Chapter 1
Introduction: What Are the True Benefits of Adversity?

One of the first author's favorite television shows of recent times has been the Netflix comedy *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. Part of the reason why he enjoyed the show so much is that it tells the story of an irrepressible young woman, played by Elle Kemper, who survived a 15-year imprisonment by a cult and begins a new life in New York with resilience and optimism. One scene in the first series has stayed with him since he first binge-watched the series. In the third episode, the title character asks a senile World War II veteran: "Do you think going through something like that, a war or whatever, makes you a better person, or deep down does it just make you bitter and angry?"

This book is in part a considered response to that question. Is ill-being the only outcome we can expect following tragedy and trauma? Can enduring significant failure and adversity in fact change your character in truly meaningful ways? Many people's intuition on the question suggests that perhaps yes, our character could be strengthened. This intuition was shared by St. Paul, who wrote that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5: 3–5). Moreover, "That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger" is ubiquitous enough a meme that you could attribute it to Kanye West, Kelly Clarkson or (originally) the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In addition, we admire people who are seen to have triumphed over adversity in achieving laudable moral goals. For example, icons such as Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King are known as much for their life struggles as they are for their heroism.

As it turns out, this phenomenon has a name in the psychological literature. While others have explored the idea of gaining strength through adversity beforehand, the psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) coined the term *posttraumatic growth* to capture the positive psychological changes they had witnessed as clinical psychologists among their patients who were coming to terms with traumatic life events. They found that people often reported experiencing positive changes since these events occurred; for example, people reported feeling better connected to the people around them and taking more pleasure in the small things in life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004).

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Many researchers agree that the positive transformations in beliefs and behavior can be manifested in at least five forms: improved relations with others, identification of new possibilities for one's life, increased perception of personal strength, spiritual growth, and enhanced appreciation of life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). Since Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) initial work that led to the development of a scale measuring posttraumatic growth, there has been a marked interest in the study of the construct and its presumed associated mental and physical health benefits (Jayawickreme and Blackie 2014). Current research indicates that posttraumatic growth is widely reported. In fact, longitudinal research indicates that the phenomenon is fairly common, with 58–83 % of survivors reporting positive change in at least some domains of their lives (Sears et al. 2003; McMillen et al. 1997; Affeck et al. 1987, 1991). Theories of posttraumatic growth view the experienced trauma as the catalyst for fostering lasting personal growth. For example, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) note: "The individual has not only survived, but has experienced changes that are viewed as important, and that go beyond what was the previous status quo. Posttraumatic growth is not simply a return to baseline-it is an experience of improvement that for some persons is deeply profound" (p. 4). Similarly, Joseph and Linley's (2008) organismic valuing theory posits that trauma can cause positive changes in "issues of meaning, personality schemas, and relationships" (p. 33).

It may be clear from the above that there is a large and growing research tradition focusing on posttraumatic growth. Hundreds and hundreds of academic papers (more than one hundred in the 18 months between June 2014 and January 2016, as assessed on the search engine PsycInfo with the term "posttraumatic growth") have examined the construct of posttraumatic growth. There have also been popular books that have focused on "the new science of posttraumatic growth" (Rendon 2015) that argue that people's intuitions about growth are actually supported by science. However, our goal in writing this short book is in fact to convince those of you seriously interested in the topic of posttraumatic growth that the question of whether adversity can lead to enduring positive change across the lifespan has not been addressed conclusively, even if you perceive vivid examples of posttraumatic growth in your own and other people's lives.

How is posttraumatic growth typically defined and understood? Chapter 1 addresses this question. People readily report experiencing it following traumatic life events (Linley and Joseph 2004), at least when asked to think about it directly. For example, as we mentioned earlier, research has demonstrated that self-reports of posttraumatic growth are fairly common—ranging from 58 to 83 % among survivors of a range of different traumas (Sears et al. 2003; McMillen et al. 1997; Affleck et al. 1987, 1991). This is not trivial—if people believe they have changed, this phenomenon is then worthy of greater study for that reason alone. We should at the very least be exploring whether their beliefs are grounded in reality, and who these people that express these beliefs are in the first place. Although only limited work to date has shown that *some* people have truly experienced benefits as a result of their experiences (Frazier et al. 2009; Seery et al. 2010; Yanez et al. 2011) it has

demonstrated that the *belief* that one has experienced positive personality change is fairly common.

Chapter 2 focused on what we know about the phenomenon and makes the case for a "reset" in posttraumatic growth research. Specifically, while theories of posttraumatic growth stipulate that people experience meaningful changes in their characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004)—that is, changes in people's personality—much of the evidence on this topic has been based on cross-sectional studies utilizing retrospective measures of self-reported growth, which do not allow for tests of meaningful hypotheses on the nature and predictors of growth, as we will argue. Concerns about the validity of this research program have been raised in prior reviews (e.g. Jayawickreme and Blackie 2014; Tennen and Affleck 2002), yet little has changed in how the construct has been studied. Indeed, this lack of attention to methodological limitations and over-interpretation of extant findings in current research on posttraumatic growth has led some researchers to question the scientific validity of the construct. In a recent debate on the value of interventions promoting positive psychological outcomes such as posttraumatic growth for individuals suffering from cancer, Coyne and Tennen (2010, p. 24) noted:

> We want to be clear that we are not asserting that people cannot grow from confronting life's slings and arrows, including serious illness and other health challenges…. What positive psychology potentially has to offer the concept of posttraumatic growth is scientific scrutiny through careful measurement, sensitive study designs, an attitude that propels investigators to seek facts that will disconfirm positive psychology's elegant hypotheses, and careful attention to credible evidence.

While this stringent critique of positive psychology arguably obscures the role that the field has played in bringing to prominence the scientific study of posttraumatic growth (Seligman 2012), we believe their core point—that research on the topic has been hampered by significant theoretical and measurement limitations—is valid. Given the current state of the research literature, the goal of this monograph is to present a critical assessment of posttraumatic growth conceptualized as positive personality change, guided by the assumption that significant limitations in how the construct has been conceptualized and assessed in the past necessitate a "starting over" (Tennen 2013). This may be the case since we cannot be certain what the construct actually is at this point. Moreover, current theories may in fact conflate the *process* of identifying positive changes with *outcomes* that may result from identifying changes (Tennen and Affleck 2002).

Chapter 3 builds on this assumption by asserting the core argument that to understand our intuition of posttraumatic growth as personality change (which is surely what Nietzsche's adage "what does not kill me makes me stronger" indicates), we need to conceptualize posttraumatic growth as actual positive personality change and draw on novel methodological approaches from the field of personality psychology to understand and assess this concept better. We focus on two approaches that we have found to be especially promising in our own research. Among other things, we argue that personality change represents an enduring shift

in the way people think, feel, and behave following a traumatic event. Such a definition is most congruent with the definition of traits provided by Fleeson (2001) and Buss and Craik (1983), in which traits are defined in terms of the frequency with which individuals perform acts representative of that trait (Fleeson and Jayawickreme 2015). We therefore argue that posttraumatic growth has been conceptualized in terms of positive personality change by past research (e.g., Park 2010; Joseph and Linley 2005; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004), but it has not been measured accordingly. If posttraumatic growth captures an enduring shift in how someone thinks, feels, and behaves, then we should also be measuring it as a change in personality over time using appropriate methods.

Chapter 4 speculates on the possible long-term benefits of adversity. Specifically, we note that that posttraumatic growth may in the long term lead to downstream shifts in personality that are characteristic of wisdom, and discusses how future work can clarify the relationship between the experience of adversity and the development of reflective knowledge about the world and generative behavior characteristic of wisdom. We outline some questions for future research.

Chapter 5 discusses the potential value of adopting a well-being and growth perspective when working with and studying survivors of adversity, failure, and challenge, as well as those who have undergone more significant life challenges, such as trauma and chronic adversity. Our focus here is on refugees and displaced populations, since our work has engaged with survivors of the long-running civil war in Sri Lanka, which ended in 2009, as well as with survivors of the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi in 1994. Our experiences, as well as interviews that we conducted with these survivors and counselors who have worked with these populations, convinced us that constructs such as posttraumatic growth can play a valuable role in contributing toward the long-term rehabilitation of such populations. Models of posttraumatic growth (and positive psychology more generally) involve a move away from a focus on seeing survivors of ethno-political warfare as victims, instead understanding them as complete and complex human actors within a specific cultural and historical context (Jayawickreme et al. 2013). However, while this approach can lead to the development of strength-based models of psychosocial treatment, it is important for psychologists to not overstate the implications. Although it is feasible that positive character development may occur for some individuals, it is also highly possible based on the current available evidence that posttraumatic growth is an adaptive coping strategy. Individuals may use it to psychologically handle stressors, and then return to their pre-trauma identities. This is not a bad outcome, but, if this is the reality, the definition of posttraumatic growth, however appealing, should not be oversold. This chapter spells out this argument, and serves as a roadmap for how we came to see the value of posttraumatic growth as a possible positive result of engaging with significant adversity.

Finally, we conclude this book with some specific recommendations that we believe will improve the quality of research being done on posttraumatic growth. Our overall goal is to convince you that the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth is a very worthy idea that has been unfortunately poorly studied thus far.

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