

From stigmatised body to corporeal post-traumatic growth: A cross-national comparative mixed-method study to promote post-traumatic growth among people living with HIV

The vast majority of studies in psychology show that experiences of trauma lead mainly to negative changes in psychological functioning among trauma survivors, out of which post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the most prevalent. Nevertheless, relatively recently scientific attention has shifted from only negative to paradoxical positive outcomes of trauma, which formed a new line of research on post-traumatic growth (PTG). PTG describes the positive changes which may happen after experiencing traumatic events, associated with greater appreciation of life, improved relationships with others, new life possibilities, personal strength, and spiritual changes. However, after more than a quarter of a century of studies on PTG, there are still numerous unresolved research gaps to fill in this research area. One of them deals with the question of whether PTG may be cultivated via psychosocial interventions. Unfortunately, so far, no effective PTG intervention has been created. Moreover, there is scarce research on the PTG among patients struggling with trauma accompanying life-threatening illness. Finally, recent studies underscore the importance of examining body image in the PTG process, which forms so called corporeal post-traumatic growth.

In our proposal, we want to create the first online PTG intervention among people living with HIV (PLWH) which puts special emphasis on enhancing positive body image and reducing HIV/AIDS stigma in a mixed-method framework. In other words, apart from a quantitative assessment of the study variables, we will invite PLWH to the creation of this intervention during the qualitative interviews with them. In addition, HIV/AIDS stigma is the main source of trauma among PLWH and subsequent PTG, but its level significantly varies across countries all over the world (see so called structural HIV/AIDS stigma). Therefore, our project will be conducted in three countries: Poland, Ireland and the United States. Since the majority of studies on HIV/AIDS stigma and PTG have been conducted in the United States so far, conducting research in different countries is necessary to obtain a comprehensive picture of the impact of stigma on PTG among PLWH. It is especially important to compare European vs. US perspectives in this regard, and particularly two European countries' contrasting public attitudes towards PLWH - Poland with one of the highest levels of HIV/AIDS stigma vs. Ireland with one of the lowest level of such stigma in EU.

To sum up, it is worth mentioning the benefits associated with realizing our research project. First, our proposal describes the first cross-national PTG intervention, which focuses on the specific clinical sample of PLWH. Second, our project will be conducted with the international cooperation between the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw, and the prominent experts within PTG research from the Growth Initiative Lab at the Wake Forest University in the USA and investigators from the Department of Health Psychology, University of Medicine and Health Sciences in Dublin. Finally, in each of the participating countries, we plan to co-operate with the non-governmental organizations helping PLWH to become involved in the design, implementation, and assessment of our intervention – see the “Positive in Rainbow” Union in Warsaw, “HIV Ireland” in Dublin and “HIV & Faith Ambassadors” at the Wake Forest University. All these factors speak to not only the epistemological but also the social significance of our project proposal.