplishing Goals</i></li> <li>• <i>New Life Priorities</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Gratitude for Lived Difficult Experiences</i></li> <li>• <i>Gratitude for the Everyday and Not Taking Things for Granted</i></li> </ul>

**Growth facilitating processes and agents.** The conversations with the nine women interviewed revealed five master themes of processes and agents that were identified by the women as contributing to the development of posttraumatic growth. These processes and agents included: (1) the belief in growth potential following hardship, (2) growth as a conscious purposeful process, (3) aligning with hope and spirituality, (4) the presence of positive role models and supportive others, and (5) knowledge and skill development. Each of the master themes consisted of subordinate themes that are presented with each master theme.

*Master theme 1: belief in growth potential following hardship.* In analysing the words of the women, it became evident that the large majority of them (seven of the nine) possessed a sincere belief in the growth potential of human beings, and particularly in the potential for the development of growth out of hardship. This master theme contains two interdependent subthemes: (1) belief in growth potential as a fundamental belief, and (2) lived experiences of growth following hardship supports this belief.

*A fundamental belief in growth potential.* For these women, the belief in growth potential has become a fundamental and core belief that is woven within their worldviews. Many describe growth as an inevitable and unavoidable process.

Penny: Growth, sounds like such a cheesy thing to say, but growth is awesome. Its going to happen no matter what.

Jessie: I think everybody has potential to grow after difficult times. It's just a matter of how you deal with what had happened to you. I think it's not easy to get through any of it at all and to grow and to accept and to deal with or even talk about the things that had happened in anybody's life.

Penny: I don't see the world as a toxic and damaging place. I see the world; I see every single little thing as having some sort of beauty or some sort of attraction to me. I think some of that comes from experiencing some ugliness and needing to find something to hold onto. I do, I feel I notice them more, it's either an off thing, and I, scientist, it's

either the off thing in that nothing can possibly be as ugly as this or everything has to be beautiful. Sometimes I feel that way, sometimes, most of the time I just feel that.

These women view their hardships and experience as being growth-promoting opportunities.

Penny: Wounds are where the light enters. I've always kind of felt that way. I've always felt that each injury, each thing is a stepping stone. - As a muscle tears it gets bigger, you have to damage it for it to get stronger bigger and better. I work a lot with metaphors. - I kind of always believed that a tree breaks, and it bends, and it becomes a different shape and bigger and stronger because of this break in it. Sometimes a broken tree can fall in and create new roots, depending on the tree you know, things like that.

Lady: What a beautiful journey. I know people say trauma, but to me that word doesn't mean trauma, it means an experience to grow. That's what life is all about, is experiences, one experience to another, and every experience is there for a reason. We just don't understand the reason at the time.

*Lived experiences support this belief.* This belief in growth potential appears to come directly out of the women's own experience of growth following difficult times. The women shared multiple examples of how their hardships helped them experience many positive changes in their lives and helped them develop into the individuals they have become. They view their difficult experiences as being instrumental in solidifying their growth beliefs and their knowing that growth comes out of the difficulty.

Penny: I believe that everything is an experience; everything is an experience to help mould us. This came out of a lot of things that have happened in my past and understanding how each of those helped develop me. Everything in your life is an experience to move you to something else, to help you understand something else.

Rebecca: I don't know. I've never had growth without difficult times. There isn't too many times, there isn't too many years that there wasn't something seriously traumatic. So all my growth has been through trauma, but there has been nothing else, so what else do you have. Well for me there wouldn't be one without the other.

Penny: For me, my growth, it started off with the massive amount of damage that was at the beginning. For me my growth experiences didn't start after I got out of the hospital, they started when I was at the absolutely worst.

In many ways, the women's experiences of growth consisted of ongoing learning opportunities, which appeared to open the door to new life trajectories, and to reinforce their belief in growth possibilities and potentials.

Melissa: I mean, I don't know. I can only talk about my experience. Every time something really horrible happened, I grew in some way. - [My partner] being as abusive as he was, my son's father, he also made me realize like that's not what I want. So I've learnt from every experience that I've had in every way. Like I know this isn't the type of person I want to be with but it took me being with him to understand that and to be where I am now.

Jessie: Especially with my son, I know that I definitely don't want him growing up the way I did. I'm not resentful to my mom for how I was raised but I look at it as a learning tool as to say how to not parent my kids in a lot of ways. I mean it was very difficult because I never wanted to be a parent, because of the way I was raised right? But I guess now I see the beauty of it, where as being the child that I was, I didn't see the beauty of having a family.

Penny described her belief in this inevitable growth that comes out of difficult times as being similar to us all going through puberty.

Penny: Growth is painful, it's painful and it's joyous, and it's yeah, all tied into one great big metaphor to puberty and every single person has gone through it at some point. You can't wait until you grow up, and you can't wait until you get older because look at those people on TV enjoying a cigarette and a drink and you think I can't wait until I get older. But you have to go through getting your first period, and your voice changes, and you're growing pubes, or not getting taller, and then all of a sudden getting taller and being awkward and yeah. And it's, it's not easy but it's pretty cool.

***Master theme 2: growth as a conscious purposeful process.*** All nine of the women identified their growth as being a conscious and purposeful process. First, it is important to note that the women all viewed their experience of growth as being a process versus an event, and second, that this process was facilitated by the women through a conscious and purposeful stance. The words of the women resonated a deep state of awareness related to either the difficult events themselves and/or to something within themselves, and that this deep awareness or consciousness was a significant agent within their growth development process. There are six interrelated subthemes within this master theme, including: (1) growth as an ongoing purposeful

process, (2) growth as a holistic multidimensional process, (3) a conscious knowing that the trauma was not okay, (4) cognitive processing, making sense, and raising awareness, (5) the self as a cycle breaking agent, and (6) consciously tapping into agency and ability.

*Growth as an ongoing purposeful process.* In speaking of their growth, the women describe it as a constant ongoing process, in which they are continually developing and growing in positive ways. There is a sense of endlessness to this process. The women describe themselves as being in the midst of their growth and as possessing optimism and confidence in them continuing along this trajectory. There is also a clear sense of the women persistently, purposefully, and consciously contributing to their movement along this continuing journey.

Jessie: I think that I'm working towards it every day and trying to. And I know where I need to go with it essentially and where I want to be with it.

Stargazer: It's still a journey you know. I'm still kind of working through it. I'm not at the end of it by any means. I still have a long way to go. Every experience I had was a stepping stone towards what I consider my ultimate one.

This subtheme was also evident in the interview with Puerto Morelos. She shared that she saw herself as being in a transformation stage, a new stage of truly discovering herself, and described her growth as a process. She shared that she was "not there yet" and was "looking forward to new discoveries" along her journey.

*Growth as a holistic multidimensional process.* The interviews with the women reverberated growth as being a holistic or multidimensional process, one that consists of many different aspects or areas of growth. They described their growth as rippling out and affecting multiple areas of their lives. In describing this process, Penny compared her growth to being similar to the growth of an asparagus fern.

Penny: So for me, growth isn't just about moving up or moving forward, it's about moving out and it's about - My great grandfather, step grandfather. - He had this asparagus fern and it took over his entire kitchen and it would grow in one direction and

he'd just staple it to the wall and it'd grow in another direction and he'd just staple it in another way, whatever way it wanted to go. When I think about that I think about growth, that this asparagus fern just goes absolutely everywhere. So, instead of thinking of growth as an upward forward direction, it's expanding on being more than, more than you were before. Or different than you were before, it's not always necessarily more; sometimes it's just different.

In reflecting on her own experience, Pippa highlighted the multidimensionality of her own growth experience following multiple traumas.

Pippa: Growth, for me, means to that you have stretched farther than you were before in a positive sense whether you've developed bigger capacities, skills, abilities, or development on an emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual level.

*A conscious knowing that the trauma was not okay.* Many of the women shared having an innate knowing that the interpersonal traumas they endured at the hands of others were not okay. Their words amplified a conscious awareness of the injustices of their abuse. This awareness seemed to stem from an inborn moral direction that came from within the women, versus from the teaching of others. Puerto Morelos, who suffered significant interpersonal abuses by several different abusers as a child, spoke of always knowing that the abuses she experienced and the ways in which she was treated were wrong. She spoke of how this cognizance of wrongdoing allowed her to not accept them as being her only option or loft in life.

The words of others like Lady, Penny, and Jessie also highlight this knowing. Lady speaks of this knowing as aligning with her sense of duty to herself and how it allowed her survive her hardships.

Lady: It was a duty to myself, so that sense of duty has helped me through. And knowing, for some reason I always knew what was right and what was wrong.

Penny speaks of this knowing after enduring a childhood sexual assault, and Jessie shared how this knowing was influential in beginning to open up possibilities towards something else in her life, possibilities towards new and different trajectories.

Penny: I knew something was wrong. I knew it was wrong. My brother was confused and didn't really understand what was going on. Going home and realizing that this wasn't right.

Jessie: Well I think that just by knowing and acknowledging the feeling I had as a child, and growing up from my parents and never wanting to have my children feel that way, and I knew that. I didn't know exactly what to do and how to do it, but I knew that whatever my mother was doing wasn't right, so I needed to change that in order to not have, mainly my oldest son, feel anything like that.

*Cognitive processing, making sense, and raising awareness.* This knowing that the traumas were not OK appeared to be related to this next subtheme of the women embarking on a journey of trying to make sense of their hardships. Many described this part of the journey as being highly cognitive, of spending a lot of time trying to find an understanding around the traumas or embarking on a search for meaning.

Penny: My growth has come through my way of coping, and way of understanding things. My way of coping with things is not to internalize, it's not to talk about it, it's to dissect it and rip it apart. Understand it and say, "That's what this is".

Stargazer: I started dissecting everything.

Penny: I use a shoebox metaphor a lot. My whole life is this big messy closet covered sort of thing. Each shoebox represents some sort of experience in my life. And as I dissect things, different things get put into different shoeboxes. They never go away, they just create this opportunity for me to pull this shoebox out, and open it up. - Opening the shoebox of understanding and going "Okay these life experiences have contributed to this"

Jessie: I spent a lot of time alone being an introvert even as a child, and a lot of time in my head. So doing that, I had always had to make everything right in my head. Meaning like if something bad had happened, I always had to figure out why. I had to know why it happened so I spent a lot of time there, and that's pretty much how I came to that conclusion [that difficulties are opportunities to prove strength]. That was the only reason that I figured that it could have happened.

For many, like Jessie, this figuring out process led to a protective re-framing of the situation. Similarly, Pippa, who experienced severe childhood bullying, spoke of how she

practiced a lot of protective self-talk as a girl, and how this cognitive process helped her reframe her negative experiences.

Pippa: There was a lot of self-talk when I was a kid. You know, just convincing myself that they might be doing these things but they're idiots, and I'm better than them, and I'm nicer than them. Things like that.

Penny spoke of how the process of her dissecting everything helped her to find new understandings around her traumas. Specifically, how her own cognitive processing helped her explore and gain insight into her own, as well as others' reactions following the traumas, and how this process helped open the door to growth.

Penny: I dissect everything and hold on to those little dissected parts because they mean something. I don't look at the things that shape me. I look at it all being a reaction. It's all a ripple that happens afterwards that I find helps me grow. Understanding my mom's reaction, my parents' reaction to my brother. Knowing how I dealt with it. Knowing how I got past it. Understanding the ripples from it. - Nothing really ever goes away, it's always there, and it's just understanding why it's there. You need those things; they build us, and help us grow.

Other women spoke of how their cognitive process of trying to understand and make sense of their experiences, also led them to explore and tap into new possibilities, or ways of responding to their traumas.

Lady: At the time it was like, "How do I do this? I don't like the feeling, so how can I change it?"

Jessie: Yes, like I say, it was a lot to do with me living in my own head and over analyzing everything. I think a lot of it has to do with me just being inside my own head, and having to put: "Ok if I continue to not deal with the problems that I have, how is it going to effect me"?

For Pippa, her cognitive processing led her to a new-found awareness of a desire to have a better life, although the journey of how she got there remained unclear to her.

Pippa: I think if there is no awareness or desire to have a much better life, then none of this will change. And a willingness to change. You have to be really fed up with your life, I think, and have a strong desire to have a really good life, but I don't know where that comes from.



*Self as cycle breaking agent.* Another subtheme within growth being a conscious and purposeful process is seeing and positioning oneself as a cycle breaking agent. Several of the women's narratives highlighted this stance, which resonated a strong desire on the part of the women to break the cycle of abuse, as well as seeing self as a change-making agent, or as having the capabilities to do so.

Jessie: Just wanting to break the cycle. Just knowing it is a horrible cycle and acknowledging the things that had happened, and to know that I can change them from happening say to my children. I knew that I definitely don't want them growing up the way I did. I just want to change the whole pattern of things.

For most of the women, this stance of seeing self as a cycle-breaking agent was closely tied to their love for their children, and values related to motherhood. The desire to make a better future for their children and to stop the cycle of abuse from continuing into next generations is evident.

Lady: My children. I brought them up, all girls. - I brought them up to be very strong, independent, free thinking women. I did not ever want them to go through what I went through. - And I made sure that they all got good education.

Melissa: I found love with my son. I felt that connection to him. I just went into maternal overdrive.

*Consciously tapping into self-agency and abilities.* In analysing the conversations with the women, there is a clear resound of them tapping into their own capacity to act, and using their abilities to exert power to make changes and move towards new growth-facilitating trajectories in their lives. In many ways, it appears that the subthemes within this master theme work together. Taking a conscious stance against the trauma through a knowing that many of the hardships were not okay, engaging in a cognitive processing and trying-to-make-sense-of journey, and seeing self as a cycle-breaking agent, all lead to, and facilitate the women's ability to tap into their agency. This self-agent position ultimately mirrors an active change stance

within the women. Many of them speak of “making a decision” to move away from the trauma and its negative effects, by tapping into their strength and abilities.

Stargazer: Feeling sorry for myself, and all that. I guess when I had enough of that, you know, I decided, “Okay, you know what, I can’t just wallow in self-pity, it’s time to move on”. - When I feel sorry for myself for whatever reason, then I say “Okay, that’s it, no more. Time to move on”. And it’s usually moving on in a positive way.

Rebecca: I think sometimes if people let trauma’s define them. That’s what I was doing, and I just stopped doing that. I was not a victim anymore. I didn’t go through life with wearing that tag anymore. I think that I grew, you know, I developed, and I made things happen for myself even in bad times.

Pippa: I got sick of feeling sick and pushed myself to make changes.

Lady: So I knew then I did not have any resources, and that this is my loft, and I am going to have to look inside. So I looked to my inner strength because I did not have anybody.

For some of the women, like Melissa and Jessie, it was becoming a new mom and aligning with maternal values and instincts that helped them connect with their own change-making abilities, and a new direction in life.

Melissa: Something just snapped in me and I just cared. I need to get my life together. I don’t know what’s going to happen with this baby but I want to keep it, so that want of having this child in my life is actually what changed my whole life. The thought of being beat up all the time, fighting with people all the time, having sex for money all the time, wasn’t working for me anymore. So I did all the things I needed to do.

Jessie: Well I’ve definitely taken control over my alcoholism and realized that it wasn’t ideal, and it came out of life experiences. So I took control over it, I feel almost complete, and I don’t let it control me anymore. - So I just said, “Okay, you know what, I’m just going to quit”.

For Rebecca, it was her love for her older son and her aligning with a protective stance that helped her come to a decision to actively make positive changes in her life for both of them.

Rebecca: I felt kind of helpless but I couldn’t put him through it any more, and so I decided to make changes on my own.

Pippa shared how her personal growth continues to be a conscious and active process.

Pippa: I'm very stern with personal development and personal growth. I think a lot about what my spiritual leader said in Montreal. He said that you should always strive to be better than you were yesterday. And so sometimes I think about that a lot, am I better today than yesterday?

***Master theme 3: hope and spirituality.*** Another significant growth facilitating master theme is hope and spirituality. This master theme includes two main subthemes: (1) aligning with hope and visualizing a better future, and (2) tapping into faith and spiritual beliefs.

*Aligning with hope and visualizing a better future.* Several of the women spoke of finding hope within their difficulties, and that this helped them get through and visualize a better future. Puerto Morelos shared that her hope was strongly intertwined with her knowing that the traumas she endured were not okay. She shared how this knowing allowed her to believe that there had to be more to life than the difficult times. For many of the women, their hope resonated from within them, and helped them not only overcome, but eventually find growth within their hardships.

Marly: I think within a hope inside me that some things would get better. I think it was just hope that someday things would get better, things would be different.

Lady: I had this plan that one day I will get out of here. One day I will get out. One day I will be on my own. I knew that. So that one day, that hope of that one day, kept me going.

*Tapping into faith and spiritual beliefs.* For others, their faith and spiritual beliefs were instrumental in helping them survive their traumas, and move them towards new growth trajectories.

Jessie: What really got me through, or continues to get me through everything, is just me telling myself that God only gives you what you can handle in life. And I guess for me, that just gets me through anything and everything, and it has. - I think that essentially that I needed to believe in something in order to get through a lot of what I've gone through.

Marly: I kept turning to God and asking for help and I really think honesty, to be honest with you, I think it has been the only thing that has kept me from not committing suicide myself. Just out of hope. - I guess my deep faith tells me "don't give up, don't give up".

Lady identified experiencing a significant spiritual event when she was on her way to the hospital with her infant daughter who perished. She shared how this spiritual experience was instrumental to her aligning with hope and beginning a new spiritual journey in her life.

Lady: That's when I started the journey. What happened is, as I was driving her to the hospital, I had this experience that I could not understand. To my left all of a sudden it seemed like a thousand suns were shining. There is this white kind of a light. And it was the most comforting light, and there was a beam in that light, and I can still feel that hand on my shoulder, holding like that and it says, "It's going to be OK, I have come to take Nina".

You know what, death is part of living and it made me stronger spiritually. I started to turn more towards, I thought religion, but religion really did not cut it for me. So I started to want to know what the meaning of life was for me. Why are we born? Nobody could tell me. Nobody had answer, and that set me on my spiritual journey. And so that was the gift she gave me by dying, and that was what I needed.

Pippa identified finding a new religion as being instrumental in moving her towards growth.

Pippa: I feel pretty different from most people. I converted to Islam more than three or four years ago. That kind of opened up a lot in my life. I went to this retreat which is called the Rainbow Gathering, spent almost two weeks there. That was very intense, very spiritually intense. It made a big change and opening in my life. And also, when I went to Indonesia, that was a very huge event that changed my life a lot.

***Master theme 4: positive role models and supportive others.*** All nine of the women identified having meaningful supportive others in their lives as significantly influencing and facilitating their growth. This master theme consisted of three subthemes: (1) friendships, (2) positive role models, and (3) spiritual community supports.

*Friendships and supportive others.* Most of the women highlighted special friendships or relationships in their lives. Individuals who knew of their traumas, who were accepting them as unique individuals in the world, and who helped them during their difficulties. Puerto Morelos shared having one long-time friend, "who knows me for me", and who has been with her along her whole journey, as a witness, and a supporter.

Jessie: My best friend. She has been in my life now for about twelve or thirteen years, and she's always been amazing. That was probably one of the main people. As for now, I would say in the past two and a half, three years, would be my partner. He helps me get through a lot by just being there to listen and support the decisions I make, that kind of thing.

Pippa: Friends, I would talk to my friends that I had in Montreal. My husband too, maybe not as much when we moved to Calgary but definitely for a certain time, and especially when we were in Montreal. He helped me a lot, and also a friend I had. So people, relationships, they made a difference.

Rebecca: There were lots of angels in my life too. I did have good friends like L. She really did help me along the way. And because she had a strong relationship with her mother, and her mom was a really strong woman, I went to her a lot too, and you know, just talk about things and whatever.

Penny: I have two really solid friends. One teaches Kundalini Yoga, and she absolutely glows. She's a beautiful person. And one of her close friends and a best friend of mine, she teaches yoga, she works in the health services. - Definitely those two women that I talked about, they're massive.

Marly: I had one or two friends that would say encouraging words to me, the good they saw in me.

Pippa talked about her experience of multicultural friendships, and how these friendships were significantly influential in her life due to their strong investment in helping her grow in positive ways.

Pippa: I think it helps also to have friends that come from different cultures. I think that when you become closer, I found, to Moroccans or the Arab community, they are more invested in you. They will tell you when you're not doing something well. They will tell you when you're doing something well. There is a constant teaching. They are teaching you, and you are teaching them, so it's like modeling in a way.

*Positive role models.* Several of the women identified having positive role models in their lives. Other women who they looked up to, and who in many ways were either mentors or models of positive growth.

Marly: I have a cousin that is older than I am, and when I was younger I really admired and looked up to her. She was kind of, you know, my older cousin that I thought was just wonderful. She used to invite me over once in a while for family dinners, and she was encouraging in a little bit of a way.

Rebecca: Like I said, her mom was a strong woman, and I did have outside people that I admired and sort of wanted to be like them, if you know what I mean. - [My friend] had a good quality, she was good with money. She taught me a lot about survival in that way. She was another single mother; she was a single mother before I was. I felt like I could do it, you know, if I have a job, and I work like her, and then I can make it. She gave me hope basically.

Many of these female role models had experienced their own share of difficulties in life, and had transcended them. These role models represented positive energy and strength, and were highly admired. Their positive energies opened up possibilities for positive trajectories in the women's lives.

Penny: C. she had an office beside me at work. - She had this book of answers and loves to give it to people. She was just always available. She was always willing to listen, and a highly compassionate person. She is this kind of person that is always interested. It's impossible for me to find out anything about her when we get together and have tea, because she's so interested in everybody else. I always had this sense from her that she'd been through something fairly heavy in her life at some point, but I actually still don't know what it is to this day. I just get this sense, there's something there, there's something under the surface, because it never really goes away. For me, with her, it was just this, this unending amount of light that pours out of her all the time, non-stop.

Stargazer: The teacher I worked with at Renfrew, she's absolutely amazing. One of the most positive people I have ever met. She had this thing, you know, she greeted you with happiness. Her enthusiasm for life, and just trying to see the positive in everything. I think I learned from her that, you know what, it is about choices. It is about how you choose to look at things, and it is about what you choose to focus on. - I would say she was a great, great influence.

*Spiritual community supports.* Both Pippa and Lady shared how spiritual and faith based supports were significant growth facilitating agents in their lives.

Pippa: I think I grew a lot very quickly when I became more involved with the Islamic community, specifically this one community in Montreal. I was a big part of that community, Sufi community. I had a spiritual guide, and I had a lot of friends through that community. So everyone just kind of supporting you, and holding you, and kind of encouraging you towards becoming better and better. Towards being, you know, towards goodness. So I feel that kind of helped me to develop a lot of awareness of the better thing to do versus the worst thing to do. It was a constant choosing of the better thing to do. Not 100 percent of the time but most of the time. Because there was so much group support, it was easy for it to come faster, changes happened faster.

Lady: There are a whole lot of spiritual people that came out of that. Every time I need something, or someone, I feel that whatever vibrations I am putting out, the universe sends me that one person to help me through. They are always there when I need them. They are always there, being with beings that are not human but are angelic.

***Master theme 5: knowledge and skill development.*** Seeking new knowledge and building new skills was identified by the women as being significantly helpful to propelling them towards their growth. This master theme contains two main subthemes; (1) professional therapy supports, and (2) reading and self-help. As part of their conscious growth process, all nine of the women actively engaged in either professional counselling or in self-help activities, and all nine recognized these acts as being critical in jump-starting and supporting growth in their lives. Most of the women identified this growth facilitating part of the process as helping them transcend the pain of their trauma experiences.

Pippa: Unfortunately, you, the one that has been hurt the most in society, is also the one that has to do the most transformational self work. It's often the victim that needs to change themselves and the victim that needs to because you feel like you're damaged. You're not exactly damaged, but you have to, it's like you've been hurt many times, or hit many times, and you have to get healing, and work, and get in touch with yourself, and transcend this pain. And then find healthy ways to be in the world, so that way, you can have a decent good life. Learning how to transcend the pain is part of growing.

Many of the women related and spoke of this need to transcend the pain of the trauma. Puerto Morelos, for example, shared that her journey towards growth included working through the depths and layers of her trauma and its effects, towards finding herself, finding healing, and managing negative trauma symptoms. She shared engaging in different therapy supports including talk therapy, body therapy, and mindfulness-based therapy. Through this work, Puerto Morelos discovered the practice of journaling, and she shared how daily writing has been instrumental in helping her process things and work through things, and helped her connect to what she identified as her "true self", or the woman-she-is apart from her trauma.

*Professional therapy supports.* Like Puerto Morelos, many of the women have accessed professional therapy supports and all of them have shared their own personal benefits of how these supports helped them reduce the negative effects of their trauma and facilitated the road to growth in their lives through knowledge and skill development.

Stargazer: Then I finally started counselling and it was really through counselling that I came to terms with what happened to me. And it was really through counselling where I managed to work through it and let go of it. Really let go.

Melissa: So that was the turning point. I had to go to WEAC in Edmonton. It took a lot of rehab and I lived in a woman's shelter at Sunshine for a year. We had life skills workshops and all that stuff where you really like, I had to talk to myself and say, "I'm worth it", and you know, That is abuse I don't have to put up with it. I don't have to have an abusive boyfriend". I didn't know those things before. I had no knowledge of that stuff. So knowledge is power for me. I have learned coping skills. I didn't have any before.

Penny: So I self-admitted into the hospital for two weeks. Then I was discharged and put into the outpatient program for four weeks. I needed to do it, to deal with them, and I had gone through all the coping mechanisms. I journaled. I collaged. I talked to people. I had been through all the avenues. The hospital, the actual inpatient, the staying in the ward and everything, and being locked down, was hugely beneficial.

Rebecca: I went to my oldest sister. She told me that I should go to therapy, so I did. I went for as long as I was on a plan, for as long as I could. I just started, you know, first of all letting go with what happened to me, and then the whole guilt. I think because I had seen the benefit of therapy, whenever I had any trauma I just hooked up with who I could. I wasn't facing anything, and until I learned to face things I don't think I grew.

Many of the women, like Puerto Morelos, engaged in a wide variety of therapy and healing supports, not just talk-therapy.

Rebecca: One of the things that helped me the most going toward growth was, I ran into a lady that does educational kinesiology and she has a way of healing people. She was part of my growth and healing at time when I started at 33 years old.

Lady: I learned Reiki from her and then I learned other healing arts and that's when my real growth started.

Pippa: I had a natural path doctor that helped. I've gotten lots of help with lots of therapists. I've gone into the DBT program. I've tried everything. I've gone on a meditation retreat. I've done Yoga. I've done body psychotherapy, hypnosis, energy



healing. So many different things that kind of build your own internal eye of yourself, to become aware of this feeling, that sensation, these things.

The words of the women echo the many benefits of therapy.

Rebecca: I feel like if I hadn't had as much as therapy as I did, or support from people, there's no way I could have entered that relationship and had any chance at happiness, you know what I mean. First of all, I wouldn't have because I'd still have that "I hate men" thing tattooed, which is not appealing, I'm sure, to anyone. But I fell in love with him, and because I had therapy, I didn't hate the whole world, and I didn't hate men. I had to be taught how to love myself basically, because we weren't taught, you know.

Stargazer: My counsellor, I feel she is the one who re-centers me, re-grounds me. Every time I walk out of her office it's like, okay, I have a better picture of what's happening. She was an amazing counsellor because she gave me clarity. She set me on the right path and there are many things that I've learned from her. I still have, you know, my sticky notes on my fridge, things that she told me just to kind of keep me on the right track.

*Reading and self-help.* A few of the women, like Stargazer and Lady, shared how acquiring knowledge and skills through reading and self-exploration was helpful in moving them towards growth and positive new directions.

Stargazer: I think that's how I opened my eyes into, you know, what happens to a person after they are molested and after they are raped. It's through reading and trying to understand. That really opened my eyes and I think that was a big part of growth.

Lady: In about 2000, that's when my life started to change. A very big influence was a very powerful book, "The Power of Now" by Eckhart Tolle. And then the books started to roll. Lots of books, lots of books, and lots of reading. There is always so much more to know. Just when I think I know a lot about the subject, I realize I have only touched not even the tip of the iceberg.

Penny spoke of the significant difference that offering another women mutual aid support had on her own self-exploration and trajectory of growth, and how this encounter provided a different avenue of self-help.

Penny: That experience in the hospital, holding this woman's hand, and you know, just talking to her and listening to her tell stories. I'm supposed to be there working on myself and I shouldn't be doing that kind of stuff, but it was more important and more of a therapy for me. It was more helpful for me than anything to go through that with her and to help her with that.

**Lived experience of growth.** The above growth facilitating processes and agents were instrumental in moving the women towards new growth. This next section highlights specifically the lived experience of growth, or the meaning of growth for these women. The conversations with the nine women interviewed revealed five master themes of lived experiences of growth following multiple traumas. Growth as: (6) the development of a compassionate self, (7) a better self, (8) an empowered self, (9) moving forward in preferred directions, and (10) aligning with gratitude. Each of the master themes consisted of subordinate themes that are presented with each master theme. Although each theme represented itself as a distinct area of growth, there is some interdependence among themes.

***Master theme 6: the development of a compassionate self.*** Growth as the development of a compassionate self was a powerfully represented theme that was evident within the conversations with all nine participants. Several related subordinate themes are captured within this master theme, and include: love, caring, and compassion for others; greater understanding and empathy for other's pain; altruism and giving back; seeing the good in others; and a sense of community and interconnectedness with others.

*Love, caring, and compassion for others.* In their own way, each woman highlighted how her difficult life experiences and traumas contributed to greater caring and compassion for others. There is a commitment to living life with these values in the forefront, and to work towards making a difference in this world.

Pippa: I feel that's the biggest meaning of all these difficulties, that I feel a lot of compassion for vulnerable people.

Penny: I would say, definitely say, it deepened my desire to be a compassionate person. That's for sure. That understanding and love. - For me, I want to focus more on my life and in growing those happy and positive things. Those things that help me contribute to the world in some better way, that help me contribute to my own world of, it's my own world that's going to impact other people in different ways too.

Pippa: For me a large part of it [growth] is people and love and giving. And also feeling like you're using the energy that God gave you, like your talents to serve humanity, and that whatever it is you're doing is pushing people to greater awareness, greater connection with love, and you know values of love and unity.

Stargazer: Because those things affected me so deeply, the only way to move on for me was to use that experience for the better of others. Share the experience and, you know, maybe make some changes.

Lady spoke of how her alignment with love and caring for others helped move her away from judgement.

Lady: All other emotions can be mixed together, except one, and that's love. When we have love, true meaning of love in our hearts, we cannot have any other emotion in there because we cannot have any room for any other emotion. We cannot have love with jealousy. We can have lust with anger, and greed with whatever; we can have any combination of it, however if I truly love somebody or something, I cannot have judgement.

*Greater understanding and empathy.* In many ways, for these women their lived experience of pain and hardships has developed into a deep understanding of a painful world, and has opened their eyes to the pain and hardships of others. In our conversation, Puerto Morelos described this understanding as having a 'sixth sense' that allowed her to connect with others on a different and deep level. In her description, this sixth sense was only possible through an insider's knowledge, or through shared common experience, which in turn helped her develop an ability to sit with another's pain, and not be scared by it. Pippa, who had experienced significant childhood bullying and interpersonal abuse within her relationships, speaks of how her compassion and tenderness for others developed in her from a void of love, and her longing for it to be returned to her through her giving of it.

Pippa: I remember I once had a friend who is Honduran, and she said you know you give a lot of tenderness and I think you do that because you need a lot of tenderness. I think there is some truth to that. I think that for myself, when you experience a void of, you know, certain types of love or good treatment, that you long for that in your own heart so you give it to the world.

All of these women not only spoke of their empathic understanding of the pain others may be experiencing, but they also spoke of the importance of, and their own commitment to, diminishing the pain of others by adding more caring, love, and tenderness to the world.

Rebecca: I have been there too, so if all I can do is be, you know, a good friend to somebody or whatever, it doesn't even have to be big. - When you know someone is going through something painful no matter what it is you can do something kind for them and help that get melted away, you help. If everyone did it.

Marly: I think about caring for people, trying to help other people...maybe it was from being bullied myself, that I would say too, even from an early age, I could not stand to see anybody get picked on and I have tried to stand up to them...and I know that even now.

Lady, Penny, and Stargazer spoke of how their compassionate selves, with its greater understanding and empathy, allowed them to see beyond the negative or hurtful actions of others, and helped align them with greater curiosity into the lived world of another.

Lady: [Before] I would be totally into judgement. I am no longer there. Now I think, 'I wonder what her story was that she would be so hurtful, right? So I see beyond the projected image that we all wear, that mask that we all wear in public. I can see beyond that. So in my interactions with people, I do not see their actions as who they are, because I know the soul is pure and they are just doing out of their own experience.

Penny: Everybody is going through something in their life, and some of us are going through things that are a lot harder. Just to be gentle, so that, that ability to and the desire to, because I seek it out, to see things in a different way. I know, I see somebody walking down the street who is staring at the ground and I get curious about what they're feeling, and, you know, what they're experiencing.

Stargazer: I started viewing people in a different way, you know. I'm like, everybody has a story, I don't know what happened in this person's life. I don't know why this person is making these choices, you know, why be just high and mighty and critical and you know be a total bitch to them. Maybe get off my high horse, try to understand and try to be more supportive. So that was one thing that I saw as a stepping stone where when I started to develop more empathy for people in general.

Rebecca further highlights how her growth consisting of empathic understanding helps her make a difference in the lives of others who too have experienced hardship.

Rebecca: I think most of the growth that I've recognized has been when I'm with other people and they have a trauma or something that they're dealing with. I feel like I'm way more equipped to point them in the right direction, or be a good listener or whatever. I think I've grown into being a better person as far as life isn't all about me.

This new awareness and compassion towards another is part of the growth process, and it appears to be only possible when the women enter a growth and healing trajectory.

Rebecca: Because I was so in, so in my own pain, I was not aware of other people at all and I don't think that I was deliberately selfish or anything, but I feel like I was perceived as being selfish in that time frame because I just wasn't even there most of the time. I was just in my own head and lost in my own crap.

*Altruism and giving back.* This greater empathic understanding within the compassionate self is moved forward within these women's lives through acts of selflessness and giving back to others. These acts of giving back stem from both a desire to make the world a better place, as well as from feelings of gratefulness and appreciation for the acts of kindness they have received from others along their growth journeys.

Melissa: I try, to you know, make value of my time, and try to give back to people because I know what it's like to be in their shoes. You know, and it's nice to have somebody care, like I know what it's like to be treated like shit.

Rebecca: I think that's been how I feel I've benefitted the most, or I've been able to give back the most because, you know, you do want to give back. It's the same thing if you use the food bank if you're broke. When you feel better you definitely don't walk past the food bank box without giving something and it's the same thing with therapy. I feel like I, I received. I have been there too, so if all I can do is be you know, a good friend to somebody or whatever.

The women experienced these altruistic acts as beneficial and as promoting further growth opportunities that add a sense of reward and value to their lives. Stargazer transformed her difficult life experience of raising a son with disabilities by working to make a difference for other children and families with special needs.

Stargazer: I dedicated myself to special needs. How much I changed, and I would just want to give of myself to make somebody else happy.

Melissa and Pippa both support local agencies and community programs to give back and help make a difference in the lives of others.

Melissa: I try to do what I can to give back and help other people. That's what I want to do. Yeah, I raised \$1500 for Sunshine. I really enjoy helping people, and I think we need more people that care.

Pippa: I did stand-up comedy. Actually it was for stand-up for mental health. Yeah, it was to demystify stigma around mental illness and different things like that.

*Seeing the good in others.* For some of the women, the compassionate self transcends past a jaded view of others despite their many negative experiences of harms and injustices at the hands of another.

Stargazer: I don't know if it's the right term seeing everybody the same, we are all equal, but I see something good in everybody, I do not believe someone is 100 percent bad. If you look deep you can see and you can find good in everybody and I think that's one of the big things that I really changed, my way of thinking. You know, seeing the good in everyone, and if I don't see it on the surface than I try to look, to look deeper.

*Sense of community and interconnectedness.* The compassionate self perpetuates a valuing of a collective society and a sense of community. Many of these women expressed an appreciation of the strength, growth, and healing that comes from interconnectedness with others.

Rebecca: To me it's all about being and living in a community and helping each other, because that's how I've made it. To be part of a community and let the community help heal me, and be part of it, and give back when I can. That's to me the biggest growth you can have.

Stargazer: I don't think I look at my life as being about me. It's more of a whole, of interacting with the people around me, and just one thing, to give more and better. I don't know how to explain it really. That's what that means to me, you know, going a little bit deeper than just the superficial stuff of, you know, it's all about me. - I think I am all about people, my life it's really about connection with people. That's what my life is about.

***Master theme 7: a better self through increased self-awareness.*** An interrelated and yet distinct master theme is the development of a better self. Again, all nine of the women

interviewed openly expressed this new self-development as an important and valued area of growth for them. This theme was entitled a better self, as this was the language used by all the women interviewed, and thus, best captured their lived experience of this area of growth. Although there is some interrelatedness between themes, this theme was separated from the compassionate self as it appeared to shine a stronger light towards the individual self, and on one's self-identity. Two main subthemes are present within this master theme and include: (1) a changed positive self-identity, which appears to be accomplished (2) through increased self-awareness and reflection.

*Changed positive self-identity.* The women spoke at length about how their growth comprised of a new self-identity, of *being a better me than I once was*. For many of these women, this better me represented a subjective positive self change experience, as well as a desire to continue to move in this direction.

Stargazer: I am not the same person I used to be, I learned patience. I learned empathy. I learned tolerance. I became a better person. I uh, I don't think I would have been the person I am today if it wasn't for my experiences. - Growth means to me becoming a better person. That's what it means to me. Taking something negative and learning from it and kind of getting yourself towards a positive, towards a better. Becoming more of a person than you were yesterday, and more of a person, that means becoming a better person.

Rebecca: I think that it's helped me be a better person, be more aware of the pain of other people and try to help where I can. I am way more happy, you know, being OK as a person and liking myself and whatever, and enjoying life for the first time.

Marly: Trying to be the best you can be, working on that, doing things to further that.

Penny: For me in life, is growing things that are important to me, is growing my inner dragon slayer, you know. You get to be somebody better than who you are, or bigger. I'll say bigger, bigger is a good way that I'd say it. You get to be somebody that is bigger than who you are, emotionally, physically, strength, yeah...I'm, you know, I'm bigger and better.

*Increased self-awareness.* Having greater insight and increased self-awareness of the negative influence of trauma on the self was identified as an important component in the development of a better self. Puerto Morelos shared that a large part of her growth journey was what she called *connecting to consciousness*. She described this as becoming aware of her true self, of who she is apart from her trauma, of her values, hopes, dreams, and intentions in life. The women spoke of how gaining awareness into how trauma can ‘bully’, or influence them into unhelpful behaviours or responses, was instrumental in their movement towards being a better self. This awareness empowered them to change the ways they interacted with themselves, others, and the world.

Pippa: I guess I feel like I’ve just become very self-aware. - Some people become so traumatized that they feel strong senses of entitlement, and so they treat other people badly because they’ve been abused. But I think it doesn’t necessarily go that way if you have awareness that comes with it. - Well I mean you have to be aware of yourself to grow. Through the awareness of yourself you become aware of the pain that’s inside you and you become aware of how this pain might motivate you to do terrible things and then when you become aware of it, then you can change it. So then you grow, you end up growing several times.

Lady: My life growth has been about a journey into knowing who I am. And the more I shed, the more I grow, growing to be the person that I am today. For me growth is having experienced all of that, and not letting that be who I am, I am not my trauma. In a nutshell it means knowing myself, getting rid of all of the negative emotions and negative self.

Stargazer: The way I used to be, if it wasn’t for all these experiences I really think I would have been, umm, take away everything that happened to me, see myself at the age of 44, I would probably still be the same self centered, critical, bitchy, flakey type of a person. I think all those experiences made me aware of my depth, or I don’t know how to describe it...with all the experiences I was forced to look deep inside myself and now I don’t want to live any other way, and I don’t want to make any other decisions any other way, they have to come from deep inside. Now the things I do, I call it more on a soul level.

Melissa: Yeah, I just want to be the best person I can be because I know what life is like on the other side. - Those eight years were so crucial into understanding who I am, what I want to be, what I want to do with my life, and where I want to be as a person. It makes me really self-aware you know.



Jessie: I've always wanted to look to ways to better myself as a parent, as a person, as a partner, as just in general. - So, me being a better person would be figuring out why I did that and trying to overcome it and trying to re-establish the relationships that I did have with them and make them better.

***Master theme 8: an empowered self.*** For all nine of the women the meaning of growth in their lives was strongly connected to an increased alignment with strength and self-agency. The women shared how their experiences of multiple traumas challenged them to uncover their overcoming abilities, and in so doing, helped them develop a newfound confidence and self-identity of possessing strength and agency, or an empowered self identity. For instance, Puerto Morelos shared that her growth within this area was evident in many different ways. She, and others, spoke of the development of a knowing that she could overcome any hardship that came her way. She shared in the past having difficulty setting boundaries with others, and often putting others first. In her growth she identified not doing this as much any more, and instead “working her own agenda versus the agenda of others”, and doing things more for herself. Through her growth experience of connecting to her own strength and agency, Puerto Morelos shared feeling less broken, and less enmeshed with others in unhealthy ways. The subthemes within this master theme included: a newfound perception of self as having strength and overcoming abilities, developing an assertive self with healthier boundaries or limits with others, and moving away from fear.

***Possessing strength.*** For all of these women, this seeing oneself as having strength became a part of their self-identity through their lived traumatic experiences. This strength is developed through their experiences of transcending pain and hardship, and discovering that they possess the abilities to do so.

Lady: I am strong. I know I am strong because of these people, because of these traumas. - I found that true me, that strong person that I am today. I am strong and people around

me realize that you know. I don't look to outside for help. I know I can do it. I know its there and that is growth.

Pippa: Yeah, I think also that I'm incredibly strong. I think I can deal with intensity a lot better than a lot of people. I might get upset, I could deregulate, but at the same time I think I can handle a lot more intensity whereas others would walk away a lot faster. -Well I feel that you become more resilient because you've experienced something difficult and you have to learn how to deal with it and get over it and move on. Learning how to transcend pain is a part of growing because I mean, you learn how to love something that is difficult. Growth is also becoming stronger than you ever thought you were. - Mostly feeling more capable and stronger and skilled and resourceful and resilient than I thought.

Jessie: They [others] see me as a strong person as well, that I can get through anything and everything. The difficult times I think they were just put into my way as obstacles for me to prove to myself just how strong of a person I really am, and to allow me to know that I can get through anything and everything. No matter how difficult it is. - The people who grow are the strong people essentially. Strong like inside their soul, that kind of thing.

Stargazer: I'm very strong. I'm a strong person and she always counts on me to come out of any situation with flying colors...Many people refer mostly to my strengths, that I am strong and I just keep on going.

Melissa: So that's when she really saw that I have strength and I'm just trying to be a strong woman.

#### *Aligning with overcoming abilities.*

Rebecca: There just is a feeling of well being to know that you are okay, that, you know, even if something goes wrong, that I know what to do now. I'm not going to be in a sea of hurt or in a mess or feel like I can't cope or, you know, whatever, overwhelmed. I don't get overwhelmed as many times anymore.

Pippa: I feel very strong now. I feel like well how much worse can it get, you know? And I've developed a lot of skills now to handle things so that's kind of, I guess you could say, that's growth. It gives you more strength and more confidence because you've been through difficulties so you know that, well you didn't die from it, and you're still here, and you're capable, and you can continue, and life still goes on.

In talking about her sense of strength and empowerment, Penny also spoke of her growth as consisting of a self-kindness, gentleness, and acceptance of times when it is more difficult for her to tap into her strength. She spoke of accepting her own vulnerabilities as a human being, and identified this balance as a growth trajectory for her.

Penny: I feel empowered now. I feel, I feel a lot stronger even though sometimes I can't be strong. Which is an area of growth for me and itself is that understanding that I don't have to be strong. - Knowing I'm a strong person and knowing the areas I'm not strong or the moments I'm not strong, it's fine, it's acceptable.

*Assertive self and healthy boundaries.* Finding a voice and establishing an assertive self in the world was an important subtheme within the empowered self. In aligning with strength, these women have simultaneously experienced the ability to stand up for themselves in new ways as part of their growth journeys.

Rebecca: I have the ability to stand up for myself more than I ever did. As far as standing up for myself I didn't really do that very often, and I do that now.

Penny: I would say the ability to stand up for myself a little bit more, it's definitely apparent in my everyday life. Saying "no, I don't want you to call me every day". "I'm not going to listen to you tell me". "I'm just going to tell you right away and not waste your time" "I'm really sorry but it's no". It's simple things like that.

Marly: I think I have become me, stronger, and I am trying not to let people bully me. I would say standing up for myself and not sort of letting someone just walk all over me and then seething inside after. I would say standing up for myself earlier and sooner, rather than just let someone take advantage of me, and walk all over me, and then being really hurt and angry after.

Lady: With people being mean and miserable to me. I have learned how to stand up to them and not be affected by them, and not allowing them to take advantage of me.

For several of these women, this alignment with a newfound voice and an assertive self became a protective factor from further victimization or re-traumatization. In many ways, fuelling further experiences of empowerment and growth promotion.

Jessie: I guess over the past year I've become more strict and said no, he's my son, you can't just have him whenever you want. So he's seen that I've essentially cut the cord from my mom and let her stop controlling me so much from my son.

Pippa: I guess I could say I stopped putting up with so much crap from other people. Kind of became more like a tigress almost.

Penny: I would definitely say my crowning moments of going, you know what, this is me, and if you don't like it just move on. I don't need you in my life. You're not a good person to me, you're toxic, and then I knew she didn't want anything to do with me anymore.

Marly: Some of them have said stubborn, but I would say its because I finally stand up for myself. They see me as being stubborn because they're not just being able to walk all over me, which is what happened in the past.

For some of the women, like Lady, this assertiveness allowed her to become her authentic self, versus moulding into someone else's vision of who she should be, or into someone else she felt she needed to be in order to protect herself from the trauma.

Lady: My growth has come where I make my mould. I am not going to fit somebody else's image of who I should be. I am going to be who I am. And that's where the growth has come. I know where I'm coming from and I will be that strong person, and now I know what a strong person can do and I will do it. And that was my daughter's death that really got in touch with me inside me, because I thought those other me's were me. They were all that I wanted to be for somebody else but that wasn't me.

*Moving away from fear.* With this newfound self-identity of possessing strength and agency, there is a simultaneous transcendence away from fear, which had for a long time been a companion in many of these women's lives. For some, like Lady, this movement was part of the conscious and purposeful growth process, while for others, like Pippa, it developed through their growth experiences.

Lady: So as long as I felt like a victim I was treated like a victim. The minute I snapped out of that, everything around me changed. People have a hold over me as long as I am afraid of them. When I am no longer afraid of them they longer have a hold over me, its gone.

Pippa: I guess I don't feel as afraid of people anymore, I mean, I don't know, I don't really feel so much like a victim. I don't really feel like things happened to me anymore. I feel like, not that I can control everything, but that I can feel a certain force.

Lady: I'm not worried about anything. I'm not afraid of anything. When I confront my fear, why am I afraid? What is it about this that is holding me back? That's a totally different way of living than when you are afraid of everything. Finding that inner strength. Finding all those things that you don't have to be afraid of. Finding that light within myself. Growing to be the person that I am today.

***Master theme 9: moving forward in preferred directions.*** The connection to strength and agency leads to the forth master theme of posttraumatic growth in these women's lives,

specifically, that of moving toward new preferred directions in their lives. There are two subthemes within this theme: setting and accomplishing life goals, and changed life priorities. Six of the nine women strongly identified with this master theme.

*Setting and accomplishing goals.* When asking about their lived experience of growth, seven of these women spoke specifically of seeing themselves using their strength and agency to set and accomplish life goals, or to move towards new favourable directions and aspirations in their lives. Within this, there is a sense of purposefulness and accomplishment that contributes to meaning-making in their lives. This attainment, and moving forward on self-driven tasks and goals in life, appears to reinforce their sense of agency and ability, and further contributes to the positive identity of a better self.

Jessie: [When I think of growth] I think of being goal oriented. Moving forward with anything and everything, like completing school, and going into a career, or into more education kind of thing. Just going, never stopping at one point and having that be enough for you. This is my idea of growth.

Rebecca: [Growth], it's the opposite of being in a rut. Moving beyond what you ever thought you could. I never thought that I would own my own business or have the things that I've done.

Marly: I went back to school and I took secretarial training. I went back to the secretarial school again and took a legal assistant course at SAIT. I worked really hard, not that it came easily to me, but I worked very hard and I was in the top of my class.

For some of the women, like Rebecca, their goal-oriented direction is a direct stance against their lived difficult experiences.

Rebecca: I think it was the poverty that made me driven to get school, because as soon as I got out of high school, I went into Business College and got a degree as fast as I could, just so I could make money. I was not interested in being poor at all, and just got to get a job, got to get you know, whatever, and I got a business going right away and did really well.

Penny spoke of how her goal directedness is purposeful and grounded in self-awareness of her own aspirations, intentions, hopes, and dreams. Once again she expresses an acceptance

and a knowing that although she is purposeful in her life goals, circumstances beyond her control may prevent her from meeting them all.

Penny: I have a greater understanding of what I want in my life. I will take actions in my life to sort of steer in that direction, and if it doesn't happen it's okay. I'm in a place and space in my life where I know what I want, whereas ten years ago I couldn't have told you.

*New life priorities.* Several of the women identified the establishment of new life priorities as a critical aspect of their moving forward in preferred directions. For these women, these new life priorities only became visible through their contact with difficult experiences. Stargazer shared discovering her new life priorities after the diagnosis of her son with special needs.

Stargazer: I think I saw the greatest growth after the baby and finding out my son had special needs. You know what, I grew up in Romania where I didn't see any people with special needs because back there they would just take them and put them in an orphanage, so I wasn't exposed to that. My first person with Down syndrome I saw in Austria. So I was very, very close-minded to special needs, and you know those peoples' abilities. I was clueless, completely clueless, like "Oh you have special needs and I don't know what to do" and now it's basically, I think, it became my life's goal. Everything I do, I want to do in the domain of special needs.

Melissa expressed how her new life priorities contribute her to a new sense of self. She openly and enthusiastically shared many goals with her new preferred direction in life, goals that were previously made invisible by her traumas.

Melissa: I feel like a completely different person. I never saw myself going to university. I never saw myself being a mom. Now my experience is going to school. I have goals and I have achieved everything I wanted to achieve. I want to be a productive member of society. I want to be someone. I want to have a driver's license. I want to have a car. I want to have a place to live, and I can do it.

***Master theme 10: aligning with gratitude.*** Five of the nine women interviewed identified an alignment with gratitude as being an important part of their growth. Puerto Morelos expressed gratefulness for everyday things, as well as a sense of gratitude for the experiences, specifically as they pushed her on a journey, which ultimately allowed her to "find herself", and become who

she is today. Puerto Morelos's experience captures the two main subthemes within this master theme, specifically: gratefulness to the experiences as they contributed to the development of self, and gratefulness for the everyday or simple things in life, or not taking things for granted. These two subthemes are echoed and align with the experiences of some of the other women.

*Gratitude for lived difficult experiences.* This area of growth aligns with the growth areas of the development of a better self and a more compassionate self. There is a sense of gratefulness for the changed better self that blossomed out of the women's adverse experiences, and a sense of gratitude towards the difficult experiences themselves as they lead to the development of self.

Stargazer: The only thing I would say, and this is really ironic, and I'm pretty sure that most people say it, but I'm really grateful for the experiences that I've had because the person that I became. I really like the person that I am. I like myself much more than I liked myself twenty years ago and if, if this is the only way, if this was the only way for me to become the way I am today, then I don't want, I wouldn't want to give any of it back.

Melissa: So now my experience of going to school and everything is, like I'm just really grateful for it, I am. The feelings that I have are like I'm happy now. My thinking is like, "you know, I can be that person and I'm grateful that I'm not like that anymore".

Lady: When I look at my experiences, my husband, my father, my grandfather, when all of these people have been abusive to me, it's like they came here with a purpose. And their purpose was to make me a stronger person, and I thank them now, so in a way I am grateful to them now. Yeah, there's some gratitude, total gratitude.

*Gratitude for the everyday and not taking things for granted.* The women also expressed gratefulness for a wide variety of everyday things, people, and possessions. A greater appreciation in life and not taking things for granted are evident within the words of these women.

Jessie: I think that material things mean a lot more to me. Just everyday things I guess, essentially. Having a home and the things in it. Making sure my son has his necessities he

needs is very important to me. I know that material things for him too, just like say buying him electronics and stuff because I can. When I was a kid we never got anything like that so, yeah. And I try to teach my son the same thing that everything he has is not, to not take it for granted.

Melissa: Like, I can go to Walmart. I have money in my bank account. Those are things that I couldn't do before. Even the simple things like going out and mowing my lawn, or having a place to sleep at night. Having my son. Those are all things that like at one point, I don't know if I could do this but I'm going to take it one day at a time and now look where I am. I'm in University! It's awesome.

In addition, a few of the women mentioned gratitude towards the available services and programs available to them as Canadian residents, particularly as they identified these services as playing a significant role in helping to facilitate their own personal growth experiences.

Jessie: I think I appreciate the people in my life because of the experiences I've had, and knowing that they're important. That they, I guess, essentially walk beside me for most of it, and have been as supportive as I need them to be to a certain extent.

Stargazer: I really feel that because of that, I was given this, given this opportunity you know, to be in Canada and have access to information, services, you name it. And I really feel I owe it to myself. It's an opportunity that many people don't have and I think in some ways I don't think I have the right to throw it away.

Melissa: I love how I live in Canada because my family is from Chile and you know, if you're on the street, you're on the street. Good luck trying to get out. So I really appreciate the fact that I'm here and there's things like rehab and things for domestic violence where you can learn about yourself and appreciate yourself as a person. That all entails growth.

The women's lived experiences and narratives of growth capture a detailed picture of the growth process following complex multiple traumas. The many factors that contributed to the women's positive changes are evident, as are the distinct areas of growth within these women's lives.



## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As research in posttraumatic growth is still in its infancy, to my knowledge this study is the first of its kind to explore the lived experience of posttraumatic growth in the lives of women who have experienced significant multiple traumas. The findings of this study revealed a rich and complex picture of growth, and it is evident from the results that posttraumatic growth is a present and real experience for these women that has both changed them as individuals, and moved them in new directions in their lives. The findings provide insight into several important processes or catalysts that the women identified as being instrumental in promoting or opening the door to growth, as well as highlight the meaning and lived experience of growth for these women. These findings support Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun's (1998) conceptualization of posttraumatic growth as being both a process and an outcome.

### **The Findings and Their Comparison to Previously Identified Domains of Growth**

The findings revealed that: (a) possessing a belief in growth potential, (b) engaging in a conscious and purposeful process of positive growth development and change, (c) aligning with hope and spirituality, (d) engaging with positive role models and supportive others, and (e) seeking ongoing knowledge and skill development, are critical growth facilitating processes and agents for these women. It is through an engagement in these processes that the women identified finding themselves positively changed, and the women's stories revealed that their positive growth changes consisted of: (1) the development of greater compassion for others (i.e., greater empathy, altruism, looking for the good in others, and increased sense of community), (2) seeing self as a better person (i.e., an improved sense of self identity, and a more self-aware person than before), (3) increased sense of empowerment (i.e., seeing self as a stronger person, aligning with newfound overcoming abilities, standing up for self, and moving away from fear),

(4) actively moving forward in new preferred life directions (i.e., setting and accomplishing new goals, new life priorities), and (5) a newfound alignment with gratitude (i.e., being grateful for their difficult life experiences, as they contributed to the development of self and growth, along with gratitude for everyday things, and not taking things for granted). This is the essence of the lived growth experience for these women.

The women's experience of posttraumatic growth following multiple life traumas appears to align well with, and be supported by, previous findings on posttraumatic growth, although previous findings were based on single trauma experiences. Through their research, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) initially identified posttraumatic growth to primarily include: changes in perception of self (i.e., increased confidence, a sense of personal strength, alongside a recognition of one's vulnerability), changes in interpersonal relationships (i.e., increased self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness with others, greater compassion, empathy, and effort in relationships), and changes in philosophies of life (i.e., changed in life's priorities, a new appreciation for life, newfound meaning, or changed or strengthened spiritual beliefs).

Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) three main domains of growth match up well with the findings of this study. The many similarities between the growth experiences of these women (who have overcome significant, multiple, and ongoing hardships, which for most began in their early childhoods) and the growth experiences identified in previous research on posttraumatic growth are evident. These similarities in the growth experience, speak to the convergent validity of the findings. There are however, slight differences in regards to the particular aspects of the various domains that the women in this study gave value to. First, in regards to the domain of *changes in relationships*, the women identified their growth as being most strongly experienced through the development of greater compassion and empathy for others. Although some of the

women spoke of experiencing such interrelationship phenomena as increased self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness with important others, and/or greater effort in and appreciation of the relationships in their lives, these areas presented as less dominant relationship themes.

Second, in regards to the domain of *changes in perceptions of self*, this study's findings echoed Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) findings of growth as possessing a sense of increased strength, and confidence. However, for these women, growth in this area also included significant changes in the development of a positive new self-identity as a whole. Particularly, seeing self as being a better human being than before, and experiencing greater awareness of self and others (which was identified as an important aspect of being a better person). This was a significant area of growth for all nine of the women, which does not seem to be significantly captured in previous research.

Third, in regards to changes in *philosophies of life*, again the findings echoed Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1995) findings of developing newfound goals and changed life priorities, as well as a greater appreciation for life and an alignment with gratitude. However, Tedeschi and Calhoun's work highlighted changed or strengthened spiritual beliefs as being an area of growth within this domain. Only one of the women in this study, Lady, identified changes in her spirituality as part of her growth experience. For instance, Lady spoke of how the death of her daughter sent her on a spiritual journey, which ultimately redefined her spiritual beliefs. Several of the women, including Lady, Pippa, Marly, and Jessie spoke more about how they utilized their faith and spiritual beliefs to help them develop growth in their lives. For these women, spirituality was a significant component within their experiences of growth, however, a changed or strengthened spirituality presented itself as a less dominant growth theme across all cases. The analysis identified spirituality for these women as being more of a growth-facilitating agent

versus an area of growth itself. It is important to note however, that Lady's identified redefinition of her spirituality was not lost in the analysis, as it aligned well with, and was captured within the other identified themes in this study. In other words, Lady's descriptions of her redefined spirituality included: developing greater compassion, being a better self, feeling more empowered, moving in preferred directions, and aligning with gratitude.

In their model on posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) include several processes that they have identified as being important in the development of growth. Specifically, their model identifies several pre-existing factors (i.e., the individuals beliefs, narrative, and emotional distress management skills), as well as several process factors including rumination (or cognitive processing), and self-disclosure and social support, which are influenced by proximal (i.e., role models for schemas) and distal (i.e., societal themes) sociocultural influences. Again, there are similarities between the process components identified by Tedeshi and Calhoun and those identified in the findings of this study. I will engage in a fuller discussion on each growth facilitating process as identified by the women in this study (as well as the growth outcomes) later in the discussion.

### **Appreciating the Holistic Nature of The Growth Experience**

It is important to highlight both the complexity and interconnectedness of the various themes. Many of the themes complement and support one another, as well as interact in complex ways. In total, this study identified 10 master themes (5 process and 5 outcome), as well as a total of 30 subthemes within the master themes. The findings highlight the idiographic details of the lived human experience of growth following multiple traumas. It is important to note that the growth facilitating processes not only facilitate the various growth outcomes, but that each of the master themes (both process and outcome) influence one another in bidirectional ways. For

instance, possessing a belief in the potential for growth out of hardship is interrelated with aligning with hope or one's faith, as well as with visualizing a better future. These subsequently may support the conscious purposeful process of trying to make sense of the hardships, and taking a stance against them by aligning with agency and abilities. In turn, such a conscious process may be strengthened by supportive others, or lead to a desire to strive to attain new knowledge and skills, all of which may reinforce the belief in the potential for growth, or any of the other growth facilitating processes. Similarly, there is great interconnectedness between one growth theme and another. For instance, being a better self is highly interconnected with finding empowerment, being more compassionate, aligning with gratitude, and moving in new directions. In many ways each growth theme is supporting the others, and also contributing to and continually fuelling the various growth facilitating processes.

In short, although the processes and outcomes are identified as distinct themes within this study, they are all not only highly interconnected, but also highly interconnected in specific idiosyncratic ways within each woman's lived experience. I encourage the reader to appreciate the holistic, interwoven, and in many ways inseparable nature of the various themes. And I hope that in doing so, the reader emerges with a profound essence of the meaning of growth for these women who have overcome significant multiple hardships in their lives.

### **Transcending the Negative Effects of Multiple Traumas**

Prior to moving on to a detailed discussion of the various growth themes, it is important to deliberate on the identified negative effects of these women's experiences. Posttraumatic growth has been identified as positive change resulting from the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). All of the women in this study spoke of the struggle they experienced with the varied and significant hardships in their lives, and how their

struggle led them to newfound growth. The women's multiple trauma experiences can be seen as meeting Briere and Spinazzola's (2005) criteria for complex trauma, in that all of the women experienced traumas that had an early onset, included repeated interpersonal victimization, with prolonged exposure. All of the women in this study experienced significant childhood abuses consisting of both a variety of interpersonal and attachment-based traumas. The literature has identified many known negative impacts of such trauma (e.g., Briere & Spinazzola, 2005; Rimmo et al., 2005; Tolin and Foa, 2006), and a recent large-scale study by Kisiel et al. (2014) verified the magnitude of the negative effects of exposure to both interpersonal and attachment-based traumas by primary caregivers. Specifically, Kisiel et al. identified this combination of exposure to be the most detrimental compared to other trauma experiences and as contributing to significant affective, psychological, attentional, behavioral, self-regulatory, and dysregulation problems, in addition to posttraumatic stress symptoms.

In their narratives, all of the women spoke of their struggle with various negative impacts. These impacts included: (a) struggle with posttraumatic stress symptoms such as experiencing dissociation, derealisation, nightmares, and hypervigilance, (b) experiencing a lack of childhood memories and childhood roles, (c) losing a sense of self, (d) loss of self-worth/negative sense of self, (e) adopting a 'self-pity' or 'victim stance', (f) engaging in self-harm behaviours, (g) becoming silenced/keeping secrets, (h) experiencing confusion and poor concentration, (i) struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide, (j) anxiety, (k) difficulties in relationships and diminished trust, (l) feelings of self-blame and guilt, (m) explosive anger at self and others, (n) emotional numbing, (o) hypersensitivity to criticism, (p) fear of abandonment, (q) self-doubt/lack of confidence, (r) feeling shattered or broken, and (s) using substances to cope. Although not all of the women shared all of the above negative impacts, they

all identified experiencing an average of six of them. Experiencing a loss of self, and a loss of self-worth (or possessing a negative sense of self) were two common impacts that all nine of the women identified. In their stories there was a strong sense of losing oneself, of not having a clear sense of identity, and possessing poor self-esteem which comprised of negative beliefs of worth and/or negative self-judgement (shame). The women's posttraumatic growth of developing a compassionate self, seeing self as a better person (positively changed self-identity), developing an empowered self (possessing strength, overcoming abilities, finding voice), moving in preferred directions (setting and accomplishing goals, new life priorities), and aligning with gratitude, highlights the many ways in which these women have transcended the negative impacts of trauma.

### **Negative Effects and Positive Growth Coexist**

Although the women have identified significant areas of growth in their lives, many of them shared how at times the negative effects of trauma resurfaced and tried to take a hold of them. Even though the women's new self-identity consisted of being a better person, having greater self-confidence, and compassion, all of the women spoke of how self-doubt, negative beliefs of worth, or negative self-judgement often resurfaced within their internal dialogues. They described how, as part of their growth experience, they consciously and actively challenged this internal discourse. Some of the women shared that at times they still find themselves under depression's influence, or experience nightmares, or find themselves hypersensitive to criticism, or struggle in managing strong emotions, etc. Even though, according to the women, such difficulties are not consistently present and for all of the women these difficulties have significantly diminished along their growth journeys; they are not completely absent. For all of

the women, some of the negative influences continue to coexist along with their experiences of growth.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) have asserted that individuals who experience posttraumatic growth have not escaped the serious negative impacts of the trauma, and that often, personal distress and growth coexist. Several studies on posttraumatic growth have found evidence for the co-existence of both positive and negative effects of trauma. For instance, child sexual abuse survivors have been found to experience both high levels of posttraumatic stress disorder symptomology, along with posttraumatic growth levels that were comparable to other trauma survivors (Lev-Wiesel, Amir, & Besser, 2005; Shakespeare-Finch & de Dassel, 2009). Shakespeare-Finch and Armstrong (2010) found that trauma survivors of sexual abuse, motor vehicle accidents, and bereavement, all experienced both posttraumatic stress symptoms and posttraumatic growth; with the bereaved group experiencing the highest levels of posttraumatic growth, and the sexual assault survivors experiencing the highest levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms while still reporting moderate levels of growth. The presence of both posttraumatic stress and growth has been found in survivors of interpersonal violence (Kunst, Winkel, & Bogaerts, 2010), as well as for a wide variety of traumatic experiences (i.e., Barton, Boals, & Knowles, 2013; Boals & Schuettler, 2011; Dekel, Mandl, & Solomon, 2011; Morris, Shakespeare-Finch, Rieck, & Newbery, 2005). The accounts of the women in this study concur with the findings of others and highlight the coexistence of both growth and some of the negative effects of trauma.

### **Is There A Need to Redefine Growth within Complex Trauma Experiences?**

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) have defined posttraumatic growth as involving movement beyond pre-trauma levels of adaptation. The large majority of the women in this study have



experienced early childhood traumas and, as such, most of them had difficulty reflecting on their “pre-trauma levels of adaptation”. Because most of their trauma experiences were continuous and ongoing from a young age the women in this study had less of a comparative sense around pre and post trauma levels of adaptation. For these women, it was more accurate to ask them to reflect on their increased levels of adaptation and growth from *during the trauma*, to now, or *post trauma*. When working with complex trauma, posttraumatic growth may be better defined as a positive growth movement beyond the trauma experiences themselves, versus a pre and post trauma conceptualization, as it could be argued that these women (and others who have experienced significant childhood traumas such as childhood sexual molestation) are less likely to have an established assumptive world preceding their trauma experience.

Although there are still a limited number of studies specifically exploring the phenomena of posttraumatic growth following complex traumas such as childhood sexual abuse, there are two studies to date that show childhood sexual abuse survivors experience posttraumatic growth. Lev-Wiessel et al. (2005) found posttraumatic growth to be present in female child sexual abuse survivors and to be higher among survivors who were sexually abused by a family member versus a stranger. Shakespeare-Finch and de Dassel (2009) found that women who were children (under the age of 12) at the time of their sexual trauma possessed similar levels of posttraumatic growth, as those who were adolescents at the time of the trauma. The authors state that the “results suggest that these participants, who are still living with significant levels of distress and whose assumptive world was being established alongside their traumatic experience, have been able to experience PTG along the same dimensions as others whose cognitions were more developed at the time of the abuse.” (p. 636).

Theories of growth following trauma share the position that trauma shatters and challenges the assumptive worlds of the individual and leads individuals on a cognitive processing or figuring out journey in an attempt to make sense of the traumatic experience. Shakespeare-Finch and de Dassel (2009) proposed that it appears that posttraumatic growth can occur via some other mechanism than the shattering of assumptions, especially in cases where individuals have not yet established assumptive worlds prior to their trauma experiences. In support of this theoretical proposition, Carboon, Anderson, Pollard, Szer, and Seymour (2005) found that a sample of cancer survivors experienced posttraumatic growth even though their assumptive worlds remain stable and unchanged. The authors suggested that their finding thereby challenged Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) hypothesis that schema revision is a necessary precursor to posttraumatic growth and their findings suggested that other mechanisms, such as possessing particular beliefs, might provide sufficient impetus for the development of posttraumatic growth. Lev-Wiesel et al., (2005) suggested that the experience of dissociation within the posttraumatic stress response might in fact facilitate the development of growth. They noted that:

Constant escape and dissociation of this kind allows the child [or individual] to function in other areas of life...possibly these mechanisms enable the survivor to have a higher level of PTG, i.e., to perceive him/herself fortunate to have survived the traumatic experience expressed in the concept of PTG (pp. 15).

The research suggests that posttraumatic growth can develop following complex traumas, even when assumptive worlds are not yet developed, as well as in cases where individual's assumptive worlds remain unchanged after the development of growth. This study, too, challenges existing trauma theories and conceptualizations that define growth as a pre-trauma to

post-trauma outcome and highlights the shattering of assumptive worlds as precursors to growth. As research on posttraumatic growth in complex trauma is in its infancy the above discussion questions the potential need to redefine growth within this particular trauma domain.

### **Recovery Versus Growth**

A question that arises is how the experience of posttraumatic growth following complex trauma (childhood, ongoing, interpersonal) differs from complex trauma recovery in general? I found myself contemplating this question as I engaged in this research, both during the interviews and during the analysis. It would appear that the two are both distinct and yet interrelated concepts. First, what is recovery? Lawson and Quinn (2013) recapitulate the many, often persistent, difficulties related to complex traumas including difficulties in: self-regulation, psychological symptoms, relationships, alteration in attention and consciousness, self-injury, identity, and cognitive distortions. The authors outline several evidence-based models for the treatment of complex traumas. A review of these models reveals several common recovery components that the various models appear to share. Specifically, working towards a reduction in negative symptoms through cognitive processing and skill development and rebuilding of relationships and healthy attachment. According to the participants in Anderson and Hiersteiner's (2008) qualitative research examining the recovery stories of adult sexual abuse survivors, recovery includes "achieving a "normal" life where sexual abuse remains a part of who they are but no longer defines them" (p. 417) and involves a process of disclosing the abuse, making meaning of one's trauma, and developing supportive relationships. According to Anderson and Hiersteiner, "participants' stories represent their recovery processes over time" (p. 417). Chouliara, Karatzias, and Gullone (2014) defined recovery as a "wide concept that relates to symptom remission...and the survivors' personal process and experience over time in order to

reach a meaningful sense of life post abuse” (p. 69). Based on the literature, recovery can be best described as the process that minimizes negative trauma symptoms, and helps reestablish the individual within what they would identify as attaining normalcy or health, in self, and in relation to others.

So how is recovery different from growth following complex trauma? According to McElheran et. al. (2012), posttraumatic growth is an outcome of recovery processes from complex traumas such as sexual abuse. The authors further advocate for clinical practices that consider posttraumatic growth as outcomes. The findings of this study highlight five master themes of growth-facilitating processes, along with five master themes of growth outcome experiences. A conceptual alignment can be made between these findings, and the distinction between recovery and growth. Specifically, the growth facilitating processes (of possessing a belief in growth potential, engaging in a conscious and purposeful growth process, aligning with hope and spirituality, engaging with positive role models and supportive others, and seeking ongoing knowledge and skill development) can be conceptualized as recovery processes, which helped the women in this study to reduce the negative impacts of their traumas and rebuild healthy relationships and attachment with others. The growth outcomes, on the other hand, (of developing greater compassion for others, seeing self as a better person, possessing an increased sense of empowerment, actively moving forward in new preferred life directions, and aligning with gratitude) are the distinct positive changes and transformations that occur for the individual above and beyond the recovery process. In addition, it is important to note, as Shakespeare-Finch and de Dassel (2009) indicated, that posttraumatic growth is possible in complex traumas through other mechanisms (other than shattered assumptions) and the identified growth facilitating processes from these findings shed light on some of these other mechanisms for

growth development. As already discussed, although there is a distinction between these two domains of recovery (also known as growth facilitating processes), and growth outcomes (also known as the lived experience of growth), both domains and their various sub-themes are highly interrelated.

### **An Ongoing Growth Experience**

The women interviewed in this study identified their growth as a continuous and ongoing process. For instance, both Penny and Stargazer referred to each injury, or each negative experience as being a *stepping-stone* to greater growth in their lives. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006), posited that further growth may not continue with multiple trauma experiences due to the development of “psychological preparedness”. They noted that Janoff-Bulman initially conceptualized psychological preparedness as being a part of posttraumatic growth and as resulting from the process of transforming one’s schemas or assumptive world beliefs post trauma. This ultimately results in the ability to resist subsequent traumas. Calhoun and Tedeschi reasoned that such psychological preparedness, or resistance to subsequent traumas, would not set in motion the extensive cognitive processing involved and needed in the development of further posttraumatic growth. Posttraumatic growth research has found support for the notion of the development of psychological preparedness. For example, past trauma research has found that posttraumatic stress symptoms increase an individual’s risk of future sexual and intimate partner revictimization (i.e., Kuijpers, van der Knaap, & Winkel, 2012; Messman-Moore, Brown, & Koelsch, 2005; Riesser, Hetzel-Riggin, Thomsen, & McCanne, 2006), however, Kunst et al. (2010) found that posttraumatic growth moderates this association between violent revictimization and persisting posttraumatic stress symptoms in victims of interpersonal violence, offering support for development of psychological preparedness.

The present study challenges the notion that psychological preparedness prevents further growth. In the analysis of the interview data, it was clear that the women's growth was experienced by most as an ongoing growth, where each trauma led to further growth, versus a cessation of growth due to psychological preparedness. This experience of an incremental growth process may be explained by considering the multitude of other factors that can influence the growth process, such as the women's individual coping capacities, the influence of ongoing trauma in their lives (versus a single trauma event), and by broader biopsychosocial evolutionary perspectives on the role of the trauma stress response in the emergence of growth.

For example, it could be postulated, based on Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006) curvilinear conceptualization of the relationship between posttraumatic growth and various coping variables, that the women in this study most likely possessed moderate coping skills (versus high or low levels of coping). The possession of moderate coping abilities may prevent full psychological preparedness from developing, and help explain the experience of ongoing incremental growth for these women. In other words, moderate coping skills may support the development of "incremental psychological preparedness" within the women, while still leaving the women in sufficient distress to support the need for ongoing cognitive processing, and thus explain their experience of ongoing growth. It is also highly likely, due to these women's continued experience of traumas in their lives, that there was a constant pull between the negative effects of trauma and growth. Again, complete psychological preparedness, or their ability to wholly transform schemas, may not have fully occurred after each trauma event; thus potentially opening the door to their ongoing incremental growth experiences.

Such explanations align well with, and highlight what we know about the coexistence of both distress and growth. There are competing theoretical explanations for the association

between posttraumatic stress symptoms, and posttraumatic growth in the literature. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004) have hypothesized this relationship as being positive, with their theory stating that high levels of distress are a necessary prerequisite for the development of posttraumatic growth. Others, such as Johnson et al. (2007) have conceptualized the relationship as being negative, considering posttraumatic growth to be an adaptive outcome of successfully coping with trauma and its negative psychological consequences. Theorists Joseph and Linley (2005) conceptualize the relationship as being nonexistent, by viewing posttraumatic stress symptoms and posttraumatic growth as being two separate dimensions within their organismic valuing theory. And others have conceptualized the relationship between posttraumatic stress symptomatology as being a curvilinear one. It is important to note that recent research has found noteworthy evidence for the curvilinear relationship, with highest levels of posttraumatic growth experienced by individuals suffering from moderate posttraumatic distress (i.e., Butler et. al., 2005; Kleim, & Ehlers, 2009; Kunst, 2010; Levine, Laufer, Hamama-Raz, Stein, & Solomon, 2008; Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009).

Although this study did not provide sufficient information on the women's coping skills to confidently know whether they possessed high, low, or moderate levels of coping, this study did provide sufficient evidence for the co-existence of both growth and distress in these women's lives. I would argue that the conceptualization of a curvilinear relationship should be highly considered as a probable explanation for these women's lived experience of ongoing growth, specifically that the women may have experienced moderate levels of posttrauma distress, along with moderate coping skills, both of which perpetuated their growth.

### **Growth as a Multidimensional Process**

The women in this study also experienced their growth as being multidimensional, or spanning across several domains and life areas (i.e., caring more for others, increased sense of strength, new priorities and goal attainment, new assertiveness skills, increased gratitude). Penny's description of growth as being like an asparagus fern highlights this experience. This multidimensionality of the growth experience is supported within the literature. From its infancy, Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996, 2004) research on posttraumatic growth has always identified growth as spanning many different life areas and experiences. The multidimensional nature of posttraumatic growth has been supported by numerous studies. Several studies have found clearly delineated support for the factor structure of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, substantiating the multidimensionality of posttraumatic growth (Lee, Luxton, Reger, & Gahn, 2010; Morris et. al., 2005; Taku, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2008). Recently, Shakespeare-Finch, Martinek, Tedeschi, and Calhoun (2013) also found qualitative evidence supporting the content validity and multidimensionality of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory using thematic analysis of interviews of 14 trauma survivors. Their findings supported the five domains of growth captured by the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory of: an increased appreciation of life and a changed sense of priorities; closer, more meaningful and more intimate relationships with others; a general sense of increased personal strength; identification of new possibilities for one's life; and spiritual growth.

### **A Closer Look at the Five Growth Facilitating Processes and Agents**

As mentioned, the five growth facilitating processes and agents identified in this study can be conceptualized as recovery processes. The findings revealed that the five growth facilitating or recovery processes played an important role in these women's lives by being critical factors that moderated negative trauma symptoms, supported the reestablishment of



health within self and in relation to others, and subsequently created fertile ground for the flourishing of posttraumatic growth. These five growth facilitating processes included: possessing a belief in growth potential, engaging in a conscious and purposeful process of positive growth development and change, aligning with hope and spirituality, engaging with positive role models and supportive others, and seeking ongoing knowledge and skill development.

**Belief in growth potential following hardship.** The women possessed strong beliefs in the potential for growth following hardships. For many, this appeared to be a fundamental intrinsic belief within themselves. In analyzing the interviews, it became apparent that this belief helped to create a growth promoting cycle for these women by creating a positive bias, which helped the women pay particular attention to positive outcomes or evidence in support of this belief. This ultimately supported and reinforced this belief. When asked how this belief came to be, many of the women expressed that it came out of a ‘need to survive’, out of a need to ‘hang on to something’. This belief in growth for several of the women appeared to be highly related to their aligning with hope for a better future.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) have identified personality characteristics and individual coping styles as contributing to growth experiences. Within the posttraumatic growth literature, this belief in the growth potential is highly related to the coping strategy of positive reappraisal coping, and to the personality characteristic of optimism. Prati and Pietrantonio’s (2009) meta-analysis review of factors contributing to posttraumatic growth identified both optimism and positive reappraisal coping as being positively associated with posttraumatic growth. The authors identified dispositional optimism as “the generalized expectancy for positive outcomes” (p. 365). I would propose that the women’s belief in growth

potential clearly aligns with this definition of optimism. I have identified this belief as being a growth facilitating process, and Prati and Pietrantonì's review of the literature supports this position. Specifically, they summarized that optimistic individuals are more likely to experience growth because they are more inclined to derive a sense of benefit from the trauma, utilize more flexible and adaptive coping styles, and are more likely to perceive themselves as having capabilities to manage the demands of the traumatic event.

According to Prati and Pietrantonì's (2009) findings, positive reappraisal is also highly related to posttraumatic growth, and consists of the individual's ability to reappraise the trauma in a more positive light. With reappraisal coping, the individual is able to recognize or view the crisis in a constructive or functional way. Carboon et al. (2005) found that the belief that things usually work out well, regardless of the circumstances, can provide a strong sense of predictability in uncontrollable circumstances, and they highlighted that if a negative event can be reappraised as ultimately positive, for instance through perceptions of growth or gain, then justice beliefs can be maintained with no negative connotation for self-worth.

The women in this study reappraised their traumas as opportunities to grow, and as opportunities to prove strengths. Prati and Pietrantonì (2009) noted that both optimism and reappraisal coping, which consists of positive thinking that the trauma has produced positive changes, can ultimately result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. I believe that for the women in this study optimism and reappraisal of the trauma were highly cyclically interrelated. Being optimistic (or having strong belief in growth potential or a generalized expectancy for positive outcomes), contributes to greater positive reappraisal of the trauma event, which subsequently reinforces the belief in growth potential. Others have identified this belief in growth potential as an inner drive towards growth (Woodward & Joseph, 2003) and as holding a positive perspective

of the events (Schuettler & Boals, 2011). Their findings support these as being positive change processes in the facilitation of posttraumatic growth.

**Growth as a conscious purposeful process.** There were many subthemes within this master theme including: a conscious knowing that the trauma was not okay; cognitive processing, making sense, and raising awareness; seeing self as a cycle breaking agent, and consciously tapping into agency and ability. This master theme and the various subthemes are congruent with various growth facilitating processes within the literature including event centrality, problem-focused coping, and the cognitive processing of the traumatic events. Agency or the capacity to exercise control over one's life, as defined within social cognitive theory, further informs how the women engaged in a conscious purposeful growth facilitating process.

The women in this study possessed a conscious knowing that the injustices and traumas they experienced were not okay with them. In other words, several of the women took an active stance against their experience identifying them as not being who I am or who I want to be in the world. Within the posttraumatic growth literature this position is related to event centrality, which leads to the use of more problem-focused coping in my opinion. Event centrality is the extent to which an event has been incorporated into an individual's identity and includes: feeling that the event has become part of one's identity, the way individuals understand themselves and the world, and has become a central part of their story (Bernsten & Rubin, 2006). Research in event centrality has initially found it to be a strong predictor of negative posttraumatic stress symptoms (Bernsten & Rubin, 2007; Schuettler & Boals, 2011). Recent research has identified that event centrality positively predicts both posttraumatic stress symptoms, as well as posttraumatic growth (Boals & Schuettler, 2011; Barton, Boals, & Knowles, 2013; Schuettler & Boals, 2011). Boals and Schuettler (2011) identified this as "a double edged sword, allowing for

both debilitation and growth” (p. 820). Barton, Boals, and Knowles (2013) explored the interaction between event centrality and negative posttraumatic cognitions (negative thoughts and beliefs that occur after the trauma event) on posttraumatic growth. Their findings reveal that both event centrality and posttraumatic cognitions uniquely predicted posttraumatic growth, and their findings suggest that cognitive appraisals play an important role in the potential for posttraumatic growth.

Barton et al. (2013) findings can be applied to lend understanding to the findings of this study. Although the women in this study possessed strong autobiographical narratives of continuous trauma experiences (in other words possessed strong event centrality, which put them both at risk of negative stress symptoms, as well as increased their potential for growth), their cognitive beliefs and appraisal of the traumas not being okay with them, would have mediated the potential negative effects and increased their potentials for growth.

The adoption of such a position (that the trauma is not okay) is also highly interrelated and reciprocally affects the other subtheme of seeing self as a cycle breaking agent, both of which lead the women to consciously and purposeful tap into their agency and abilities to make positive change and promote growth. Within the literature, these subthemes are associated with what others have identified as tapping into problem-focused coping. The utilization of problem-focused coping has been found to be a growth-facilitating vehicle of change (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Schuettler & Boals, 2011; Wild & Paivio, 2003), and has also been found to significantly predict posttraumatic growth longitudinally over a 6-month period (Scrignaro, Barni, & Magrin, 2011). Problem-focused coping has been defined as: analysing the event logically, re-evaluating it more positively, seeking supports, and taking actions to solve the problem or situation (Schaefer & Moos, 1992). Problem focused coping has been found to be related to dispositional

optimism, where individuals who were more optimistic following an adverse event, were more like to use problem-focused strategies, which in turn facilitated posttraumatic growth (Buyukasik-Colak, Gundogdu-Akturk, & Bozo, 2012).

Woodward and Joseph's (2003) qualitative study of positive change processes in individuals who have experienced childhood abuse identified problem-focused coping as an *awakening of responsibility*, where the participants identified a turning point where they made a choice to take responsibility and control for their own lives. Similarly, the women in this study spoke of making a decision to move away from the negative impacts of the trauma and to work towards actively contributing to positive changes in their lives such as stopping self-pity, accessing supports and resources, removing negative coping strategies such as substance use and self-harm, and facing fear head on.

Bandura (2001) identifies the capacity to exercise control over the quality and nature of one's life as an essential feature of humanness. Within social cognitive theory he recognizes three modes of agency: direct personal agency, proxy agency (which utilizes others who have access to resources or power to act on one's request), and collective agency (which is exercised through interdependent and socially coordinated effort). The women in this study exercised personal agency to take a stance against trauma and negative impacts. Bandura highlighted that personal agency is characterised by a number of features including: (a) intentionality – which is grounded in self motivators that effect the likelihood of action in the future, (b) forethought - which provides direction, coherence, and meaning to one's life, and involves setting goals, anticipating likely consequences of future actions, and selecting courses of actions likely to produce desired outcomes, (c) self-reactiveness – the deliberate ability to influence and give shape to appropriate actions, and (d) self-reflectiveness – the metacognitive ability to reflect on

oneself, and on one's thoughts and actions. The personal agency of these women in this study is evident. According to social cognitive theory, efficacy beliefs, or the beliefs in one's capacity to exercise some measure of control over environmental events and one's functioning, are the core foundation of human agency (Bandura, 2001), and perceived coping self-efficacy has been found to be an important mediator of posttraumatic recovery (Benight & Bandura, 2004). The women's efficacy beliefs are unmistakable as they see themselves as cycle breaking agents.

The findings of this study support that cognitive processing was highly evident within these women, a process that contributed to their growth experiences. Theories of growth following trauma include cognitive processing of the traumatic event as a core feature, and factor in the development of posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Christopher, 2004; Joseph and Linley, 2008). The women spoke of spending a lot of time trying to process and make sense of their difficult experiences, trying to understand their lived events, and engaging in a search for meaning. Cognitive processing has been verified to be an important factor in the development of posttraumatic growth (Currier, Lisman, Harris, Tait, & Erbes, 2013; Nightingale, Sher, & Hansen, 2010; Salsman, Segerstrom, Brechting, Carlson, & Andrykowski, 2009; Scignaro et al., 2011; Stockton, Hunt, & Joseph, 2011). Recent research has shown that different forms of cognitive processing lead to different outcomes. Stockton et al. (2011) found deliberate rumination and reflection (purposeful active processing, search for meaning, and problem solving) was significantly associated with posttraumatic growth; whereas intrusive re-experiencing and ruminative brooding (characterised by passive focus on the negative emotions or the experiences, as well as a repetitive comparison of one's trauma to some unachievable standard, and dwelling on obstacles to overcoming problems) were not. Deliberate processing was found to mediate the relationship between religious coping and posttraumatic growth

(Bosson, Kelley, & Jones, 2012). Longitudinally across a three-month period, cognitive intrusions have been found to predict posttraumatic stress symptoms whereas cognitive rehearsals (more deliberate effortful processing) have been found to predict posttraumatic growth (Salsman et al., 2009). The women in this study were active cycle-breaking and health-making agents within their own lives, who utilized active coping and problem solving skills, and who engaged in conscious deliberate processing of their trauma and lived experiences; all of which contributed to and opened the door for growth within their lives.

**Hope and spirituality.** For the women in this study, this master theme included subthemes of aligning with hope and the visualizing of a better future, as well as tapping into faith and spiritual beliefs. The maintenance of hope is highly related to optimism, or the general expectancy for positive outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1985), and the visualizing of a better future is also highly related to both hope and optimism, as well as a to personal agency, as it captures both intentionality (motivation to move towards a preferred direction in life) as well as forethought (a sense of direction and goal). As such, this subtheme is highly interrelated to some of the other process factors already identified and discussed.

Snyder (1995) defined hope as “the process of thinking about one’s goals, along with the motivation to move towards (agency), and the way (pathways) to achieve those goals” (p. 355). Hope has been found to be positively related to reported posttraumatic growth among traumatized Somali refugees (Kroo & Nagy, 2011), and is highly imbedded within studies assessing the impact of religiosity and religious coping on posttraumatic growth. Gall, Bisque, Damasceno-Scott, and Vardy (2007) found that victims of abuse who identified a relationship with a benevolent God or higher power, experienced a greater sense of personal growth, abuse resolution, improved mood, as well as higher self acceptance and hope. Religious coping (active

coping through the participation in religious or spiritual activities, such as prayer, seeking God's guidance, seeking support through one's clergy or congregation), versus just intrinsic religiousness (possessing religious beliefs without actively engaging in religious acts, rituals or communities), has been found to be strongly correlated to positive life changes and growth following trauma (Bosson et al., 2012; Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger, & Long, 2004; Prati & Pietrantonio, 2009). Kroo and Nagy (2011) found both positive religious coping (i.e., looking for a stronger connection with God, asking for forgiveness) and negative religious coping (i.e., wondering what I did for God to punish me) to be related to posttraumatic growth, and Cadell, Regehr, and Hemsworth (2003) identified that even general spirituality as measured by spiritual activities and beliefs, had a positive relationship with growth post trauma. A recent qualitative study explored Christian women's lived experience of religious and spiritual growth following trauma (de Castella & Simmonds, 2013). The findings revealed that the participants' religion provided a helpful framework in their search to find meaning from their suffering, which led them on a spiritual and religious process (of seeking connection, facing challenges to growth, finding meaning in suffering), strengthened their spiritual and religious beliefs (through spiritual experiences, greater religious and spiritual understanding, a personal relationship with God), and resulted in personal and spiritual growth and healing (increase sense of strengths and virtues, purpose in life and changed priorities, relationships with others).

Several of the women identified turning to their faith and spirituality as a way of coping and getting through their difficult experiences, and they identified this spiritual process as being a helpful and important part of their journey in reducing negative trauma effects, aligning with hope and optimism, and creating positive changes and openings in their life for new trajectories.



For these women, aligning with hope and spirituality was a positive recovery and growth-promoting process, which has also been found to hold true in the experiences of others.

**Positive Role models and supportive others.** Friendships, supportive others, and positive role models were identified by all of the women as being critical recovery-promoting, and growth-facilitating influences within their lives. These intimate relationships make up what Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) identified as proximal social influences within an individual's life. Within their model of posttraumatic growth, Calhoun and Tedeschi incorporated social supports and self-disclosure as being critical coping components, which accelerate and provide venues for cognitive processing, and facilitate the process of posttraumatic growth. Within the resiliency literature, family, friends, and supportive others have reliably been found to be vital protective factors against the negative impact of complex trauma experiences (Afifi & MacMillan, 2011; Folger & Wright, 2013; Marriott, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Harrop, 2014; Powers, Ressler, & Bradley, 2009). Research exploring the potential transformative powers of these influences has also found positive social supports to promote and sustain the development of posttraumatic growth following trauma (Cadell et al., 2003; Kroo & Nagy, 2011; Prati, & Pietrantonio, 2009; Weiss, 2004), especially informal supports and friendships (Borja, Callahan, & Long, 2006; Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2003).

Several of the women identified the presence of role models in their lives (other women who radiated strength, caring, and positive energy) as being helpful to their recovery. The women spoke of admiring their role models, of wanting to be like them, and of them helping to instill hope for recovery and positive change. Some of the women perceived that their role model may too have overcome hardship in her life, and appeared to be an example of possible positive growth trajectories. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) emphasized the important role of mutual

supports or others who too have experienced similar difficulties in helping trauma survivors consider and incorporate new perspectives or schemas. The Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun and Cann (2006) study exploring posttraumatic growth in women with intimate partner violence histories found that contact with a role model of posttraumatic growth as well as having left the abusive relationship were both positively related to growth. However, there still appears to be limited current research on the impact of role models on the development of posttraumatic growth and how role models may differ from other positive social supports.

Within social cognitive theory, Bandura (2001) would identify the women's use of social supports as an example of their proxy agency, in that they actively seek to improve their well being by tapping into the supportive resources and expertise of others (Bandura, 2001). McElheran et al. (2012) presented a conceptual model of posttraumatic growth among children and adolescents exposed to complex sexual abuse. Their model incorporates social, psychological, and cognitive factors that promote recovery and growth as well as considers attachment style, gender, and time since trauma as key considerations to understanding growth within this population. The authors note that "it can be reasonably assumed that securely attached children would be better able to expect and access appropriate social support post-trauma, which research has consistently shown to be an important factor of PTG" (p. 76). Based on the interview data, many of the women in this study would identify with ambivalent or avoidant attachments with their primary caregivers. It is plausible that the social supports and role models within these women's lives helped them learn and develop secure attachments with significant others, facilitating the development of posttraumatic growth; however, again further research would be needed to explore this theorization.

**Knowledge and skill development.** Attaining knowledge on the impacts of trauma and developing new skills to overcome trauma symptoms was an important growth facilitating aspect of the women's journey. All of the women accessed some form of professional assistance as part of their recovery, and several of them also utilized self-help resources, as well as a wide variety of holistic and spiritual healing practices. Joseph and Linley (2006) argued that the alleviation of distress does not automatically generalize to the facilitation of growth, however, the urge and willingness to discuss trauma was found to be a predictor of posttraumatic growth (Currier et al., 2013).

Eight of the nine women in this study identified that the learning of skills and practices helped them connect to a sense of safety, helped them step away from pain, and reduced trauma symptoms. They expressed this as a critical initial step that opened the door to growth. Lee, James and Gilbert (2011) highlighted the main functioning of the brain and affective regulation systems involved during trauma responses. They noted that high levels of stress hormones due to trauma experiences knock out some of the functions of the frontal cortex. The frontal cortex is responsible for higher order thinking (executive functions such as our ability to think, anticipate, plan, calculate consequences, and have empathy for others) and is the brain's conductor of our affective regulation systems, including the threat/protection system, the achieving/activating system, and the contentment/soothing system. The threat/protection system detects and deals with threats, and initiates fast acting emotions (i.e., anger, anxiety, or disgust) and behaviours (i.e., fight, flight, submission, freeze, or dissociate) to help keep us safe during traumas. This system is highly associated with our primitive brain regulated by the thalamus (the brain's gatekeeper of information), the amygdala (the brain's alarm system), and the hippocampus (the brain's event memory storer/administrator). The achieving/activating system promotes positive

emotions that motivate and guide us to seek out things that we need to survive and flourish as human beings, while the contentment/soothing system releases endorphins associated with creating a sense of peaceful well-being, safety, and connection to others. Trauma therapies are critical recovery and growth facilitating treatments because they help individuals learn skills to reduce the responses of the threat/protection system (which present as posttraumatic symptoms in the absence of current threat), increase the activation of the other two positive emotion systems (achieving/activating system, and the contentment/soothing system), and also help individuals tap into the full potential of a working frontal cortex, which enables individuals to become more mindful, aware, compassionate, and take a stance against negative ways of thinking or dwelling on things (Lee et. al., 2011). Herman (1992) identified three important phases of trauma recovery work that support both recovery and potential for growth: safety and stabilization, trauma memory processing, and reconnection. In addition, as with the utilization of supportive others, therapy and counselling is an avenue that enables and promotes cognitive processing (Lawson and Quinn, 2013), which is an important component to posttraumatic growth development.

Several of the women in this study engaged in a variety of holistic, mindfulness, meditation, and/or spiritual healing practices. Practices such as meditation and mindfulness have been found to be helpful in trauma recovery and can confidently be identified as being growth-promoting practices (Chopko & Schwartz, 2009; Lee & Zaharlick, 2011). For example, compassion meditation has been found to decrease personal distress, increase activation in regions of the brain associated with goal directed behaviour, and increase the connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and the insula (where representations of the body occur) and the nucleus accumbens (where motivation and reward are processed; Davidson & Begley, 2012).

**Summary.** The above five growth facilitating processes work together to promote recovery and the development of growth. I would argue from the findings that these were the processes that helped the women connect to, and effectively utilize their positive emotion systems (achieving/activating and contentment/soothing), and promoted an effective reconnection to emotional regulating and higher order functions of the frontal cortex. These together allowed the women to experience growth as the development of: a compassionate self, a better self, an empowered self, moving in preferred directions, and aligning with gratitude.

### **A Closer Look at the Five Main Growth Areas**

**Growth as the development of a compassionate self.** For the women, the development of a compassionate self included experiencing greater love, caring, and compassion for others; greater understanding and empathy for others' pain; acts of altruism and giving back; seeing the good in others; as well as experiencing a sense of community and interconnectedness in the world. Davidson and Begley (2012) asserted that "feeling distress interferes with the desire to help [others] – the hallmark of compassion – because you are in pain yourself, you have little reserve for others' pain" (p. 222). Such a position is evident in the words and lived experience of the women. In other words, compassion is aligned with a stepping away from the pain of trauma. Further, as Lee et al. (2011) identified, re-engagement of the frontal cortex through trauma recovery work facilitates mindful awareness and the ability for compassion.

For most of the women, the development of a compassionate self appeared to be a primary area of growth in their lives. Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) have identified the development of compassion as one factor within posttraumatic growth, which has been supported in several studies (Lee et al., 2010; Morris et. al., 2005; Taku et al., 2008). However, in examining the findings on posttraumatic growth following single trauma

experiences, the development of strong compassion for others does not present itself as a *primarily* noteworthy area of growth among the other common growth areas often cited (relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life). For the women in this study, their growth of high levels of empathy and compassion may be a direct result of overcoming complex multiple traumas, although future research would be needed to explore whether complex trauma experiences result in higher levels of compassion for others in comparison to single trauma experiences. The development of increased empathy for others in similar situations has been found to be a significant area of growth for close to 80 percent of sexual assault survivors (Frazier & Berman, 2008). An increased sense of compassion and connectedness was found in clinicians who experienced traumas associated with September 11 (Bauwens & Tosone, 2010) and increased compassion, sympathy, and concern for others has been found among cancer survivors (Jim & Jacobson, 2008).

For the women in this study, the development of a compassionate self consisted of the seeing of good in others, which appears to be at odds with other studies. For instance, Frazier, Conlon, and Glaser (2001) found that beliefs in the goodness of others to be significantly negatively affected among survivors of sexual abuse, even after one year following the traumatic event. The women's stance of looking for the good and seeing the good in others appears to be a purposeful stance related to their optimism and alignment with hope. For many, this seeing the good in others was also developed out of direct experiences of the kindness of others along their recovery journeys (friends, role models, therapist etc.). The women's recovery journeys allowed them to experience what Bandura (2001) identified as collective agency, positive changes, and actions only possible through interdependent and socially coordinated efforts. Rebecca, for instance, identified strongly with this experience of collective agency when she shared how

important being and living in a community and helping each other was to her, as this was the only way she not only survived but found growth in her life. This experience of collective agency contributed to the development of a greater sense of community and interconnectedness with others in the world as an aspect of the compassionate self. Further, the women contributed to collective agency through acts of altruism and giving back (e.g., Pippa participating in stand-up comedy for mental health, Stargazer's new life course involves working with individuals with disabilities, and Rebecca's giving back by being available to a friend going through hardships).

**Growth as a better self.** I would propose that the reconnection to the executive functions of the frontal cortex is evident in the women's growth experience in regards to the development of a better self. The women expressed developing a changed positive self-identity, consisting of a perception of self as a better person, as someone who cares for themselves and others, as someone who gives back to others, as well as possessing an increased awareness of self (or a connecting to consciousness as Puerto Morelos described it). This connection to consciousness and self-reflective positive changes are made possible through the engagement of the frontal cortex (Lee et al., 2011), and disengagement with trauma responses and pain. The women's increased awareness of self aligns with their experiences of becoming more mindful of themselves, their emotions, their needs, their hopes, and intentions for the future. The women shared how this self-awareness or mindfulness helped them make better decisions around how they treated both themselves and others, thus creating growth as a better self. This master theme of a better self is highly connected to compassion for self and others. Segal, Williams, & Teasdale (2013) identified mindfulness as "being a vital portal into self-compassion (p. 139) and they specified curiosity, kindness, calmness, and steadiness as being the fabrics of compassion that allowed for the disidentification with distress.

Several studies on growth following hardship have found positive self-identity changes to occur. For instance, personal growth as perceived by greater maturity and wisdom was found to be a posttraumatic growth outcome in severely traumatized youth (Glad, Jensen, Holt & Ormhaug, 2013). As part of posttraumatic growth individuals with myalgic encephalomyelitis chronic fatigue syndrome, experienced a disengagement of their former self and a rediscovery of a new true or core self (Arroll & Howard, 2013). A similar finding of a reinvention of the self was found by Shakespeare-Finch and Copping (2006) for individuals who have experienced traumatic events. This reinvention of a new self included an effortful decision to change certain behaviours or attitudes by eliminating negative behaviours and attitudes and consciously fostering positive ones. These findings are similar to this study as the women identified their development of a better self as a purposeful and conscious process resulting in more positive actions and feelings towards both themselves and others.

**Growth as an empowered self.** The women's lived experience of growth as an empowered self consisted of an increased sense of personal strength and overcoming abilities, being able to stand up for themselves and set healthy boundaries and limits in the world, as well as a continued experience of moving away from fear. This empowered self developed directly from the women's experiences, specifically their experiential learning that they have the capacity, knowledge, skills, and abilities to overcome hardships. The women shared experiencing less fear of future life difficulties because their lived experience had taught them that they were capable of not just surviving traumas, but surpassing them and becoming better and stronger for it.

For the women, the empowered self also consisted of them finding their voice in the world. The women spoke of how they were more capable of setting healthy limits with others,



such as taking a stance against future harms or revictimization, saying no to unhealthy relationships, feeling less enmeshed with others, and caretaking of others less. This empowered self allowed them to more openly and honestly share their own wants and needs with others. Several of the women spoke of finding a balance between compassion for others and compassion for self.

The development of an empowered self, defined as an increased sense of personal strength, has been a consistent finding within the posttraumatic growth literature. It has been found to be an outcome for severely traumatized youth (Glad et al., 2013), sexual assault (Frazier & Berman, 2008; Frazier et al., 2001), childhood sexual abuse (Lev-Wiesel, 2008), intimate partner violence (Cobb et. al., 2006), following terrorist attacks (Vázquez, Pérez-Sales, & Hervás, 2008), holocaust child survivors (Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2003), traumatized refugees (Kroo & Nagy, 2011), cancer survivors (Jim & Jacobson, 2008), and various single trauma experiences (Shakespeare-Finch & Copping, 2006). Increased assertiveness has been found to be a characteristic of childhood sexual abuse recovery (Chouliara et. al., 2014).

**Growth as moving forward in preferred directions.** An identified area of growth for the women was a new positive experience of setting and accomplishing life goals. For many of the women, this proactive stance was identified as a new way of being in the world, and this growth area appeared to highly align with their new empowered selves. Lee et al. (2011) noted that the calming of posttraumatic stress symptoms allows an individual not only to tap into the full potential of a working frontal cortex (capable of planning and calculating consequences), but also allows them to utilize their achieving/activating system to pursue and meet goals. This appears to be in line with the lived experiences of the women, who identified not being able to set or meet goals prior to their growth due to being numb, feeling broken, and/or feeling caught

in their trauma. Segal et al. (2013) noted that self-compassion for ourselves allows space for skillful choices, as it allows us to embrace acceptance and a non-judging position. Again it appears that the women's development of a compassionate self works together with their empowered selves to be able to both set and accomplish preferred life goals. As a whole, the women were able to tap into their personal, proxy, and collective agency (Bandura, 2001) in order to move forward in preferred directions in their lives.

For the women, their goal accomplishments included such actions as removing unhealthy relationships from their lives, self-care and exercise, finding safe housing, going back to school, gaining custody of their children, giving back to others, breaking the cycle of abuse, and finding rewarding employment. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) have identified the identification of new possibilities for one's life as an area of posttraumatic growth. For these women, there was not only a strong identification of new possibilities in their lives, but they also experienced significant success in meeting many of their life goals. For several of the women, this growth area also included a reprioritizing of life priorities, for example: working with special needs (Stargazer), and mothering (Melissa).

**Growth as aligning with gratitude.** According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004), individuals who experience significant hardship often experience an increased appreciation of life and this finding too has been supported in other studies on posttraumatic growth (Frazier and Berman, 2008; Frazier et al., 2001; Glad et al., 2013; Jim & Jacobson, 2008; Lee et. al., 2010; Morris et. al., 2005; Shakespeare-Finch et. al., 2013; Taku et al., 2008). Several of the women in this study expressed a sense of gratitude both for their lived difficult experiences as well as gratitude for everyday things such as not taking things or life for granted. Specifically, there is gratitude for the difficult experiences themselves, as these events were instrumental in the

women's development of who they became as individuals, as well as the growth that came out of their hardships. The women expressed gratefulness for the positive growth changes they have experienced and most did not believe their growth would have been possible without the difficulties in their lives. The women also possessed sincere appreciation and gratitude for the help they received from others along their growth journeys, as well as for the resources available to them. The women also expressed gratitude for everyday things like having a home, being a mom, having their basic needs met, having a supportive other, etc. These women's lived experiences have provided them with a first-hand experience of what life is like without such things and what life is like without the nurturance of another. And as such, sincere gratitude has grown within them.

Again, just like with the development of a compassionate self, I would argue that the development of a grateful self is only possible after one is able to step away from the crippling pain of trauma. Although pain and growth co-exist, the pain is no longer all consuming, thus, there is room for something else to grow or take its place. This study showed that the growth facilitating and recovery promoting processes were instrumental in helping the women come to a place of gratitude. And just like with compassion, gratitude is only possible through purposeful higher order and executive thinking of the frontal cortex as one reconnects to consciousness. In addition, there appears to be a reciprocal relationship between gratitude and posttraumatic growth in that gratitude is not only found to be a posttraumatic growth outcome, but as Ruini and Vescovelli's (2013) study shows, it has also been found to promote high levels of posttraumatic growth in other domains, increase positive affect, and lower negative symptomology. In other words, a dose of gratitude can also be a catalyst to positive posttraumatic changes.

## **Promoting Growth in Therapeutic Settings**

The women in this study were eager to talk about and share their lived experience of growth. The large majority of the women interviewed indicated that no one has ever asked them about growth, although they had been asked at excess about the negative effects following multiple traumas by the various professionals they had worked with. From the lived experiences of these women, it is evident that mental health professionals need to be cognisant of also exploring the positive growth aspects that come out of difficult times, even when someone has endured complex trauma experiences. The findings of this study promote greater awareness of the importance for clinicians to work to amplify both growth-facilitating processes, as well as growth outcome possibilities. This study has helped to challenge the stigma of being forever broken following complex trauma, and as such, professionals are challenged to adopt a new view encompassing a belief in the growth potential within this population.

Shakespeare-Finch and de Dassel (2009) highlighted the importance of clinicians to be aware of, and understand the interactions between both negative and positive trauma outcomes, and of being aware of what stage of growth and distress a client presents in order to effectively choose helpful interventions. They stated, “this would enable the clinician to recognize and work through PTSD symptomatology as it arises while also being alert to the positive changes that may accompany this resolution of symptoms” (p. 637). As growth has been found to be present regardless of the amount of time that has passed since the trauma (Morris et. al., 2005), it is also important for clinicians to be consistently curious about growth, even in early post-trauma encounters with clients.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) indicated that therapeutic modalities such as cognitive, narrative, and existentially based interventions which focus on cognitive processing of trauma,

and on amplifying meaning and other existential concerns, are most conducive to facilitating posttraumatic growth. Joseph and Linley (2006) echoed this view by highlighting that it is only through therapeutic interventions that foster the self-determination of the client that growth is possible and they amplified the importance of utilizing approaches that incorporate person-centered perspectives. I would also add that compassionate-based, mindfulness-based, and gratitude-based approaches should be highly considered when helping individuals recover and grow from multiple traumas, as these have most recently been found to have significant healing and transformative outcomes (Chopko & Schwartz, 2009; Fredrickson, 2004; Lee et al., 2011; Lee & Zaharlick, 2011). Several of the women in this study indicated that they had participated in mindfulness meditation practices, and identified these as being helpful in healing and promoting the growth in their lives. Compassion-focused therapy uses compassionate mind training to promote calming, a sense of well-being, inner warmth, safeness, and soothing, which has been found to promote healing and positive changes in a wide variety of populations and problems (Gilbert, 2009), and compassionate-mind therapy has been used in trauma recovery work (Lee et al., 2011). Just like gratefulness, compassion appears to have a reciprocal effect on posttraumatic growth as it has been found to be both a growth outcome (as in this study) as well as a growth promoting catalyst. Similarly, the positive feeling of gratitude has been found to have transformative effects on individual health and well-being (Fredrickson, 2004). In my opinion, post-modern approaches such as narrative therapy and solution-focused therapy that amplify clients' agency, knowledge, skills, and abilities should be strongly considered by clinicians wanting to promote and thicken client growth experiences. Narrative therapy in particular may be most helpful in thickening alternative storylines related to compassion, a better self, an empowered self, preferred directions, gratitude, and other areas of posttraumatic growth.

## **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study may be its lack of transferability, or lack of generalizability to the larger population. The five growth-facilitating processes and five areas of posttraumatic growth found in this study may be specific to the nine women interviewed. Smith and Osborn (2008) note, however, that with multiple IPA studies with similar groups more general claims will be able to be made. As this study appears to be the first to explore the lived experience of posttraumatic growth in the lives of women with multiple trauma experiences, further research is needed prior to generalizing the findings. The findings of this study, however, possess strong similarities to the posttraumatic growth literature to date, hence increasing the convergent validity of the findings. In addition, women in this study represented a heterogeneous sample (in respect to age, trauma experiences, cultural backgrounds), which also increases the findings transferability. Finally, although purposeful sampling was used to recruit women who identified themselves as having experienced growth following multiple traumas, it is important to note that one woman in the study appeared to present with less growth and more negative symptoms than the other eight women.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Although these women have overcome grave difficulties in their lives they did not see themselves as damaged. In fact, through their growth experiences they viewed themselves as being a better person, a person who possessed great compassion for others, someone who treated herself and others well, a strong and empowered individual who was moving in preferred directions in her life, and was grateful for her lived experiences. This study, and continued research on posttraumatic growth challenges the “damaged” discourse and stigma often present when working with individuals who have experienced complex traumas in their lives. This study

has shown that women with complex trauma experiences are capable of experiencing positive growth over and above just surviving, and that their growth is similar to others with single trauma experiences.

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Appendix A



**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR  
RESEARCH STUDY**



EXPORING

**GROWTH AFTER TRAUMA!**



**Are you a woman who has experienced several traumas in your life? AND  
Do you see yourself as having experienced growth as a result of these  
traumas?**

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of women's experience of growth following multiple trauma events/experiences, and to examine how this growth develops and influences an individuals' life.

To Participate:

- You must be a female 18 years of age or over
- Agree to take part in a 1-2 hour interview
- Participants will receive a \$25.00 Superstore gift card

If you are interested in finding out more about this study, please contact Katerina Renny, MSc  
Counselling Psychology student at [krenny@ucalgary.ca](mailto:krenny@ucalgary.ca)



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Appendix B  
Damaged? Not Me: Women's Lived Experience of Growth After Multiple Traumas  
A Qualitative Research Proposal

This proposed research seeks to lend understanding to women's experiences of growth after trauma and is guided by the research question of "*What are women's lived experiences of growth after multiple traumas?*" Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is described as changes that go beyond a person's ability to just resist and not be damaged by highly traumatic events, and includes a process of qualitative changes in functioning that involves movement beyond pre-trauma levels of adaptation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The prevalence of trauma exposure among women is high, with National prevalence rates ranging from 49.5% to 73.8% (Mills et al., 2011; Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dransky, Suanders, & Best, 1993; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Gender trauma research has shown that women more frequently experience early onset traumas such as childhood abuse and neglect, interpersonal traumas of rape and sexual assault, multiple traumas, and prolonged traumatic exposure; resulting in complex trauma and greater posttraumatic stress symptomatology (Briere & Spinazzola, 2005; Green et al., 2000; Herman, 1992; Rimmo, Aberg, & Fredrikson, 2005; Tolin & Foa, 2006;). Alongside these impacts, positive psychology research has revealed that trauma distress often coexists with PTG, and reports of growth experiences after traumatic events outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Growth experiences have been found to include such effects as increased appreciation of life and priorities, positive changes in meaningfulness, closeness, and intimacy of relationships, increased sense of personal strength, an identification of new possibilities for one's life, and spiritual and existential growth experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). A recent meta-analysis revealed that women report more PTG than men following trauma (Tolin and Foa, 2006), and PTG has been found to be present among women who have experienced a wide range of trauma events including intimate partner violence, sexual and physical assault, childhood abuse, breast cancer, and homelessness (Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2006; Grubaugh and Resick, 2007; Hefferon, Grealy, & Mutrie, 2010; Vishnevsky, Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Demakis, 2010; Woodward & Joseph, 2003). However, the large majority of research on PTG has utilized quantitative methods. Little is known about the personal lived experiences of PTG, especially among women with histories of multiple trauma experiences.

The aim of this study is to use Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the experiences of growth after multiple traumas in a sample of 6-8 women. IPA is embedded within a theoretical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. IPA is interpretive in nature, is used to explore individuals' personal experiences, and their perceptions and meanings within contexts of social interactions (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The purpose of this study is to gain a phenomenological understanding of: What are women's personal perceptions or accounts of growth following multiple trauma experiences? What meaning do they ascribe to their growth experiences? And what are women's perceived relationships between trauma experiences and their PTG? Purposeful sampling will be used to recruit women who identify themselves as having experienced growth following two or more trauma experiences. Women will be recruited through notices in community newsletters and through radio/media announcements. Semi-structured interviews will be used to explore participants' lived growth experiences. Written transcriptions of recorded interviews will be used for the analysis. The data will be analyzed using Smith and Osborn's (2008) guidelines for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, and the analysis will adhere to Vivar, McQueen, Whyte, and Armayor's (2007) four measures of rigour for qualitative research.

This study will add to gender-specific research, bring greater awareness around how women with multiple traumas experience develop PTG. The study will help to reduce and challenge stigma of “being damaged” after multiple trauma experiences, thus adding to the positive psychology discipline and future research endeavours in this field. The results will strengthen assessment and treatment interventions by bringing greater awareness to clinicians of the importance of exploring areas of growth following trauma when working with women. Reflections of growth can be directly empowering to the participants, and the dissemination of results will help to facilitate reflections of PTG in other women with multiple trauma experiences, inspiring hope and further challenging the “being damaged” discourse.

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Appendix C  
Phone Screening Interview Questions

Thank you for your interest in this study. The purpose of this study is to examine and gain an understanding of women's experience of growth following multiple trauma events/experiences. I am interested in learning about this growth, and your experience of it (i.e. how it develops and influences your life, and what this growth means to you).

To make sure you are a good fit for this study, I will need to ask you a few questions first. Is that OK?

1. Are you a female 18 years of age or older?
2. Have you experienced more than one trauma in your life?

For this study a broad definition of trauma is used, and may include such things as childhood abuse or neglect, interpersonal violence or victimization, death of a loved one, an accident, a diagnosis of a life threatening illness, or other highly stressful events.

3. Have you experienced growth as a result of your trauma experiences?

Growth is defined broadly and is determined by your subjective experience of growth. Generally it may be described as self-perceived positive changes.

Note: Yeses to above, indicate appropriateness for study.

4. If you agree to participate, you would be asked to meet with me for approximately a 1-2 hour interview. We would meet in an agreed upon confidential place. When we meet I would provide you with more detailed information about the study (and provide you with written information for your records), so that you can further decide whether or not you want to participate. Please know that you can change your mind at any time.
5. As a participant you would also be compensated with a \$25.00 Superstore gift card.
6. Would you be interested in participating?

Schedule an agreed upon time and place to meet.



Appendix D  
Informed Consent Form

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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Katerina Renny, BA, Student - Master of Education in Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, 403- 226 -6047, katerina.renny@hotmail.com

**Supervisor:**

Dr. Sharon Cairns, Ph.D., Professor, Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, 403-220-3671, scairns@ucalgary.ca

**Title of Project:**

Damaged? Not Me: Women's Lived Experience of Growth After Multiple Traumas

**Sponsor:**

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:**

The purpose of this study is to examine and gain an understanding of women's experience of growth following multiple trauma events/experiences, and to examine how this growth develops and influences an individual's life, and the meaning this growth has for you. You have been selected as a potential participant because you identified yourself as a woman who has experienced growth following multiple traumas, and are at 18 years of age or over.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?**

As a participant, you will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview. In this interview you will be asked about your life experiences, your experience of growth after difficult times, how you have experienced this growth, how this growth has developed and influenced your life, and what this growth means to you and your sense of self-identity. This interview should take approximately 1-2 hours to complete.

Your participation is voluntary. This means that you may refuse to participate or change your mind and withdraw from the study at any time, and for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your

participation will end immediately, and you will be given a choice for your taped interview information to either be immediately destroyed or retained for the purposes of the study.

You will be asked to review the typed copy of the interview based on the interview recordings. The typed copy will be e-mailed to you approximately four weeks following the interview. You will be asked to provide feedback on whether the written interview fits with your understanding of what you said during the interview. You will be asked to respond to the researcher within two weeks of the written interview. If you do not respond within this time frame, this will be understood as approval of the written interview.

A summary of the themes from your interview will be e-mailed to you once analysis has been completed. You will be given two weeks to review the themes and provide any feedback. If you do not respond within this time frame, this will be understood as approval of the themes.

A summary of the study results will be e-mailed to you for your information and records, once the study has been completed.

I agree to have the typed copy of the interview e-mailed to the following address:

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Please provide feedback to :  
Katerina Renny  
Primary Researcher  
Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology  
Email: katerina.renny@hotmail.com

### **WHAT TYPE OF PERSONAL INFORMATION WILL BE COLLECTED?**

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your name, age, and e-mail address on this consent form. This information will only be available to the primary researcher and the research supervisor and will be kept in a secure locked cabinet.

To maintain your confidentiality, your name will not be linked with the information you provide in the interview. Instead you will be asked to choose a pseudonym. This pseudonym will be used to label and identify your interview.

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: \_\_\_\_\_

### **ARE THERE RISKS OR BENEFITS IF I PARTICIPATE?**

There may be some benefits if you participate. This study asks you to reflect on your experience of growth following difficult time/life events. Thinking about and sharing your experiences of growth may be helpful, as this may provide you with greater insight and understanding into your own growth experience. Talking about your growth and reflecting on what growth means to you may also help to strengthen your personal growth experience. It is hoped that this study will bring greater awareness about growth after trauma, help to reduce and challenge stigma associated with trauma, and positively influence the work of others in this area. Another benefit in sharing the findings of this study, is that the study may inspire hope in other women who have experienced difficult times.

There may also be risks if you participate. There is a risk that you may find some of the questions upsetting, or may feel upset while participating in this study. During the interview you are asked to share your life experiences and share your story of growth following difficult experiences/times. Recalling and talking about difficult life experiences could potentially bring up upsetting feelings.

If you decide to participate, it is important to know that you have the right to only share what you are comfortable sharing. You will not be asked to share trauma details, and you will not be required or pressured to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. You can change your mind and stop your participation at any time.

If you feel upset or distressed at any point during the study, please make me, the researcher, aware of this so that support services can be provided. If you are interested in receiving individual counselling services during or after your participation in the study, several local resources are listed below:

1. If you are in crisis, please contact the Distress Centre's 24-hour support line at 403-266-HELP (4357). Calls to the Distress Centre are anonymous and free.

**Distress Centre**

Suite 300, 1010 8th Avenue S.W.  
Calgary, Alberta, T2P 1J2  
403-266-HELP (4357)

You can also access free in-person counselling services at the Distress Centre.

2. **Calgary Counselling Centre**

Suite 200, 940 6th Avenue S.W.  
Calgary, Alberta, T2P 3T1  
403-265-4980  
[www.calgarycounselling.com](http://www.calgarycounselling.com)

There are fees associated with the counselling services provided at the Calgary Counselling Centre. These fees are determined on a sliding scale which is based on your annual income.

3. **Calgary Family Services**

Main Downtown Office:  
200, 1000 - 8th Avenue SW Calgary, AB T2P 3M7  
Intake: 403.205.5244  
Phone: 403.269.9888 (general inquiries)

Other locations are available. Calgary Family Services provides counselling on a sliding fee scale based on a client's ability to pay.

### **WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INFORMATION I PROVIDE?**

The information collected in this study will be used for the primary researcher's Masters Thesis. No one except the researcher, the transcriber, and the research supervisor will be allowed to hear the interview recordings, or see the written copies of the interview, although quotes from your interview may be

included in a research report. Only your pseudonym may be used in any reference (if needed) to you or your interview data.

The data will be kept in a locked cabinet or on a password-protected digital storage device, which will only be accessible to the researcher and the research supervisor. The data will be stored for up to two years after the study has been published, at which point it will be shredded or permanently erased. If you choose to withdrawal from the study, you will be given a choice to destroy any personal information that you have provided.

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Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### QUESTIONS/CONCERNS

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Katerina Renny  
Primary Researcher  
Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology  
Email: katerina.renny@hotmail.com

Or

Dr. Sharon Cairns  
Supervisor  
Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology  
Email: scairns@ucalgary.ca  
Phone: 403-220-3671,

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email rburrows@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix E  
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

**Introduction**

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this study is to examine your experience of growth following traumas, and to explore how this growth developed and influenced your life. My hope is that our conversation will allow you to share your lived experience of this growth, and your perceptions and meanings related to this growth. Remember that you can share only what you are comfortable sharing.

**Interview Questions**

**A. History**

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself, your history, and life experiences?

Prompt: growing up, relationships, significant events

2. What life experiences were most difficult for you?

Prompt: What do you remember most during these times?

3. What did you do during these difficult times?

Prompt: How did you respond? Where were things, people, or places that were important/significant during these times?

4. If you had to describe what these difficult times mean to you, what would you say?

Prompt: How do you feel about them? What words, thoughts, or images come to mind?

**B. Growth**

5. What do you think about growth after difficult times?

6. Tell me about your experience of growth following these difficult times?

7. In what specific ways have you grown?

Prompt: Ways of thinking/feeling? Ways of responding? Connecting? View of the world?  
View of self and others?

8. Who or what most influenced your growth?

Prompt: Aided this growth? Impeded this growth? How did they influence this growth?  
In what specific ways?

9. As you understand it today, what does the word “growth” mean to you?



10. Who else knows of this growth? / Who else sees this growth in you?

Prompt: What would they say about your growth? What would they see/notice?

11. How does your own personal growth experience affect your everyday life?

Prompt: What difference has this growth made in your life? How do you feel about this growth?

### **C. Identity**

12. How would you describe yourself as a person?

Prompt: What sort of person are you? Important characteristics? How do you see or define yourself? What specific beliefs or values help define “you”, make up who you are?

13. Has having growth after difficult times made a difference to how you see yourself?

- Prompt: If so, in what ways is this different then how you might have seen yourself prior to this growth? How would you say you have changed?

14. What about compared to before your difficult life experiences?

Prompt: How do you see yourself differently now compared to how you saw yourself before both the difficult times/experiences and your experience of growth?

15. How would you say other people see you?

Prompt: Family members? Friends? How would they describe you? Have their sense of you changed?

16. Is there anything else you wish to say about growth in your life?

