

Does Personal Growth Mediate the Link Between Trauma Exposure and Mental Health?

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that people often report personal growth (e.g., appreciation of life) after exposure to traumatic events. The purpose of this research was to examine the degree to which personal growth may explain why more traumatic experiences have a negative impact on mental health. Participants were 389 undergraduates (mean age = 23.66, $SD = 7.92$; 81.7% female; 88.9% White) who completed online questionnaires. Traumatic life events were assessed using the Traumatic Life Events Questionnaire (Kubany, 2004), personal growth was assessed using a “current-standing” version of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Frazier et al., 2009), and mental health was assessed using a modified version of the SF-12 (Ware et al., 1996). Preliminary analyses indicated that older participants experienced more traumatic events than did younger participants ($r = .32$, $p = .001$) and that females reported more traumatic events ($M = 4.03$) than did males ($M = 2.76$), $t(387) = -3.79$, $p = .001$. Therefore, all analyses controlled for age and gender. As expected, mediation analyses indicated that there was a significant indirect effect of more traumatic events on worse mental health via less personal growth, $ab = -.09$, BCa CI $[-.14, -.03]$, with the mediator accounting for approximately one-quarter of the total effect ($P_M = 25\%$). Thus, less personal growth appeared to function as a partial mediator explaining why more trauma exposure is related to worse mental health. Overall, these findings suggest that clinicians could focus on strengthening personal growth as individuals adjust to challenging life events.

Background

Previous research on trauma

- Possible negative effects
- e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD (Lopez-Martinez et al., 2018)

Possible positive effects

- e.g., posttraumatic growth (PTG) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996)

Participants and Procedures

Participants

- $N = 389$ undergraduates
- Mean age = 23.66 ($SD = 7.92$)
- 81.7% female
- 88.9% White

Procedures

- Participants were recruited for the Life Events Study via the Regional Campus Subject Pool
- All completed online surveys

Instruments

Traumatic Life Events

- Traumatic Life Events Questionnaire (TLEQ; Kubany, 2004)
- 23 items: e.g., Have you experienced... loss of someone close, burglary, family violence, etc. Rated: 0 (No) or 1 (Yes)
- 89.7% reported at least one trauma
- Range: 0 to 12; $M = 3.79$; $SD = 2.88$

Personal Growth

- Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (C-PTGI; Frazier et al., 2009)
- 21 items: e.g., “I have a feeling of self-reliance;” “I appreciate each day”
- Scale: 0 (Not at all true) to 5 (True to a very great degree)
- $M = 4.50$ ($SD = 0.90$); $\alpha = .93$

Mental Health

- SF-12 Health Survey (Ware et al., 1996)
- 6 items; e.g., “During the past 4 weeks, have you accomplished less work than you would like as a result of any emotional problems (feeling depressed or anxious)?”
- Scale: 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely)
- $M = 3.53$ ($SD = 0.80$); $\alpha = .82$

Results

Preliminary Analyses

- Being older was related to more traumatic life events ($r = .32$, $p = .001$) and more growth ($r = .12$, $p = .019$).
- In addition, females reported more traumatic life events ($M = 4.03$) and worse mental health ($M = 3.46$) than did males ($M = 2.76$ and 3.84 , respectively).
- Therefore, primary analyses control for age and gender.

Research Question #1

Are more traumatic life events related to worse mental health?

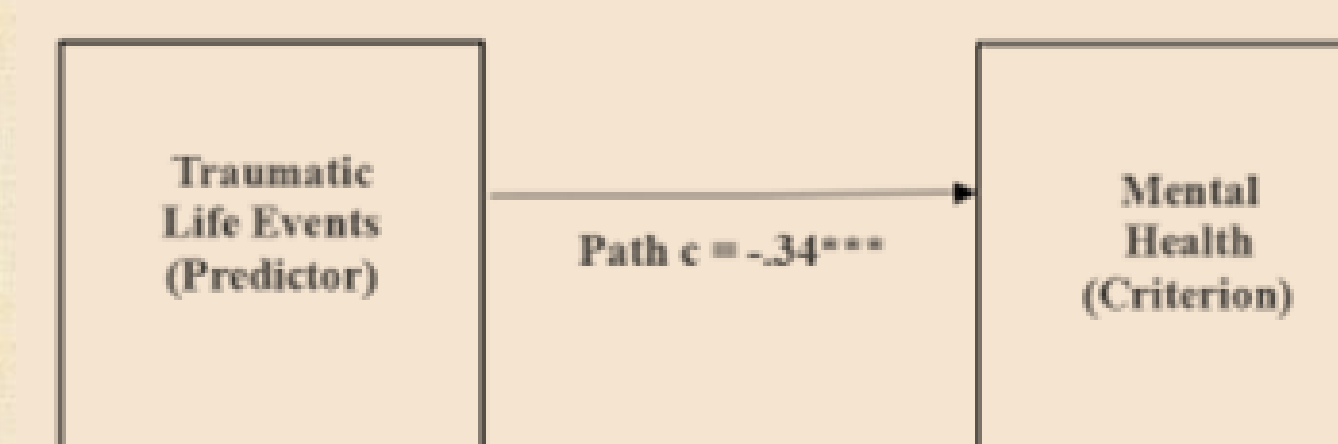


Figure 1: Direct pathway shows more traumatic life events predict worse mental health.

Research Question #2

Does personal growth explain the relation between more traumatic life events and worse mental health?

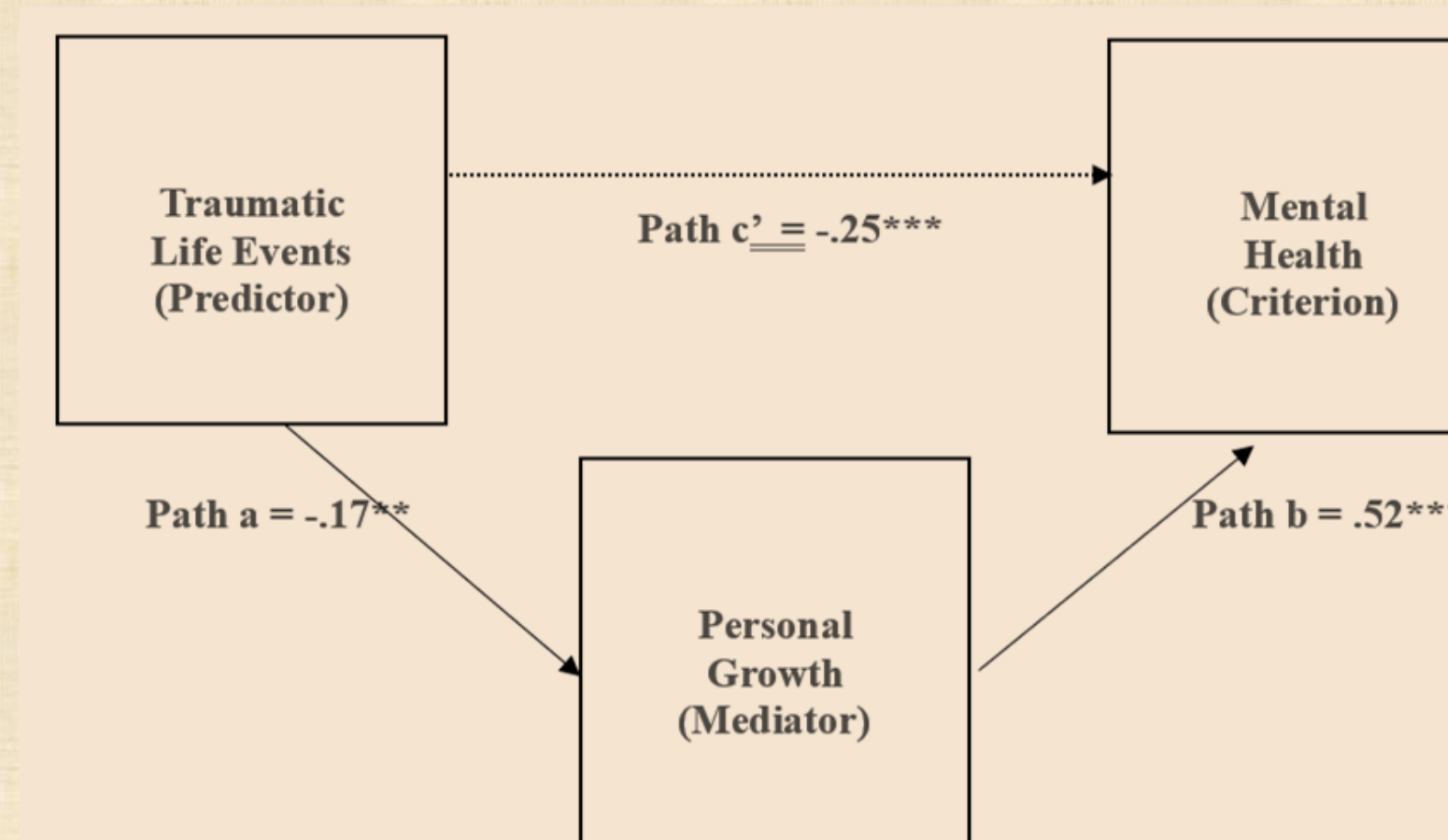


Figure 2. Mediated pathway shows partial mediation, whereby more traumatic life events indirectly influenced individuals' mental health via less personal growth, $ab = -.09$, BCa CI $[-.14, -.03]$. The mediator accounted for approximately one-quarter of the total effect ($P_M = 25\%$).

Note: Hayes' (2020) bootstrapping process macro for SPSS was used for the mediation analyses, with each test resampled 5,000 times, yielding 95% confidence intervals (CI).

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Conclusions

Conclusions

- Overall, the experience of more traumatic life events had an adverse impact on individuals' mental health.
- Also, experiencing less personal growth following trauma may help explain why more trauma exposure is related to worse mental health.
- In essence, experiencing a greater number of lifetime traumas led to reports of less personal growth, but more growth was related to better mental health.
- Importantly, it may take time for traumatic experiences to foster actual personal growth.

Clinical Implications

- These findings suggest that clinicians could focus on strengthening personal growth as individuals adjust to challenging life events, which in turn, may help improve their general mental health.

Limitations and Future Directions

Convenience sample

- Primarily White females limits generalizability to other groups
- Future research should replicate and extend these findings with more heterogeneous samples

Cross-sectional analyses

- Cross-sectional analyses limit causal interpretation of findings
- Future longitudinal research should examine causal relations between variables.

Contact Information

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