

## Ep #112: Post-Traumatic Growth



### **Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**

**Brooke Castillo**

Welcome to the Life Coach School Podcast, where it's all about real clients, real problems and real coaching. Now your host, Master Coach Instructor, Brooke Castillo.

Hello, hello my friends, how are you guys today? I'm amazing, it's a great day, I love today. I hope you guys are having a great day. I'm really excited about this topic that I'm going to talk to you guys about. I can't remember when I heard this term, I wish I could remember it but I can't remember exactly when I heard it, but somebody said something, I think it was in a Ted Talk or something that I was listening to and they called it post-traumatic growth. I said what? What do you mean post-traumatic growth? I deal and work with so many clients that have post-traumatic stress and one of the things that I notice pretty consistently with my clients that have post-traumatic stress is that they have a hard time getting past it. It's definitely something that happens after any kind of trauma... there can be post-traumatic stress, which is a very normal reaction to stress, and yet so many of my clients of my clients come to me 10 years, 20 years later and are still dealing with it.

When I heard this idea of post-traumatic growth, I immediately purchased every book I could find on it and so excited to have found these books, and I'm going to give you the names of them and we will have them in the show notes so you can go buy them. One of the books is *What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth* and it's by Stephen Joseph, PhD. The next book is called *Upside: The New Science of Post-Traumatic Growth*, it's funny they both have the same tagline. Then the third book is *Supersurvivors*, what an amazing title for a book and what an amazing concept, supersurvivors, I love it. The *Surprising Link Between Suffering and Success* and that one is by Dave Feldman PhD and Lee Daniel Kravetz. *Upside* is by Jim Rendon.

*Upside*, *Supersurvivors* and *What Doesn't Kill Us*, those will all be in the show notes if you would like to check them out. I purchased all three and inhaled them all. They're all based on really solid science and research and they talk a lot about the science and research, but they also tell the stories of the people that suffered from post-traumatic stress and also were able to channel that into post-traumatic growth.

As you can imagine, the definition of post-traumatic growth is positive changes from traumatic experiences that include dramatic breakthroughs and personal growth. The idea is that there is, and as I talk in this podcast I want to orient you this way, there is life before the trauma, then there's the trauma and then there's the life after the trauma. Most trauma includes post-traumatic stress and the post-traumatic stress usually lasts as long as any kind of avoidance behaviors are involved, and so it's really important to know that when there is a severe trauma to our psyche or to our physical body the way that we survive that, most of us, is through avoidance. I'm not saying that avoidance is a bad thing, temporarily and in fact it is a survival mechanism, it is a way for us to get through something. If we are being raped, if we are being tortured, if we are being starved to death, if we are in the middle of a battlefield, to be present with our emotions and feel what we're feeling is ill advised. That horror and that pain is something that we need to avoid just to get out of the situation that we're in.

Then what happens is once we get through the trauma then we experience the emotion of the trauma in a safe environment if that makes sense. It's almost delaying the horror because we have to avoid it to get through. That's where a lot of people have flashbacks. They remember things. They re-experience the trauma. This can be a very helpful thing if you're able to do it, mostly people need to do it with professional guidance, but if you can be in the presence of someone that can hold the space for you to re-experience the trauma at least once and experience the emotions that go along with the trauma that you had to avoid in order to survive it, there is so much healing there.

From there, most people with the proper professional guidance, can then move into what they're calling post-traumatic growth. There's the time before the trauma, there's the trauma, there's the post-traumatic stress after the trauma and then there's the post-traumatic growth after the trauma. What they're talking about with the post-traumatic growth is that the life can be better than it was before the trauma and because of, not in spite of, the trauma which I think is such a fascinating concept.

Now at no point in anyone of these books does anyone say that trauma is good and that you should seek it out. Trauma creates suffering, genuine suffering and no one would suggest that suffering is needed in order to grow or that it is advised to suffer in order to grow. What they are saying is that out of suffering can come growth and can come a growth that maybe would not have happened otherwise. They give many, many examples of people, they give examples of refugees, and holocaust survivors, and people that are in terrible accidents, and people that deal with unspeakable harm that take those experiences and use them to become stronger and to develop more compassion, more empathy, more awareness than they had before those events happened and they may not have developed those same characteristics had they happened.

Now I wanted to do this podcast, first of all, because I'm thinking about five of my students in particular, five who suffer from post-traumatic stress who have gone through unspeakable things that have come to me and told me how powerful my work has been for them because it doesn't keep them in the post-traumatic stress of retelling the story and re-experiencing it, but it helps them move into the post-traumatic growth piece of that. That yes, that happened to you and now what? Yes that happened to you and so what are you making it mean and what do you want to make it mean, and do you want to use that?

I do a lot of work with them on how they're telling the story of being a victim and if they want to continue to be victimized. We've done some really powerful work with our students. It is life altering, amazing work and it really helps me have so much confidence in the power of coaching. That's not to say that therapy and psychotherapy and even psychiatry isn't necessary in the beginning stages, but to get through the post-traumatic stress I think that's absolutely imperative, but after that work is done I think coaching can really help and the coaching techniques, don't necessarily need a life coach, a psychologist could do these same techniques, to move into the growth stage beyond the stressful part of the trauma.

That's one of the reasons why I really wanted to do this podcast was for an honor of those students of mine who have done this work and I also really want to offer it to those of us who maybe haven't gone

through something quite as traumatic as some of my students where their lives were threatened and they were in severe survival mode, but those of us who have gone through things that were incredibly painful and difficult and caused suffering and can we use these same techniques to move beyond those things, and for those of us who maybe haven't had a lot of trauma and want to use these techniques to grow without the trauma.

I really feel like this podcast is for everyone who wants to grow and any of us who have suffered we can use this work to move beyond it. One of the things that I had talked about, I think it was in my last podcast, was how I feel the suffering of the middle class woman who wants to lose weight I feel is deluded by her ability to pay her bills. The suffering seems less real, what do you have to suffer about? You have a roof over your head, you have plenty of food, you have clothes, you have children, you're married, you have a job, you have a car, your suffering can't be anywhere near as someone who is starving. I don't know that it's important to compare suffering but what I do know is that suffering is suffering and that we can create a really painful spiral of suffering that we can make even worse by our own judgment that we shouldn't be suffering.

Here's what I mean by that, if I am really struggling with my inability to stop overeating it seems like we call it a rich person problem, it seems a modern problem, so we talk about it in a way that maybe it shouldn't cause suffering. Whereas when someone is getting beaten and someone is in prison or someone's being tortured, their suffering is of course valid and maybe even more valid than someone who's going through an emotional suffering and you can't compare them. My solution to that is don't compare them, it's not important to compare suffering, suffering sucks, but what will we do with our suffering is what post-traumatic growth really adds, a terminology to this conversation.

It's important to focus on that suffering is real and if you've been through something horrible in your life your suffering is for sure real, but resilience is also real. Surviving is real, but super-surviving is impossible and one of the things that they say in this book is that lots of people bounce back from trauma and all the research in these books is really focused on those people and why did they bounce

back and how did they bounce back. They talk even further about some people that bounce forward, that even have a better life after the trauma, because of the trauma, because of the strength they developed by going through it, their life is then better.

It was one woman who talked about she had been in a car accident and became paralyzed from the chest down and one of the things that she says after this whole experience of going through the pain of that and after having been an athlete and having been very active in her life that if she could ... They asked her at the end if you could get back in that car would you? She said yes I would do it all again to have had the life that I've had. She would willingly be paralyzed again to be able to have the richness of the life that she had. I read that and I was stunned and obviously that wouldn't be necessary for her now but that experience for her instead of creating additional and long-term suffering actually made her life better.

The question becomes how do they do that? What is it that they do? What all of these books elude to is that they transform the meaning of their personal tragedies by making them basis for change, they develop their inner strength, they notice their value, they have an increased appreciation for life. All of the psychological gains, all of these psychological gains lead to the idea of post-traumatic growth. They revolutionize their lives and they transform their suffering. The idea is that trauma can lead to growth and transcendence.

Stephen Joseph who is the one that wrote the book What Doesn't Kill Us says this and I think this is a really interesting concept to hold in your mind for a minute. Trauma is not an illness to be helped by a doctor. I read that and went whoa, what does he mean by that? It's not an illness to be helped by a doctor trauma, it is something that is emotional, that we've experienced in our past and it effects us ongoing, the suffering is ongoing because of how we respond to it. Trauma can have negative implications and it does, but it also can have positive implications.

They say that post-traumatic stress can be the beginning of post-traumatic growth and not a definitive label of permanent mental illness. The paradigm shift that this offers us is amazing. I have a client that I'm thinking about who was abused sexually tremendously

for many years of her childhood and that's how she defined herself and is still struggling. One of the things that I had told her was, she always used to be afraid in her room that someone was coming as a child. One of the things I said to her is nobody's coming now, nobody's coming. For her, she had been playing the loop of somebody's coming, I need to be afraid, somebody's coming, I need to be afraid since she was a child that she had never acknowledged that that was a thought that she could now release, that was something that she could let go of. That level of awareness for how what happened to us becomes alive in us and continues to stay alive in us by the story we tell about it, and all of these stories talk about the narratives that we create to explain what happened to us.

We all need to cope in the aftermath of trauma and we need to cope when trauma is happening. I already spoke to the idea that avoidance is necessary until we're safe and ready because it prevents the psychological overwhelm that we wouldn't be able to handle, it gives us grace, the ability to avoid our emotion gives us grace. Obviously if we are sexually abused as children we cannot not avoid the psychological overwhelm of that, but when we are in a place where we are ready and capable as adults to be able to handle that trauma, which may be many years later, then we must do the work of non-avoidance. Because long-term avoidance creates ongoing stress, increased numbing and distraction behaviors, drinking, drugs, overeating.

So many of us are in long-term distraction techniques and we don't even realize it, we think we're just in life, but really we're distracting ourselves from our own traumas, our own experiences, our own suffering. For those of you who don't feel like you have anything traumatic in your life it's even worse for you because you're not even validating the experience that you may be trying to avoid. You may be further avoiding it by diminishing it in your mind, and it's really important to know that certain experiences for you could be just as psychologically debilitating as one's that would be on the top worst traumas in the world, you understand what I'm saying?

Being able to go back and say that was traumatic for me and acknowledge it and stop avoiding the feeling that it's creating can offer a lot, a lot of freedom. Long-term avoidance is the roadblock to

recovery and all it does is produce ongoing post-traumatic stress if it's never dealt with.

Trauma exposes our vulnerability and shakes us to our core. Locking into avoidance locks us into being victims where we feel hopeless and out of control which leads to more avoidance behavior. We have the option to change out of avoidance and overcome our trauma and victimhood, that is an option that's available to us, especially when we've arrived in a place where it's safe to do so. A lot of people that are locked into post-traumatic stress and locked into victimhood ask what happened to me and why did this happen? How could this happen? They replay it and they are defined by it. I've had so many people introduce themselves to me based on their trauma. I am a victim of, I am a survivor of, I have post-traumatic stress, that's how they lead the conversation, that's how they identify themselves, by what happened to them. Many times it was 10, 20, 30 years ago that this happened to them and they're still identifying by it.

Really important to know if that's you, are you telling a story and presenting with a story that happened to you many, many years ago and are you defining yourself by that story? Now, there's nothing wrong with defining yourself by something that happened to you as long as you like the way that you're being defined in your story. That's a huge question for many, many people. When you tell the story who are you in the story? Are you the victim or are you the super survivor, are you the person that overcame it, are you the hero of your own story despite or maybe even because of being a victim before? Are you continually victimizing yourself with your story about being a victim and emphasizing that to yourself, or have you moved beyond the stress of that experience by really getting some help with it and then moving onto okay yes, that did happen to me and now what? What will I create with my life and how will I do it? Being defined instead of by what someone else did to you or the experience that you have, but now being defined by what you will create and what you will contribute and what you will be in the world and how can you use that experience to get stronger and to grow?

I never would recommend that you'd have to look up the experience fondly or that you'd have to say oh yes I'm glad that happened. I'm not suggesting that at all, but what I am suggesting is that you can

look at that experience as an opportunity to become stronger, to overcome that, to build strength because of it. You cannot control what happened and you cannot control how you reacted in that moment now. When you argue that it shouldn't have happened or that you should have done something different, Byron Katie would say when you argue with reality you will lose, but only 100% of the time.

If you're constantly trying to rewrite the memory where you do something different in the situation or where the situation doesn't happen you will be caught in a web of post-traumatic stress over and over and over again. Reliving it, trying to make the outcome different which is impossible, but what you can do is you can control what you think about it now and how you choose to think about it now and you can control what happens next and what you do next.

The story you tell about it will be the story that you live about it. We have the power how we tell that story and how we tell that story matters. If we were victims of another person, that person doesn't get to tell that story for us. They don't get to define that story for us. They don't get to decide who's the victim of how I tell the story now. How I reacted in that moment and what happened to me gets to be defined by how I choose to define it, and if I choose to define it that I did something wrong and that I'm a victim and that I was hopeless and helpless and I still am, then that is the story I will continue to live. I love knowing that I have the power to tell that story any damn way I want now and I will tell it, and I will tell it in a way where maybe I didn't have the strength then and maybe that happened then because of the reasons that that happened then, but here's how I tell the meaning of that story now and I have my back.

I'm not going to throw myself to the wolves, I'm not going to say oh I did that wrong, I shouldn't have done that. I did what I did for the reasons that I had at the time, period. I wish I would have done it better doesn't serve me now. I did what I did and that I have my back on. I want you guys to think about if your best friend made a mistake and someone was criticizing them for it, you'd be like oh hell no, you're not going to talk to her like that, she had her reasons for doing that, it's none of your business, whatever. You would stand up for your friend, no matter what the mistake was you'd be like oh no, she's

amazing, she had her reasons for doing that, period. That's what we need to do for ourselves in the past. So many, many, many of my students wish they would have behaved differently and they weren't capable at the time, had we been capable at the time we would have done differently at the time, we weren't capable of it at the time and it's okay.

I'll tell you what I'm going to do now and I'm definitely not going to throw myself under the bus, I'm definitely not going to criticize myself, hell no, I'm not going to criticize myself for that situation that happened. I'm certainly not going to let it effect me negatively now. If anything it's going to make me stronger and more positive and more of an advocate for myself and that's available.

You have to ask yourself what do you want to give your brain juice to? You have a limited amount of energy in there, I like to call it brain juice, what are you going to give it to? Are you going to give it to that person that harmed you, are you going to give it to that memory? Are you going to give it to an explanation that makes you feel like a victim, or are you going to increase your awareness, your direction, what you choose to focus on and think about matters. What do you lead with when you meet someone? Do you lead with your damage, do you lead with your victim story, or are you a hero? Everybody wants there to be a hero, everybody loves to hear a story of super surviving. This happened to me but look at what I did with it, my experience and getting through that and the strength that it took me to get through that is the basis for everything I do. If I can get through that I can get through anything. I did that, I survived that, all of the pain around it I made it though that.

Now what can I do? Anything I damn well please. I can create anything in my life. I wouldn't have wished that on my worst enemy but it happened to me and it made me strong and now I'm going to roll. I am the hero of my story, I am the super survivor of my story, here is my post-traumatic growth story. I want to have a post-traumatic growth story. Our of my struggle, my painful struggle with myself, with my weight, with hating myself, with all that loathing, I turn that around and found a way where I know I have a deeper relationship with myself then I ever would have had had I not had that struggle. Had I not had that pain I would have never found a way to

be present with myself, to listen to myself, to have intimacy with my own thoughts in my mind, to care about my own growth. If I hadn't had the struggle to want to look good in a bikini, I'm so thankful for that struggle now.

I will tell you there was some real suffering that was associated with some real thoughts of suicide and thoughts of not wanting to live and deep, dark, guttural pain and cry and shame and loathing, all of that was there and present for me. Because of it, not in spite of it, but because of it I'm so much stronger now. I really do feel like hey, I made it through that, bring it on, bring on failure in business, bring on any kind of financial situation, I got this. I'm not afraid of the world. I feel like I am strong because of the work that I've had to do and how important is this story in your life? This trauma, how important do you want it to be center stage?

I have some people that come to me that present with their childhood abuse and that is the main stage in their life and I have people that mention it in passing as if it's no big deal. It's fascinating to me to see how people tell their stories differently, and I don't think there's a right or a wrong way to tell your story, I think you should do it consciously, you should decide. I don't think you should say this is my story so I have to present with this. My brother passed away and my father passed away when I was young, younger I should say and my mom lost a son and she very rarely talks about it. There are other people that have lost children that's what they always lead with and I don't think one is right, I don't think one is wrong, I think that the intention behind it matters.

If the reason why someone wants to talk about it is they want to keep the memory of their child alive and they feel really good about that amazing. If every time they bring it up they identify as a victim and feel terrible then that's something to consider. Just like your reasons for why your story is center stage or why it isn't. Are you hiding something because you're ashamed of it or are you talking about something because you're so identified as a victim?

How do we cope with post-traumatic stress and do we prolong it with destructive avoidance? Ask yourself those questions and answer them honestly. Do you feel revenge, hostility, are you emotionally

closing down, or do you get support? Tell your truthful story in a factual way to someone who cares and can hold the space and allow the pain to be there. I would say that story probably needs to be re-experienced fully one time for sure, maybe a couple. The story does not need to be re-experienced for years and years and years. It doesn't need to be retold in therapy for years and years and years, and in fact when my clients come to me and they've had a post-traumatic situation and they have already had therapy for it, I don't even need to know the story, I don't think it's useful to hear it. I want to know what they think about it now.

When we acknowledge how we feel and what we are thinking and how that is separate from the facts, we can really see how much control we have. That's one of my favorite things to do, is to show a client here are the facts of what happened to you, everything else is optional. Every thought you have about yourself, every thought you have about your perpetrator, every thought you have about what it means, every thought you have about the circumstance is all changeable and optional. None of that has to stay the same, it's the most amazing paradigm shift for people to be able to understand that.

The process of understanding how to process pain and release it is imperative and many people would never learn how to do this had it not been for trauma. To be able to truly experience pain and then let it go and there's physical pain associated with a lot of trauma, there's emotional terror associated with a lot of trauma and then there's all the stories we tell afterward that make the trauma worse. Decide how to tell the story and then create a future that builds on the strength it took to overcome the trauma.

Human beings have a natural impulse to grow psychologically, but it may be a long road from the trauma, professional help is tremendous but progress is so important to monitor and continue to make sure you're making progress. There's a difference between spinning in your story and calling it healing, retelling your story and calling that healing, hiding and calling that healing, those are all things that my students and clients and I have done. I need to take care of myself, I need to spin in this painful web of this story versus going out into the world and creating what you want to create from the ashes and be willing to face a new kind of fear, a new kind of pain that's different

from the pain that you maybe have been recycling.

There's a beautiful example that they use in one of the books where it talks about a vase and it's a beautiful vase and this is your life before a trauma. Trauma is the taking of the vase and shattering it on the ground. Post-traumatic stress is the recognition that everything is shattered, and the attempt to put that vase back together the way it was, the idea and the argument that it shouldn't have happened and that the vase should go back to the way it was which is incredibly difficult to recreate, to put those pieces back together in a way that is as it was before the trauma is next to impossible. When you think about taking all of those shards and making a new mosaic, making a new experience that is as beautiful because it has all the same ingredients, but maybe is even stronger afterwards is the path to post-traumatic growth.

They talk a lot about how when people argue that that shouldn't have happened to them, they talk a lot about how we have an unrealistic sense that we are safe in the world and that only good things will happen to us. When you look at the statistics of how many people die of cancer, how many people get in car accidents, how many people suffer tremendous hardships in their life chances are that will happen to us, but none of us think about that, thank goodness we have an unrealistic view of the world that we should be happy all the time. Then when something so traumatic happens to us it shatters all of our optimism temporarily.

In certain cases if you're trying to put that vase back exactly the way it was it can shatter it permanently if you're committed to making sure that it has to be back the way it was. If you can look at everything and say okay, I'm going to rebuild this in a new way I will never be the same again and that's okay. I can be a different version of myself, a stronger version of myself because of this and then you can take that vase and put it into a new mosaic and create that for yourself. It does take work to do it and takes creativity, but that can be available to us if we recognize it.

There's the story before the trauma, there's the trauma and then there's the story after the trauma. How you tell the story that accommodates that trauma and doesn't deny it and doesn't avoid it

and doesn't pretend that it isn't there, but includes it in a way that makes you feel strong and makes that experience part of your foundation that you build on can be incredibly powerful.

Here are the suggestions that they make. Seek out positive people and ideas, have a problem solving attitude, seek meaning from the struggle and create a new kind of fulfillment. One of the examples talked about the difference between the happiness that she had before the trauma and the fulfillment she had after and how the fulfillment she had after was such a deeper feeling for her. We know that we can create and seek deeper meanings in our life and often a trauma will and can help that process, that we can acknowledge that we've been through something traumatic, we can take the time to heal it and then we can have post-traumatic growth.

I hope for all of you that are listening to this that have had trauma in their life will take this very seriously, this is a game changer. I highly recommend you pick up the books and read them and I'd love to hear your experiences in the comments. If you are someone that has had trauma in their life that has made it through successfully and your life is better because of it, it doesn't matter what the trauma is, you don't have to have some vilified trauma, it can be, I would love to hear about it. You can go to [lifecoachschool.com/112](http://lifecoachschool.com/112) and I'll be very excited to read about your trauma and I hope this was really helpful for you guys.

If you're interested in taking this work to a deeper level and you want to work with me for two days in July, make sure you go to [lifecoachschool.com](http://lifecoachschool.com), go to our training page and check out our advanced upcoming training. Everybody is invited, if you'd like to come we are going to take all this work you're learning in the podcast to the next level. I hope to see you there. Have a wonderful week everyone, I'll talk to you next week, bye bye.

Thank you for listening to the Life Coach School Podcast. It is my honor to show up here every week and connect with people that are like minded, wanting to take their life to a deeper level with more awareness and more consciousness. If you are interested in taking this work to the next level I highly encourage you to go to the [lifecoachschool.com/howtofeelbetteronline](http://lifecoachschool.com/howtofeelbetteronline). It is there that I have a

class that will take all of this to a deeper application where you'll be able to really feel and experience how all of these concepts can start showing up in your life. It's one thing to learn it intellectually, it's another thing to truly apply it to your life. I will see you there, thanks again for listening.