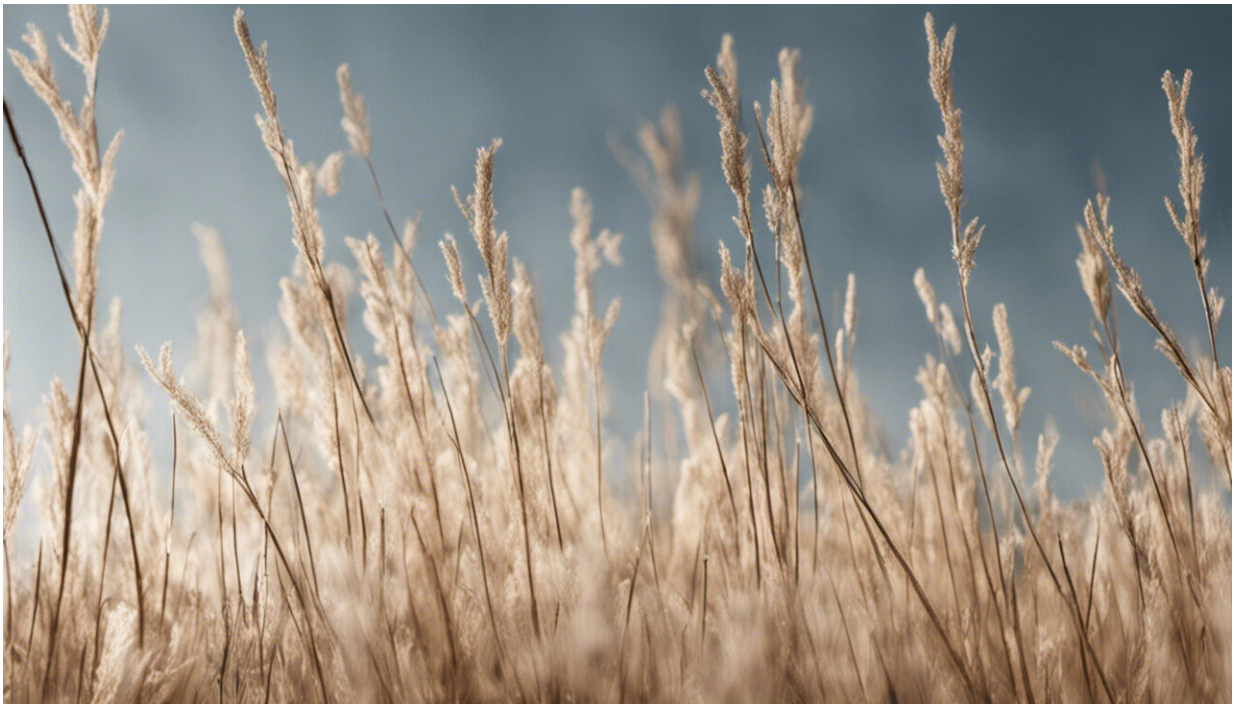


How trauma survivors can harness spiritual contemplation to process stress

August 15 2022, by Catrin Eames



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

[Trauma](#), such as surviving or witnessing road accidents, natural disasters and violence, can shake up our lives, challenging our core beliefs and views of the world.

But this upheaval can also trigger what's known as "[post-traumatic](#)

[growth](#)" in [different aspects](#) of our lives. This can mean a greater appreciation for life, seeing new opportunities, a deeper sense of personal resilience or strengthened relationships.

My team was interested in what things can help us have post-traumatic growth. [Our recent study](#) found spiritual (but not necessarily religious) practices, such as pondering how [life experiences](#) relate to our understanding of who we are and our place in the world, encourages the sort of contemplation that helps process trauma.

But we also found that [spirituality](#) didn't reduce the likelihood of experiencing stressful effects from trauma. And the amount of time that had elapsed had no bearing on post-traumatic growth in our study. Simply waiting for time to pass did not result in personal growth. In short, it's not time that heals, but how you use time.

To process the shock of trauma, we often think about the distressing events again and again. And there are two types of such repetitive thinking.

[Intrusive rumination](#) is involuntary and unwanted reactions like nightmares or flashbacks. These are symptoms of [post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

[Deliberate rumination](#) is when we think about trauma on purpose to find meaning in what happened to us. This is where spirituality can come in.

A frame of mind

[Spirituality](#) is about exploring who we are and how we relate to ourselves and others. It [can help people think](#) about experiences in a way that feels safe and structured.

[Other researchers have previously found](#) people who are more spiritual (but not necessarily religious) experience less distress after trauma. We thought this could be because people who have [spiritual beliefs](#) tend to explore their core beliefs in response to changing life circumstances. In other words, because spiritual practice involves a lot of deliberate rumination.

We ran an online study in 2017 for our recently published research, asking participants about trauma, growth and spirituality. Ninety-six adults who experienced a traumatic event after the age of 16 but not in the last four months took part. The events included serious accidents, illness, sexual assault and [natural disasters](#).

We found that the more participants engaged with deliberate rumination, the more post-traumatic growth they experienced. This was especially true for those who had high or moderate levels of spiritual beliefs. The link between deliberate rumination and growth was stronger for people with average to high levels of spirituality.

There is hope

Probing our beliefs about who we are and what matters to us before and after trauma helps rebuild our personal security. This is the kind of deliberate rumination people with spiritual philosophies build into the fabric of their lives and practice, perhaps every day.

They expect to have their beliefs shaken every once in a while and use contemplation to deal with the fallout. Processing trauma helps us [make sense](#) of it, which reduces [fear and avoidance](#) of things that remind us of what happened.

Our conclusion is that people who rate spirituality as important to them could harness those beliefs to set in motion the process for [deliberate](#)

[rumination](#). This could be because they feel supported by a spiritual community that lessens isolation or grief. They routinely practice forgiveness, relaxation, reflection or meditation practices.

It is hard to measure something like the strength of someone's spirituality, but it is important that we find ways to [measure value and belief systems](#) in a scientific way if we want to understand the human experience. That is, [what helps us stay well and thrive, not just what makes us distressed](#).

We can explore and find meaning in our experiences, finding positives in the distressing aftermath of trauma. You don't need spiritual beliefs to benefit from aspects of spirituality such as [acceptance](#) that help us move on. No one should have to go through [trauma](#). You may never be the same afterwards but post-traumatic growth can transform us.

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