

The Power of Suffering (2020) by David Roland. Simon and Schuster. ISBN: 978-1760850128

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Reviewed by:

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Book Review

My best friend recommended this book by Dr. David Roland after hearing him talk at a writers' festival. It has been nearly 10 years since my friend tragically lost her beautiful 25-year-old daughter, Louise, in a horrific fire in a Paris apartment block. Louise died along with four other students studying at Sciences Po and the Sorbonne. They were bright, vibrant, and talented young women who were dedicated to humanitarian causes and wanted to improve the world. Louise wanted to work for the United Nations, which is why she was studying French in Paris. For many, many years, my friend's grief was unrelenting and inconsolable. For this reason, I was curious to find out why she might have recommended this book, which explores post-traumatic growth that comes from suffering and the struggles that arise out of injustice, tragic loss, and trauma inflicted by others or by random misfortune and accidents.

Dr. Roland's own encounter with suffering provides an important background for this book. He worked for 20 years as a psychologist, primarily in the forensic field. He eventually became affected by post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of this work. However, this was only the beginning of the chaotic disintegration of Dr. Roland's life as he knew it. He experienced a significant stroke, which was misdiagnosed as a psychotic suicidal breakdown. It took three weeks for an MRI to confirm the correct diagnosis. Although Dr. Roland was aware enough to realise the irony of being in a psychiatric hospital where he had treated so many other mentally unwell people, this was, unsurprisingly, a very frightening and confusing experience. Thus began Dr. Roland's own journey of physical, intellectual, emotional, relational, financial, and vocational recovery and rehabilitation from the devastating losses that ensued from a serious stroke at a relatively young age.

In *The Power of Suffering*, Dr. Roland seeks to answer the question: Why do some people grow through unexpected crises, personal losses, painful tragedies, and suffering? Dr. Roland is a powerful storyteller and excellent writer. The *Power of Suffering* involves interviews with 11 people who have experienced life-altering traumas, such as losing one's whole family in a car accident, losing a child to cancer, experiencing a stillborn child, surviving a brutal brain injury as a result of intimate partner violence, surviving refugee and war trauma, and the long-term effects of exclusion resulting from being

shamed for being gay and having an undiagnosed learning disability. Dr. Roland tracks these 11 people over their journeys through these various experiences of human suffering.

It is interesting that Dr. Roland and his publishers chose to use the word suffering in the book's title. When I asked three people to review this book, their response was that they were "really not into suffering." A central maxim in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is "pain is inevitable but suffering is optional." People often say that we "didn't want someone to suffer," when they died after a prolonged painful illness. Suffering is more than mere physical pain; it is emotional and is held together by various thoughts, memories, perceptions, meanings, and relationships. Suffering involves a "storied self," as Dr. Roland explains. For example, a pregnant person undergoing labour may experience intense labour pains, but if this is a pregnancy to which that person has been looking forward, that person is unlikely to describe the labour pains as "suffering." However, a person going through labour pains to deliver a baby that the person knows is stillborn is likely to perceive those labour pains as "suffering".

Key conceptual ideas and empirical evidence about post-traumatic growth, developed by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, are explored for the non-academic reader. Tedeschi and Calhoun found in their research that some of the positive changes experienced by people who faced and struggled with highly challenging and traumatic life crises included an increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life.

Interwoven with the various narratives in this book are some non-academic discussions and interviews with key researchers in the field, such as Antonio Demasio on neuroscience, and the work of Paul Gilbert on compassion-focused therapy in *Mindful Compassion*. Victor Frankl's seminal work on the search for meaning is also a rich source of reflection in this book.

I believe Dr. Roland has managed to locate himself well within the book. His interviewing skills are sensitive. Sometimes, he is present bearing witness to the story, while at other times, he is engaged with the storyteller's narratives. I appreciated that the author did not over-interpret people's stories and that he allowed the post-traumatic growth to emerge naturally from the narrative, rather than forcing its appearance. Some of my key takeaways from this book are that growth is often slow and incremental over a much longer period of time (5-20 years); that it takes courage, patience, and perseverance to rebuild one's self-identity and self-narrative when it has been shattered; and that meaning comes from both appreciating ordinary pleasures in life and from a commitment to altruism, and a belief in something larger than yourself. Most people had some kind of altruistic "project" involving nature, people, or animals.

I would recommend this book to clients who enjoy bibliotherapy or just enjoy reading or hearing other people's stories. None of us wants to feel alone in our suffering. I think many therapists would also benefit from this book when reflecting on what helps our

clients get through tough times, and to create healing stories. It is also relevant to us as practitioners, as we face adversities and unexpected challenges in our lives and contemplate our own resilience. Dr. Roland writes in a very engaging narrative style – a skill that does not come naturally, especially when you are trained in academic writing. The book is well-edited and has a surprisingly “light” feel when describing very “heavy” topics. As the world responds to the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the learnings and insights from *The Power of Suffering* may be increasingly relevant.

[Acting Editor’s Note: As highlighted by the concerns of many people and communities with lived experience of marginalisation and oppression, suffering is not merely *intra*-psychic or personal. Suffering is often caused by inequities and exclusions perpetrated at communal, institutional, and societal levels. It is important for practitioners to prevent the mischaracterisation of suffering as a personal problem that can be fixed, without also addressing disadvantage and deprivation at an institutional and societal level. Models of post-traumatic growth that highlight individual triumph over oppressive societal forces must also address the essential role of communities of care, institutions, and systems in achieving economic, climate, health, housing, and sanitation-related justice.]

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