

# Resiliency after trauma can influence growth

Talking it out can be helpful

By JOSHUA NORMAN  
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Frank was diagnosed with schizophrenia when he was a teenager, struggled with treatment for decades, lost his apartment and most of his worldly possessions to Hurricane Katrina, then watched his father die from heart failure almost immediately thereafter, and is feeling much better and more secure today than he has in a long time.

Frank, who asked that his real name not be used in this story, is exemplary of growing through and in spite of trauma, an experience which many psychologists call post-traumatic growth.

"I feel more relaxed and less stressed in my day-to-day life," Frank said in a recent interview. "The Katrina thing did have a much more powerful effect on not just me but my whole family than I thought about while I was going through it. The single greatest thing that has helped me work through the stress and be devoid of any more of it is the fact that I began to talk my way through it."

While many psychologists and academics have focused for years on the negative reactions to traumas like disasters and wars, recently some have focused on what happens to people like Frank.

There are many ways you can improve yourself after a traumatic event, said Richard Tedeschi, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, who is one of the nation's experts on PTG. However, fostering personal

**WEB EXTRA**  
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growth after a traumatic event is a mysterious art at best, as Frank's example illustrates.

"That's not a question that's been very well answered at this point," said Tedeschi, adding that relative to those focusing on the negative effects of trauma, academics and psychologists studying PTG like him are very few. "There's been very little focus on how to turn this into something productive. You can't be formulaic about it. (It's important to) distinguish between the event and the aftermath of the event. For example, you can't say to a person, 'It's a good thing that (something horrible happened to you) given the growth afterward.'"

There are five main areas of personal growth that people talk about after traumatic events, Tedeschi said. They are spiritual growth, improved sense of self, enhanced relationships, a general appreciation of the value of life, and being set on a positive new life course or new life path.

In Frank's case, he experienced a little bit of all those things after Katrina.

"I think generally speaking, the innate nature of his illness never goes away," said Will, Frank's brother, whose name has also been changed for this story. "I think overall, in his own way, I think it gave him a pretty good perspective. Now that it's all said and done, he realizes things are pretty comfortable. The everyday little challenges that he's got, he realizes that we're not really

overall in such bad shape."

Hurricane Katrina forced many people like Frank to see the world from a broader perspective, said Jeff Bennett, director of Gulf Coast Mental Health Center, the sliding-scale mental health treatment provider serving all of Harrison and Hancock counties.

"I have seen a number of people experience growth by living through that," Bennett said. "They get a sense of confidence and self-reliance they didn't have."

In the mental health field, treatment providers walk a fine line between getting people to grow themselves and forcing their personal growth, Bennett said.

"We develop these safety nets for them and sometimes I worry if we seriously overdo it," Bennett said. "You certainly don't want people to suffer to the point that they're in constant mental pain, but life has suffering in it. Many of the patients surprise themselves (with their PTG.)"

The term resiliency has been tossed around a lot on the Coast post-Katrina, Bennett said, not entirely coincidentally.

"Those are kind of connected, resiliency and growth — not giving up, hanging tough," Bennett said.

Frank said he agrees, adding that getting there may be hard, but the path to personal improvement is available to everyone.

"It's simple: Talk about it," Frank said. "It can open a lot of doors."

*Joshua Norman is a Media Fellow with the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation studying post-Katrina mental health issues.*

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# Minnesota helpers heading down

Group will be staying at Camp Victory during trip

By NATALIE CHAMBERS NETTLES  
SUN HERALD

**OCEAN SPRINGS** — A bus load of Minnesotans will make the trek to the Gulf Coast this week to continue Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

"This is our seventh trip. The maximum we can bring is 47," the Rev. Ed Wheatley, pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Stacy, Minn., said by telephone Friday.

"We are working with Camp Victory in Ocean Springs, supported by the Lutheran Disaster Relief. They give us a dormitory to stay in and food, and we go out and work. In the course of five days, we will spend 40 hours helping to rebuild people's lives and homes," Wheatley said.

Their mission is to continue assisting the Gulf Coast — Mississippi and Louisiana — until rebuilding efforts are completed, he said.

"There are over 500 (Mississippi) families still asking for Sheetrock, taping, painting and for work. We imagine we will be doing this for a couple more years until nobody else needs help," Wheatley said.

The Katrina relief group also will bring gifts of food supplies to restock the pantry at Camp Victor, which continues to assist the needy.

"We can't imagine what (Gulf Coast) went through. It is a small part to say we are willing to help. I have seen tornadoes and floods but trust me, the devastation that I saw there is enough to keep me motivated for years to come," Wheatley said.

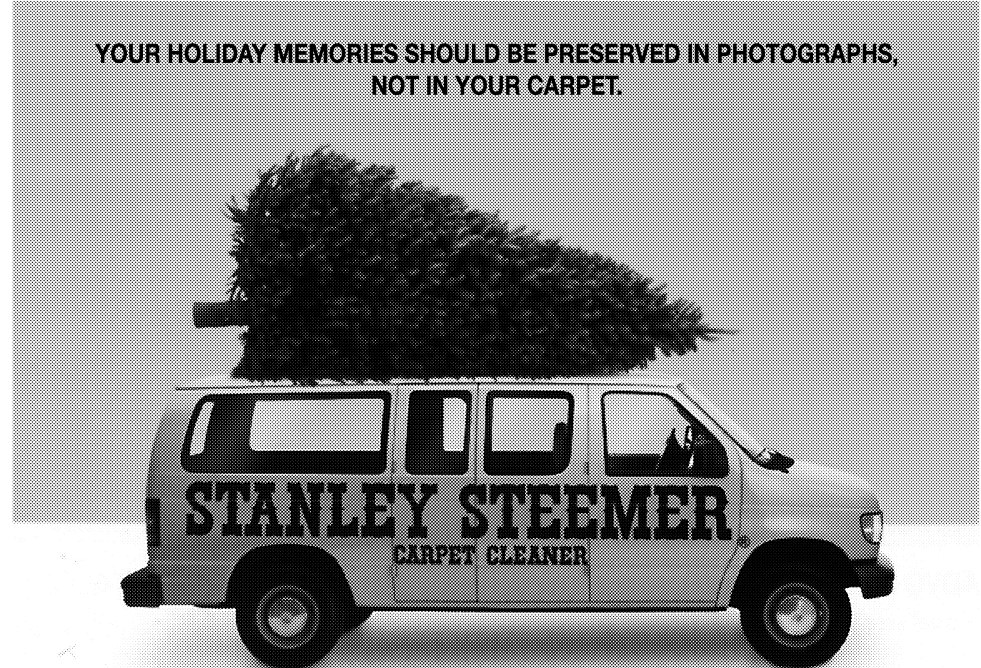
The volunteers will consist of skilled and unskilled workers, 16 years and older.

"This is a bad economy and we have a lot of laborers who are not working right now," he said. "We have people who can't come on their own but they are giving money to sponsor other people. It costs \$299 for the bus, food and lodging."

Approximately 212 people come from across the United States, each week, to donate time to Camp Victory, Wheatley said.

Supplies and tools are provided by Camp Victory.

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