

Personal Experiences of Psychosis: Recovery & Growth*

Clare Mapplebeck
Clinical Psychologist
Leeds Partnerships NHS Foundation Trust

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What is Growth?

- Concept predominant within the trauma literature
- Defined as:
 - the experience of individuals who not only recover from trauma (as defined by returning back to pre-trauma functioning), but also use it as an opportunity for further individual development¹
- Posttraumatic growth is thought to consist of five main categories:
 - appreciation of life, relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength and spiritual change²

How is Growth Applied to Psychosis?

- Research has suggested a high co-morbidity of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in people with psychosis^{3,4}
- Three main relationships between PTSD and psychosis have been proposed⁵:
 1. Traumatic life events cause psychosis
 2. Psychosis is a traumatic event that causes PTSD
 3. Psychosis and PTSD could both be part of a spectrum of responses to a traumatic event



How is Growth Applied to Psychosis?

- If psychosis is considered a stressful and/or traumatic life event, then the potential for psychological growth and positive change is possible, according to researchers⁶
- Therefore, the study aims to explore whether the potential for psychological growth was possible for people presenting with trauma and psychotic experiences

Method & Analysis

- Results taken from semi-structured interviews conducted with 7 participants aged 28-68 with psychosis
- Reports of significant and distressing trauma, either:
 - Before the onset of psychosis (e.g. sexual/physical abuse)
 - Trauma due to psychosis & associated problems
- Data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis⁷

Results

- Overarching theme - participants describing their *“journey towards personal change”*
- Two super-ordinate themes were identified each with a number of subordinate themes:
 - Barriers to Change
 - The Adapting Self

Barriers to Change

- All participants described a number of barriers and restrictions to moving forward
- Three main barriers were identified as hindering progress:
 - the mental health system
 - impact of psychosis
 - stigma & rejection

Barriers to Change

- Mental Health System
 - Loss of hope for the future, coercion, re-traumatisation and loss of self and individuality
- Impact of Psychosis
 - Loss of self, impact on quality of life, co-morbid difficulties and re-traumatisation of past abuse
- Stigma & Rejection
 - Self and other stigma, rejection by others, increased social difficulties, increased feeling of being “different” leading to negative impact on their mental wellbeing

Barriers

“...the other negative erm thing (1) it’s not really having psychosis, it’s really of entering the services because, erm the mental health services took away every single bit of my control that I had over my life. They made me feel abnormal erm even though I’m not, they made, they made it worse...” (Cathy)



The Adapting Self

- Participants described a number of changes within themselves which helped facilitate personal growth and recovery
- Subordinate themes included:
 - finding meaning and purpose
 - support and understanding
 - inner strength and determination
 - self-acceptance and awareness



Meaning and Purpose

- Most participants tried to understand and make sense of their experiences
- Appeared to be a catalyst towards appreciating life and self-fulfilment
- Studies have shown a positive relationship between ‘meaning making’ and growth following adversity⁸



Support and Understanding

- Relationships played a key role in supporting and encouraging participants and inspiring positive change
- Led to greater empathy for others, engendering a sense of belonging and feeling understood by others
- Social support has found to be important in aiding recovery⁹



Inner Strength and Determination

- For some participants, regaining power and control over their own lives was a catalyst for moving forward
- Promoted greater self-belief and determination in participants, along with adapting to life's difficulties
- Taking back control is an important stage in the recovery process¹⁰



Self-Acceptance and Awareness

- Acceptance and self-integration appeared to be key factors in promoting psychological growth for participants
- Symptoms are accepted as a part of the self – led to greater self-awareness and understanding
- Rebuilding the self has been found to be an important component in facilitating the recovery process¹¹

Personal Growth

“...I need to thank the voices somehow. Because they’ve made me who I am...They’re a part of me. I wouldn’t want to go through the abuse again, but if I had a choice of someone saying to me ten years ago you can spend rest of your life out of the system and not hear voices, but you’ll not be happy and you’ll not know who you are, or you can have ten years of hearing voices and probably for the rest of your life but eventually you’ll know who you are and you’ll be happy. And I think that’s the journey that I’ve took and they’ve took me on, like ‘cos I could probably say erm (1) I’m probably the happiest I’ve ever been in my life at the moment” (Eddie)

Discussion

- Psychological growth was evident in the majority of participants – demonstrating that growth following complicated trauma and psychosis is possible
- Participants reported a greater appreciation of life, finding meaning and purpose, inner strength and determination, understanding and self-awareness
- Findings supported by both the growth and recovery literature
- Additional ongoing barriers to recovery continue to be evident in mental health services, in the severity of symptoms and in self/other stigma

Recovery vs. Growth

- The research highlights the indistinguishable overlap in definitions for the concepts of growth and recovery
- A five stage model of recovery has been proposed, with growth considered the final stage of recovery¹²
- Therefore, is recovery the overarching term for the processes of positive change, with growth a key (final) component of this?
- Important to not force a distinction between the two concepts as it has been within the trauma literature

Clinical Implications

- Services need to consider how to facilitate psychological growth in people with psychosis
- However, this should be approached carefully to avoid promoting unrealistic expectations ¹³
- Whilst the process of recovery and growth is a unique and personal journey, there is considerable overlap in themes of recovery
- Psychological therapies which focus on aiding self-acceptance and awareness may be beneficial in supporting psychological growth and recovery



Study Limitations

- Reliance on retrospective accounts of change and recovery
- Differences in time when diagnosed, length of psychosis, traumatic experiences, recovery etc amongst participants
- Reliance of self-perceived growth and recovery
- Influence of support groups on individuals accounts of recovery

Future Research

- To understand more fully the extent to which the highlighted themes have on facilitating the recovery process
- This would aid the development of a more tangible measure of recovery and could aid therapeutic attempts to facilitate recovery and psychological growth
- Can measures of growth following trauma help to identify recovery and growth from other mental health problems?



Final Thought

“I wouldn’t want anybody to go through it, but you realise how much you can achieve and how much you come through, come through the other end and actually it be positive and how much more there is to do, how much more there is in the future...I’ve learnt so much and I’ve come a long way”



Contact Details

Clare Mapplebeck

Clinical Psychologist

Leeds Partnerships NHS Foundation Trust

clare.mapplebeck@leedspft.nhs.uk

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