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Uncovering Post Traumatic Growth Among Survivors of Sex Trafficking: What Counselors Need to Know?



Priscilla Rose Prasath, PhD; Devon E. Romero, PhD; Claudia G. Interiano-Shiverdecker, PhD;
John J. S. Harrichand, PhD; & Leslie Garza Mendoza, MS

UTSA
The University of Texas at San Antonio
Department of Counseling
College of Education and Human Development

Post Traumatic Growth & Sex Trafficking

- Some individuals experience positive psychological transformations in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, referred to as Post Traumatic Growth (PTG).
- PTG includes improved relationships, new possibilities for one's life, a greater appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength, and spiritual development.
- Among trauma survivors, such as those who may have experienced sex trafficking, exploration of PTG using a grounded theory approach may offer a perspective to counselors while offering strengths-based support toward promoting holistic wellbeing.

(Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006)

Sex Trafficking in the United States –

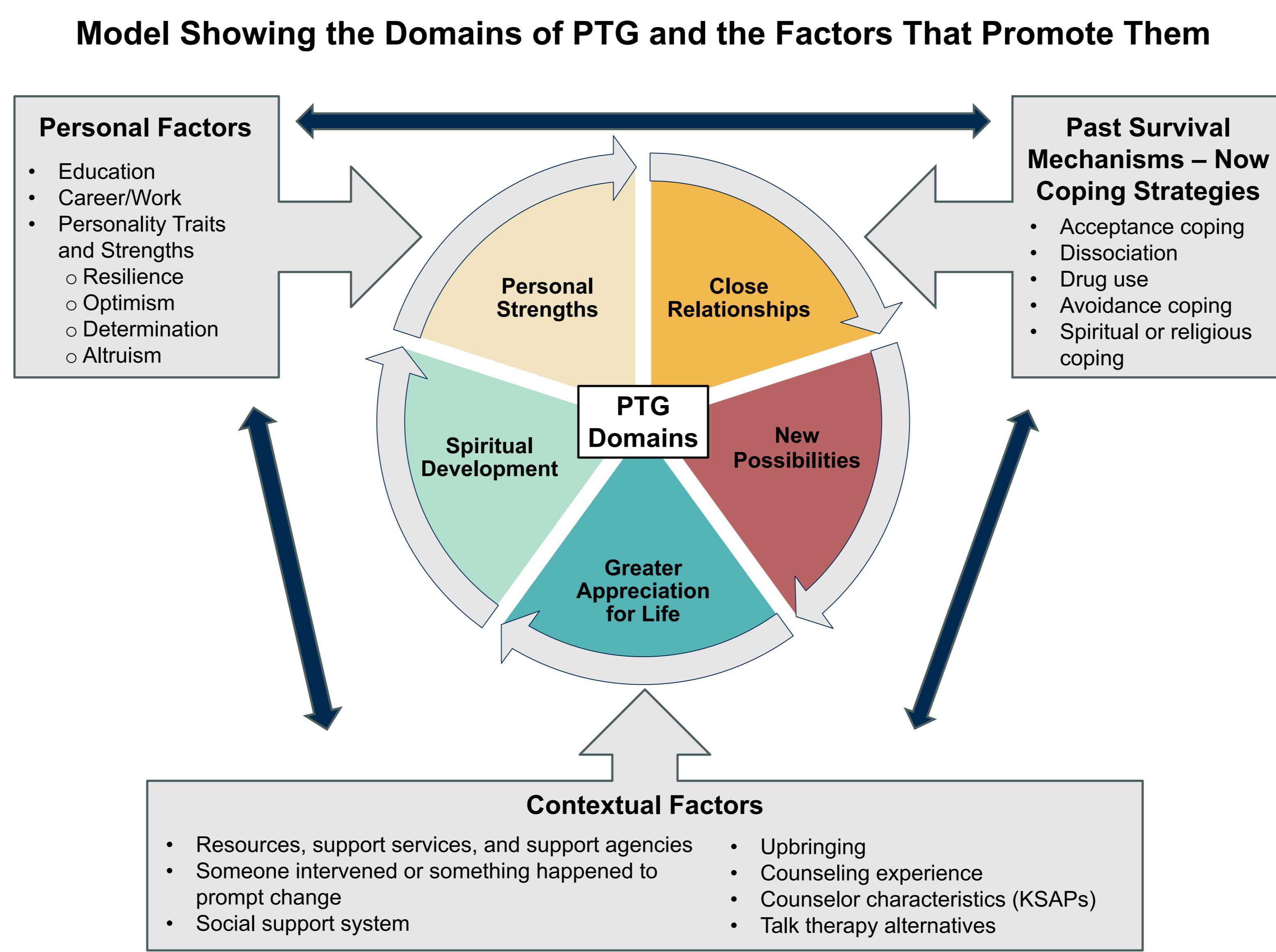
- A commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or when the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.
- 6.3 million people are estimated to be trapped in forced sexual exploitation globally on any given day.
- The United States is listed among the top three countries of origin of victims along with Mexico and Honduras.
- Multidimensional Impact: psychological, physical, vocational, relational, and spiritual.

(Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2024)

Methods

- Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
- 10 Survivors of Sex Trafficking
- All women from 30 - 42 years of age
 - 8 White
 - 1 American Indian/Alaskan Native
 - 1 Black
- Individual Interviews ($M = 80.9$ minutes)
- Data Analysis followed Smith et al.'s (2009) Guidelines

Findings



Domains of PTG	Subthemes
Personal Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Warrior and Survivor Mindset Goal Focused and hard Working Self-Awareness Optimistic & Confident Personality Empathy and Forgiveness
Greater Appreciation for Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A Sense of Acceptance and Gratitude Positive Reframed Perspective Toward Life and Self
New Possibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wanting to Make a Difference Pursuing a New Career Path as An Advocacy Agent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To Educate and Train Other Professionals To Empower Other Survivors
Close Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A Few Close Family and Friends vs. No Close Relationships Out of Choice Seeking Community Support
Spiritual Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meaning Making of Experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attributing God to One's Healing Considering Oneself as Spiritual Now Engaging in Spiritual Practices Follower of a Religion Now Neither Religious Nor Spiritual Now

Implications for Counselors

- When working with ST survivors, counselors need to explore the trauma's impact, considering both the negative (e.g., pathological, deficits) and positive growth and resilience areas.
- The findings underscore the importance of adopting a strengths-based approach to counseling, one that celebrates the resilience and personal strengths of ST survivors as they navigate the path toward healing and empowerment.
- Factors promoting PTG can be broadly classified into internal and external factors, along with coping mechanisms that encompass both.
- It is important to note that ST survivors may have developed coping strategies that initially served as survival mechanisms, resulting in what may be exhibited as a blend of healthy and unhealthy behaviors.
- Through a trauma-informed approach that respects survivors' coping mechanisms and fosters a safe space for exploration and healing, counselors can empower survivors to navigate their trauma, cultivate resilience, and embark on a journey of PTG.

(Henson et al., 2021; Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005)

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