Chapter 15

Beyond Words:
Arts-Based Assessment of Post-Traumatic Growth

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ABSTRACT

Post-traumatic growth is an intangible yet a very real and possible phenomenon. Conventional measurement of post-traumatic growth relies on formal self-assessed questionnaires and interviews which may be challenging to administer and sustain in the long course of the healing process. This chapter builds upon the post-traumatic growth inventory designed by authors Tedeschi and Calhoun and proposes an arts-based assessment for post-traumatic growth. This may offer a more organic approach to the measurement of growth and it may be utilized by caregivers and counselors in a safe, non-clinical environment. The results from this research demonstrate the effectiveness and depth of arts-based assessment both as a standalone as well as a complementary tool that can be used alongside other forms of assessment to measure growth.

INTRODUCTION

During a traumatic experience, the left hemisphere (that controls linear processing and language function) tends to be inhibited while the right hemisphere (that controls sensory-perceptual experience) is stimulated (Van der Kolk, 1994). People who suffer from post-traumatic stress replay their traumatic memories through the sensory and imaging storage area of the brain’s right hemisphere (Lanius et al., 2004). This may explain why healers or shamans, through generations, used experiences that engaged the brain’s right hemisphere such as drumming, dance and imagery for healing (Jacobson-Levy, 2013).

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BACKGROUND

Trauma and Brain

During a traumatic experience, the dominant hemisphere (likely to be the left brain) which controls linear processing and language function tends to be inhibited while the non-dominant hemisphere (which controls the sensory-perceptual experience) is stimulated (Van der Kolk, 1994). Lanius et al. (2004) confirmed that people who experienced a traumatic event and are suffering from post-traumatic stress replay their traumatic memories through the sensory and imaging storage area of the brain’s right hemisphere. Thus, through generations, healers or shamans used experiences that engaged more fully the brain’s right hemisphere such as drumming, dance, and the use of symbols that appeared in the person’s dreams, art, and imagery (Jacobson-Levy, 2013) for healing.

In the absence of cultural rituals in our postmodern world, the arts may serve as an effective platform where traumatic narratives may be expressed, and where community bonds may be forged in a safe space. On the other hand, conventional counseling or talk therapy may not attain its desired effectiveness in facilitating healing since the traumatized person has likely lost most connection with the brain’s left hemisphere, and therefore may find it hard to process the situation through words. The traumatic experience is likely to be articulated in an entirely different language – the language of the nonverbal and of the enacted (Bloom, 2010). Whether it is through verbal or nonverbal expressions, many researchers and authors in the field of trauma recovery spell out the need for one to tell his or her story of the trauma. Through this, the person is able to reconcile the right hemisphere with the left. In doing so, the person can categorize, order or place the traumatic experience in a meaning that is associated with the past, and relegate it to the past as a memory (Bloom, 2010). If not, the traumatic experience will remain unmetabolized, unintegrated and continues to have an existence in the non-dominant hemisphere reality. The experience may continue haunting the person in the form of nightmares, flashbacks and behavioral re-enactments (Bloom, 2010). Until some other experiences occur to permit a reordering of reality and incorporation of the trauma into a new sense of meaning, the haunting will continue and the person may develop all kinds of secondary behaviors in an attempt to cope with this continuing problem. In fact, addictions, compulsive behaviors, behavioral reenactments, anxieties, phobias, depression, and a variety of physical symptoms may manifest due to a failure to cope with their trauma in healthy ways (Bloom, 2010).

To facilitate healing and give trauma a new meaning, the arts may be a good and safe platform for one to “re-tell” his or her traumatic experience. As such, arts-based assessment may also be a relevant approach in evaluating post-traumatic growth.

Arts and Healing

Art acts as a bridge between the two hemispheres of the brain. For example, the melody within a piece of music works on the right hemisphere while the lyrics work on the left (Huey-Heck & Kalnin, 2006). The bridging process requires both hemispheres to function in an integrated, active manner and this helps one to make sense of and deal with the traumatic memories.
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