Positive Psychological Transformation: A Mixed Methods Investigation Into Catalysts and Processes of Meaningful Change

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This mixed methods study investigated the experience of positive psychological transformation, including its catalysts, dynamics, supportive factors, and outcomes. The first phase of the study was a 13-item survey (N=130) that revealed trends and associations in participants' experiences of transformation. The most significant correlation was between "expressing myself" and change stabilization (p < .01). Forty-four percent of participants reported trauma or emotional distress as the main catalyst of their transformation. Each of the other three main catalysts (dissonance, adaptation, and inspiration) drew approximately 18% of responses. Connecting with nature (71%), introspection (65%), solitude (63%) and empathy (61%) were commonly reported supportive factors. Common changes related to participants' way of interacting with others (77%), perception (75%), and emotional patterns (70%). The process of transformation differed substantially depending on multiple factors including the catalyst and demographic categories. Additionally, the survey revealed a trend of moving away from organized religion toward a sense of being spiritual but not religious. The second phase of the study consisted of interviews with a portion of the participants who reported trauma as the main catalyst of their transformation (n = 26) and was focused on the experience of posttraumatic growth. Thematic analysis revealed that transformation is typically initiated by a series of traumatic events and that the process of transformation can involve impaired well-being/functioning before elevated well-being/functioning. The results of thematic analysis were consistent with existing data on posttraumatic growth.

Keywords: transformation, posttraumatic growth, trauma, dissonance, way of being, framework of transformation

Transformation is a process of meaningful and lasting change in an individual's way of being. It can unfold in a variety of ways, yet longitudinal evidence indicates that the experience of transformation has a common ground that may transcend differences mediated by culture (Schlitz et al., 2008). In this definition, *way of being* refers to such factors as one's values, worldview, and mode of perception, along with mental, emotional and behavioral patterns. To describe the changes as *meaningful* signifies that these changes are important to the individual and produce qualitative differences in the individual's subjective experience; *lasting* means that the changes stabilize into a new, enduring way of being.

The transformation literature has been growing for decades, and formal academic investigation into the phenomenon was pioneered particularly by scholars from the humanistic and transpersonal branches of psychology (Frankl, 1963; Friedman & Hartelius, 2013; Lukoff, et al., 1998; Maslow, 1968; Schlitz et al., 2008; Sutich, 1976; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993; Welwood, 2002; Wilber, 1980; Wilber et al., 1986). Mezirow (1978a, 1978b, 2000, 2012) also contributed substantially to the academic understanding of transformation from the perspective of transformative learning. There is still much to be understood about how transformation is catalyzed, which factors facilitate it, and what

kinds of outcomes can be expected when someone transforms. There is also much to be understood about how the process of transformation differs depending on what catalyzes the process, as well as how it is different for various social groups.

While negative transformations may also occur—resulting in decreased functionality, elevated hatred toward oneself or others, or persistent negative affect—this study focused exclusively on positive transformation. Factors that lead to negative transformations would likely differ in important ways and would require a substantially different study design; in any case, durable psychological deterioration is not typically framed in the language of transformative change.

Attempts to delineate transformation from related constructs are imperfect. For example, there is a distinction between a transformative process and a *formative* process. The latter is a predictable developmental stage leading towards an established, mature personality. By way of illustration, puberty is a formative process. Transformation is distinct from formation in that it refers to meaningful changes that were not developmentally inevitable or biologically driven, such as the way a person changes as a response to a major life event or a spiritual practice. As a more nuanced example, menopause is biologically driven and inevitable, and there is evidence that women transform through this experience (de Salis et al., 2018). Yet major changes to a woman's way of being during this process can accurately be classified as transformation given that her way of being will have been established by the time she reaches menopause, and psychological transformation that accompanies menopause may not be inevitable (Busch et al., 2003).

Transformation also differs from the gradual, constant change throughout the lifespan. Drawing the line between gradual change and a distinct period of change is difficult, but here we identify transformation as a process of accelerated change with a loosely identifiable beginning, middle, and end that is not driven by conventional developmental process. Transformation disrupts and goes beyond (*trans-*) the relatively stable, formative phases of life. This disruption of an individual's established form is effected by what Schlitz et al. (2011) described as "destabilizers—a combination of factors that set the stage" (p. 227) for

change. In this study, these destabilizing factors are referred to as *catalysts* of transformation.

Transformation can be initiated by a variety of catalysts, several of which were explored in this study. Trauma, one of the more thoroughly investigated catalysts of transformation, has undergone shifts in definition through successive editions of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (North et al., 2016), and no clear consensus has been reached on how to distinguish it from other unpleasant emotional experiences (Dalenberg et al., 2017). In this study trauma is "any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning" (VandenBos & American Psychological Association, 2007). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) currently defines trauma as "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (p. 271), but we consider the American Psychological Association's definition of trauma to be preferable because it is based on the subjective impact of events rather than the events themselves.

When struggle with trauma catalyzes positive transformation, the result has been called posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Tedeschi et al., 1998). The three general domains of change associated with posttraumatic growth include: The perception of self, the experience of relationships with others, and one's philosophy of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995)—later subdivided into five domains: personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual changes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Other researchers have proposed concepts similar to posttraumatic growth, such as stress-related growth (Park et al., 1996), resilience and thriving (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995), suffering induced transformational experiences (Taylor, 2012), and adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

Study

While these various elements of transformation such as catalysts and outcomes have been studied individually, little work has been done to

characterize the larger process of catalyzed positive life change—a deficit the current study attempts to address in a preliminary way.

Methods

This mixed-methods study was designed to contribute to the developing understanding of what prompts transformation and how the process of transformation unfolds. The researchers inquired about common catalysts, key supportive factors, features of the process, and types of changes that came about as a result of the transformation process. In phase I, a 13-item Transformation Experience Survey designed for the study and based on the instrument used by Schlitz et al. (2008) was administered to 130 participants. Phase II consisted of qualitative interviews with the subset of 26 participants who reported that their transformation was initiated by trauma or emotional distress, and who consented to participate in the qualitative phase of the study. The research was reviewed and approved by the Research and Ethics Committee at Sofia University in Palo Alto, California.

Participants

A total of 130 individuals (76F/52M/2NB) with a mean age of 38 participated in the study. Participants were asked to check all ethnicities that applied. The majority of participants reported European/Caucasian heritage (73%), followed by Latino-American (23%), African American (9%), and Native American (9%). Household income until age 18 was estimated at an annual income of $40,000 or less by 33% of respondents, $40,000 to $80,000 by 40%, $80,000 to $100,000 by 13%, and 13% of respondents reported growing up in a household earning over $100,000 per year. Participants were also asked to check all religions they were primarily exposed to in the household or the culture while growing up. Christianity (65%) and Catholicism (43%) were selected most frequently, followed by Judaism (10%), Buddhism (5%), Indigenous Native American (5%), and Hinduism (4%).

From the total sample, 26 participants (18F/7M/1NB) with a mean age of 40 participated in Phase II, the interview process. Twenty-two interview participants indicated European/Caucasian heritage, 5 indicated Latino-American heritage, and 2 indicated Native American heritage.

Seven interviewees estimated an annual household income until age 18 of $40,000 or less; 2 estimated between $40,000 and $60,000; 5 estimated between $60,000 and $80,000, 6 estimated between $80,000 and $100,000; and 5 estimated over $100,000. The religions this group was primarily exposed to while growing up included Catholicism (15), Christianity (13), Judaism (3), and Paganism (2).

Recruitment

Calls for participants were published online to the researchers' social media accounts, as well as to the survey sharing websites surveycircle.com, reddit.com/r/takemysurvey, and surveyswap.com. The study was also advertised at multiple institutions with which the researchers were associated. In the invitation to participate, the study was described as an investigation into the experience of transformation, designed to contribute to the developing understanding in psychology of what prompts meaningful change in people and how the process unfolds. Anyone age 18 or older who believed that they had experienced transformation, defined as a meaningful and lasting change to an individual's way of being, was allowed to participate.

At the end of the survey, participants were invited to provide their name and contact information if they wanted to participate in Phase II. This invitation read: "If you are open to being interviewed once for approximately 20-60 minutes as part of the second phase of this research, please provide your name (first name only is fine) and email address." Of the survey group, 84 participants volunteered for Phase II. The researchers recruited participants for interviews who had selected the most commonly chosen catalyst of transformation based on the rationale that by choosing a subset of survey participants whose transformation was catalyzed in relatively the same way, it would be possible to focus on a particular type of transformation and potentially glean a clearer understanding of its common subjective features. Of the 84 participants who volunteered for Phase II, 35 were from the trauma or emotional distress group. All of these participants were contacted to schedule an interview and 26 followed through with being interviewed.

Measures—Transformation Experience Survey

The Transformation Experience Survey employed in Phase I of this study was developed by the research team, based on current transformation literature. The complete survey is available in Appendix A. Four additional questions related to demographic information and the 13 survey items related to aspects of the transformation experience. The types of questions on the survey included single answer multiple choice questions, "select all that apply" multiple choice questions, and rating scales. The inclusion of each survey item was justified by its relevance to the experience of transformation, which was determined by its presence in existing transformation literature. We considered it to be especially important to review the literature to identify the potential catalysts of transformation included in the survey.

Researchers at the Institute of Noetic Sciences conducted a 10-year investigation into the experience of transformation (Schlitz et al., 2008), including interviews with 50 transformation scholars and teachers, and 900 online survey responses from individuals who experienced transformation. Among the findings, Schlitz et al. identified common catalysts of transformation. Consistent with existing evidence and prevailing theories (e.g. Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), Schlitz et al. (2008) found that "profound transformations are frequently triggered by intense suffering or crisis" (p. 34). Also, transformation can be brought about by the realization that "your life has diverged from your values and purpose" (p. 37), which we have classified in this study as *dissonance,* defined in our survey as: An experience of inconsistency within yourself (i.e., between your beliefs and your experiences, your values and your motivations, your self-concept and your actions, or your words and your deeds). Schlitz et al. also found that intense positive experiences, which can be classified in a number of ways—extraordinary, numinous, noetic, mystical, peak—frequently initiate transformation. We classified these experiences in our survey as the catalyst of inspiration. Additionally, Schlitz et al. found that approximately 10% of the survey sample reported that psychedelic experiences were the catalyst of their transformation. This finding, along with other evidence (e.g., Kjellgren, 2009;

Pollan, 2019), informed our decision to include psychedelic experience in the list of catalysts. Schlitz et al. (2010) found that a person's worldview transforms as an adaptation to newly established social consciousness, leading to enhanced prosocial behaviors, and Mezirow (1978a) demonstrated that women can undergo transformation as a result of re-entering education or the work force after an extended hiatus. Thus, we have also included the catalyst of adaptation—meaningful change as a result of the necessity to adapt to new circumstances or roles in life.

Materials and Procedures

In Phase I all participants completed a 13-item Transformation Experience Survey (Appendix A) designed to inquire about catalysts of transformation, key supportive factors throughout the process, and types of changes that occurred as a result of the process. Surveys were administered online via surveymonkey.com. Participants had the option to remain anonymous, unless they volunteered to participate in Phase II, in which case they provided their name and email address at the end of the survey. Results were tabulated and subjected to simple statistical analyses. One percent of participants selected psychedelics as a catalyst of transformation. Because of this low number, this group was excluded from some statistical analyses.

Qualitative interviews in Phase II were conducted with 26 participants who successfully completed Phase I, indicated that their transformation was catalyzed by trauma or emotional distress, and agreed to participate in the qualitative phase. In addition, all interview participants completed an informed consent form. Video conference interviews lasted from 35 to 68 minutes with one outlier at 110 minutes and were designed to gather additional details about survey responses. Interviews were conducted by all four of the researchers on this study, who followed the same protocol. The primary researcher assigned interview participants to each interviewer and provided interviewers with the corresponding individual survey responses. Interview protocol consisted of asking interviewees to elaborate on their response to each survey item. Where relevant, follow up questions were pursued. Follow up questions were expressed by prompting the interviewees to clarify and/or elaborate on their answers.

Given that the interview group had experienced trauma or emotional distress, the interviewers were sensitive about the seriousness of what interviewees were being asked to discuss and did not to press for details about the traumatic events that catalyzed their transformation. The question interviewers typically asked was, "What did you have in mind when you chose 'traumatic or otherwise emotionally distressing event' as your main catalyst of transformation?" Many interviewees were forthcoming about details and others were reserved, which accounted for the broad range of interview duration. All interviewees were informed of the option to be connected with a clinical psychologist if they needed professional support after being interviewed. Interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.

Results

Important survey findings included following: Trauma or emotional distress was the most common catalyst of transformation, constituting 44% of responses among four broad categories (Figure 1). Among the supportive elements of transformation that participants could have selected, solitude and empathy drew the highest percentage of responses. The most frequently selected behaviors and/or practices that supported participants' transformation were connecting with nature and introspection. The selection rate for all supportive factors is represented in Figures 2 and 3. The most common changes reported by survey participants included their way of interacting with others, their perception of life, and emotional patterns (Figure 4). Yet the most common supportive factors and changes were different according to catalyst groups (Figures 5, 6) and demographic groups. Chi-square analysis revealed several statistically significant associations between transformation catalysts and supportive factors (Table 1). The experience of transformation affected participants' religiosity and spirituality, leading 59% of participants to now identify as spiritual but not religious (Figure 7). Additionally, 63% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there were times during the process of transformation that their well-being and ability to function was impaired (Figure 8).
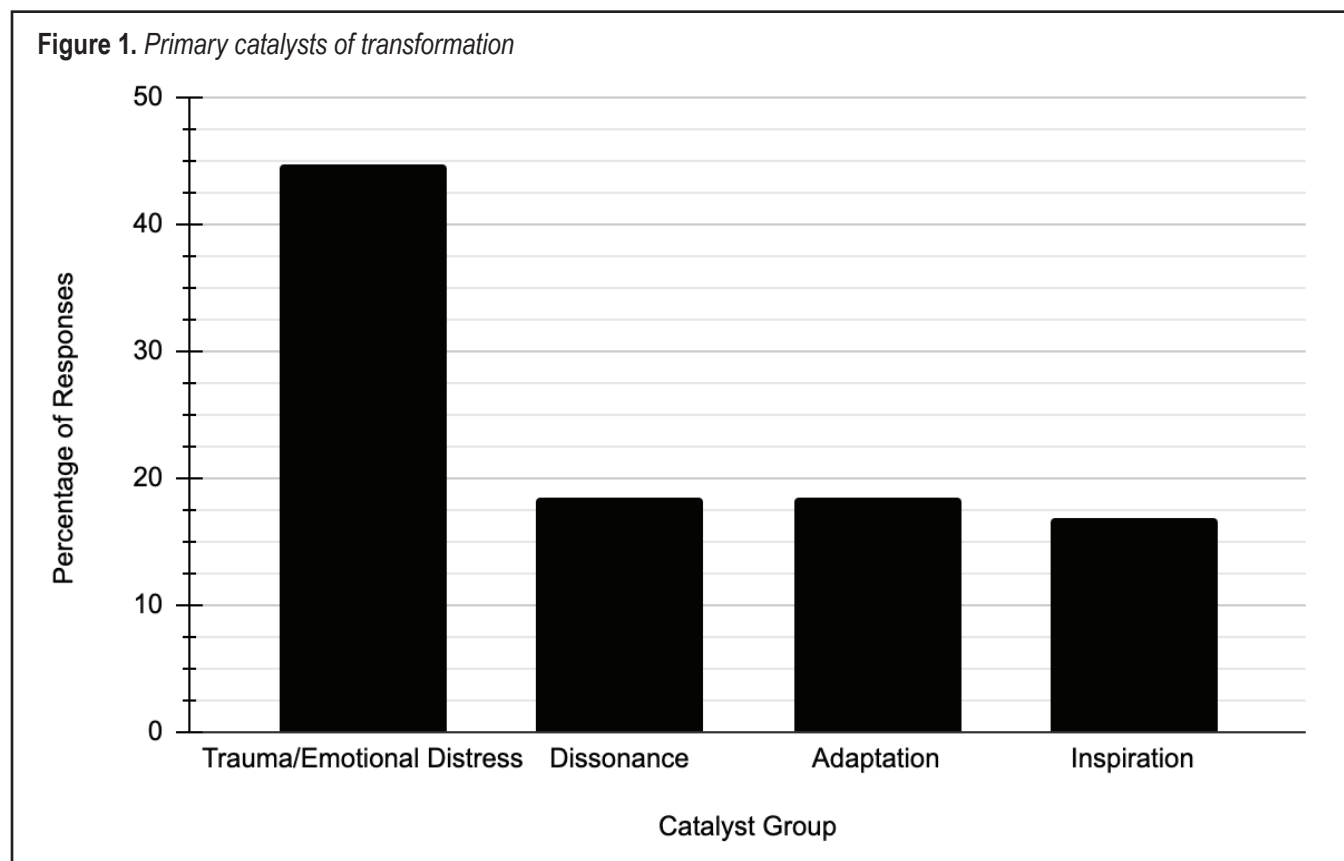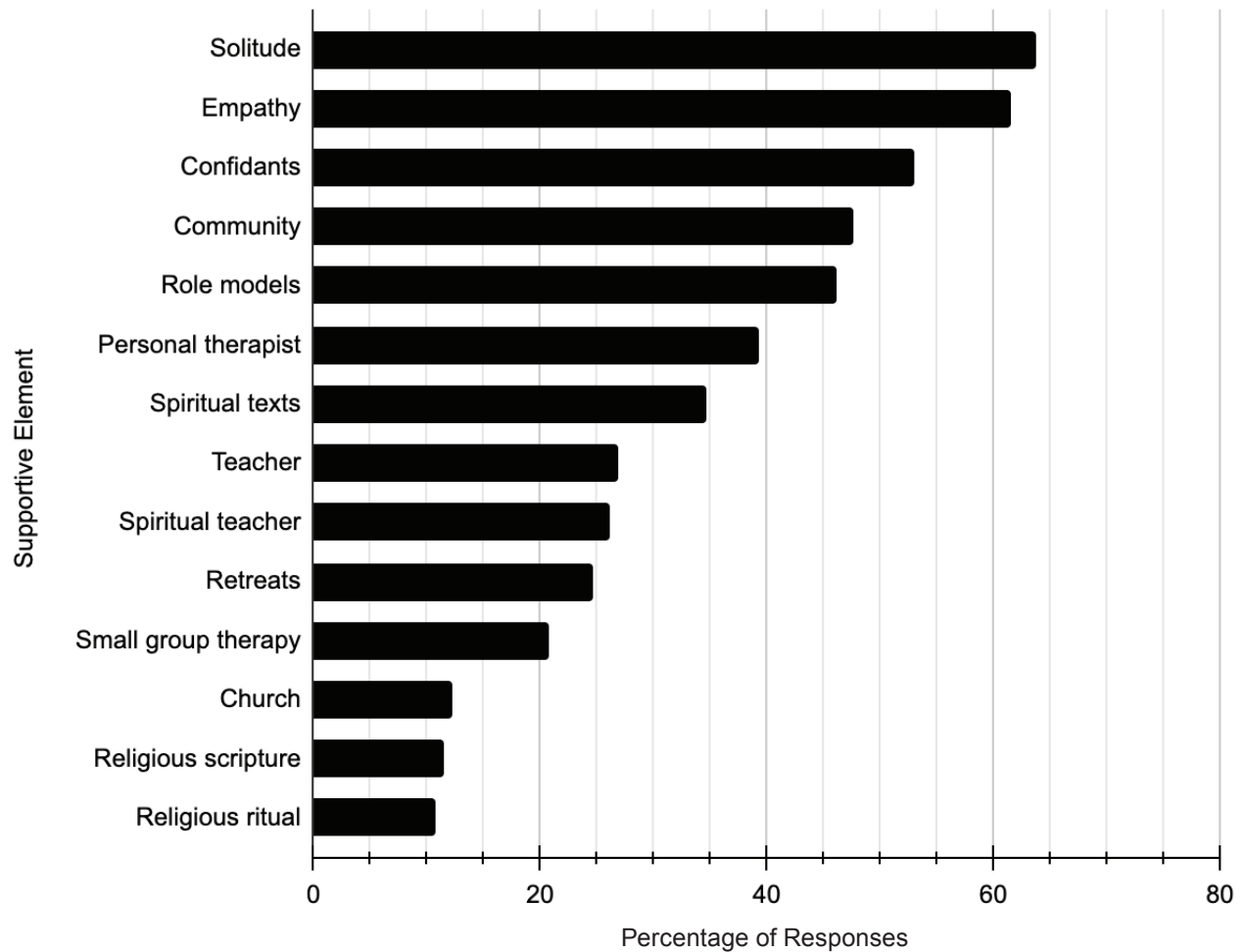

Figure 1. *Primary catalysts of transformation*

**Figure 2.** *Elements supportive of the process of transformation*

Interview data added nuance and detail to the survey findings and revealed themes that were undetected by the survey. Twenty-two out of the 26 interviewees reported that a *series* of traumatic events, instead of a singular event, served as the primary catalyst of transformation. Interview data also provided clarity on how participants were interpreting the notion of self-expression, and revealed a connection between self-expression and empathy, indicating that self-expression elicited empathy and empathy encouraged self-expression. Interview data also indicated that transformation, particularly when catalyzed by trauma or emotional distress, involved temporarily impaired functioning, but eventually led to enhanced well-being and functioning, especially when it was facilitated by a variety of supportive factors

and behaviors. Because interview participants' transformation was brought about by trauma or emotional distress and led to elevated levels of functioning and well-being, their experiences of transformation reflected posttraumatic growth. The domains of growth in the theoretical framework of posttraumatic growth—personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual changes—were evident in the interview data.

Survey Results

Overall survey results revealed trends in the experience of transformation along with associations between particular variables. The first survey prompt was: "At least once in my adult life, I have experienced significant and lasting changes to core aspects of myself." Participants rated the

Figure 3. *Behaviors and practices supportive of the process of transformation*
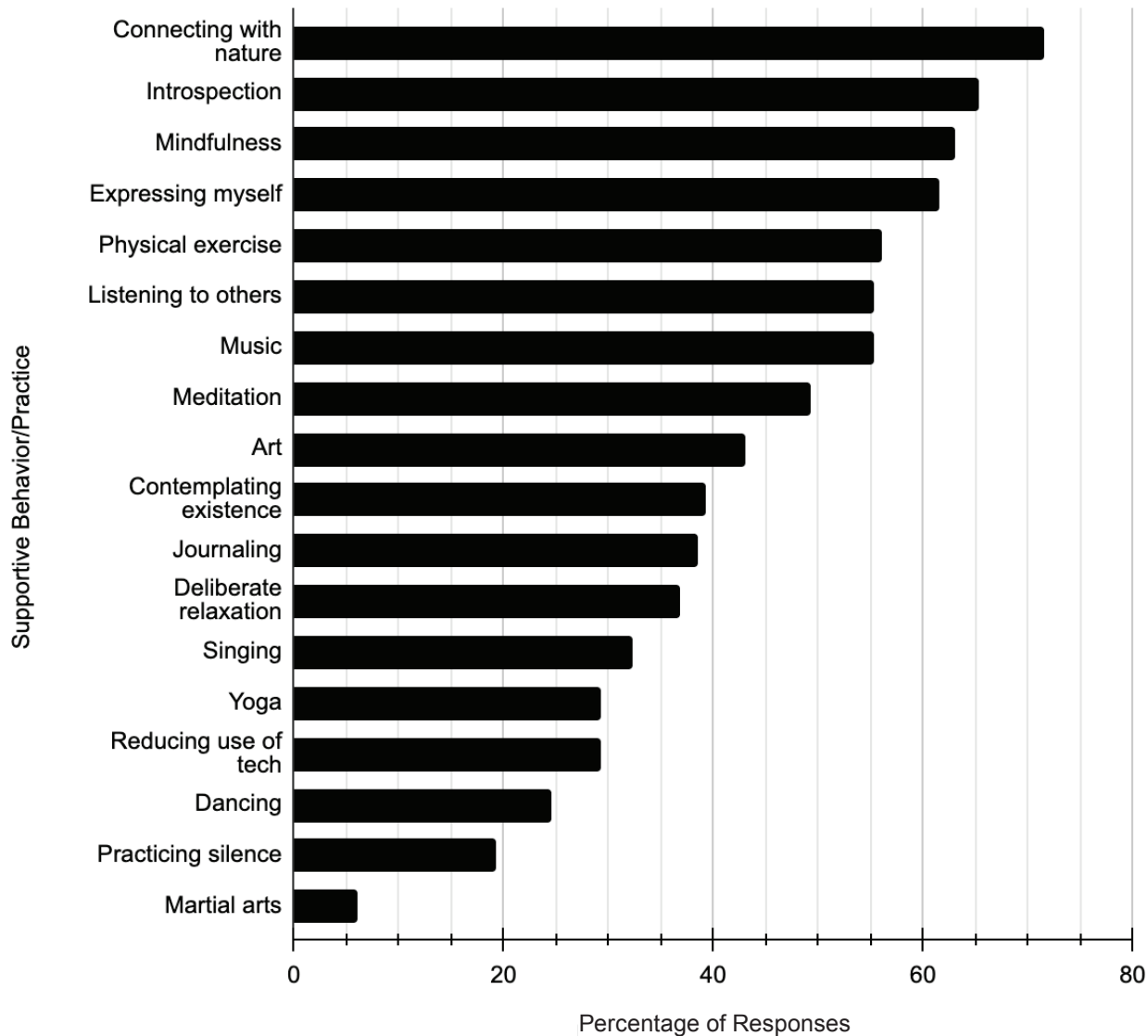
degree to which they agreed with this statement on a scale of 0 to 100. The average rating was 83 (*SD* = 19.95), and 36% of participants reported agreement of 100. Significant or meaningful change was common to participants, yet the experiences of transformation did not unfold in the same way for everyone.

When survey participants were divided into four subgroups based on the main catalyst of their transformation (trauma/emotional distress, inspiration, adaptation, dissonance), the profile for each group looks different according to which factors were most supportive and what the most

common changes were. Figure 5 shows data representing the five most supportive elements for the trauma/emotional distress group, compared to how supportive these elements were for the adaptation, inspiration, and dissonance groups. Data representing how each of the most frequently selected supportive behaviors in the whole survey were stratified among each of these subgroups are shown in Figure 6.

Along with the differences in the transformation process based on the catalysts of transformation, there are differences among various social groups as well. For example, the percentage

of respondents who reported trauma or emotional distress as the primary catalyst of transformation was greater ($\chi^2 = 7.77$, df = 1, $p = 0.005$) among European-Americans (53.4%) than among other ethnic groups (24.3%).

Also, 89% of Asian-American participants and 81% of African-American participants reported that self-expression was crucial in supporting their transformation process, whereas 53% of Latino-Americans and 50% of Native Americans reported that self-expression was crucial. However, these differences should not be considered statistically significant because the sample sizes for these ethnic groups are extremely small. Another difference between ethnic groups was that 89% of

Asian-Americans and 82% of African-Americans, compared to 56% of Latino-American participants, reported empathy from others as being crucially supportive. Again, though, these sample sizes are too small to say that these differences are statistically significant.

There were also notable differences in the process of transformation between men and women. Regarding the catalysts of transformation: 51% of women, compared to 34% of men, reported trauma or emotional distress, though this difference was not quite statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.67$, df = 1, $p = 0.1023$). Regarding supportive elements: 47% of women, compared to 25% of men, reported that a personal therapist was supportive ($\chi^2 = 5.62$, df = 1,

Figure 4. *Reported changes related to the transformation process*
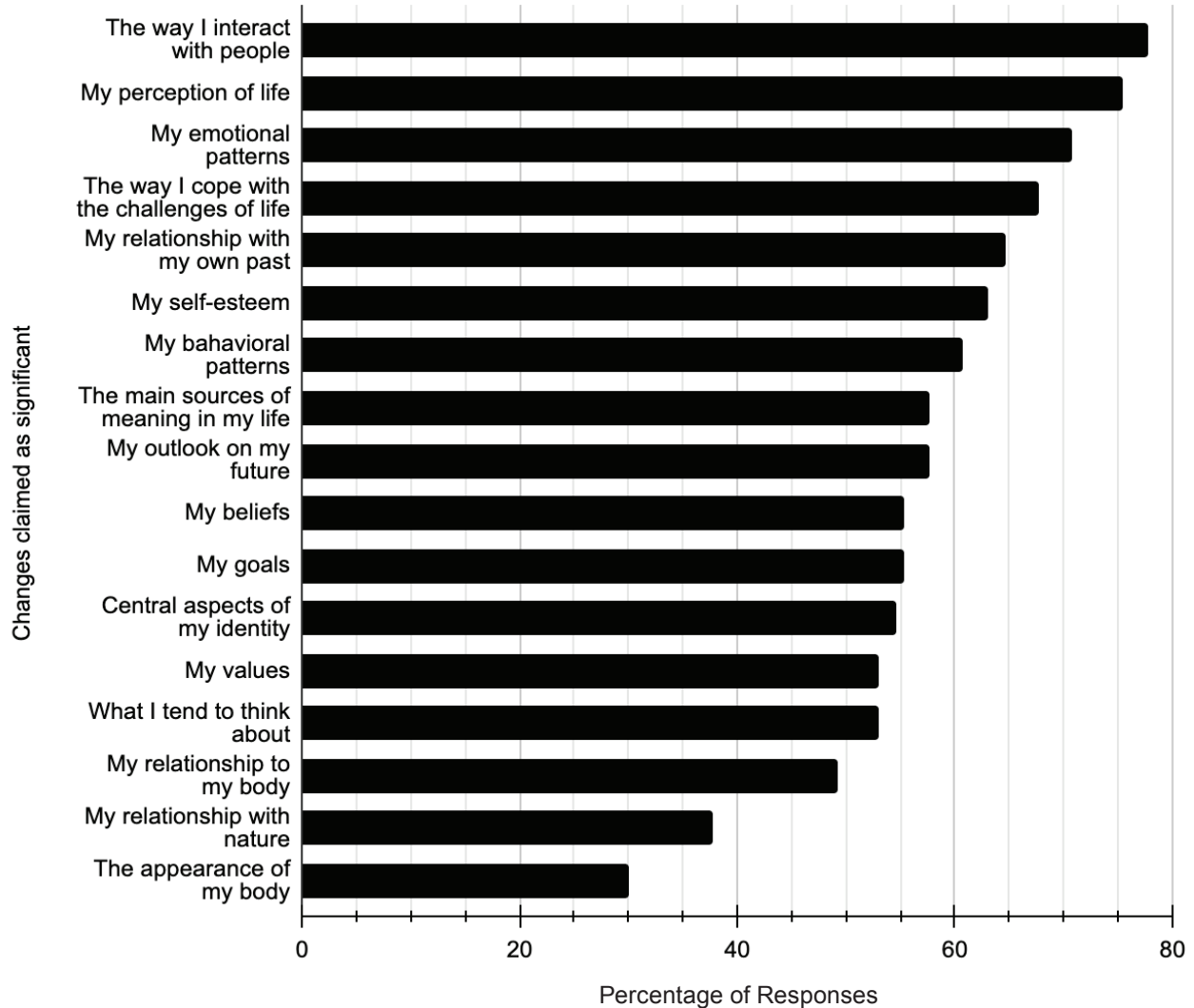
Figure 5. *Top 5 supportive elements for the trauma/emotional distress group vs. other catalyst groups*
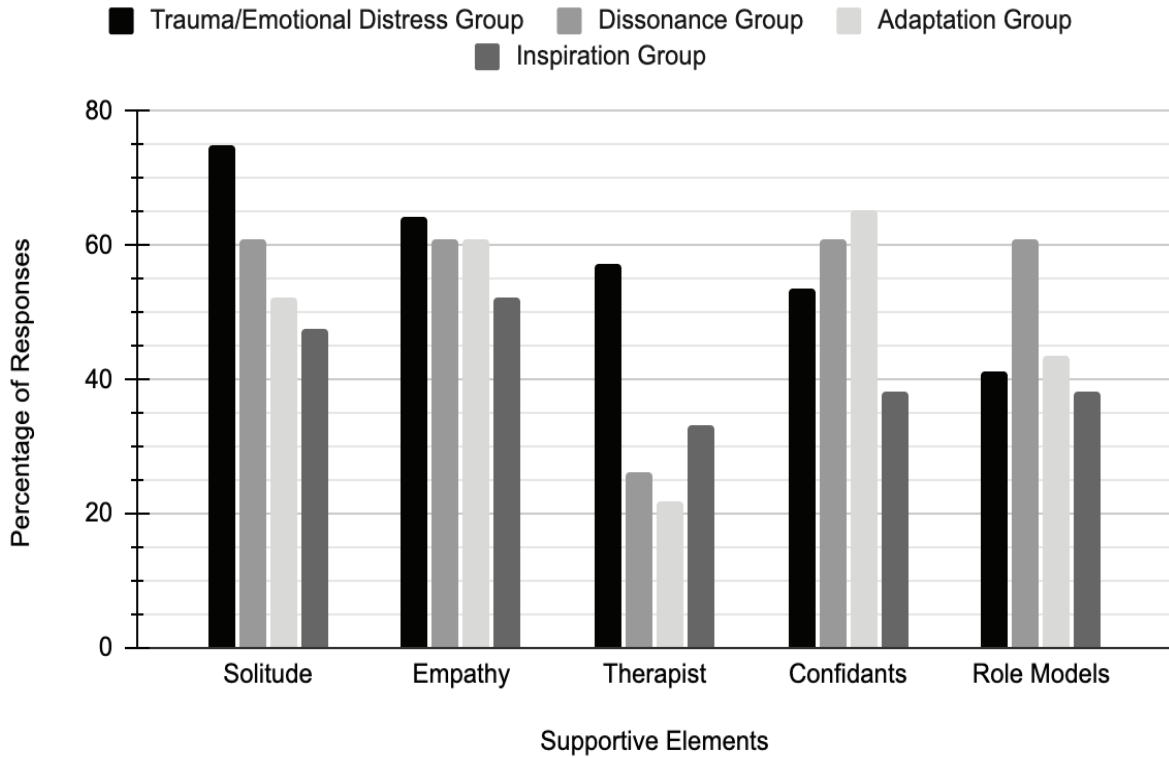

Figure 6. *Representation of catalyst groups in the top 5 overall supportive behaviors/practices*
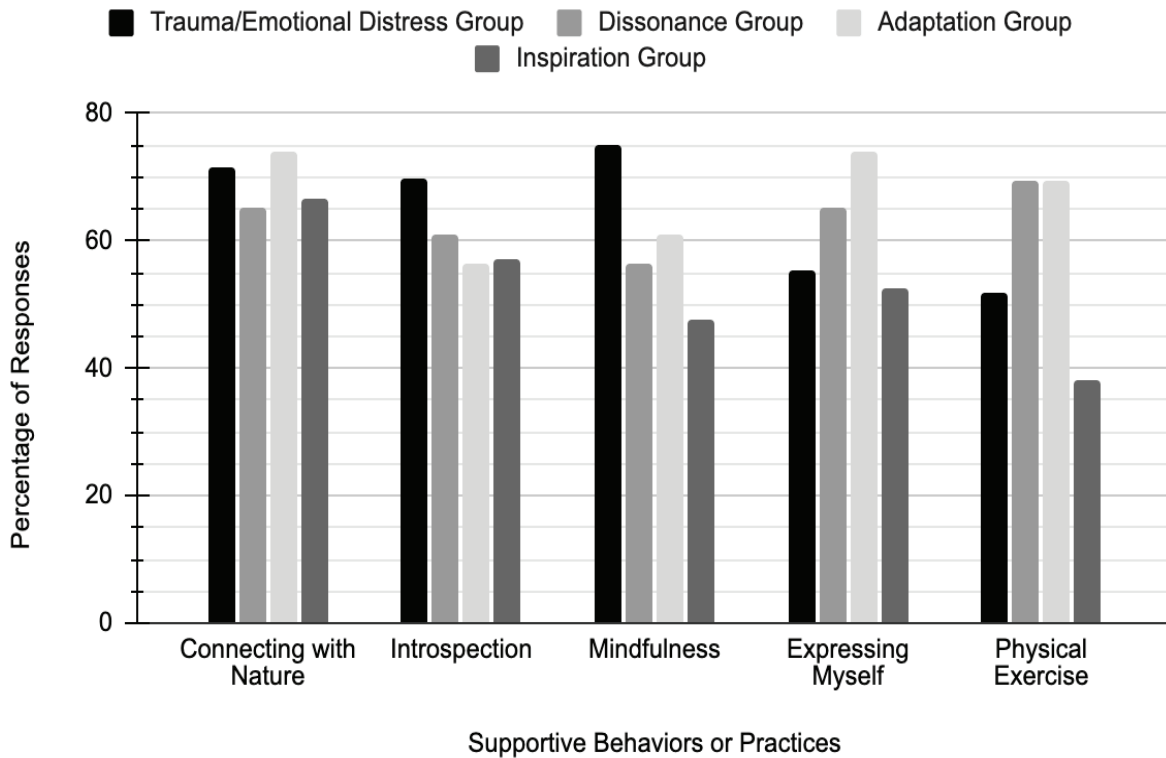
Table 1. *Correlations between variables and supportive elements, supportive behaviors, perceptions, and experiences*

Variable	Correlation	χ^2	*p*-value
Change stabilization	Expressing myself	6.28	.012
Catalyst for change Trauma/Emotional distress	Personal therapist	12.79	.005
Catalyst for change Trauma/Emotional distress	Music (creating, playing, or listening)	9.67	.022
Catalyst for change Trauma/Emotional distress	Emotional patterns	9.20	.027
Catalyst for change Trauma/Emotional distress	Feeling of unfairness	33.47	.015

$p = 0.01$). Regarding supportive behaviors: 36% of women, compared to 17% of men, reported that yoga asana was supportive ($\chi^2 = 4.82$, df = 1, $p = 0.02$); 46% of women, compared to 25% of men, reported that journaling was supportive ($\chi^2 = 4.97$, df = 1, $p = 0.02$).

Chi-square tests were carried out to determine whether there were associations between catalysts, supportive factors, and change stabilization. Participants were prompted to rate, on a scale of 0-100, the degree to which their process of transformation had reached a relative completion—this is referred to in this paper as *change stabilization*. Results indicated that the supportive behavior "expressing myself" was significantly associated with a high degree of change stabilization. A higher percentage of participants with change stabilization above 85% reported "expressing myself" as a supportive factor in their transformation process (80.6%) than those did not list this behavior (19.4%). The following supportive factors were significantly correlated with the trauma or emotional distress catalyst group: a personal therapist as a supportive factor, music as a supportive factor, changes to emotional patterns, and having had an experience that made life feel unfair.

Religion and Spirituality

Asked which religion participants were primarily exposed to in their household or culture while growing up, 65% selected Christianity and 43% selected Catholicism. Asked which religion participants currently practice or identify with, 25% selected Christianity and 5% selected Catholicism. Participants rated the degree to which they had adopted the values, belief system, and rituals of the religion to which they had been primarily exposed while growing up, and the mean score was 43 on a scale of 0-100; it is possible that participants were exposed to these religions but never personally adopted them. Although 5% of participants had been primarily exposed to Buddhism while growing up, 16% of overall participants and 22% from the trauma/emotional distress group reported practicing Buddhism currently. Participants were also asked to indicate whether they agreed with a series of statements related to how the experience of transformation affected their religious and spiritual orientation. Results from this question are represented in Figure 7.

Impaired Well-Being/Functioning During the Process of Transformation

The survey prompted participants to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with this statement: "There are/were times during the process of transformation that my well-being and/or ability to function was at a lower level than before the process started." Overall, 63% of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, yet participant responses differed according to the main catalyst of their transformation as shown in Figure 8.

These findings, along with other key survey findings, were further illuminated by interview data.

Interview Results

Because the interview data came from a specific subset of the overall study sample, these findings are specifically reflective of the experience of transformation as catalyzed by trauma or emotional distress. The primary theme to emerge from the qualitative data that was not detected by the survey was that participants typically experienced a series of traumatic/distressing events leading up to the experience of transformation. Additionally, reports of traumatic/distressing events were of a wide variety. The specific survey trends that were strongly emphasized and elaborated upon in the interview data included: the supportive impact of nature, empathy from others, self-expression, and therapy; a movement away from religion; and changes in perception. Interviewees also emphasized the survey

trend of impaired functioning and well-being during the process of transformation, but frequently (23 participants) added that their levels of functioning and well-being were higher than before the process of transformation started.

Series of Traumatic Events

Twenty-two interviewees described a series of traumatic events when asked about the catalyst of their transformation, and the traumatic/emotionally distressing events that were reported were of a wide variety, including sexual assault, physical abuse, the death of loved ones, illness, injury, divorce, false accusations, and abandonment. The next four paragraphs include descriptions of these various distressing and traumatic experiences.

Maria (all names are pseudonyms) had a "profoundly stressful job," then entered into a relationship that became emotionally abusive and conceived a child with the man. Subsequently she

Figure 7. *How transformation affected religious orientation*
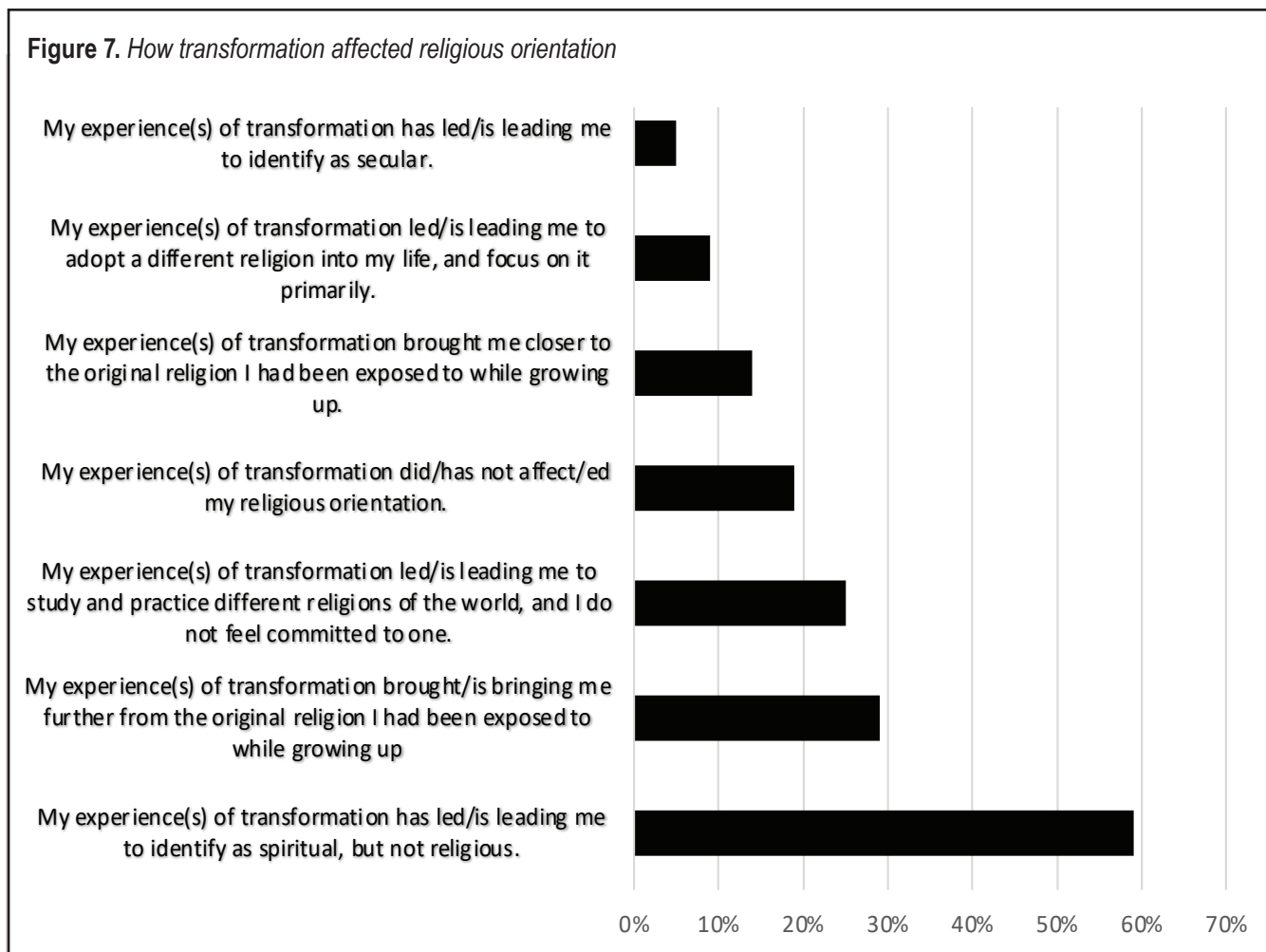
had an abortion, which she felt pressured to do, and it was "the single most traumatic experience of my life and I've really never recovered from it. I just felt so devastated that I had to make that decision." Later she was sexually assaulted, and suspected that she had been drugged. This made her feel "embarrassed and grossed out."

Francesca battled cancer for 2 years, which included five surgeries, was sexually assaulted and stalked by a man with whom she worked. She was later terminated from that job (the stalker maintained his employment). Additionally, her mother and father died within a year of each other. This whole series of events occurred within a small window of time. Kristi experienced physical injuries, infertility, and an autoimmune disease. For Terri, her parents divorced, her brother died in a motorcycle accident, and she experienced rejection from a spiritual teacher whom she had admired greatly. Virgil was falsely accused of sexual harassment, lost his employment, and went through a divorce. Miguel witnessed the gruesome death of his father and endured a difficult bout of cancer. Hillary was sexually harassed and assaulted, and "taken advantage of in a lot of different ways." After Mike's parents divorced, his father "disappeared" and his mother was incapable of caring for him and his siblings. This led to them becoming homeless. "What really caused my trauma," he said, "was that my mom started blaming me for everything … and she said she wouldn't care if they took us away from her. … That shattered my heart."

Breeze watched her stepdad "beat up my mom, like a lot," and then married "the same type of person" who was physically abusive to her. She ended her relationship with him, and one year later he died, which was emotionally complicated because he was the father of her three children. Mark experienced the suicide of his best friend and also spent years in prison. Heather was neglected as a child and, as a young adult, received harsh body image criticism in the world of professional dance.

Figure 8. *Impaired well-being/functioning during the process of transformation: Participants' agreement rating, organized by catalyst group*
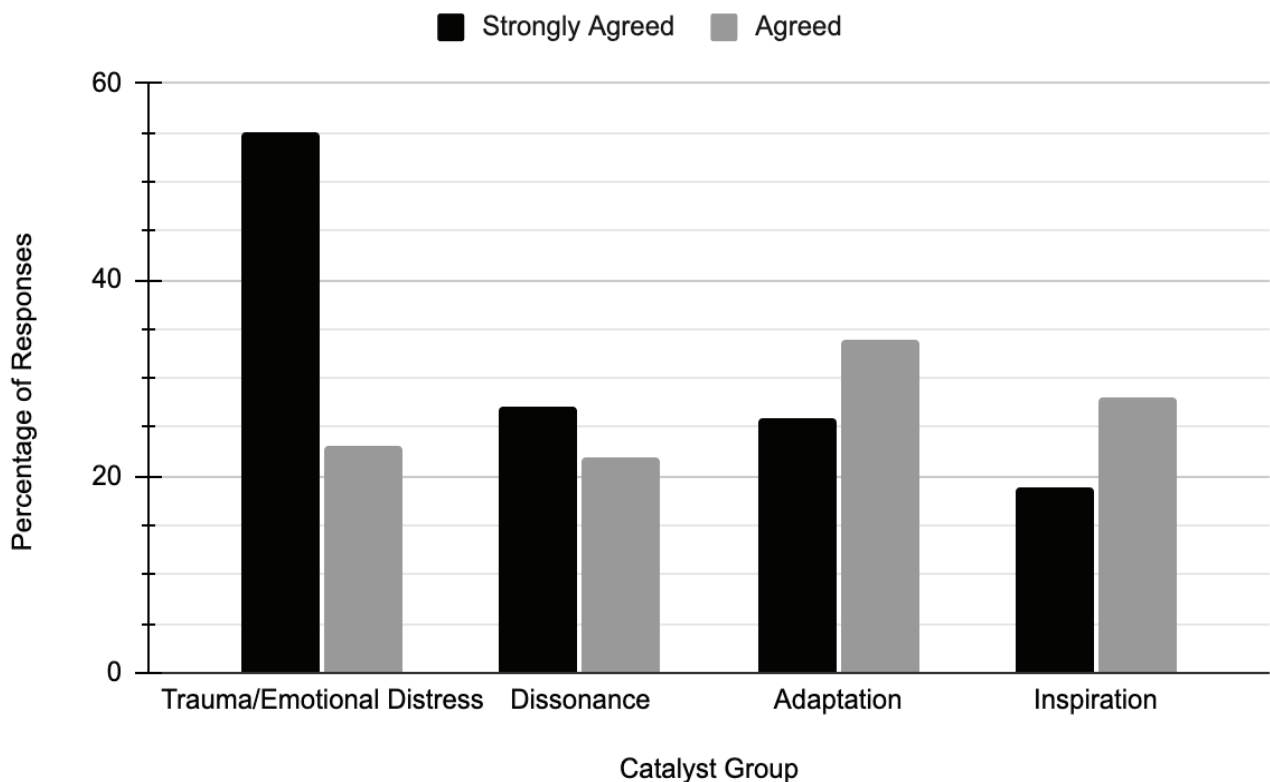
This contributed to the development of an eating disorder. Renee returned from military service and felt unappreciated and unsupported. Soon after Renee's return, her cousin murdered his younger twin brothers. Abigail was raised by a bipolar father, who was verbally, emotionally, and physically abusive, which "left me with a lot of self-esteem issues." She moved away from home at an early age and then got into a relationship in which she survived "domestic violence and sexual violence."

A particularly extreme and drawn-out series of traumatic events were survived by a man we will call Grasshopper. During childhood, his brother died and his parents were found to be responsible. They lost their parental rights and Grasshopper lived in an orphanage for five years, at which point an older couple assumed guardianship. The father was physically abusive and Grasshopper worked as much as possible starting at the age of 12 to avoid being home. At age 18, when the guardians stopped receiving state funds to raise him, they told him "our obligation to you is over. Please get out tomorrow." Soon after leaving, Grasshopper joined the Air Force. While in combat in the Middle East, he

> witnessed a beheading at the range of about 2 meters…and I didn't tell anyone, not a soul.… The military is a very alpha male society… and it would mean that I was weak if I showed that I was afraid, if it was obvious that I was crying. I just hid it from everybody, and I did so for about 25 years.

When he returned from this deployment, he discovered that his wife had conceived a child with Grasshopper's own brother. After confronting his brother about this, his brother committed suicide. The trauma was compounded by self-blame.

> I blamed myself for not being good enough to have real parents. I blamed myself for the beatings I got. I blamed myself for what happened to that man over in [the Middle East], and I blamed myself for my brother's suicide.

The final event in this horrifying series of traumas before he began to heal and change was when, during an altercation with his new wife, he held her and his stepchildren at gunpoint. He was arrested and incarcerated, and, at the time of the interview, had not spoken to this woman since that event.

The Importance of Nature

Twenty of 26 interviewees discussed the importance of connecting with nature to support the process of transformation. Grasshopper said, "when I'm out in nature, things don't have to move fast. Things can move very slow and if I just stop and acknowledge that, my troubles go away." Poppy put it this way:

> Being able to get myself immersed in nature… is so healing. Being outdoors, hearing the birds, and the sun and the breeze on my skin, the trees just being, and hiking in a forest, and just being amongst these giants who've been here for thousands of years…it just feels so healing. And the ocean! The trees and the ocean are my favorite. Being in the ocean… I can't describe the level of bliss and healing that comes from just being in the water. It's just so transformative for me.

Francesca attributed her positive psychological changes as well as her physical healing process to being in nature: "when I got cancer, all I wanted to do was be outside. There was like an instinct… like, I need to be in nature." Elda described the way that connecting with nature affected her perspective:

> Something about the quiet of [nature], listening to the wind in the leaves … or sitting by the ocean … it reminds me of the timelessness of life … and that my problems, whatever seems really huge in this moment, are insignificant in the scheme of things. And that there are constants in life, like the ocean, that I can always come back to.

Erin shared that during her healing process, she took a month-long camping trip by herself, which gave her access to many tools for transformation including solitude, introspection, music (as she would play her ukulele), and connecting with nature. "I feel like my spiritual path has mostly been through relationships with nature and learning how to sit alone in the woods and, like, listen … ask a question of nature and get an answer back" Asked how she experiences the answer back, she replied,

"it comes through metaphor. … sometimes you'll see … a tiny ant doing something way stronger than it is, you know, and then you … get, like, a message of strength."

Molly said she feels connected with God while in nature, and that being in nature "just takes me from this anxiety place down to a place where I can just really think about myself, think about my breathing … and process." Breeze described her experience in nature as being "cradled." In a similar vein, Virgil said that the experience of being in nature can feel as though "nature is embracing you and teaching you." It is also noteworthy that seven participants highlighted the soothing and grounding effects of gardening. Much of what participants said about the role of nature underscored their increased appreciation of life and spiritual changes, features of posttraumatic growth.

The Importance of Self-Expression

Interview data helped clarify exactly what participants meant by marking self-expression in the survey, which was emphasized by 15 interviewees. Self-expression was found to essentially relate to being uninhibited, and there were three variations of this evident in the interview data, all of which seemed to be important in supporting the process of transformation.

Self-expression meant opening up about difficult emotional processes, which participants reported as being helpful whether that was in the presence of others or in solitude (as in journaling). In this regard, Heather reported that "so much of my transformation has been in understanding that I need … language to understand what I'm experiencing … to verbalize it and then share with others … to express what I need instead of keeping it within." Adam also spoke to the importance of self-expression, especially about inner processes that have made him feel vulnerable to express, but he has found that "it's so important for people to actually know who you are." Adam explained that allowing people to see him for who he is and allowing people to know what he is processing internally has fostered connection, empathy, and support.

Self-expression also meant being outgoing and creative. Lourdes, for example, spoke about how singing freely is a "big part of my healing process."

Another participant stated that, "after those traumatic experiences, I got into singing. Singing really helps me to this day when I feel very upset."

Self-expression also meant asserting oneself when necessary. Abigail, for example, said that prior to her transformation, "I just would let people hurt me and kind of let it go or cower to them. And now, I realized that I have the power. I can stand up, and I don't have to take that anymore." All three of these forms of self-expression appeared to play an important role in supporting the process of transformation.

The Role of Empathy and Self-Expression

The importance of empathy was emphasized by 15 interviewees. Interview results revealed a link between empathy and self-expression. Abigail shared that she had "always felt alone" and "kept everything inside," but then found the courage to talk about her experiences and feelings, which facilitated the healing process.

> I actually started interacting with other women, and talking and learning from other women who had similar experiences [and] that was an eye opener for me, like, wow, I'm not alone. There are other people out there and they are willing to help me and they're giving me support and we're talking and crying together.

There was a time in Abigail's experience when she felt "so depressed and suicidal [that] I didn't even leave my apartment for probably a couple months. I just stayed home and would cry." She recalled having "a form of PTSD." "I would have nightmares of my abuser making me do things," from which she would wake feeling "creeped out and just disturbed for the rest of the day, almost like it happened again." Initially, she felt "embarrassed to talk to anyone about that," but eventually found the courage to seek help from a friend "who has always really been there for me." "I would always talk to this person about my dreams and they would help me analyze them and … break down … what they could mean," she said. This was an example of self-expression supporting the process of transformation, as indicated in the survey results. Once Abigail began to express her inner experience to a compassionate person, she was able to process her experience. "I have not really

had those nightmares anymore." What made the difference and "empowered me" was "getting help, getting therapy, [and] talking with other people." "Now, if I ever get really upset or depressed, I just know that I can make it through this." Abigail emphasized that talking to supportive, empathic people about what she was experiencing enabled her to process her experience in a healthy way.

Fifteen interviewees spoke about the importance of empathy in their process of transformation. Some of the interviewees experienced empathy primarily from a therapist, and many experienced it from family, friends, or people they met who had endured a similar trauma. Adam recalled how supportive it was that "I never felt like I was I was alone." Adam and his brothers grew very close when their mother died. "Having my brothers there and being able to talk openly with them … especially right after my mom died, and throughout my life. … It gave me the skills to … open up" to people. The ability to open up to people was a meaningful and lasting change for Adam, and he indicated that this change was facilitated by the empathy he received. Empathy was more than therapeutic for Adam; it was transformative.

Heather recalls how helpful it was when she began living in a community, wherein "I felt seen and heard" in a way she had not experienced before. She described this as "freeing." Mark, who had been expecting that his family and friends would judge him about being incarcerated for a second time, experienced "unconditional loving support. … They didn't give up on me, and there was really a lack of judgment from them." Mark shared that this experience helped him become a more unconditionally loving person.

Thomas recalled that during the period of time when he was coming out about his sexuality, he experienced empathy from an acquaintance that impacted him powerfully.

> She detected that there was something going on with me and … she just turned to me and said … 'something's clearly impacting you and I don't need to know what it is, but I just want to give you a hug because clearly something is causing you trauma.'

According to Tom, this experience of empathy, as relatively simple as it was, was a life lesson. "When you see someone in need … it's not about you. So don't project … [or] put your own ego on top of it. … Just be there, as a human being," he said. Every interviewee gave some degree of credit to empathy, and specifically nonjudgmental acknowledgment and emotional mirroring, for enabling them to process their trauma and proceed through the experience of transformation. It is worth noting again that the role of empathy in transformation may be different for people whose transformation is catalyzed by factors other than trauma.

The Impact of Therapy

As noted previously, 39% of all survey participants, and 57% from the trauma/emotional distress group, reported that seeing a therapist was a crucial supportive element in their transformation. Each of the 16 interviewees who had selected this in their survey answers were asked to elaborate on the role of therapy in their transformation process. Thirteen participants talked about the value of therapy. Three participants expressed that therapy was unhelpful, however. It seemed that therapy had a substantial impact in every case, whether that was positive or negative.

Maria, for example, expressed that "I've never had a super positive experience [in therapy]. And I had two really negative experiences at very important times." She told one therapist about an abortion she was devastated about, and Maria recalled the therapist's reply: "I'm just so glad to see that you're upset about this right now because I've had women come into my office who told me about having an abortion and they're not upset at all." Maria's impression was that the therapist allowed her own views about the morality or significance of abortion to come through in the session, and the message Maria heard was, "I'm so glad you're ashamed because you should be."

Therapy was extremely helpful for Elda, who saw the same therapist for over 13 years.

> She was just so incredibly compassionate and available. I feel like it was the first time I ever actually felt fully seen. … I was able to be vulnerable and be completely myself and she

accepted me and continued to work with me no matter what I did or said. It felt unconditional in a way that I hadn't experienced before.

Elda's experience was so positive and crucial to her process of transformation that she became a therapist "in large part because of the significant help that being in therapy gave to me, and there's a strong part of me that feels like I need to pay it forward."

Other participants spoke about the positive impact of therapy with enthusiasm as well. Elena expressed that her therapist "asked a lot of key questions that helped me to answer things for myself." Virgil said, "I love going to therapy," because "the therapist asks you different things and …[helps me] engage—in an active, forgiving way—in this kind of introspection." Heather was particularly enthusiastic about therapy and pointed out the importance of being "a willing participant in it." She said that therapy has "just been something magnificent, just to like, have something that anchors me and to have it be an outlet… therapy has been so transformational for me, in terms of processing through things and understanding … myself." The theme among interviewees who had positive experiences with therapists was that the therapist was a compassionate listener who asked meaningful questions that led to intrapersonal insight. This increased self-awareness was indicative of meaningful and lasting changes to participants' perceptions of themselves.

Perceptual Changes

Data from 21 interviewees provided specific examples of perceptual changes brought about by the experience of transformation, which overall related to changes in the factors that most substantially shape perception, such as participants' fundamental worldviews, core beliefs, and values. Changes to participants' core beliefs appeared to account for substantive changes in perception, and this seemed to give rise to different emotional patterns. Ted described his changes this way: "Before, … the material world was primary, and what was unseen, that God aspect, was … not as strong. … What God tells me, the intuition, is primary now, whereas what I can see, feel, and touch is secondary." This is an example of *spiritual change,* characteristic of posttraumatic growth. Mark also discussed a shift in

his core beliefs. He said that he had come to believe that, under any circumstance, "it's going to be fine, you know, even if it's not something I want, it's still going to be fine. I'll get through it … it's kind of, like, a distillation of the idea of impermanence." This can be also be considered an example of spiritual change, as well as *personal strength*, another feature of posttraumatic growth.

Elda expressed a shift in her perception of others, reflective of the *relating to others* domain of posttraumatic growth; "I definitely feel much more connected to others and I [am] more able to just see the humanity in other people." She has also experienced a change in the perception of herself. She had a "realization of my impact on other people around me. … I was more powerful than I thought." In a similar vein, Miguel shared that the death of his father and his own confrontation with cancer led him to perceive himself as "someone that could possibly inspire others or someone that could be the strength to somebody that lacks strength at that moment." This is an example of the *new possibilities* inherent to posttraumatic growth. Miguel also expressed a shift to his fundamental sense of self. His perception now is that "I am part of everything, and everything is a part of me." Kristi talked about a change in her perception of herself as well. She admitted to having been a "control freak" but through her transformation has come to realize that "I have control over only me." "Good things happen when I let go and, you know, surrender," she added.

Mark, who experienced his most meaningful changes while in prison, recalls a shift in the way he thought of himself and his future. He would contemplate the question, "who do I want to be? … not like what do I want to be, like, *who* do I want to be? What sort of person do I want to be?" Although he acknowledged that his sense of self eludes words, he said "if I'm coming up with an identity, it's just, like, this collection of values. It's not a thing…. it's not a noun," which he emphasized is much different from how he had previously thought of himself. Elena expressed a similar perceptual shift. She said that the adversity she experienced led her to ask herself, for the first time, "what kind of woman do I want to be?" Prior to her transformation, "I feel like I didn't really… stand for anything. I didn't really

have a core set of values that I really felt were mine." Now, having changed meaningfully, Elena says she feels a "real confidence" unlike ever before, and she knows what she cares about; "I want to help people wake up and realize things about themselves, and heal themselves and heal past trauma." It seemed that Elena's transformed perspective had become a source of passion in her life.

Terri, who experienced rejection from a spiritual teacher that had suddenly become quite unreasonable, contrasted some of her beliefs from before and after experiencing transformation.

> I actually thought that there was such a thing as a spiritual teacher. And I thought there might be a master … I don't believe in [this] anymore. I really don't. It may sound cynical, but you know, I listen to the Dalai Lama and I think, yeah, he's probably a good man, you know, with some wisdom, but that's about as far as I go. I don't believe gurus are these mystical teachers.

Although changes in *relating to others* as an aspect of posttraumatic growth is generally portrayed as an increased tolerance and ability to communicate, what Terri expressed may be a good example of this type of change. It reflects a hesitance or resistance to exalt people to beyond human status.

Movement Away from Religion

The religion that interviewees strayed from the most was Catholicism. Fifteen interviewees stated that they grew up primarily exposed to Catholicism; one interviewee reported that they currently practice Catholicism. Interview data shed light on what participants found to be aversive about Catholicism. Granted, this was the subgroup whose transformation was catalyzed by trauma. What was aversive about Catholicism for this group might not be what was aversive for the inspiration, dissonance, or adaptation groups.

Poppy, for example, who experienced physical abuse from her stepmother as a child, expressed the following:

> I was brought up in a Christian household and brought up to believe, you know, God, Jesus loves all the little children. And all of a sudden, I have a stepmom who's abusing me, and

nobody's doing anything about it. And she puts on a good face in front of other people. And so I was like, What the fuck God, like, something's here. There's a disconnect here. So it really made me question … God and life. … I stopped believing in God then. And I have come back around to having a … spiritual life, but not a religious one.

Lourdes also survived child abuse and other horrific traumatic events such as rape and physical assault. She, too, talked about a movement away from Catholicism. For her, it was toward other traditions such as Buddhism. Asked why she felt more attracted to Buddhism, she replied:

> I feel there's this inner peace … that there's a drive to find in Buddhism, and it seems … judgment free. In Catholicism, there is so much judgment … the shame of everything was just so heavy. And I didn't find any peace in it. There's no peace. I just felt shame and blame and, you know, asking to be forgiven for sins that I didn't commit….Buddhism was just a whole new philosophy…. I just think it's beautiful.

Virgil was also drawn to Buddhism as he began to feel "less and less tied to the beliefs of Catholicism and Christianity." He said he started to find "it more and more difficult to take a literal interpretation of the Bible." He began to observe that literal interpretations of the Bible were "becoming more and more damaging to society … so … I moved away from regularly practicing Catholicism." He was drawn to Buddhism for a number of reasons, including that the Buddha was not depicted as a god and, as he understood it, "Buddhism is a philosophical tradition; it's not a religion." This became so meaningful to him that he decided to join the Peace Corps and live in Sri Lanka, a Buddhist country. Ultimately, Virgil had come to believe that the ancient traditions of the world "all have the same kind of lessons." He came to see the value of the Catholic tradition again, but finds it to be "a little too confining to reduce myself to just the one tradition."

As one more example of moving away from Catholicism, Tara, whose traumas included physical

abuse and infidelity in a long-term relationship, was one of the participants who came to identify as spiritual but not religious. For her now, religion is "within me when I go run, and I'm looking at nature, and I feel the presence of something bigger than myself. That's my religion." As a young person she embraced Catholicism "completely" but started noticing that in this tradition, "nobody's asking me how I feel." She felt a sense of final closure with her association to the Catholic tradition after an experience at a youth camp. A priest told her she could not room with her friend, who was a boy, because they were opposite sexes. Then, she went to talk to him "upstairs, and he has all these women around him on the couch. He's chilling on the couch. He's like a young priest, and all these girls are flaunting and flirting with him." Tara felt that the young priest was imposing rules that he was not willing to follow, which she perceived to be hypocritical.

Interviewees who reported moving away from organized religion generally emphasized hypocrisy in the church, the inability of Christian or Catholic religious doctrines to help them make sense of their experiences, and the experience of being made to feel guilt and/or shame within the general culture of the religion. This movement away from religion was linked to personal transformation in that it involved meaningful and lasting changes to participants' philosophy of life, sense of spirituality, and emotional patterns—particularly a reduction of feelings of shame and guilt.

Impaired to Elevated Well-being/Functioning

Interview data reflected the survey trend indicating that the middle of a transformative process can be associated with lowered levels of well-being/ functioning, particularly when the transformation was catalyzed by trauma(s) or emotional distress. Yet interview data indicated that as participants' process of transformation continued to unfold, they began to experience levels of well-being and functioning that were higher than before the transformation process was catalyzed.

Grasshopper's interview data was especially reflective of this theme. His experience of transform-ation appears to have been markedly substantial. At the time of the interview, he was training to become a psychologist and was leading small group therapy

for veterans. His perception of himself had become notably healthy: "I used to think I was a horrible person … for what I did, scaring [my wife] and her kids. I now know that I'm not a horrible person. I did a really horrible thing, but I'm a good person."

Poppy said that through, and because of her hardship, she set the clear intention to "grow and evolve," and that "otherwise, I probably would have committed suicide." Mark spoke of a similar experience. He was in prison facing a potential life sentence. He was in so much pain that he was "planning my own suicide." One of the key factors that pulled him out of his suicidality was meeting other prisoners who had experienced transformation. These other prisoners were men who were serving long sentences for violent crimes, but "had become … spiritual giants." They became role models for Mark and helped him adopt a set of beliefs that he could change, and that his well-being could dramatically improve.

"I went from being pretty depressed to just feeling better," Elda said. Asked what guidance she would offer people who may be in the middle of transformation process that is associated with lowered levels of well-being and functioning, Elda emphasized the importance of remembering that "it gets better. It's not always going to be like this…. slow down and, like, really listen to yourself, and take the time to do that personal work." She wanted to make it clear that not only can it get better, but it can get *way* better.

> I … got torn down deep, to the deepest pit of despair, self-esteem destroyed, and had to pull myself back up out of it and reclaim my power and reclaim my sovereignty…. The traumatic experiences have definitely made me think about… what's the purpose of life? Why are we here? What's my role? … I think it's led me to be more intentional … and more deliberate. … Now I'm even more empowered to be on my path and more determined than ever.

Elda became a highly functional person. At the time of the interview, she was managing a demanding job that involved being emotionally available for people. She reported that she has a variety of effective self-regulation tools, and she described her

own well-being as being much higher than before her experience of transformation.

Discussion

Survey data revealed that transformation can be catalyzed in a variety of ways, and that trauma or emotional distress appears to be an especially common catalyst. The differences between the profiles of transformation in the various catalyst subgroups are noteworthy because they indicate that the factors most supportive of the transformative process, and the outcomes the process leads to, may differ depending on the catalyst of transformation. It is relevant to know, for example, that transformation catalyzed by trauma or emotional distress significantly correlates with therapy as a crucial supportive factor and changes in emotional patterns as an outcome of the process. Ongoing research aimed at understanding how transformation unfolds according to its primary catalyst, and at identifying uniquely facilitative factors for specific types of transformation, will likely be of great benefit to people experiencing transformation.

The experience of transformation may have much common ground. Yet, along with differences between types of transformation, there are likely crucial experiential differences between ethnicities, genders, generations and other sectors of identity, which this study was unable to adequately address. As Kashyap and Hussain (2018) pointed out about posttraumatic growth specifically, "cultural elements play an important role in influencing the behavior of individuals in the aftermath of trauma. Hence it is important to conceptualize and measure posttraumatic growth in the framework of the culture to which the individual belongs" (p. 51).

Although this study sample lacked the sufficient diversity to achieve strong external validity, the differences among groups were notable. We expect that further research will continue to show common features of the process of transformation, and also continue to reveal important differences related to common catalysts, supportive factors, and outcomes of the process, dependent on social groups. Mental health professionals will be better equipped to support individuals who are undergoing transformation if the professionals are knowledgeable about how the process of transformation might unfold differently depending on its catalyst or depending on the background of the individual undergoing transformation. Continued formal investigation into the experience of transformation among diverse populations will help develop this knowledge.

The importance of understanding the experiences of people who report a high level of change stabilization is worth emphasizing. Change stabilization is the degree to which the individual feels that their process of transformation has reached a relative completion, that the changes have stabilized into a new norm. The factors that support a transformational process through to its relative completion are likely best understood by the people whose transformation feels relatively complete. Understanding that there is a significant association between self-expression and high change stabilization can be valuable for individuals in the midst of transformation and professionals supporting them. This study suggests that self-expression refers to talking about inner processes, expressing oneself creatively, and being self-assertive. Importantly, it appears that self-expression, particularly talking about inner processes, elicits empathy, which was among the most supportive factors in this study. People amidst transformation will likely benefit if they are encouraged, and given the opportunities, to express themselves.

The process of transformation, and specifically posttraumatic growth, can be framed as a process of change that moves from equilibrium, through disequilibrium, to a new equilibrium (Braun & Berg, 1995; Calhoun et al., 2010; Dutton & Zisook, 2005; Rando, 1995; Schlitz et al., 2011). Rando (1995) described the disruption to an individual's equilibrium as an *upheaval* of "everything a person assumes to be true about the world and self on the basis of previous experience" (p. 217). The fact that the majority of interviewees in this study had experienced a series of traumatic/emotionally distressing events raises the question, how can one discern the degree to which an individual's equilibrium is disrupted by each traumatic event? How thoroughly one's established way of being is destabilized by a new experience is difficult to

measure. There may be a gradual destabilizing with each disquieting experience, culminating in a final event that disrupts equilibrium sufficiently to set the stage for transformation.

Survey and interview data indicated that it may be common for people to experience impaired well-being/functioning during the process of transformation, which makes the term *disequilibrium* fitting as a description for the middle of the transformation process. Interview data showed that this impairment in well-being and functioning during the transformative process can eventually lead to levels of well-being and functioning that were higher than before the transformation. Stabilized, elevated levels of well-being and functioning reflect the *new equilibrium*, and getting to this stage of the transformation process depends on the presence of supportive factors. Experiencing impaired well-being and functioning as a result of a traumatic experience and elevated well-being and functioning as a result of recovering from a traumatic experience is the nature of posttraumatic growth and was evident in this study.

Given the solidity and widespread acceptance of the model of posttraumatic growth put forth initially in 1995 by Tedeschi and Calhoun, it is appropriate to interpret the qualitative data, and facets of the quantitative data, in a way that is informed by this model and compares to this model. The data in this mixed methods investigation of transformation are consistent with the model of posttraumatic growth. Each of the five domains of posttraumatic growth were represented in the interview data. The association between self-expression and change stabilization revealed in the survey, and the reciprocal relationship between empathy and self-expression reflected in the interviews, may be of particular interest to researchers and clinicians who want to further investigate and support the experience of posttraumatic growth.

The findings in this study, considered in the context of prior research findings (i.e. Chopko, 2010; Hammer et al. 2019; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Schlitz et al. 2008; Taylor, 2012) and existing theoretical frameworks (i.e. Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Grof & Grof, 2017; Schlitz et al., 2011), highlight the relevance of the concept of a *framework of transformation*,

defined as the inclination to interpret feelings of impaired well-being and functioning as potential signs of transformation. Another way to articulate the meaning of a framework of transformation is, a paradigm that prompts an interpretation of disequilibrium as potentially being in the service of a new equilibrium. The study findings highlight the relevance of this framework by showing that transformation is a process of meaningful change that can be disruptive to an individual's equilibrium and accompany impaired levels of well-being and functioning prior to reaching enduring, elevated levels of well-being and functioning—provided that the proper supportive factors are available.

A framework of transformation can help attenuate or eliminate stigma around expressions of disequilibrium, disorder, discomfort, instability, grief, depression, and/or anxiety by understanding that they do not necessarily indicate that something is wrong with an individual, or an individual's neurological functioning. They may be "undergoing an evolutionary crisis rather than suffering from a mental disease" (Grof & Grof, 2017, p. 30). The framework of transformation can have a positive effect on the psychology of individuals experiencing transformation, potentially by instilling a valid sense that there is nothing defective about them, and that a new normal marked by positive changes and elevated well-being is possible.

Maslow (1968) asserted that "in any given moment, we have two options: to step forward into growth or step back into safety" (p. 47). Safety in the context of transformation can show up as a fear of change, or in the context of posttraumatic growth specifically, as an avoidance of the healing process. Maslow came to believe that "we grow forward when the delights of growth and anxieties of safety are greater than the anxieties of growth and the delights of safety" (p. 47). He argued that the way to encourage growth in ourselves and others is to make comfort less attractive and growth more attractive. A framework of transformation makes growth attractive. When in the wake of personal crises individuals and their support systems interpret feelings of depression and anxiety as part of a process of transformation, it may change the relationship to those feelings in a way that shortens

their duration, adds meaning to the suffering, and facilitates positive changes.

These findings and their implications are encouraging, yet the study was limited in several ways. Although the sample size was relatively large, it was relatively homogenous, particularly related to representation of ethnic groups. The use of a research instrument designed by the researchers may be seen as a weakness in the study as well. Until the reliability and validity of this transformation survey as a research instrument is well-established, confidence in the survey results can understandably be questioned. As a research team, we intend to continue improving the content validity and face validity of the survey instrument so that this can be a reliable tool available for transformation researchers. Additionally, the interview phase of this study, which focused on posttraumatic growth, did not overcome the methodological flaws highlighted by Jayawickreme and Blackie (2016), who pointed out the inherent limitations of gathering data from participants based on retrospective perceived posttraumatic growth. There is a need for longitudinal studies of transformation and posttraumatic growth, for greater representation of diverse populations in these studies, and for the development of increasingly reliable research instruments to measure transformation.

Conclusion

The sample size of 130 and the mixed methods approach generated more quantitative and qualitative data than we have been able to present and interpret in this report. However, we consider our most important findings from the survey to be the following: There was a significant association between self-expression and change stabilization ($p \leq .01$); trauma/emotional distress was the most common catalyst of transformation, constituting 44% of responses among four broad categories; in general, the most frequently selected elements for supporting transformation included connecting with nature (71%), introspection (65%), solitude (63%), and empathy from others (61%)—yet percentages and leading supportive elements change substantially for different catalyst groups and demographic profiles; the most common changes

related to participants' way of interacting with others (77%), their perception of life (75%), and emotional patterns (70%); the experience of transformation led 59% of participants to now identify as spiritual but not religious; and 63% of survey respondents agreed that there were times during the process of transformation that their well-being and ability to function was impaired.

The most important findings from the interviews include the qualitative nuances they added to the survey findings and the themes brought to light by the interviews that were undetected by the survey. Interviewees provided detailed, specific examples of the nature of their traumatic/emotionally distressing catalyst of transformation, how the supportive factors affected their process of transformation, and how the changes that they had reported on the survey have manifested in their lives. The importance of nature, empathy, self-expression, and therapy were strongly emphasized, as were changes in perception. The movement away from organized religion toward a more personalized spirituality, which was reflected in the survey data, was elaborated upon in the interview data. A wide variety of traumatic/emotionally distressing events were reported in the interviews, and the majority of interviewees reported that their transformation was catalyzed by a series of distressing events. Interview data also revealed a connection between self-expression and empathy, showing that self-expression can elicit empathy and empathy can encourage self-expression—a virtuous cycle conducive to posttraumatic growth. Additionally, interview data showed that although the process of transformation involved impaired well-being and functioning, when supportive factors were in place, transformation often resulted in elevated levels of well-being and functioning.

The evidence lends credence to the idea that a framework of transformation is important. We are advocating that the framework of transformation be adopted personally, professionally, and culturally. This framework can be understood as the inclination to interpret disequilibrium—and the feelings of depression, anxiety, and general instability that may accompany it—as potential signs of transformation. This study has shown that the right, personalized

combination of supportive factors can facilitate the process of transformation to a relative completion, whereby an individual's way of being has changed in a positive, meaningful, and lasting way.

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Appendix A
Transformation Survey Instrument

1. At least once in my adult life, I have experienced a significant and lasting change in core aspects of myself. (Rating Scale)

I have not experienced any kind of significant changes to core aspects of myself   **0**

I have experienced moderate changes to core aspects of myself   **50**

I have experienced extreme changes to core aspects of myself   **100**

My self-rating: ☐

2. To whatever degree you have experienced transformation, what was the main catalyst of the process? We acknowledge that many of these factors may have played an important role in your transformation, but we are interested in what you consider to be the initial catalyst.

- ☐ A traumatic or otherwise emotionally painful event
- ☐ An inspirational experience
- ☐ An inspirational person
- ☐ I had to adapt to a new role or a new set of circumstances in my life, which led to the changes
- ☐ Dissonance (defined as an experience of inconsistency within yourself, i.e. between your beliefs and your experiences, your values and your motivations, your self-concept and your actions, or your words and deeds)
- ☐ A psychedelic experience
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

3. Although the process of change is ongoing, to what degree do you feel that you have stabilized into a new way of being? In other words, to what degree do you feel that your transformative process

has reached a relative completion? (Rating Scale)

I feel like it just started happening   **0**

I feel like I am in the middle of the process   **50**

While I know I will experience more change in my life, I feel that my most recent process of transformation has reached its completion and I have stabilized into a new way of being   **100**

My self-rating: ☐

4. During your process of transformation, which of these supportive elements were/are crucial for moving along the process and helping it bear fruit? By moving along the process, we mean that these supports help prevent you from feeling stuck in the process. By help it bear fruit, we mean that these supports help positive changes manifest and stabilize. Check all that apply.

- ☐ Empathy from others
- ☐ Role model(s)
- ☐ Confidant(s)
- ☐ Solitude
- ☐ Community
- ☐ A small group therapeutic relationship
- ☐ A personal therapist
- ☐ A teacher (not necessarily in a spiritual context
- ☐ A guru or spiritual teacher
- ☐ Spiritual texts
- ☐ Religious scripture
- ☐ Formal or informal retreat

☐ Church

☐ Religious ritual

5. During your process of transformation, what behaviors or practices did you find/are you finding to be important for moving along the process and helping it bear fruit? Check all that apply.

☐ Meditation (seated with my eyes closed)

☐ Mindfulness (the practice of present moment, nonjudgmental awareness

☐ Yoga (asana)

☐ Martial Arts

☐ Journaling

☐ Contemplating existence

☐ Introspection

☐ Expressing myself

☐ Listening to others

☐ Connecting with nature

☐ Eliminating or reducing my use of unnecessary technology

☐ Practicing silence (meaning deliberately not talking for a designated period of time)

☐ Dancing

☐ Singing

☐ Physical exercise

☐ Deliberate relaxation

☐ Art (taking it in and/or expressing yourself artistically)

☐ Music (taking it in and/or expressing yourself musically)

6. What about you changed/is changing to a degree that you would describe as significant? Check all that apply.

☐ My perception of life

☐ Central aspects of my identitys

☐ My self-esteem

☐ My beliefs

☐ My values

☐ My emotional patterns

☐ What I tend to think about

☐ The way I interact with people

☐ My behavioral patterns (habits)

☐ My goals

☐ The main sources of meaning in my life

☐ My relationship with nature

☐ My relationship with my own past

☐ The way I cope with the challenges of life

☐ My outlook on the future

☐ The appearance of my body

☐ My relationship to my body)

7. I have a vision of a future version of myself that inspires me to strive toward it.

☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Somewhat Agree)

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

8. At some point in my adult life, I have had an experience that made life feel unfair.
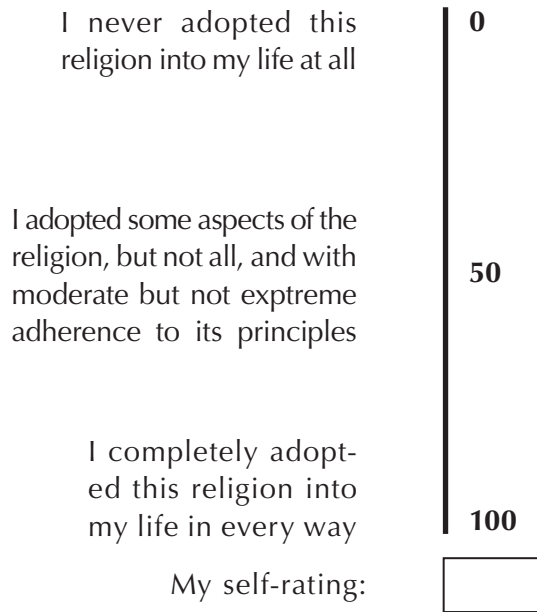
☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Somewhat Agree)

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

9. Growing up until the age of 18, which religion(s) were you primarily exposed to, either in your household or your culture?

☐ I do not practice or identify with a religion

☐ Christianity

Islam	Taoism
Catholicism	Hinduism
Judaism	Indigenous Native American
Buddhism	Traditional African
Taoism	Paganism
Hinduism	Other (please specify):_____
Indigenous Native American	
Traditional African	
Paganism	
Other (please specify):_____	

- [ ] Islam
- [ ] Catholicism
- [ ] Judaism
- [ ] Buddhism
- [ ] Taoism
- [ ] Hinduism
- [ ] Indigenous Native American
- [ ] Traditional African
- [ ] Paganism
- [ ] Other (please specify):_____

10. Up until the age of 18, to what degree did you adopt the belief system, values, rituals, and lifestyle of the religion to which you had been primarily exposed?

I never adopted this religion into my life at all	**0**
I adopted some aspects of the religion, but not all, and with moderate but not exptreme adherence to its principles	**50**
I completely adopt-ed this religion into my life in every way	**100**

My self-rating: [ ]

11. Now in your adult life, which religion(s) do you study, practice, and/or identify with?

- [ ] I do not practice or identify with a religion
- [ ] Christianity
- [ ] Islam
- [ ] Catholicism
- [ ] Judaism
- [ ] Buddhism

Right column:

- [ ] Taoism
- [ ] Hinduism
- [ ] Indigenous Native American
- [ ] Traditional African
- [ ] Paganism
- [ ] Other (please specify):_____

12. Which of these statements is accurate for you? Check all that apply. As a reminder, you can skip any questions that do not apply to you.

- [ ] My experience(s) of transformation brought me closer to the original religion I had been exposed to while growing up
- [ ] My experience(s) of transformation brought/is bringing me further from the original religion I had been exposed to while growing up
- [ ] My experience(s) of transformation led/is leading me to adopt a different religion into my life, and focus on it primarily
- [ ] My experience(s) of transformation led/is leading me to study and practice different religions of the world, and I do not feel committed to one
- [ ] My experience(s) of transformation has led/is leading me to identify as secular
- [ ] My experience(s) of transformation has led/is leading me identify as spiritual, but not religious
- [ ] My experience(s) of transformation did not/has not affected my religious orientation

13. There are/were times during the process of transformation that my well-being and/or ability to function was at a lower level than before the process started.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Somewhat Agree)
- [ ] Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

About the Authors

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