

## **Can Faith and Spirituality Promote Healing and Post-Traumatic Growth in the Aftermath of Trauma? What We Can Learn from Cambodian Trauma Survivors and Those Who Support Them**

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### **Abstract**

Although precise numbers are difficult to estimate, close to 1 billion children under the age of 18 experience trauma every year. Many of these children will go on to thrive despite their lived experiences of trauma, whereas some will not. Thriving in the aftermath of trauma has been defined by some researchers as Post-Traumatic Growth. This article will explore Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) in a Cambodian context, with trauma survivors who have been supported by Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and looking specifically at faith and spirituality, which are recognised within a PTG framework. This article will present some of the findings stemming from a wider piece of research conducted in Cambodia, seeking to understand resilience in the aftermath of trauma (Wyatt, 2021). The data captured in this research contains the perspective of 26 young Cambodian trauma survivors. These adult participants (aged 18-30) not only survived significant trauma in their early

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childhood but appeared to do remarkably well in life. This research set out to understand what role, if any, faith did play in building the resilience for these individuals. Furthermore, this article presents the perspectives of NGOs and the people who support trauma survivors in Cambodia and what they can add to the PTG narrative. Specifically, this article will explore how individual coping methods such as social resources, faith and spiritual practices, culture and community can facilitate positive adaptation and PTG for these young trauma survivors.

**Key Words:** Faith, Spirituality, Cambodia, Post-Traumatic Growth, Positive Adaptation, Resilience

## I . Introduction

Globally, a vast number of children and young people face the harsh realities of war, genocide, natural disasters, poverty, neglect, and violence every year. UNICEF (2018) estimates that in Cambodia, 1 in 4 children have endured psychological and emotional abuse and 1 in 20 have been sexually assaulted. Much research has been done on how the aftermath of trauma may manifest and impact childhood development (Anda et al., 2010; Danese and McEwen, 2012). According to the World Health Organisation ([WHO] 2020), childhood trauma results from six main types of violence: 1) maltreatment, which involves neglect and physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse; 2) bullying, which can manifest at the community or interpersonal level in the form of psychological or social harm; 3) youth violence, which is violence between and among peers; 4) intimate partner violence, which can be witnessed in domestic households or experienced directly through child marriage or dating violence; 5) sexual

violence, including trafficking, rape, sexual assault and harassment; and 6) psychological and emotional violence, which can include non-physical abuse such as intimidation and hostile behaviour towards children.

Importantly, experiences of childhood violence have been linked to continuing impacts on wellbeing and health in adulthood (WHO, 2020). Early trauma can also lead to higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicide and other mental health problems later in life (Anda et al., 2010). Research on trauma in Cambodia continues to focus on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) interventions rather than on recovery and the development of resilience post-trauma.

Yet there has been an abundance of global research conducted on religion and faith as protective factors that promote wellbeing and resilience (Krause, 2008; Williams and Lindsey, 2010; Brewer et al., 2015). Theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich's work entitled *Dynamics of Faith* (1957) examines the nature of faith and how faith can assume both religious and/or non-religious forms. He argues that the nature of faith is that of courage and the centring act and integration of the entire personality (Tillich, 1957). Williams and Lindsey (2010) reviewed the roles of spiritual practices in American at-risk adolescents and they identified three major spiritual themes that underpin resilience: 1) having a personal relationship with God or a higher power; 2) finding meaning and purpose in life; and 3) embracing personally meaningful spiritual practices. This is because faith and spiritual practices can be protective factors that help trauma survivors move forward with their lives (Williams and Lindsey, 2010). Brewer et al. (2015) found that religious and spiritual practices can enhance wellbeing by promoting healthy behaviours and providing religious social support. Krause (2008) concurs with Brewer et al.'s findings (2015) that spiritual practices are linked with an

improvement of physical health, by directly lowering levels of stress cortisol in the body through mindful meditation. Anand (2009) found that Buddhism enables resilience through faith in reincarnation and acts in past lives affecting circumstances in the present, which “facilitates acceptance of a tragic situation” (818).

These researches (Williams and Lindsey, 2010; Brewer et al., 2015; Anand, 2009) informed the current study significantly, as it became apparent that there was a need to further understand the link between faith and spirituality, resilience and the recovery from trauma in a Cambodian context. The findings presented in the next section of this paper capture the lived experiences of young people who have experienced trauma, some of whom had found solace in their faith. The behaviours, motivations and attitudes of the young people, which arose from their specific trauma histories and experiences, became clearer through their lens. The lived experiences of the young people captured through their narratives provides an understanding of what happened to them, the challenges of overcoming their circumstances and how faith and spirituality may have further underpinned their resilience.

Researchers use many theories to explain trauma and resilience, such as post-traumatic growth (PTG) theory (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996). It is proposed that the integration of faith and spirituality within a PTG perspective provides a framework for understanding trauma and the support needed for recovery. These include social supports, such as emotional bonds that connect people and foster development of self-esteem and self-worth learnt through social influence, as well as the potential for positive psychological change post-trauma (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) developed PTG theory which sees struggle with emotional distress as essential for cognitive

processes leading to growth post-trauma.

PTG is the individual's experience of significant positive change arising from the struggle of a major life crisis (Calhoun et al., 2000). While there is some overlap between PTG and resilience, as both are concerned with positive recovery from trauma, PTG differs from resilience considerably. It could be argued that while resilience is defined by some as the ability to "bounce back" (Smith et al., 2008), PTG refers to what can happen when someone who has difficulty bouncing back due to a traumatic event and endures a psychological struggle or a mental illness, such as PTSD, ultimately finds a sense of personal growth (Calhoun et al., 2000). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) developed the PTG Inventory which looks for positive responses in five areas: 1) appreciation of life; 2) relationships with others; 3) new possibilities in life; 4) personal strength; and 5) spiritual change. PTG therefore is not resilience itself, but rather a change in the five areas listed above resulting in a higher level of functioning detected in survivors of traumatic events.

It was originally thought that PTG was a culturally neutral concept. However, further research has demonstrated that PTG is influenced by cultural perceptions and worldviews of the trauma survivor themselves, who are informed by their own cultural understandings and preconceptions (Berry et al., 1996; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004). In particular, some researchers have found there is a lack of culturally neutral PTG assessment tools when utilised outside of the West (Chen and Wu, 2017; Kashyap and Hussain, 2018). Nonetheless, studies conducted on PTG with child Holocaust survivors (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2004), Chinese adolescent Ya'an earthquake survivors (Chen and Wu, 2017), Iranian cancer patients (Rahmani et al., 2012) and refugees in Somalia (Kashyap and Hussain, 2018) all found that survivors shared certain personal growth consistencies

despite varying cultural differences. This suggests that PTG may be applicable in cross-cultural settings, such as the context of modern-day Cambodia.

Cambodia has long been a Buddhist-majority country. During the 13th century, a major cultural shift occurred when Theravada Buddhism was brought into the rural communities, presumably by monks, with the Buddhist faith reproducing itself locally and also gaining popularity with the monarch and royal court, which may have inspired thousands of Cambodians to follow suit (Agger, 2015; Harris, 2008). In modern times, Cambodian Buddhism is made distinct by the blending of traditional animistic, folk religious practices with a state-sanctioned form of Theravada Buddhism informed by the country's Hindu history (Harris, 2008). Animism maintains that there is a spiritual realm unseen to everyone and followers believe in a constant battle between spirits, rather than one, all-powerful creative force (Chouléan, 1988).

However, Christianity is on the rise in Cambodia (Cormack, 2014). Modern-day Christian practice in Cambodia has seen a fusion of traditional religious beliefs with Christian beliefs, indicating one of the many manifestations of religious syncretism in the country (Chew, 2013; Smith, 2008). This has occurred because Christian converts in Cambodia bring with them their religious histories of Theravada Buddhism and folk animism, which are reshaped into the new paradigm of Christianity (Baeq, 2012). Whatever the motivation for conversion from Theravada Buddhism to Christianity may be, Coggan (2015) argues that converting comes at a cost, because to be Khmer is to be Buddhist and to "cease being Buddhist is almost an act of treason" (153).

Tensions arising from religious pluralism has been captured in research in other Buddhist countries, such as Thailand (Bowie, 1998) and Sri

Lanka (Harris, 2006), creating serious ramifications for those taking up the new faith in their wider communities. Whilst religious faith may build cultural identity, the introduction of Christianity into Buddhist societies has the potential to do harm (Mahadev, 2014). Furthermore, it is understood by Coggan (2015) that evangelical Christianity has a reputation for teaching disrespect of traditional Cambodian family values as it does not adhere to the Theravada Buddhist festivals of Khmer New Year and Pchum Ben, which are important for family unity. Khmer Christians may not feel that they can participate in rituals involving monks and paying respect to images of the Buddha, as Christianity has no policy or teaching on this (Cormack, 2014).

Furthermore, global research on trauma survivors indicates strong linkages between social environments of children post-trauma and their ability to recover (Masten, 2015; Miles et al., 2020; Perry and Szalavitz, 2006; van der Kolk, 2014). For example, research has linked higher levels of social support and family acceptance after reintegration efforts to more positive psychological and social adjustment post-trauma among former child soldiers with histories of prolonged exposure to violence (Betancourt and Khan, 2008). Likewise, adults exposed to natural disasters have fewer symptoms of PTSD and depression if they experience and/or perceive having positive social support (Arnberg et al., 2012; McGuire et al., 2018). Further research indicates a high correlation between social connectedness, faith and spirituality, mental health and resilience from trauma (Mhaka-Mutepefa and Maundeni, 2019; Ungar, 2011).

Yet there remains limited research on how spiritual change in PTG has been demonstrated by trauma survivors in developing nations such as Cambodia. This study seeks to explore potential coping methods that were utilized by trauma survivors outside of a western framework of

understanding. By exploring the lived experiences of trauma survivors in Cambodia and those that support them, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature that could potentially inform further trauma and resilience discourses.

## **II. Methods**

The study's aim is to contribute to the growing body of work in the field of resilience and recovery from trauma in Cambodia. It is hoped that the knowledge generated might be used to further strengthen programs working with trauma survivors in cross-cultural settings. By focussing on resilience and recovery, this study draws upon a strengths-based framework using grounded theory and an exploratory case study approach (Wyatt, 2021). As this study incorporates naturalistic inquiry, it requires the researcher to locate themselves within the picture to ensure that the significant influences that shaped the study design became transparent (Williams and Haverkamp, 2015).

The research project encapsulates key themes and experiences from the researcher's professional background as a trauma therapist working in Thailand. Researchers (Thompson and Russo, 2012) point to the potential for boundary blurring to occur when the researcher is also a therapist. However, professional therapeutic skills can actively enhance the research process due to increased awareness on how to respond appropriately to vulnerable populations and trauma survivors (Thompson and Russo, 2012).

Before undertaking field research, ethics approval was sought and granted by Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Cambodian Ministry of Health. Furthermore, the researcher is bound by

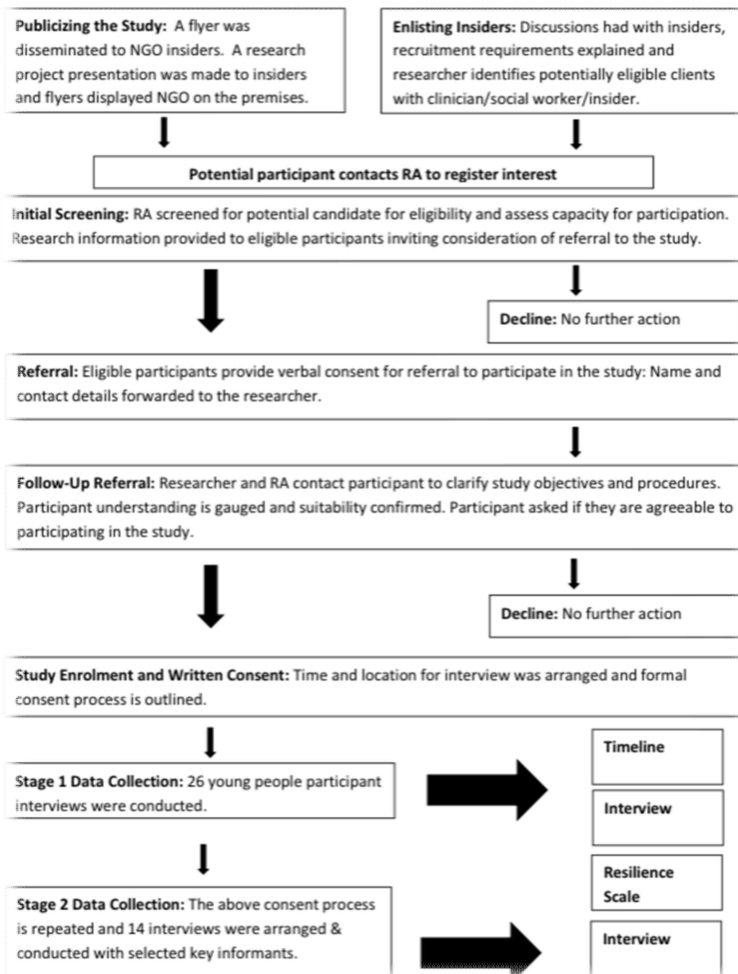


the Australian Association Social Workers in ethically sound research practices. An extensive literature review was conducted prior to the researcher's relocation to Phnom Penh to conduct field work in 2019. The researcher remained in Cambodia for 18 months, during which time they spent time learning the Cambodian language and travelling across the country for interviews. The researcher also did volunteer work with child protection NGOs, delivering trauma workshops to staff. All these experiences added to a rich tapestry of context and understanding about Cambodia.

There has been a strong NGO presence in Cambodia since the 1990s after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement. Although not without challenges, it is the researcher's belief that their work appears to fill in the gaps of government social and economic policies, supporting individuals, families and communities, that would otherwise not be able to access opportunities such as education, training and health care services. Three NGOs were selected to participate in the research as it was the belief of the researcher that they were doing important work and were creating a positive impact in the lives of the survivors they support. Hagar International, Flame Cambodia and This Life Cambodia are the participating NGOs and assisted in the recruitment of participants for this study.

Some participants are former clients of Hagar International Cambodia (Hagar) and/or are employed by Flame Cambodia (Flame). Other participants are supported by This Life Cambodia (TLC). These NGOs provided some early contextual information on trauma and the resilience demonstrated by some of their clients. The young people interviewed for this study all shared similarities in terms of having some type of early childhood trauma, which necessitated NGO intervention (Wyatt, 2021).

All participants in this study are former clients of Hagar and TLC. Flame was included in this study as they employed a group of ex-Hagar clients. TLC was selected to complement the study population and was



<Figure 1> Research Process

included in the research design for diversity of the participants. For example, Hagar and Flame are faith-based NGOs and TLC is a secular NGO and this influence is captured in the findings between Buddhist and Christian participants presented in the next section. Below is a flow chart that describes the recruitment method and steps that were undertaken with NGO insiders, the research assistant (RA) and the approach data collection.

One-hour participant interviews were conducted in both English and Khmer, to which a Cambodian interpreter was used for the interviews in Khmer. A culturally sensitive, open questioning interview style was incorporated, alongside the use of visual timelines and resilience scale for the interviews with 26 young people and 14 key insiders working in the child protection space (Wyatt, 2021). The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale is a widely used instrument for measuring resilience and its Khmer translation (Kh-CD-RISC-10) was used for this study. This was used in conjunction with the narrative timeline to build rapport with participants, utilising participants as navigators, allowing for therapeutic moments with positive closure (Kolar et al., 2015). Furthermore, research has shown that through a visual representation and construction of a participant's life, narrative timeline research is helpful in the study of resilience with marginalised groups and have been found to situate semi-structured interviewing (Rose, 2007).

A sensitive, trauma-informed interview style was important, as all of the young people interviewed lived through some type of trauma during childhood. The majority spent their early life in the Cambodian provinces where violence and poverty were commonplace. Almost all participants had encountered child labour and hunger, as well as the death of a close family member. Most had experienced multiple forms of abuse and

trauma—physical, sexual, emotional or psychological—by the time they were teenagers. A common theme among the trauma stories, although not shared by all, was the prevalence of human trafficking.

### **III. Findings**

Many young people spoke of significant relationships with people outside of their immediate family who had believed in them and positively impacted their lives. For the young people who were orphaned, foster families played a central role in cultivating a sense of belonging through family. Some of these young people spoke of feeling safe and not having to work long hours cooking or attending to farming duties. Instead, because of being placed with a new family less affected by poverty than their biological family, they had more time to focus on their studies. Another theme that emerged from the young people who had foster families was their introduction to Christianity through the church. Some of these participants commented on how they found acceptance and love through their new Christian communities. For the orphaned participants, finding a Christian community and the sense of belonging that accompanied it impacted their ability to trust others and develop and sustain connections with others well into adulthood:

“I remember my life was better and more comfortable when I lived with my foster family. I got [my foster mum’s] good advice to solve my problems. She taught me to manage my feeling and anger or stress, when I had problems with people or things. When I had any troubles, I could tell her all and she helped me to fix them with her advice.”

Many of the young people spoke of significant adults with whom they

had connections in their teenage years. These adults were often teachers who encouraged them and believed in them, even if they were “acting out.” The experience of compassion was incredibly profound, especially for the young people who had experienced trauma and violence by a family member when they were children. This expression of compassion by significant adults was captured in the following comments, when some of the young people reflected on their early educational experiences:

“How can I study? [My counsellor] said, ‘The school needs to teach those who don’t have knowledge, so you should study and try your best. I trust you. I trust that you can do it.’”

“I’m so blessed, so lucky. One of my English teacher [in high school], she’s a Christian. She’s from the US. She tried to speak up with the school and said she wanted me to stay, but the old people wanted to kick me out [for behavioural issues]. She believed in me and made them let me stay.”

For many participants, belonging came from pre-existing family, such as the young people who had been incarcerated and still had their families of origin. Other participants who lacked their families of origin found a sense of belonging through the creation of their own families as adults. The importance of family was valued by all participants; however, how this value manifested in participant lives varied depending on their lived experiences. Notably, a sense of belonging stemming from the existence of a family support structure was evident in the data:

“From when I was 5 till 20, I still felt very lonely. But from 20 to 25, I don’t have it anymore because I have my [own] family [now].”

“When I came out [of jail], I didn’t commit any more crime. I worked hard and try to be strong and reliable for my family, my wife

and my children.”

“My husband is a man from [an NGO] too. The man who rape me had died in 2012 by heart attack. After that I open my heart. I got marriage with my husband in 2016; now we had one son.”

Opportunities provided by the NGOs were critical to developing life skills and a way of generating an income for the young peoples’ recovery. However, the orphans who did not have a family to assist them with their livelihoods considered that acquiring an education was a path to success in life. Yet, for the young people who were previously incarcerated, the family unit was paramount for their survival. Educational opportunities and independence are both themes in the next chapter and will be explored in more detail. One participant explained that he was given an opportunity to learn a skill when he was in jail, which he hoped he could use to earn an income and assist his family in surviving financially:

“I was angry because of the time wasted [in jail], which would otherwise be for making an income to support my family and younger siblings. But after making friends, getting to learn from different organisations, my anger subsided. I took the chance as an opportunity to learn new skills. Once I’m out, I could help my family better.”

Many of the young people from the NGOs had secured scholarships to go on to university yet, appeared to be quite humble about their academic successes. Many believed that doing well in their studies was dependent on the educational opportunities they were provided, rather than contributing their successes to being gifted or special in any way. One participant who is a medical doctor and studying surgery, (when asked if he was proud of himself) framed it thus:

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“Not really. The thing that I do, it’s my natural skill, but it doesn’t mean I’m the smartest. I believe all people can do if they believe in it and have the opportunity to try. Because everything already exists. We’re not the researcher; we’re not the discovering people, because we follow the things that people have already found. So, I think if we try, we can get it. Because of the books, the medicines, they already exist. The surgery has been done before. I didn’t do the research; I follow them. This problem, cut here. That problem, cut there. So, I think everyone can do it because I’m not that smart.”

Many participants were highly motivated to achieve their educational goals. These participants saw education as a way out of extreme poverty, which was a shared experience of most of the young people interviewed:

“Before, I noted that most girls in my village have low education due to their poverty and family issues. They just finished Grade 7 or 8. At that time, I also knew that no one in my family got a good education as the villagers, either. I wanted to help myself so that I could help others. I wanted to finish high school and enter a university someday.”

Young peoples’ self-determination was also evident in their personal relationships. In some instances, it was the stigma that young people experienced that became a driving force for their determination to succeed in various areas of their life:

“I always try my best to reach my goal. So, when I date with my wife, and I heard a lot of people said, ‘Orphan guy cannot get married with a beautiful wife, or their family, situation is different, cannot be together.’ So, I focus on my purpose and then I try my best. I don’t want others to look down on me. So, yes! That’s how I achieve my goal.”

Faith and spirituality formed part of an unconscious environment for

the socialisation of the participants, although personal beliefs and practices varied among them. Importantly, many participants found love, support and social connectedness through their faith, and a sense of belonging to their community and family. From the participant interviews, many expressed a more blended understanding of faith, which speaks to the religious syncretism present in Cambodia today. The majority of participants interviewed self-identified as Christian; however, some still incorporated Buddhist elements into their spiritual practices. Even still, some of the young people were not as devout in their faith as others. Interestingly, only one participant of the 26 interviewed did not align with any religion nor had any self-reported spiritual practices that she utilised in her life:

“When I was in the NGO, I had to follow in Christ because of my house parents [in my foster family], but now in I have no affiliation in any religion. I sometimes used to go to pagoda for some events, but I never do any religious practice now. I am not interested in it.”

Importantly, the young people from Christian NGOs Hagar and Flame had different faith-based experiences and influences than those from non-Christian NGO TLC. This is due to the role of family and its influence on the religious beliefs of the young people. While TLC participants were still connected to Buddhism through their families of origin, Hagar participants were often orphans who lacked their families of origin and were often first introduced to religion through their foster families. Many of the young people from Hagar found meaningful connection with others through their foster families taking them in and introducing them to church and the Christian community, where they found love and support. For many of the orphan children, going to church and being part of the Christian community provided a support



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system, sense of belonging and social connectedness never before experienced:

“I can say it was a good community where everyone looks after everyone. When you have troubles, the group leader, they call and ask for everyone to come and pray. It is good you know, the support.”

But for most of the Hagar/Flame young people, going to church with their new families was not enough for them to find God themselves. Some participants even self-reported not having any connection to faith until later in life when they found God. As one participant who was placed with a Christian foster family through Hagar, described his experience:

“When I start with Hagar, they picked me to live in a province with a Christian family. He is a pastor, so he teaches me, let me follow God, but we were young; we don’t know and not clear about God, just follow and get the candy at church. Get something to eat, follow the other child, play all together until high school. Still also not clear about God, but when we change to live in Phnom Penh, I think I am Christian but still don’t know God yet. Before, I was young, but my heart still not accept God. But now, yes, I believe in Jesus.”

While many Hagar/Flame participants favoured Christianity over Buddhism as a direct result of their adoptive family’s influence on their faith during their reintegration, some had embraced elements of both. Others found their way back to Buddhism after a predominately Christian education through their foster family placement and church communities. One of 22 participant who was introduced to Christianity through her NGO foster family, later returned to her Buddhist origins:

“For me a faith or a religious belief is not much more important for

my life than my self-belief, my self-confidence, self-encouragement. Sometimes I just sit and close my eyes and pray for my parents [who died]. I remember before I got a scholarship from the cooking school, I used to go to pagoda to pray to Buddha; I bought a flower as a gift to Buddha statue. At that time, I sat and spoke to him that, 'If you exist, please I wish my life brighter, leaving all the troubles.'"

Unlike the Hagar/Flame participants, the majority of TLC participants were almost all Buddhist. This was due to the continual presence of their families of origin, which also connected them to their local Cambodian communities and the religious rituals and holidays celebrated there. However, while NGO 2 participants primarily identified as Buddhist, their faith leanings seemed to be more of an outcome of family and community influence and oral transmission of religious traditions. This is in contrast to the Hagar/Flame participants who had a more formal religious education, such as reading the Christian Bible at home and in church. A participant from TLC described how faith works in his life:

"Basically, I believe in [Buddhism] because my parents believe in it. I don't actually understand much of what it's about. But I do believe in good and bad deeds and some magic."

Many of participants' interviews reflected a blended understanding of faith, with many of their beliefs incorporating aspects of multiple religious traditions into their spiritual practices. As such, practice of religion and religious rituals varied among the young Cambodians interviewed. As one participant described his integrated faith perspective:

"I am Buddhist because since the beginning, my mother believes in this religion. But I also believe in other religions like Christianity. I don't hate any religion because all religions are meant to teach us good ways of living, so now I go to temple and to church. I like

church; I seek advice from the pastor.”

## IV. Discussion

As detailed in the introduction of this article, PTG is the process of positive growth after trauma. Although participants in this study were not formally measured using the PTG Inventory (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996), narratives across the group of young people interviewed were found to be consistent with some of the core concepts of PTG. These core concepts were identified as personal strength, relational strength, avenues of growth and religion/spirituality (Calhoun et al., 2000).

Relational strength in PTG theory is often centred around strong personal relationships and enjoyment derived from close emotional attachments to others (Lepore and Revenson, 2006). The ability to form these emotional attachments later in life, is contingent on an early attachment being present in childhood (Alink et al., 2009). This can help the child build a sense of security and form adult attachments later in life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). All participants in this study had an important parent/caregiver relationship before the age of two, which allowed them to develop a foundation of trust for their future relationships with family, friends and their wider community. This foundation was further informed by their lived experiences, which were embedded in their socialisation and internalisation, steeped in values and grounded in culture.

Secure attachments and the social connectedness of the young people interviewed were found throughout their stories and present in connections formed through a parent and/or caregivers, extended family members and

sometimes through relationships with others in the community. This is consistent with the large body of research, which identifies social connectedness as a key factor to positive growth in the aftermath of trauma (Greene, 2015; Masten, 2018; Overland, 2013). Alternatively, when a strong attachment to a family member was not possible (for example, when family of origin had been lost), the young people did this through finding a suitable alternative, such as the creation of their own families.

PTG acknowledges that relational strength and emotional strength is often intertwined with self-dependence, even amidst suffering (Cann et al., 2010). Whilst an individual may still be in emotional pain, emotional strength is the redirecting of this pain into growth (Lommen et al., 2014). For example, the young people in this study highlighted their ongoing struggles trying to regulate negative emotions. Some participants admitted to using alcohol and drugs to cope and/or having outbursts of anger in response to stress. While these responses are forms of maladaptive coping, they speak to these participants' methods of managing stress. Many participants acknowledged that these behaviours were undesirable and spoke of wanting to change, indicating that recovery is an ongoing process rather than a singular event.

Effective coping strategies are often defined as efforts to regulate the self or the environment under stress (Compas et al., 2012). Research on active coping has focussed on describing common ways of coping by understanding their psychosocial development and effectiveness in different situations (Compas et al., 2012; Erikson and Erikson, 1998; Masten, 2015). While some of the young people in this study appeared to still be experiencing some adverse effects from past trauma, their desire for positive growth and ability to cope and adapt despite their early life experiences, indicated PTG. This highlights that recovery from trauma is

not linear and that one may still do well and be able to find meaning in their life post-trauma, but not be completely devoid of trauma symptoms (van der Kolk, 2014).

PTG researchers often describe avenues of growth and positive growth outcomes as witnessing individuals embrace new opportunities, both personally and professionally (Lepore and Revenson, 2006). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) describe PTG as a ‘visionary change’ which was demonstrated by many of the young people in this study. The young people often sought to reclaim their identity through educational advancement opportunities and/or becoming mentors and teachers to other young people. This desire for positive growth was often facilitated through prayer to a higher power. As such, Christian participants managed stress by relying on their conception of a higher power and prayer, indicating the role of faith in self-care strategies.

Findings from multiple research studies have demonstrated a strong link between prayer and subjective wellbeing (Richards, 1991; Francis and Evans, 1996). For example, researcher have found the ‘I-position’ in a prayer is largely shaped by the voice of a culture, community and learning through social relationships (Hermans, 2003). This presented differently with Buddhist participants, who reported self-care and stress management strategies not through prayer, but through their family and friendship groups.

Social connection appeared to be central with both Christian and Buddhist participants. Perhaps, connecting survivors with other young trauma survivors may in turn facilitate growth. This process of connection in the aftermath of trauma, cultivates personal and social values and beliefs, which impact our experience and perception of healing (Kiser et al., 2010). One trauma survivor connecting with another, sharing their

experience, strength and hope may aid in their recovery from trauma (Maté, 2008). This approach encompasses the core concepts of PTG as personal, relational, spiritual, avenues of growth are intertwined and interconnected (Calhoun et al., 2000).

## **V. Conclusion**

Recovery from trauma appeared to be cultivated through relationships with others post-trauma, by building social connectedness, which at the same time mitigated sociocultural stigma felt by survivors through the experience of acceptance by their peers. For many of the young people interviewed for this study, in addition to their faith, the power of prayer was also a central theme in faith helping build resilience. Faith and spiritual practice for these young people seemed to help them facilitate control over their own lives (Wyatt and Welton, 2022). One of the main implications of this research is the identification of the intersection between faith, spirituality, cultural and social supports operating as protective factors. Importantly, demonstrating how participants experienced these supports (or sometimes a lack thereof) in their communities.

Based on these key findings, both communities and NGOs can play a critical role in developing and supporting culturally sensitive perspectives of PTG, resilience and recovery from trauma. Hopefully, through further work and research in the field, there will be more focus on individual and community supports for survivors recovering from trauma. Additionally, the data in this study indicated that successful interventions for trauma survivors emphasise empowerment, healing, as well as managing stress and emotions, with a focus on a trauma survivor's

achievements.

The young people interviewed frequently described social connectedness, which was captured in their stories later in life and was often influenced by their faith-based communities. These connections, coupled with their faith, appeared to reinforce positive adaptation to their life circumstances. Participant accounts highlighted how religion and spirituality in Cambodia is both highly syncretic and very fluid. Often, faith in Cambodia incorporates elements from various traditions present in the country, such as Buddhism, Christianity and animism. In developing healing-centric interventions, NGO/INGOs and communities could develop creative ways to integrate spiritual practice that is already an important part of communities and traditions in Cambodia. This could connect survivors with their local faith-based community, hopefully empowering youth at the community level.

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