CHAPTER - 5
DISCUSSION

The present study aims to explore Posttraumatic Distress, Sense of Coherence, Wisdom and Cognitive Emotion Regulation as correlates of Posttraumatic Growth in victims of trauma.

Hypothesis 1 of the study proposed a positive relationship between posttraumatic distress and posttraumatic growth. The results supported the hypothesis and we found that posttraumatic growth does have a significant positive correlation (0.313, p<0.01) with posttraumatic distress. Results denoted that as the levels of distress experienced by trauma in individuals increase so does the growth intensity.

Similar findings have been reported by Park et al. (2008) while examining coping and emotional reactions as mediators of the effect of traumatic event on both PTG and posttraumatic distress. Results validated moderate positive relation between PTG and posttraumatic distress. Also it is seen that Solomon and Dekel (2007) who thought growth to co-exist with distress positively i.e. higher the distress, more the growth.

Kashdan and Kane (2011) found evidence to imply that individuals reporting greater distress and low reliance on experiential avoidance post trauma, demonstrate greatest growth and meaning in life. People who heavily rely on experiential avoidance and post traumatic distress reported minimal levels of growth, not accounting for number of traumatic events reported.
Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) also noted that distress and growth coexist and in fact, elevated levels of initial distress are sometimes thought to be an essential factor in promoting later growth. After a trauma the initial levels of distress trigger the process of reorganization of self system. When an individual is willing to be in contact with distressing feelings, images, thoughts, they all serve as catalysts for growth after trauma. Anxious confrontations and confusions from trauma reminders might help an individual to interpret traumatic experiences in a special meaningful way, integrating experience to form a coherent world and in due course permit a personal narrative eventually leading to benefit-finding and growth (Lepore, Ragan & Jones, 2000).

Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) theory of growth can also be used to provide an explanation for the results obtained in the current study. The three fundamental assumptions proposed by Janoff-Bulman include: the world is benevolent; the world is meaningful; and the self is worthy. Such assumptions provide individuals with a sense of security and safety. Janoff-Bulman (1992, 2006) suggests that before experiencing a traumatic or life changing event, the world is considered a safe and just place. Traumatic events call into question one’s assumptive world and threaten the sense of meaning in life, including self concept, comprehensibility, and meaningfulness of one’s assumptive world. Following a traumatic event it is hypothesized that instead of assuming the world is predictive and controllable, the world becomes dangerous, unsafe, and unpredictable. Following traumatic events, subsequently, individuals attempt to rebuild their assumptions and their shattered beliefs about the world. The reconstructed assumptions may be different than their pre-event assumptions about the world. The symptoms of distress following trauma
maybe in response to the shattering of one’s assumptive world and a lost sense of meaning.

PTG outcome models reflect several common themes, including the idea that in order for PTG to be perceived an event must reach acutely critical level, enough to challenge one’s assumptive notions about life. The associations between posttraumatic distress and posttraumatic growth have been emphasized in the related literature. However, the pathways from distress to growth are not very clear. The strongest justification that I find is that the experienced distress tends to keep the victims in active contact with the trauma. Absence or low levels of distress might lead to experiential avoidance, thus making growth more unlikely to occur.

Posttraumatic Distress consists of three clusters i.e. Avoidance, Intrusion and Hyperarousal. A regression analysis of the data determined Hyperarousal to have a significant role in predicting PTG. Findings of the current study are in line with Dekel, Ein-Dor and Solomon (2012), accordingly it is the emotional arousal in response to trauma which drives PTG. Hyperarousal as a cluster of distress includes response sets like anger, hyper vigilance, difficulty in concentrating, irritability, heightened startle, etc. (Solomon et al. 2009).

However, contrary findings have been reported by cross-sectional studies showing association between PTG and intrusive thinking. In their model of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1998) suggests that re-experiencing the trauma leads to subsequent growth. Possibly, when an individual is in a hyperaroused alert state, one tends to actively connect with the world, take part in activities happening around rather than socially withdraw oneself and engage in
avoidant behaviors. Consecutively, an individual may begin a process of re-assessing his life goals, ambitions and relationships which might actually facilitate growth. Moreover, as hyperarousal is mostly the first response to any trauma and can be considered as PTSD, symptoms set in motion the later growth outcomes, including PTG.

Hypothesis 2 of the study proposed a positive relationship between sense of coherence and posttraumatic growth. The results supported the hypothesis and we found that posttraumatic growth does have a significant positive correlation (0.542, p<0.01) with sense of coherence. Results implied that more the individual discovers and assigns meaning to a particular traumatic event, higher will be the individual’s level of growth post trauma.

Comparable findings have been reported by Forstmeier et. al. (2009) who examined PTG and its predictors social acknowledgment as survivors, sense of coherence (SOC) and trauma severity. Results suggested that recognition as a survivor by significant others (SAQ) and SOC remained the only significant predictors of PTG.

Similar findings have also been reported by Aguirre (2008) that bereaved individual’s ability to make sense of the loss have lead to higher posttraumatic growth behavior. When an individual appraises the traumatic situation in a positive manner it leads to growth in that individual, as appraisal is an important feature of any post trauma event.
The findings of the current study can also be explained in light of Stress and Coping Model, one of the Process Models of PTG (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The model talks about two types of appraisal an individual does while facing a traumatic event in life. Primary appraisal occurs when a person gives importance to a particular person – environment transaction. Secondary appraisal occurs when the individual evaluates the traumatic event and thinks about the possible outcomes i.e. coping process. Appraisal of the person environment interaction helps the trauma victim to make a sense of the stressful situation. Making sense is a coping process by which individuals are likely to engage in appraisal and tend to seek meaning.

Further regression analysis determined that out of the three dimensions of SOC, meaningfulness emerged to be the most important predictor of post traumatic growth. Findings of the current study are consistent with the views of Forstmeier et. al. (2009) and Znoj (1999), suggesting that individuals are more likely to experience growth and find meaning in traumatic events when they have a universal conviction of a meaningful world. Moreover, individuals who have a general conviction of a meaningful world are more expected to discover meaning in their traumatic experiences so as to lessen cognitive dissonance.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) proposed that an individual tries to search for meaning in two ways after a traumatic event has occurred in their lives. Firstly, by exploring meaning in the traumatic event itself and asking why it had to occur in their lives. Secondly, by searching for meaning in their lives when the individual’s world view gets disrupted due to the traumatic event. Therefore search for meaning
might lead to benefit finding or post traumatic growth. Aguirre (2008) also supported that meaning making is positively correlated with post traumatic growth.

The findings can be explained with the help of Meaning-Making Coping Process Model (Park & Folkman, 1997) which identifies global and situation meaning making as related to post traumatic growth behavior in an individual. Individuals when faced with a traumatic life event respond to them by altering the meaning of the appraised situation to fit in with their global meaning which includes their beliefs, basic goals and assumptions about their world. Situational meaning refers to “the interaction of a person’s global beliefs and goals and the circumstances of a particular person environment transaction”. (Park & Folkman, 1997; p. 121). Individuals also find meaning by changing their pre-existing beliefs and views to integrate with the traumatic event. Schorr and Roemer’s study (2002) as quoted by Zoellner and Maercker (2006) says that individuals who were engaged in search for meaning are more likely to report posttraumatic growth behavior.

Meaningfulness as the most important predictor of PTG can also be seen in light of Benefit-Finding as a Selective Evaluation given by Taylor, Wood and Lichtman (1983). As stated by them the processes involved in selective evaluation of a specific traumatic life changing event decrease the sense of victimization when the trauma victim focuses on the gains rather than the losses. Benefit finding as a selective evaluation process is based upon discovering important meaning and reason behind the traumatic experience, visualizing situations to be more adverse than they already are and making comparisons with the less privileged ones. These selective appraisals are presumed to assist individuals re-establish their personal
ideals and treasured convictions about themselves as valuable and view their world as relatively secure, comprehensible and meaningful.

The results of the current study lend support to SOC as a predictor of PTG with meaningfulness contributing maximum variance in the prediction of PTG.

Hypothesis 3 of the study proposed a positive relationship between wisdom and posttraumatic growth. The results supported the hypothesis and we found that posttraumatic growth does have a significant positive correlation (0.461, p<0.01) with wisdom. Results denoted that as an individual grows wiser, the likelihood of PTG increases.

While reviewing the literature on wisdom as a variable for my study, in spite of the fact that I did not find any empirical researches suggesting a direct link between wisdom and PTG, I was guided by the basic nature of wisdom as the expertise of an individual in the basics of life. Wisdom assumes a “high level of knowledge about life issues; a high level of procedural knowledge regarding life's problems; superior contextual understanding; superior understanding regarding differences in values and priorities; and a high level of understanding regarding life's unpredictability, as well as the capacity to deal with uncertainty” (Baltes & Smith, 1990, p.21). The positive relationship between wisdom and PTG lends support to the theoretical pathway that the ability of applying knowledge to the everyday situations of life (wisdom) opens avenues of growth (PTG) when faced with challenging life events.
Sternberg (1990) while studying wisdom in relation to intelligence and creativity, conceptualized wisdom as the superior ability to understand life’s concepts and deal with them prudently. Wisdom endows on a person the ability to develop one’s own strength, acquire insight of one’s own failures and setbacks and then learn how to rise above them efficiently. The nature of PTG corresponds well with the above conceptualization of wisdom. According to Sternberg (1990) wisdom leads to metacognition in individuals which helps them to be aware of “what they know and what they don't know, as well as the limits of what can and cannot be known”. This metacognitive style can probably be helpful in accepting and coping with ambiguity in life and foster an understanding of traumatic events which is more holistic in nature and enhances human growth. As stated by Sternberg in his wisdom model, ‘a wise person goes through a process that may resemble high levels of moral decision making. First, the person is challenged by a real-life dilemma that activates the reasoning abilities. This leads to his or her use of available tacit knowledge in balancing interests and generating wise responses. The person striving to be wise then examines possible responses to determine the extent to which solutions require adaptation to the environmental and cultural context, shaping of the environment to fit the solutions or selection of a new environment where the solutions might work. Finally, if balance is achieved, then the common good is addressed with the proposed solution.’

Considering Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) model of posttraumatic growth, PTG can lead to major change in life narrative development. The model also points out to the mutual influence of PTG and general wisdom, thus supporting the view
that wisdom may direct subsequent growth. More research is required to confirm the directionality of the wisdom- posttraumatic growth relationship.

Further regression analysis determined cognitive and affective dimensions of wisdom share the maximum amount of variance in predicting PTG. According to Sternberg’s framework, in face of trauma the victim can be expected to experience PTG if he applies wisdom to regain the balance in cognitive and affective domains of life. The indirect pathways between wisdom and PTG have yet to be researched. Wisdom as a predictor variable of PTG has a huge potential for research.

Hypothesis 4 of the study proposed a significant relationship between cognitive emotion regulation and posttraumatic growth. From the results it can be implied that blaming others and acceptance were significant negative predictors of PTG, while catastrophizing significantly positively predicted PTG. Results implied that specific cognitive emotion strategies would predict growth related behavior in an individual.

Similar findings have also been reported by Garnefski et. al. (2008) that besides personality and psychological health, cognitive coping strategies play a significant role in determining PTG. Hussain and Bhushan (2011) examined PTG and PTS with the mediation effect brought by cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Results reported that strategies like putting into perspective and acceptance partially mediated the association between posttraumatic stress and traumatic experience. Other strategies like refocus on planning, catastrophizing, positive refocusing and putting into perspective acted as partial mediators in the association between traumatic experience and PTG.
Park et al. (2008) while examining coping and emotional reactions as mediators of the effects of trauma on both PTG and Posttraumatic Distress validated moderate positive relation between PTG and Posttraumatic distress. But the pathways from coping and emotions to the outcomes showed dissimilarity. While positive coping and anger were more strongly related to PTG, on the other hand pathways of coping and depression were strongly related to Posttraumatic Distress.

The role of cognition in the regulation of emotions is not a new thought. In the face of stressful events it is very common to have thoughts which help to keep a check on the emotional arousal (Garnefski et al. 2001). In the present study blaming others is a significant negative predictor of PTG. Blaming others refers to a thought pattern which aims at blaming the environment or others for the traumatic experience. This probably leads to avoidance and an easy escape from the emotional arousal caused by the aftermath of trauma. Thus, trauma victims who tend to shift the blame outside are less likely to experience post trauma distress which is the prerequisite for experiencing PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The negative relation between blaming others and PTG can be explained on the basis of the necessity of being involved and undergoing the emotional upheaval to experience PTG.

Putting into perspective is suggestive of cognitively reducing the gravity of the event by looking at it in relation to the other events. Putting into perspective can be related to increased levels of adaptation as it might help the individual by looking at the traumatic event as only a part of the larger picture. This line of thought can be utilized to explain the findings of my study which shows a positive relationship between this coping strategy and PTG.
One unexpected finding of my study is the positive correlation of positive refocusing and refocus on planning with PTG. Positive refocusing refers to thinking about positive and pleasant events instead of focusing on the actual traumatic event. Refocus on Planning refers to thinking about what are the measures to be taken and how to handle the traumatic event. Research has shown that this strategy leads to an individual’s well being as it distracts the mind from the actual traumatic event leading to lower posttraumatic distress (Endler & Parker 1990; Garnefski et al. 2001) thus helping in focusing on the future events and planning for a better life ahead.

Positive reappraisal refers to thoughts of finding meaning in the traumatic event that helps an individual to grow positively stronger amidst the aftermath of trauma. Previous researches have consistently indicated a positive correlation between coping strategies like reappraisals, positive appraisals, benefit finding and PTG. Furthermore, positive reappraisal cognitive emotion strategy is linked with construct of meaning making and search for meaning. This is in line with the findings of our current study as well. When an individual appraises the traumatic situation in a positive manner it leads to growth in that individual, as appraisal is an important feature of any post trauma event. This can be supported by the Stress and Coping Model, one of the Process Models of PTG (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) which talks about two types of appraisal an individual does while facing a traumatic event in life. Primary appraisal occurs when a person gives importance to a particular person – environment transaction. Secondary appraisal occurs when the individual evaluates the traumatic event and thinks about the possible outcomes i.e. coping process. Positive coping strategies when used along with other active coping
strategies like positive reappraisal, refocus on planning, putting into perspective would lead to better growth in an individual.

Another cognitive coping strategy i.e. rumination and catastrophizing positively predict PTG in the current study. Rumination refers to the focus on thoughts associated with the traumatic event. It is one of the common cognitive emotion regulation strategy used across all age groups (Garnefski & Kraijj, 2006). Catastrophizing refers to thoughts of explicitly highlighting the traumatic event. This finding is unexpected as previous studies (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema, McBride & Larson, 1997; Tait & Silver, 1989) have shown that both are positively related with higher levels of distress and mental ill-health following trauma. Both as cognitive coping strategies maybe expected to lead to increased levels of distress. Firstly by forcing the individual to focus upon and magnify the negative impact of the traumatic event. Secondly, by reducing the capability of the individual to indulge in negative thinking which might facilitate problem solving. However, it should be remembered that the sample in the current study is not utilizing any coping strategy in isolation. All the strategies are being used simultaneously and more research is required before anything can be clearly stated about the functionality of various combinations of cognitive emotion regulation strategies.

The findings can be explained with the help of Taylor’s Cognitive Adaptation Theory (1983). According to the cognitive adaptation model, traumatic events lead individuals to search for meaning in the experience, in an attempt to restore a sense of mastery over the event and life more generally, and engage in self-
enhancing evaluations in an effort to regain a sense of self-esteem. The theory posits that when individuals experience challenging life events, they respond in cognitively adaptive ways to help them return to or exceed their previous level of psychological functioning. Under this theory individuals search for meaning in an effort to gain mastery and enhance the self. In the context of PTG, self enhancement occurs by individuals’ construing personal benefit from their experience.

The present study attempted to study the correlates of Posttraumatic Growth on trauma victims. From the above discussion it can be concluded that significant positive correlation was seen between Posttraumatic growth and Posttraumatic Distress, Sense of Coherence, Wisdom, Cognitive Emotion Regulation. Meaningfulness, an important dimension of Sense of Coherence was found to be the most significant predictor of Posttraumatic Growth. Hyperarousal (posttraumatic distress), cognitive, affective (wisdom), blaming others, acceptance, catastrophizing (cognitive emotion regulation) were found to be important predictors of posttraumatic growth. Some of the findings are in line with previous studies and some do not completely agree with the existing literature. The efforts to empirically understand PTG and related phenomena are too recent for the findings to converge on a single point of understanding. There is a need to investigate the mediating and moderating influences of the various related phenomena especially within the Indian context.