



## School, A Focal Point for Post-Traumatic Growth: The Lived Experience of Adolescent Students after Father's Sudden Death

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Education in school is considered to be the most important part of every adolescent's life, and exposure to a traumatic experience in this disturbing period can greatly affect it. However, trauma does not only lead to negative consequences and psychological trauma, as sometimes it also induces positive changes called "post-traumatic growth". The main objective of this study was to explore the students' lived experience of academic factors affecting their post-traumatic growth

**Methods:** This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological method. The participants were 15 male and female adolescent students sponsored by an NGO supporting orphans in Isfahan and were selected based on purposive sampling. The data were collected using semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and analyzed by Colaizzi's 7-step method in MAXQDA software.

**Results:** After data analysis, 296 primary codes were extracted and classified into 11 categories. Then, 4 main themes including the school support network, teacher's role, school attachment, and academic well-being appeared in the participants' experiences.

**Conclusion:** It can be concluded that post-traumatic growth after the father's sudden death among adolescents is affected by several academic factors such as the school support network, teacher's role, school attachment, and academic well-being. Therefore, schools can provide a suitable context for students to reach this growth by developing and implementing appropriate counseling and intervention programs.

**Keywords:** Adolescent, Growth, Phenomenology, Qualitative research

### Introduction

Traumatic events are integral parts of human evolution. A trauma is an unfortunate and unpredictable event that a person or those around him/her consider it to threaten the life, psychological well-being, and social functioning of the

person (1). Experiencing a traumatic event, when a person is going through one of the most sensitive ages such as adolescence, leaves the most unpleasant impact because adolescence itself is the starting point of significant changes in various biological, identity, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of life and is one of the most

challenging stages of human life (2). Moreover, during this time, all adolescents have other concerns that increase their stress. One of the most important of these is academic concerns, including trying to get good grades, choosing a major, entrance exams, transitions, or academic failures (3). However, the experience of a traumatic event can change the whole cycle of development and create a storm of tension for the adolescent (4). Studies have shown that one of the most damaging and exhausting experiences for an adolescent is the sudden loss of a loved one, especially a parent (5). Meanwhile, the sudden death of the father creates many psychological pressures for the adolescent child by creating problems for the whole family (6). This can weaken relationships or create mental health problems such as emotional turmoil, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders (7). Since adolescents spend most of their time in school, the loss of a parent can influence their academic performance and adversely affect their career aspirations and success and performance. It might lead to frequent absences, and insufficient concentration due to common mental preoccupations, sometimes leading to more serious outcomes such as dropping out of school, running away from school, or creating other problems in the school environment (8,9).

However, the findings of recent studies promise positive changes after dealing with traumatic events. For example, grieving individuals are challenged not only by the emotional aspects of losing an intimate person but also by adjusting to a new life without the missing person (10). Accordingly, it can be acknowledged that adolescents may experience some psychological stress and maladaptive behaviors after experiencing

a very stressful life event, but they can reassess and redefine their life priorities and move toward their goals with determination by changing their attitudes toward the world around them (11). This phenomenon is known as post-traumatic growth (PTG) (12). Post-traumatic growth covers a wide range of positive personal and psychological changes that occur after struggling with challenging and exhausting living conditions (13). These changes are as follows: (a) The development of a network of relationships with others and greater intimacy with them, (b) new possibilities that indicate the creation of a new path or opportunities, (c) the ability of a person that points to an increase in inner strength and self-reliance in adversities, (e) a spiritual change or understanding of experiences and the strengthening of spiritual beliefs, and (f) appreciating the life and discovering its value (14).

The studies conducted among different groups experiencing traumatic events suggest that adolescents and young adults are more likely to undergo development and growth than others (15). For instance, Stein et al. studied people who had reached the age of puberty, experienced the loss of a close friend, and found that personal change meant a change in personality, values, individual identity, and type of worldview, and individual behavior meant a change in interactions with others as instances of post-traumatic growth (16). Taku and McDiarmid also reported that post-traumatic growth has a positive effect on adolescent self-esteem. However, they argued that self-esteem increases if the adolescent's changes after an unfortunate event are consistent with his/her family's value system (17). There have also been studies on post-traumatic growth and education. For example, it was shown that

post-traumatic growth and resilience have a negative relationship with adolescent academic burnout (18), or such growth can manifest itself in the form of increased motivation and having full attention to academic and career choices (19). Therefore, according to students, developing programs to increase post-traumatic growth in school is essential (20).

Based on what was mentioned, it is important to pay attention to the role of educational factors in experiencing growth after a traumatic event, such as the sudden loss of a father for students who are facing the changing period of adolescence. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the lived experience of adolescents with a focus on academic factors affecting their post-traumatic change.

### Methods

This qualitative study was conducted using a descriptive phenomenology method. This

method, without subjective judgments, provides a deeper understanding of individuals' intended meaning and direct and immediate description of their experience of the phenomenon in question (21).

The participants were selected using purposive sampling (22). One of the criteria for entering the study was having the experience of the sudden loss of the father in the last two years. Research shows that traumatic events that occurred at least two years before have a stronger relationship with positive developmental changes (23). Another inclusion criterion was primary screening to select the adolescents who experienced post-traumatic growth as measured based on a valid questionnaire (24). Sampling continued until the data were saturated, and data analysis was performed simultaneously with sampling. The research sample included 15 participants (9 female and 6 male students) aged 14 to 17 years (Table 1).

**Table 1. The participants' demographic characteristics**

Participant	Gender	Order	Educational grade	Age at the time of the interview	Age at the time of the father's death	Cause of death
1	Female	Second	11 <sup>th</sup>	17	14	Burning
2	Female	Second	11 <sup>th</sup>	17	12	Accident
3	Female	First	11 <sup>th</sup>	17	13	Apoplexy
4	Female	First	11 <sup>th</sup>	17	13	Heart attack
5	Female	First	10 <sup>th</sup>	16	12	Heart attack
6	Female	First	9 <sup>th</sup>	15	12	Heart attack
7	Female	Second	9 <sup>th</sup>	15	11	Heart attack
8	Female	Third	9 <sup>th</sup>	15	12	Accident
9	Female	First	9 <sup>th</sup>	15	11	Accident
10	Male	Second	11 <sup>th</sup>	17	14	Apoplexy
11	Male	First	11 <sup>th</sup>	17	13	Accident
12	Male	First	10 <sup>th</sup>	16	12	Heart attack
13	Male	Second	10 <sup>th</sup>	16	13	Drowning
14	Male	Second	10 <sup>th</sup>	16	11	Heart attack
15	Male	Third	9 <sup>th</sup>	15	12	Heart attack

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants with a general question about the experience of losing a father followed by exploratory

questions about academic factors influencing post-traumatic change. All interviews were conducted at the time and place chosen by the participants and upon their informed

consent. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes, and all interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's 7-step method (25), including word-for-word transcription of each interview, recording key phrases from the transcripts as the primary codes, categorizing the

codes, creating themes by organizing the extracted categories based on their common themes, reviewing the content of the themes, defining and naming them, and providing detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under study. The results were organized in 4 main themes and 11 categories as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Factors affecting students' post-traumatic growth**

Codes	Categories	Main themes
The presence of classmates at the memorial ceremony, joint activities with friends at school, teaching the instructed materials to the classmate who was absent in the classroom	Peer support	The school support network
Not judging the current behavior of the student, informing the authorities of mourning stages and psychological reactions, informing the teacher and other school staff, holding continuous counseling sessions at school, having contact with the student's family	Receiving support from the school counselor	
Paying attention to the student and understanding and accepting his/her feelings, not being strict about homework, conveying a sense of calm in the classroom, the teacher's relationship with the counselor, inquiring about the student's status	Teacher's empathy	The teacher's role
Using humor, the ability to create a happy environment in the classroom	Increasing joy and happiness in the classroom	
Receiving positive feedback from the teacher and the school's executive staff, teachers' appropriate and respectful treatment, teacher's affectionate relationship	Satisfaction with relationships at school	School attachment
Feeling relaxed at school, feeling safe at school, school attachment, the favorite physical environment of the school	Love for school	
Setting career goals, strengthening motivation and hope for the future with career goals	Career aspirations	Academic well-being
More active participation in class discussions and groups, studying more resources on study topics, trying to eliminate weaknesses	Increased interest in study and learning	
Referring to a school counselor, getting job information, paying attention to recognizing desires and talents, getting familiar with work environments	Increased interest in the chosen field of study	
Achieving a top rank in the GPA, improving grades, improving study methods and curriculum planning	Improved academic performance	
Participating in scientific, sports, and artistic activities organized at the school, achieving success and top ranks in competitions	Participating in school extracurricular activities	

In the last step to ensure the robustness and validity of the data, the four criteria were used: credibility (allocating sufficient and appropriate time to collect data and establish a good relationship with the participants), confirmability (interest in the phenomenon in question, conducting long-term studies, and making effort to use the views of experts in the field), dependability (having the analyses reviewed by an experienced qualitative

analyst), and transferability (accurate recording and description of research methods, tools, and procedures) (26).

**Results**

Based on the results of data analysis, a total of 4 main themes and 11 categories were extracted that can describe the students' lived experience of academic factors

affecting post-traumatic growth.

### **The school support network**

The analysis of the experiences of a large number of participants showed that peer support at school played a very important role in helping a traumatized student to adapt to the aftermath of a traumatic event. *“My school friends supported and understood me. At that time, all my family members were sad and the situation was terrible. At school, my mood changed. Well, we're all the same age. We studied together”* (Participant 5).

Some of the students considered going to a school counselor and receiving professional advice and help from them as support from the school staff. *“I attended some meetings with the school counselor because I could not focus on my school assignments. After they found out that I had just lost my father, they understood me and talked to the teachers about my condition”* (Participant 6).

### **The teacher's role**

Most interviewees talked about the impact of having a teacher who tries to build a good relationship to help the affected student. The analysis of the experiences of many students showed that if a teacher can fully understand the situation for an adolescent who has experienced a sudden loss, the adolescent will feel more comfortable and secure at school. *“Teachers need to show sympathy with a student who has run into a problem like this because the student is preoccupied with the event. Two of my teachers were like that, and this made me feel better quickly and not go through academic failure”* (Participant 13).

After each unpleasant and especially sudden event, a wave of negative emotions is created and reduces the affected person's motivation and interest. Creating a happy

atmosphere in the classroom by the teacher and inducing the sense of humor in the student are some of the factors that helped the participants a lot. *“One of our teachers in the classroom was very happy, and he influenced me a lot and helped me feel happier as I was feeling terrible after the incident”* (Participant 11).

### **School attachment**

School attachment was one of the main themes identified in this study and was placed into two categories: *Satisfaction with school relationships* and *love for school*.

Most of the interviewees stated that they were satisfied with their relationships at school with classmates, school staff, and the teacher, which made the school atmosphere lovable for them. *“At school, teachers and children were united and well connected. The children did not show off and the teacher treated us well. All in all, I was and am satisfied with my school conditions”* (Participant 15).

Some of the students pointed to the feeling of love and peace that the school environment conveyed to them, *“I was more relaxed and comfortable at school. My concerns were relieved at school. Talking to friends and being busy with school assignments make you not stick to negative thoughts and not evoke them”* (Participant 8).

### **Academic well-being**

The last main topic emerged in this study from the analysis of the interviews with the participants was academic well-being that was categorized into career aspirations, increased interest in study and learning, increased interest in the chosen field of study, improved academic performance and participating in school extracurricular activities.

Most students stated that thinking about their career aspirations and goals gave them a sense of hope and direction in their lives, *"I wanted to study and have a good job in the future. So at that time, although I was very sad, I went to school with love and I was determined to do my school homework so that I could build a better future for myself"* (Participant 14).

For some participants, the successful choice of the major of interest was effective in increasing their perception of post-traumatic growth. *"I am very happy with my major and the right choice has made me feel strong. In fact, I think anyone who has a good choice will be more successful, more satisfied, and happier"* (Participant 4).

Most students stated that increased performance in terms of grade point average and some academic achievements was an important factor in post-traumatic growth. *"I fought hard for my studies and I was able to achieve a lot of success. I was able to have a good performance in terms of grade point average and school grades. The teachers counted on me and I became more active at school"* (Participant 2).

Some of the interviewees stated that participating in scientific, sports, and artistic extracurricular activities organized at school could be an important factor in their post-traumatic growth by involving them in group activities and enabling them to achieve success. *"I'm a member of young researchers group. I do scientific research. Well, these research activities make me feel very strong"* (Participant 3).

## Discussion

The present study explored the factors influencing post-traumatic growth among

adolescent students in the aftermath of the sudden loss of the father. The findings showed that students considered different academic factors to be involved in post-traumatic growth. These factors were classified into four main themes, including the school support network, the teacher role, school attachment, and academic well-being, each being further divided into underlying categories.

Most students considered the school support network consisting of peers and school counselors as a key element in achieving the post-traumatic growth. By receiving support in stressful situations, the student feels he/she is valued and belongs to a communication network (27-30). Researchers have stated that this support is recognized in the form of both informal and formal sources (31). From their point of view, the peer group at school is the best source for the adolescent's self-expression of their thoughts and feelings about an unfortunate event, because at this age they have a stronger emotional attachment to their friends and classmates. Abedi et al. concluded that the attitudes of those around the traumatized person, such as peers, could facilitate their growth (32).

According to the findings of the present study, in addition to having a position of power, the teacher can act as the best friend for the affected student and help him/her to cope with the loss by showing sympathy and conveying a sense of compassion to the student. This can induce a sense of being appreciated and noticed in the student, contributing to growth and development and reducing academic problems faced by a student whose body and mind are still involved in reacting to the suffering caused by the traumatic event (33).

Increasing joy and elation in the classroom by the teacher is also effective in suppressing the intensity of the student's unpleasant emotions. With the teacher's artistry in creating a happy atmosphere, the student better manages his/her emotions. The presence of a sense of humor in relations is predictive of post-traumatic growth (34).

Following the results of Jordan's study, the school, as one of the most important social bases for adolescents, has a significant effect on ensuring the attachment of traumatized students (35). According to the findings of the present study, a sense of satisfaction with social relationships at school is an important element in school attachment and paves the way for growth. A study by Crosby et al. also showed that school attachment reduces negative post-traumatic symptoms (36).

According to the findings, career aspirations motivate students to plan and pursue more realistic goals for their studies and future careers. For students, making a successful choice based on their abilities and interests gives them a sense of satisfaction, all ultimately leading to academic well-being. To our knowledge, one of the previous studies, emphasizing the importance of the role of school in post-traumatic growth, supports the results of the present study (37).

The study has been conducted in Isfahan with a qualitative approach. Therefore, a limitation of the study was that findings cannot be generalized to all adolescents with the experiences of a sudden loss.

### **Conclusion**

According to the results of the study, it seems schools can play a supportive role in

helping students go through the post-traumatic growth by emphasizing the role of teachers, trying to increase students' attachment to the school, and increasing their academic well-being.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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