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## **Psychological Eco-Facilitation as a Path to Post-Traumatic Growth: Trauma Integration and Personal Development**

**Abstract** This article explores the concept of post-traumatic growth through the lens of psychological eco-facilitation, developing approaches to assist individuals who have experienced trauma. Drawing on his experience working with victims of extreme events, including Chernobyl disaster participants and war veterans, P. Lushyn discusses methods for treating post-traumatic stress disorders, emphasizing the importance of personal growth after trauma. He utilizes eco-facilitation principles to support individuals in restoring their ability to dream and plan for the future, a key aspect of post-traumatic growth. A dialogue with artificial intelligence, simulating an eco-facilitation session, demonstrates the dynamics of change in client perception, aiding in understanding the efficacy of this approach.

**Keywords:** Post-traumatic growth and development, psychological eco-facilitation, trauma psychotherapy, personal development, extreme events, spontaneous self-organization, tolerance for uncertainty, war veterans, artificial intelligence in psychotherapy.

**Problem Statement:** This article began when Facebook reminded me of a post I made on March 31, 2014. In it, I discussed an invitation to speak before the Maidan psychological service about methods of assistance in extreme conditions. At that time, the military situation was just developing, and both psychologists and ordinary people were struggling due to a lack of experience in dealing with post-traumatic stress disorders.

By then, I had significant experience working with victims of extreme events, including participants of the Chernobyl disaster and veterans of the Afghan War. I had collaborated with renowned psychotherapists such as Francine Shapiro, the developer of the EMDR method (Shapiro, 2001), and William Yule (Yule, 2001), one of the world's first psychotraumatologists. My research in psychological eco-facilitation was documented in my doctoral thesis (Lushyn, 2003), after which I founded the original School of Eco-Facilitation to train psychologists, including for work with post-traumatic stress disorder.

It was then that I discovered my work and practice in eco-facilitation occupied leading positions in contemporary psychotherapy research, particularly in the area of post-traumatic growth. This phenomenon implies that a person who has experienced trauma can not only stabilize but also significantly enhance their personal potential (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), (Joseph, S., & Linley, P. A., 2005). Simply put, instead of weakening and uncertainty, which was previously

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assumed, a person, according to the well-known Nietzschean maxim, can become stronger: "That which does not kill us makes us stronger".

**Principles of Working with Trauma: Retrospective Validation.** Re-reading my ten-year-old post, I was struck by the relevance and correctness of the trauma treatment principles described therein. In a recent comment from April 2024, I noted: "Who would have thought ten years ago that this was the beginning of a years-long war with Russia, which became full-scale in 2022, and the principles of working with trauma would become more important than ever?" This statement resonated significantly and was supported by my followers. Let me quote it in full:

"Professional block of a psychologist: how to behave when everything is wrong, or can we prepare in advance for the worst?"

1. We are taught with the aim of foreseeing the worst in advance and avoiding it in time.
2. A professional is someone who can predict the future and, unlike amateurs, orient themselves in advance.
3. If we consider that the worst in transitional times is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it is necessary to differentiate its phenomenology or clinical signs and then accordingly actualize a complex of measures for their processing or overcoming.
4. However, a professional is also someone who can encounter an unknown phenomenon, realize that their level of competence is insufficient, and orient themselves to the situation.
5. We assume that what is happening now is not PTSD; it's a transitional period (TP).
6. The essence of TP is that we don't know exactly where we are moving. We only know that there is no going back, and TP has positives that are not given in ready-made form.
7. How to discover them? The first step - it's not only your task!
8. The second - being unprepared in advance to solve the problem is very important!
9. The third - if you don't know what to do, look at what you are already doing: tolerate uncertainty. (C) P. Lushyn".

This text emphasizes that the transitional period in a person's life is unique in that it is impossible to accurately plan and foresee one's future. This period is marked by uncertainty: we realize that life will not be as it was before and that the upcoming changes are linked to both suffering and positive moments. Interestingly, these experiences are not always conscious; they can manifest at the level of unconscious self-organization of the personality, forming peculiar goals or attractors. It is important to learn to trust this process of self-organization and to be open to unpredictable turns of events that can underlie positive changes. This implies paying attention to one's spontaneous actions and tolerance for uncertainty of consciousness, especially when it does not provide clear understandings and goals.

It is noteworthy that these principles of self-organization during the transitional period were reflected in the events of the last ten years in Ukraine. They demonstrate the paradoxical nature of changes, including difficulties in survival and development under the conditions of a full-scale war with the aggressor from February 2024. On one hand, the population of Ukraine faced unprecedented challenges; on the other, it gained a unique experience of self-preservation, independence, and received global support. The paradox of this future perspective is that it is practically impossible to apply it step by step and sequentially. Moreover, even remembering this

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in moments of radical changes and dramatic events can be difficult. However, as the post's commentators note: "We have been living in this rhythm for ten years, tolerating uncertainty."

This particular case in the space of Facebook reflects certain patterns of the phenomenon of post-traumatic growth and development and the conditions for providing psychological assistance according to our developed psychological modality called "eco-facilitation". A key feature of this method is the client's realization of their own future recovery, the ability to dream and plan for life. Psychotraumatologists emphasize that one of the main characteristics of post-traumatic disorder arising from encountering severe events such as death of loved ones, serious illness, divorce, emigration, and others, is the shortening of life perspective. The victim loses previously significant life values, there is an absence of new ones, the ability to dream and plan for the future is lost, focusing only on survival.

Our experience of eco-facilitative assistance shows that in overcoming post-traumatic disorder and in transitioning to post-traumatic growth, the first thing to be restored is the ability to dream, plan, and envision one's future for 5, 10, 15 years and beyond. Below, we will model a case of our work using artificial intelligence and demonstrate the validity of the principles mentioned above. It is especially important to pay attention to the dynamics of changes in the personality of the client in terms of building and changing the images of his/her future as an important condition for post-traumatic growth and development (Lushyn P. & Sukhenko Y. 2021).

**Eco-Facilitative Practice: An Example of Working with Trauma.** Considering the need for confidentiality, a psychological counseling session was simulated using artificial intelligence — ChatGPT 4. In this simulation, the chatbot acted as a client who had experienced a traumatic situation, while the consultant was a psychologist-eco-facilitator with 35 years of experience who is also the author of this article. It's important to note that in this simulation, the chatbot-client behaved excessively attentively towards the consultant and used literary language, which was not specifically set in our chatbot programming settings. Nonetheless, all other aspects, including statements and the psychologist's approach, were as close to reality as possible. Our extensive experience with real clients confirms that this scenario corresponds to the typical character and process of eco-facilitation. Next, I present a transcript of my dialogue with ChatGPT 4. (2023, October 20).

Client: "Hello. I returned from a combat zone and since then feel that I cannot adapt to normal life. I constantly experience tension, nervousness. Sometimes, memories of battles haunt me, causing loss of sleep. I cannot understand how to return to normal life when these terrible images constantly replay in my head. I feel disconnected from everyone, even my own family. It's hard for me to explain what's happening to me, and I don't know what to do."

Psychologist-Eco-Facilitator: "You said you can't return to normal life..."

Client: "Yes, exactly. It seems that the life I knew before has disappeared, and I don't know how to find my way back. Everything around reminds me of what I experienced, and I constantly feel anxiety and alienation."

Psychologist-Eco-Facilitator: "So, you use the term 'normal life' understanding it as a memory from the past..."

Client: "Yes. It seems that the 'normal life' I knew before the war has stayed in the past. Now, the world around me seems completely different, and I feel lost in this new reality. It's hard to reconcile with the idea that what once seemed mundane and familiar now seems alien and distant to me."

Psychologist-Eco-Facilitator: "It turns out that modern life for you is a combination of pre-war memories and how you feel now, as well as the quite recent military experiences on the front..."

Client: "Exactly. I constantly feel a rift between the past and present. Memories of the war and the hard experiences on the front overlap with my notions of pre-war life, creating an internal conflict. I often feel simultaneously here and there, unable to fully adapt to either of these worlds. It's very confusing and hampers my recovery and return to normal life."

Psychologist-Eco-Facilitator: "You talk about normal life... what do you mean when the previous life is behind, the war is not over yet, and the front experience is still with you..."

Client: "By 'normal life,' I mean a sense of stability and safety I had before the war. Returning to simple everyday tasks, communicating with family and friends without constant tension and anxiety. But now, with the war not yet over and the frontline experience continuing in my memories, I can't find that sense of stability. I feel like I'm constantly in a state of readiness, anticipating something bad happening, which prevents me from living a normal life."

Psychologist-Eco-Facilitator: "So, it turns out that you are simultaneously in a calm, stable situation but also intentionally or subconsciously ready for the situation to change for the worse, when your survival and defense skills might come in handy..."

Client: "Yes, that's true. I feel split. On one hand, I am safe in a peaceful environment, but my psyche is constantly on alert, as if I'm still on the frontline. I'm unconsciously preparing for the worst as if a battle could start at any moment, which makes me feel tense and anxious even in normal everyday situations. This feeling of readiness for battle prevents me from relaxing and enjoying the moment, being here and now in a calm setting."

Psychologist-Eco-Facilitator: "Correct me if I'm wrong. It seems that you want to understand that it's still too early to relax fully, and to be on guard, but on the other hand, while the situation outside the combat zone is normal and safe, you would like to feel relaxed and enjoy the moment..."

Client: "Yes. On one hand, I feel the need to remain vigilant because the situation in the country is still unstable, and my military training constantly reminds me of this. But, on the other hand, I really want to learn to relax and enjoy peaceful moments, realizing that I am now safe. It seems I'm stuck between these two states, and it's difficult for me to find a balance between them."

Psychologist-Eco-Facilitator: "You speak of balance. Do I understand correctly that we have now somewhat clarified the goal of our work and you consider that normal under the current conditions would be to find a balance between readiness for defense and the ability to enjoy the moment when it seems possible..."

Client: "Exactly. I understand that I can't completely ignore my military training and instincts, especially in the current situation in the country. But at the same time, I want to be able to recognize and appreciate moments of peace and safety when they occur. Finding this balance, learning to live in the present without losing vigilance but also without constant internal tension and anxiety, would be ideal for me. That's what I'm striving for and where I hope you can help me."

Psychologist-Ecofacilitator: "You just mentioned another self-improvement goal — 'to recognize and appreciate moments of peace and safety'..."

Client: "Yes, and this is indeed important to me. In my current situation, where I constantly feel anxiety and tension, I often forget what it's like to appreciate calm and safe moments. I want to learn not only to feel more relaxed but also to recognize and enjoy these moments of peace when they arise. It seems to me an important step towards recovery and returning to a more balanced life."

Psychologist-Ecofacilitator: "Listen, you've just added that you would like not only to feel relaxed but also to be able to enjoy these moments when they occur. It turns out that you can indeed track moments of relaxation, but you find it difficult to fully enjoy them... This is another advancement in our work, isn't it?"

Client: "Yes, you're right. I indeed sometimes sense moments when I manage to relax, but they are infrequent and I'm not able to fully immerse in and enjoy these moments. This is truly a new realization for me. I understand that I need to work not only on feeling more relaxed but also on learning to appreciate and enjoy these moments when they occur. This could help me return to normal life and recover from the stress I've experienced."

Psychologist-Ecofacilitator: "It seems to me that you've just formulated something like a plan for self-development: to capture moments of relaxation and then learn to enjoy them... Does it follow then, that your current 'normal life' now includes another element, in addition to memories of pre-war life and the hardships experienced during frontline life? In the sense that this is also self-work in terms of identifying relaxation and enjoying it..."

Client: "Yes, that sounds correct. My current 'normal life' actually includes all these aspects: memories of pre-war life, frontline life experience, and now, as you rightly noted, self-work in terms of recognizing and valuing moments of relaxation and tranquility. This adds a new dimension to my recovery and adaptation to life after the war. Working on recognizing these moments and learning to enjoy them seems key to my further personal growth and return to a more fulfilling life."

Psychologist-Ecofacilitator: "You interestingly said 'returning to a full life', although you're speaking about the future..."

Client: "Yes, this expression seems appropriate. For me, 'returning to a full life' means gradually finding ways to integrate my past experiences, including frontline life, into my present and future. This is not just a return to life as it was before the war, but the creation of a new life, taking into account all my experiences and lessons learned. Thus, my full life in the future will include both memories and lessons from the past, and new ways of understanding and enjoying the present moment. This is the direction I want to move in."

Psychologist-Ecofacilitator: "Well, this is quite a life perspective you have there, where everything is considered, nothing is overlooked, and yet, an image of your future is created."

Client: "Indeed, that's how it is. Considering everything I've experienced and looking forward, I'm beginning to see how I can build my future. It's important to acknowledge and respect my past experiences, but also to move forward, not allowing these experiences to fully define me or my future. I realize there's still a lot of self-work to do, but I now have a clearer vision of where I want to go and what I want to achieve. This sense of direction and purpose really gives me strength."

Psychologist-Ecofacilitator: "You sound very decisive and positive, does this mean that we can conclude our session?"

Client: "Yes, I think at this moment we can conclude. I feel that today's conversation has really helped me see things in a clearer light and has given me a direction for further self-work. I'm grateful for this opportunity to talk and sort out my thoughts and feelings. Thank you for your help and support."

**Discussion on the Process and Outcomes of Psychological Ecofacilitation.** The fundamental principles employed in the provision of psychological aid through the ecofacilitation method can be delineated as follows:

1. **Respect and Understanding of the Client's Individual Experience:** The process initiates with active listening and acknowledgment of the client's unique experience, encompassing their memories, current experiences, and future perspectives.

2. **Focus on Integrating Past Experience:** The approach involves integrating the client's past experiences, including their traumas, into their current state, aiding in constructing a new life that accounts for these experiences.

3. **Support for Personal Growth and Development:** Psychological assistance is aimed not only at recovery from trauma but also at the development of the individual, including their capacity for post-traumatic growth and development.

4. Spontaneous Self-organization and Tolerance for Uncertainty: The principles include the notion that the client is capable of spontaneous, self-organizing behavior and a tolerance for uncertainty and life changes.

5. Constant Identification of New Tasks and Goals: The developmental process in the context of ecofacilitation involves attention to the client's changing developmental contexts and the spontaneous transformation of tasks and goals in self-organization while working with a psychologist. In a sense, it's about supporting the rhythm of self-development and self-help.

6. Creating a Supportive Space: The approach entails the idea that the client can create a supportive environment for themselves, including a support group and an ecofacilitator psychologist (Lushyn, P., & Sukhenko, Y., 2021).

This transcript of working with trauma within the context of post-traumatic growth arose from a reflection on the principles for overcoming stagnation and difficulties in resolving life and professional tasks, particularly when it seems impossible to prepare for the future (see the beginning of the article: Facebook posting). We also consider this situation in the context and terms of the "buffer zone of development," where none of the interaction participants, be it psychologist and client or teacher and student, can offer a model for overcoming obstacles, and no one has a clear idea of the next steps towards the future. In this context, the actions of the ecofacilitator, which contribute to forming new visions of the future for the client, are particularly vividly described. Here, the seventh principle is important: "How to discover this? First, it's not just your task!", emphasizing the joint efforts of all participants, in this case, the psychologist and the client. This does not mean that the ecofacilitator lacks ideas or suggestions for the client. However, it is important to provide and create opportunities for the client to independently develop such perspectives (principle 8). In this context, the ecofacilitator reflects the client's actions, helping them realize what they are already doing by coming to the psychologist, noticing contradictions in their actions, and understanding the nuances and dynamics of their movement in the process of professional assistance.

The psychological assistance process demonstrated in this example shows the value of deep understanding and respect for the client's individual experience. The ecofacilitator-psychologist focused on the importance of recognizing and integrating the client's past experiences, including the harsh experiences at the front and memories of pre-war life, into their current state and future plans.

During the counseling session, the client comes to understand that their "normal life" now includes not only past experiences, but also active self-work aimed at recognizing and enjoying moments of peace and safety. This process allowed the client to form a new life that accounts for all their experiences and learned lessons, providing them with a sense of direction and purpose necessary for recovery after the stress experienced.

Thus, it can be asserted that this psychological assistance contributed to the client's development not only as a survivor but also as a person actively striving for betterment. This

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reflects the concept of post-traumatic growth, where difficulties and problems caused by traumatic experience can lead to personal growth and development.

**Conclusions.** In this article I provided an attempt to demonstrate that post-traumatic growth is a tangible possibility for people who have experienced trauma, and that this growth can be enhanced through the process of psychological ecofacilitation. This process involves respecting and understanding the client's unique experience, integrating past experiences into the current state, and focusing on personal growth and development. Particularly important are spontaneous self-organization and tolerance for uncertainty, enabling clients to adapt to new life circumstances and gain a sense of direction and purpose.

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