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## Post-traumatic Growth and Cancer

Going through cancer is a life-changing experience. But these changes are not always negative. Many people share that having cancer led to positive changes to their goals, beliefs, and how they live.

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### What is post-traumatic growth?

**Post-traumatic growth (PTG)** is the name for the positive changes that can happen to a person as a result of living through a trauma (like cancer). PTG is internal, mental, emotional, and psychological growth.

Post-traumatic growth is different from **resilience**.

often make meaningful life changes that better fit their personal beliefs, values, and goals.

Many people report struggling with their sense of self during or after cancer treatment. It's normal and common to feel this way after a trauma like cancer.

It's also common to wait, and not start processing everything until after your cancer treatment is over. You might be in "survival mode" for most of your treatment. This is your brain's way of trying to protect you, so you have the mental and emotional ability to get through a terrifying experience.

Our brains often do this automatically, without us even realizing.

But it's important to know that at some point, you will need to process and cope with what you've been through. This is an essential part of moving forward as a cancer survivor. Talking to a counselor or joining a support group can help you work through this. Talk to your health care team if you need a referral.

**If you are thinking about suicide or hurting yourself, please get help right away. You are not alone.**

### **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support via phone or chat for people in distress, resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. Includes information on finding your local crisis center.

**Phone:** 988

- Interpretation for more than 240 languages
- ASL Videophone for people who are deaf or hard of hearing

**Text:** 988 (English and Spanish only)

**Website:** <http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org><sup>1</sup>

To get immediate help, you can also go to the emergency department or call 911.

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have, or had, cancer describe experiencing:

### **Deeper connections to others**

Going through cancer can have a major impact on your relationships. Some people grow closer, while others grow apart. Many people report wanting deeper or more meaningful connections with others.

### **Shifting priorities**

A cancer diagnosis may shift your priorities and change what you view as most important. Some people make major life choices, such as changing their job or taking a chance on something they were afraid to try before.

### **Greater appreciation and awe**

Some people say they value life more and feel more aware of the beauty and joy around them. This awareness may help you appreciate the world in new ways.

### **Increased sense of personal strength**

Some people report feeling like they are a stronger person because of their experience with cancer. This can also help you feel more confident and treat yourself with greater compassion.

### **Spiritual or religious growth**

It's common for people to seek spiritual growth during or after cancer treatment. For some people, their religious beliefs are connected to their spirituality. Religious beliefs and spirituality are related, but not the same.

Spirituality often refers to a person's internal search for meaning, purpose, or connection to something greater than themselves. Religion often refers to organized beliefs related to a specific faith or religion.

Both religion and spirituality might include ideas such as the spirit, soul, or greater meaning and connection to something larger. Someone might consider themselves spiritual, religious, or both.

### **Does everyone go through PTG after cancer?**

Post-traumatic growth, like post-traumatic stress, is not something everyone experiences. PTG doesn't mean "getting over" or "moving past" cancer. Growth and grief can and often do happen at the same time. Each person experiences PTG differently. And it's okay if you don't go through the "common" growth changes listed here, or if your growth looks different than what you hear from other survivors.

## Why is it important to process your trauma?

Processing your trauma after cancer is about more than just personal growth. Not processing trauma can affect your nervous system, too. The nervous system is often referred to as our unconscious "flight or fight" and "rest and digest" responses.

**Fight or flight** refers to your sympathetic nervous system, which is controlled by your brain. When you feel stressed, your fight or flight response is triggered automatically. You might notice your heart rate gets fast or your stomach hurts.

The **rest and digest** response refers to times when you feel calm or relaxed. Rest and digest helps you conserve mental and physical energy.

Most people go back and forth between "fight or flight" and "rest and digest" throughout the day. Both of these responses are important.

But if your nervous system gets out of balance (dysregulated), certain parts of your brain can get smaller, larger, and more (or less) reactive to stress. When this happens, your body doesn't get the rest it needs. Or, you might stay in rest and digest when you are faced with a real threat. A dysregulated nervous system affects your ability to cope or heal after trauma.

## Learning to regulate your nervous system after trauma

Here are some activities that have been shown to support a healthy nervous system. Practicing these can help you balance your nervous system after experiencing cancer or another trauma.

### Mind-body practices

[Mind-body practices](#)<sup>2</sup> such as meditation and yoga have been shown to support a healthy nervous system.

### Grounding techniques

Grounding techniques can help if you feel like you are stuck in fight or flight. These are often simple activities that connect you to one or more of your senses (things you can

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