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Do Many Hands Make Light Work? The Role of Romantic Partners and Close Relationships in Posttraumatic Growth

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Our relationships are an important resource for health and well-being in times of need, often buffering the negative effects of stressful situations. Recent research has expanded on these buffering effects, exploring the role of close others in the experience of posttraumatic growth (PTG), or positive personality change that occurs after someone has experienced trauma. In the current review, we examine how much of a role partners play in PTG for individuals, summarizing the existing evidence suggesting that partners can influence the experience of PTG. Additionally, we examine which partner traits or behaviors may facilitate this growth for individuals, discussing relationship-relevant mechanisms, facilitators, and suppressors of PTG. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we also discuss the quality of existing evidence for the influence of social relationships on PTG, how can we improve the quality of future research, and what is needed for a comprehensive examination of partner-influenced PTG.

Public Significance Statement
Many are interested in the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth—the idea that surviving negative events may change people in positive ways. This review article examines the evidence we have for romantic partners' roles in posttraumatic growth. Ultimately, while the evidence we have currently is not strong enough to definitively answer questions like these, the article closes with several suggestions for improving the quality of future research on this topic.

Keywords: posttraumatic growth, close relationships, partner support, responsiveness, dyadic data analysis

Actor Christopher Reeve, best known for his recurring role as the title character in several *Superman* films throughout the 1970s and 1980s, was no stranger to trauma. As a Hollywood leading man, he was the embodiment of strength. A tragic horse-riding accident in 1995 left him completely paralyzed from the neck down, dramatically transforming his life. However, Christopher Reeve was also no stranger to resilience; since his injury, he grew his platform to advocate for others with spinal cord injuries, raising money for his community, and lobbying for technological advances in the treatment of spinal cord injuries. In an interview, Reeve once explained his outlook:

> Who knows why an accident happens? The key is what do you do afterwards … mobilize and use all your resources, whatever they may be, to do something positive. That is the road I have taken.

This desire to create something positive out of a traumatic[1] event is a hallmark of posttraumatic growth (PTG)—a

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[1] There is some debate about what makes an event an ostensibly "genuine" trauma or adversity (Haslam, 2016), and there are several closely related constructs that are used, sometimes interchangeably, in the literature (e.g., "negative life event," "stressor"). In our review here, we framed PTG as possibly stemming from adverse circumstances, broadly defined. Unfortunately, most work on PTG merely identifies if/when a life event happened, leaving researchers with little understanding of the perceived impact of the event (i.e., if the participant considers this event traumatic or not). This is a glaring methodological problem, as how traumatic or challenging a life event is judged to be likely relies on a unique interaction between the event and a person. Some new methods, such as the Event Characteristics Scale (Luhmann et al., 2021), have been recently incorporated into PTG work to better capture the perceived impact of an event and help researchers distinguish when events are considered traumatic, as defined by people's perceptions and perceived impact of the event.

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framework wherein negative life events are conceptualized as catalysts for positive personal growth (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; Jayawickreme et al., 2021). In short, rather than maintaining preevent levels or mitigating declines in personality or well-being, PTG advocates suggest that people have the potential to thrive—to be happier, to have more positive personality characteristics, and to find life to be more meaningful. However, as Reeve would likely be the first to tell you, these traumatic events do not occur in a vacuum; traumatic events send ripples through people's social relationships. Often, when faced with adversity, people tend to seek out social support from others (Taylor, 2011). One less-known aspect (Bradbury & Karney, 2014) about Christopher Reeve was his enduring loving bond with his wife, Dana Reeve, and the role she played in turning his tragic accident into a catalyst for positive growth for both Christopher and their relationship. In his autobiography, Reeve (1998) recounted an interaction with Dana shortly after regaining consciousness following the horse-riding accident:

> Dana … made living seem possible because I felt the depth of her love and commitment. I was even able to make a little joke. I mouthed, "This is way beyond the marriage vows—in sickness and in health." And she said, "I know." … A crisis like my accident doesn't change a marriage; it brings out what is truly there.

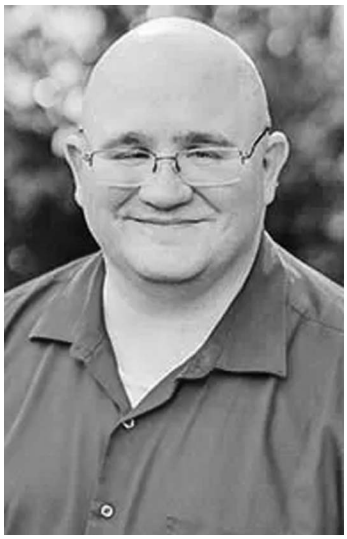
Reeve's experience—a partner's support easing the stress or anxiety of an extremely negative situation—is well-documented in research (Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009; Schroevers et al., 2010). Literature on the subject finds that social support plays an important buffering role in times of stress and that partner support, in particular, improves individuals' outcomes. This effect has been documented across a variety of stressful contexts, including pregnancy, serious medical diagnoses, and breaking addictions (de Jong-Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1987; Mermelstein et al., 1986; Racine et al., 2019; Rini et al., 2006; Talley et al., 2010). However, while there is an empirical consensus that partner support can make challenging times feel less stressful and buffer well-being, the story of Christopher and Dana Reeves prompts different questions altogether: Are there times when a negative life event can be *good* or *transformative* for a relationship—strengthening it? Can these events be opportunities for partners to change themselves or their relationships? How much of a role do partners actually play in PTG for individuals, if any? What sorts of partner traits or behaviors facilitate this growth for individuals? Importantly, do we have the correct tools and methods to capture this sort of growth—and are we using them correctly?

In this review, our scope is to examine the current evidence suggesting that partners can, and do, influence the experience of PTG. In our discussion of potentially relevant mechanisms, facilitators, and suppressors of this phenomenon, as well as our discussion of the quality of this evidence, we hope to outline what is needed for a truly comprehensive examination of partner-influenced PTG.

Romantic Partners and PTG

PTG among individuals has received a large amount of attention recently, although some of the first evidence was found in the 1960s–1970s (Luthar, 2006). Several process models for describing why people might grow from adversity have been developed, often centering on how individuals make sense of and process their trauma, how it reshapes their perspectives about themselves and the world, the narrative with which they describe their trauma, and adopting growth-related principles and values that help them live their lives moving forward (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014; Dorfman et al., 2022; Luhmann et al., 2021; Tennen & Affleck, 1998). However, the field is not without controversy. The strength of the data and methods supporting PTG as a common phenomenon is lacking, and enthusiasm for the concept often outpaces the need for large, methodologically sound demonstrations that PTG is common (Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014, 2016; Jayawickreme et al., 2021). Often, this literature is left with many people attesting to the fact that they have grown and improved in many ways, but either mixed or fewer solid empirical and longitudinal illustrations of growth (Blackie & McLean, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2015).

One potential advancement that might clarify how and when PTG might happen for individuals is expanding the focus to include a person's immediate social context, such as their *romantic partner* (Lamarche, 2022). Many relationship theories and phenomena have implications for whether partners might facilitate PTG for individuals, such as constructive responding (Gable et al., 2006), ideal partner



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shaping (Rusbult, Kumashiro, et al., 2009), and self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1996; Aron et al., 2013). All of these concepts and others, at their heart, involve changing perspectives and framing interpretations of everyday life events. While one's relevant social contexts may include nonromantic relationships (indeed, family and friends offer important, coping-related support; Due et al., 1999; Figley, 2014; Racine et al., 2019), these relationship theories suggest that romantic partners are uniquely poised for facilitating growth processes due to their inherent interdependence and closeness (e.g., one person's struggle becomes something to endure together; partners work to help each other meet their goals; Aron et al., 2022; Rusbult, Kumashiro, et al., 2009). Partners also tend to serve as individual's primary support providers and attachment figures—the go-to person when things feel challenging (Fuhrer et al., 1999; S. D. Lambert, Harrison, et al., 2012). So, while other members of social networks can offer important support, the closeness and accessibility that is characteristic of romantic relationships may make them especially relevant features of a social landscape.

To note, in the following discussion of partners and growth, most of the literature cited uses PTG as the sole/main indicator of personal growth/positive personality change. In this work, researchers will often use a self-report measure of PTG, one that requires participants to engage in cognitively demanding (likely impossible) retrospection and introspection (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). As we discuss later in the article, the quality of evidence regarding PTG is not robust and has many methodological limitations (many of which worsen when attempting to answer dyadic questions). Additionally, individuals often report experiencing *negative* changes in their lives following negative live events (i.e., experiencing holistic improvements alone after trauma is not a norm; Brewin et al., 1996); the same is likely true of dyadic processes—while positive changes in or from close relationships may lead to gains in other nonrelational domains (such as life satisfaction), they certainly may not. While the rigor of current work is not ideal, other, more validated models of adaptation situate romantic partners as resources in times of need (see Table 1). As a result, we encourage researchers to take a critical perspective to any empirical claims of dramatic PTG in most contexts, even dyadic ones. Altogether, we discuss the existing literature here as a way of characterizing the possible theoretical grounds for partners' involvement in the PTG process.

Partner- and Relationship-Relevant Mechanisms

Merely having a romantic partner is likely a necessary but not sufficient condition for spurring growth when adversity strikes. Having an antagonistic or unsupportive partner often undermines people's goals for navigating difficult transitions. But more generally, why might we expect these two factors—relationships and PTG—to be connected? Why might close others be so central in an individual's experience of PTG? The answer might ultimately lie in both the individual and dyadic characteristics that people share and the sometimes ineffable adaptations and behaviors that emerge from relationship dynamics. When a couple navigates adversity, they recruit many assets from both the individual people involved and their shared interactions. Many existing theories attempt to capture this process (as summarized in Table 1), although few have incorporated the personal or relational growth often implicated in PTG.

Although there have been a few demonstrations of PTG being possible in the context of relationships, we hope to advance the study of this phenomenon by providing what we feel are the most promising mechanisms to study in this space. Here, we focus on four major relationship-relevant mechanisms that might facilitate growth within and across people—support, partner responsiveness, attachment orientations, and interdependence. Importantly, we view these mechanisms as jointly influencing the likelihood of PTG (not independently so), and there are cases where some mechanisms serve as partial antecedents to others (e.g., individual differences in attachment are associated with support-related behaviors; Simpson et al., 1992).

Importantly, before we discuss these mechanisms, we want to acknowledge that one of the most popular measures of PTG, the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), includes "relating to others" as one dimension of growth (i.e., growth has occurred when one feels closer to others). This presents a potential problem with circularity: If relationship improvement is growth, one form of relationship growth cannot be meaningfully used to predict another form of relationship growth. Additionally, it is possible that reported growth really reflects a bidirectional process; for example,

Table 1
A Summary of Preexisting Models Surrounding Relationship Adaptation, Stress, or Trauma

Model	Citation	Key component/mechanism	Outcome predicted	What it leaves out
(Double) ABC-X model of crisis	Hill (1949) McCubbin and Patterson (1982)	Stressor (can be typical life stress or introduction of chronic trauma), new and existing resources (ability to cope with a stressor), and family perception of stressor	Family adaptation (good or bad)	Individual-level growth, dyadic focus
Theory of thriving	Feeney and Collins (2015)	Life adversity, life opportunity, interpersonal support processes, outcomes for self and relationships, and individual's long-term thriving	Individual's long-term well-being	Long-term relationship outcomes
Vulnerability–stress–adaptation model	Karney and Bradbury (1995)	Stressful events, enduring vulnerabilities/strengths, adaptive processes, and relationship quality	Relationship stability	Relationship growth
Transactive goal dynamics theory	Fitzsimons et al. (2015)	Opportunity, motivation, transactive density, relationship skills, shared representation of goals, goal coordination, gain/loss, and goal recovery	Relationship persistence	Relationship growth
Posttraumatic growth	Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004)	Traumatic (seismic) events, challenges (e.g., emotion management, beliefs, narratives), rumination/cognitive processing, self-disclosure, and social support (e.g., models for coping)	Posttraumatic growth of the individual (improved relationships, new possibilities/greater appreciation for one's life, increased sense of personal strength, and spiritual development	Relationship-specific mechanisms and dyadic-level traits (e.g., interdependence)
Michelangelo phenomenon	Rusbult, Finkel, and Kumashiro (2009)	Partner perceptual/behavioral affirmation and target movement toward/away from ideal self	Changes in personal well-being and couple well-being and change toward/away from ideal self	Trauma, challenges, or stress

Note. ABC-X = The theoretical framework consists of (A) stressor event, (B) family's resources, (C) family's perception of the stressor, and (X) crisis.

negative events may prompt one partner to draw close to the other and, in turn, cue the other to do the same. In the current operationalization of PTG, this, too, is a process wherein growth predicts growth—and could only be disentangled with longitudinal data where many of these mechanisms are captured *prior* to a negative event. With this in mind, in our discussion of these mechanisms, we conceptualize the constructs as being predictive of growth, but not reflecting growth itself (e.g., attachment styles may play a role in PTG, but changes in attachment styles are not considered growth). Thus, although relationship improvements may indeed be one facet of growth, we conceptualize relational processes as catalysts (and antecedents) for growth and adaptation following adversity (whether that is characterized as relationships improving, personalities changing, or well-being increases).

Support

One theory relies on the importance of support provision in PTG. Multiple forms of partner support (i.e., emotional and instrumental support) are correlated with and predict PTG (Nenova et al., 2013; Schroevers et al., 2010). For example, in a longitudinal examination of cancer survivors and their partners, Schroevers et al. (2010) found that partner support was associated with cancer survivors finding more "silver linings" in their illness (e.g., "I appreciate life more because of my illness," "My illness strengthened my relationships with others"). Specifically, these effects of emotional support were seen in the short weeks and months following the diagnosis, a challenging time for many individuals and couples. Impressively, this association remained significant over long periods of time—up to 8 years after diagnosis (Schroevers et al., 2010). The authors posit that emotional support—the intangible care provided by others—may facilitate PTG by facilitating conversations about the trauma and providing an opportunity for close others to assist in the coping process. Conversations like these may help individuals positively reinterpret the situation at hand, restructuring and rebuilding the perception of their plight (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). On the other hand, instrumental support—the tangible assistance that partners provide (e.g., doing chores, running errands)—uniquely predicts PTG in that having a reliable partner to take care of logistics alleviates daily stressors, giving the directly impacted individual the mental and emotional space to grow (Nenova et al., 2013). Interestingly, while emotional and instrumental supports measure two distinct types of support and are independently associated with PTG, there is some evidence of synergistic effects. Specifically, the best well-being outcomes, for both the provider and the recipient of support, come from instrumental support that is also emotionally engaged (Morelli et al., 2015). With this in mind, the prosocial instrumental support provided by

spouses, who assumedly care for their partner with a great deal of emotional investment, may be especially effective in creating an environment for PTG.

Responsiveness

Partner responsiveness offers another explanation for this relationship. Responsiveness—a partner's ability to demonstrate that they understand and value an individual's needs—has been long linked to relationship and life satisfaction (Reis, 2012; Reis & Clark, 2013; Selcuk et al., 2016). While partner responsiveness is good for relationships when neither partner is experiencing a crisis, it may have extra benefits in challenging times. In fact, responsiveness to mutual disclosures is thought to be one of the primary mechanisms that builds intimacy between individuals (Reis & Shaver, 1988). This is especially salient in the context of trauma. Being sensitive to and understanding of a partner's needs during a time when they may feel especially vulnerable is important immediately after experiencing trauma—perhaps more important than providing instrumental support (Dagan et al., 2014). Canevello et al. (2016) proposed a pathway where an individual's PTG leads them to become a more responsive partner, thereby ultimately facilitating the PTG of their partner. Again, some of the key components predicting growth across partners are whether romantic partners adopt compassionate goals to better understand and listen to their partners (Jiang et al., 2023), and these feelings of compassion after tragedy might be necessary preconditions for even believing positive outcomes are possible (Canevello & Crocker, 2011). In this process, living through a challenge may prompt individuals to shift their priorities, offering more focus to the care and validation of their partner. This increased responsiveness may prompt growth in many ways—perhaps reminding partners of positive coping techniques and strengths (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014; McMillen, 2004), encouraging trauma-specific disclosure (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014), or serving as a peer model for growth (Canevello et al., 2016; McMillen, 2004). Many models of partner-assisted adaption suggest that couples experiencing a crisis rely on preexisting strengths (see Table 1); however, this proposed pathway relies on postevent behavior change (i.e., partners "stepping up" to identify and fulfill new needs).

Attachment

Work on attachment orientations—the lifelong patterns of interaction that people have with close others (Simpson, 1990)—suggests both individuals' and partners' characteristic approaches to relationships can also influence how they respond to trauma. Secure attachment (i.e., feeling comfortable with intimacy and generally confident in relationships and self-worth) has been connected to increased PTG via the framing of adversity as more positive and engaging in active coping when faced with health-related trauma (Schmidt et al., 2012). These researchers speculate that securely attached individuals may feel more comfortable relying on their partner, allowing them to then feel more comfortable focusing on their own needs and growth. Individual differences in attachment can be a feature of both individuals (i.e., consistent across relationships in their lives) and relationship specific. Ultimately, the attachment orientations of partners not directly going through trauma also appear to be important. In one relatively small study of women going through breast cancer treatment, having a partner with high attachment security was associated with greater PTG among both couple members (Ávila et al., 2017). These findings align with a dyadic model of PTG, suggesting that, within a couple, one partner's secure attachment can be drawn on as a source of strength in negative situations for both members of the couple.

Attachment orientations also influence how individuals both *seek* and *provide* support, offering another explanation for this association. For example, secure individuals are more likely to participate in both support-seeking and support-providing behaviors (Simpson et al., 1992), while insecurely attached partners are less likely to engage in effective support-seeking and support-providing behaviors (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Ognibene & Collins, 1998). Avoidant partners may be less likely to reach out in times of need to avoid the emotional vulnerability involved in support-seeking behavior, while anxious partners may struggle to separate from their own needs to provide responsive support (Collins & Feeney, 2000). As a result, being insecurely attached and having an insecurely attached partner might make PTG less likely through a dampening of support seeking and provision cycles. Indeed, these types of normative and individual difference attachment processes are often seen when individuals navigate relational adversity specifically, like bereavement (Shaver & Fraley, 2008; Shaver & Tancredy, 2001).

Interdependence

Of course, a negative life event does not solely impact one member of a couple. As discussed earlier, romantic partnerships are different from other close relationships because they involve a merging of identities (Aron et al., 2022). Because of this shared sense of self, life events or emotions experienced by one partner will almost certainly impact the other. So, in theory, while negative life events can be vicariously stressful for a partner (Gill-Emerson, 2015; Leggett et al., 2020; Wofford et al., 2019), they can also contribute to vicarious growth for a partner. Some partners do, in fact, report "parallel growth" (Zwahlen et al., 2010) in which they experience some form of PTG while their partner navigates a negative or traumatic event, such as a cancer diagnosis (S. Manne et al., 2004; Thornton & Perez, 2006; Weiss, 2004). In fact, partners' levels of PTG are often correlated with

one another, despite their varying roles in the traumatic experience (e.g., patient vs. caregiver; Hodges et al., 2005; Weiss, 2002, 2004; Zwahlen et al., 2010). There is also the potential for change and growth in one person to have implications for their partners (Chopik et al., 2018). In cross-sectional examinations of both breast cancer patients and their partners, a partner's PTG predicts an individual's own PTG over and above other relevant variables (such as social/marital support, depth of commitment, and the intensity of the traumatic stressor; Weiss, 2004). This body of work emphasizes the social and relational dynamics of PTG—not only do close relationships serve as a facilitator of growth for individuals but this positive growth appears to be "contagious," with the growth of one partner occasionally encouraging the growth of the other (as occasionally seen the cross-over and social network literature; Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Norling & Chopik, 2020; Wayne et al., 2017).

In fact, some argue that PTG should alternatively be conceptualized as a couple-level characteristic (Ávila et al., 2017). This suggestion is aligned with a large body of research finding that psychological characteristics grow and develop together among romantic couples (C. A. Hoppmann et al., 2011; C. Hoppmann & Gerstorf, 2009; Schimmack & Lucas, 2010). Further, some couples may be more prone to increases in personal growth after trauma than others; "couple PTG" is a phenomenon that can occur irrespective of many individual-level considerations (like role in trauma; Zwahlen et al., 2010). Perhaps this couple-level trait could explain why traumatic events, which typically show negative effects on relationship satisfaction (Goff et al., 2007; J. E. Lambert, Engh, et al., 2012; Weinberg et al., 2018), can, in some circumstances, show *positive effects* on relationship satisfaction. Perhaps being able to successfully overcome hardship as a couple, as was the case for Christopher and Dana Reeve, boosts confidence and satisfaction in the relationship (e.g., "We can survive anything together," "I'm glad I have my partner when things get hard"). In one example of this phenomenon, Williamson et al. (2021) found that after surviving a natural disaster, Hurricane Harvey, newlywed couples enjoyed a temporary *boost* in relationship satisfaction (also see Cohan & Cole, 2002). Some of the same effects were seen among couples in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic: Couples' negative attributions about their partner decreased, and people in particularly strong relationships saw increases in relationship satisfaction (Williamson, 2020). It may be the case that especially resilient couples are the ones who can to grow in the face of trauma that may otherwise dampen their relationship satisfaction. For instance, Connolly (2005) detailed this type of resiliency in a qualitative examination of long-term lesbian couples, who describe having both relational resiliency—the ability to protect the relationship from external stressors, such as antigay prejudice—and couple resilience—the ability to bounce back from adversity as a couple (Connolly, 2005). Couple members cited these forms of resilience as central to their relationship maintenance and satisfaction. Vangelisti (2006) highlighted other dyadic factors that may influence a couple's odds of breaking up in nontraumatic contexts, such as couple-specific patterns of behavior (e.g., demand-withdraw patterns, in which one partner actively makes demands of their partner, who, in turn, withdraws from them) and shared networks of friends (who may serve as sources of support for the relationship). These factors may also predict a relationship's success and satisfaction in posttraumatic contexts.

Summary and Recommendations

The existing literature offers many possible mechanisms and pathways for partner involvement in PTG, both as an active facilitator and as a beneficiary of mutual "vicarious growth." Of course, the mechanisms summarized here are not an exhaustive list of *all* of the possible ways partners could be involved in the growth process. In evaluating the mechanisms potentially leading to PTG, measuring and modeling these characteristics simultaneously can help quantify which are the largest contributors to PTG. There are several ways to operationalize and integrate these mechanisms into empirical work, ranging from measuring them as individual and couple difference variables to formally intervening upon them to see if they foster growth (e.g., S. L. Manne et al., 2007; S. Manne et al., 2023). Including these measures prospectively, as well as manipulating or cultivating their presence, can help establish a time-ordered sequence to their influence in the growth process. For example, do certain forms of interdependence in the context of adversity cultivate attachment security as they do in other contexts (Arriaga et al., 2018)? Although each of these factors has been implicated in growth-adjacent processes, to date, a full explication of their interrelations and antecedents in PTG has not been done; our review here highlights some particular ways they might influence PTG, suggesting that there are many opportunities to identify their joint influences and, in turn, help identify the most promising times and places to intervene.

What steps need to be taken to ensure that future work on this topic is methodologically sound? Below, we discuss important factors to consider when attempting a comprehensive examination of partner involvement in PTG.

Methodological Considerations and Future Directions

The idea of PTG for individuals, their partners, and their relationships can be appealing to many. Growth-oriented thoughts are highly influential in Western cultures, providing a socially acceptable framework to recover from adversity (occasionally called a "master" narrative; Jayawickreme et al., 2021; McAdams et al., 2001). In non-Western cultures, the idea of negotiable fate (that we can autonomously navigate whatever life has in store for us)

also communicates a sense of optimism—that people can effectively deal with trauma and adversity (Au et al., 2012). However, although we have tried to make the case that close relationships can provide fertile ground from which people and relationships can grow, given the current state of the literature, we should temper expectations as well. Some of the necessary components to advance the science of close relationships and PTG are shared with the broader PTG literature. Other components are unique to the study of PTG in the context of close relationships. Here, we focus on three methodological aspects important for this work—how PTG is measured, the challenges in studying PTG among couples, and incorporating diverse populations into this literature as they are disproportionally likely to encounter adverse experiences.

Previously Identified Methodological Challenges in Studying PTG Among Individuals

Methodological challenges go hand in hand with the PTG literature, whether it is how PTG is measured, how researchers design studies capable of examining PTG, or how PTG is modeled even when good data are available. In a sweeping review of the PTG literature, Jayawickreme et al. (2021) highlighted that many studies of PTG rely on cross-sectional examinations of individuals engaging in (relatively complex) retrospection about how they have grown after adversity has already occurred. Instead, researchers advocate for collecting prospective longitudinal data (preferably from before to after the event; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014), assessing characteristics and appraisals about the event (Chopik et al., 2022; Luhmann et al., 2021), and adopting analytic approaches that do not make assumptions about variability in people's starting status and changes across the study window (see Infurna & Luthar, 2016, 2018, for expanded discussions).

Modeling change longitudinally presents its own methodological challenges. It can be challenging to identify statistically appropriate ways, which capture change while, at the same time, appropriately model various sources of error. Measurement error—the difference between a participant's true score on a given variable and a measurement tool's assessment of it—can be especially pernicious in longitudinal data and PTG research. While there are statistical techniques for combating or accounting for error, there have been relatively fewer applications of these methods in the PTG literature. In addition to a paucity of longitudinal data (and dyadic longitudinal data at that), researchers have not as readily taken advantage of approaches to modeling PTG that could yield definitive insights into the processes we have outlined above. For example, latent variable approaches can help with modeling measurement error, integrating multiple observers, and operationalizing different patterns of change, such as nonlinear, time-interrupted patterns, or person-centered approaches. Applying these approaches could lead to a better understanding of the shape of PTG—whether it is wholly linear, whether participants and partners exceed a particular threshold of well-being increases, whether growth is observable by others over time, if there are anticipatory changes before an event, and whether there are subpopulations within a sample that grow and others that do not (Infurna & Luthar, 2016; Lyon et al., 2021; Marotta-Walters et al., 2015). The evidence for PTG and its hypothetical trajectory is still very murky, there is no clear or definitive hypothesis on what PTG should "look like" in real-world data. The pattern of growth may be linear (a particular trait increasing steadily throughout a difficult experience), stable (resulting in permanent changes), temporary (boosting a trait for a while before returning to baseline), or follow another trajectory entirely. Whereas these questions are more commonplace in other disciplines and areas of psychology (Ram & Grimm, 2007), the PTG literature has often lagged in this regard—an unfortunate situation given that operationalizing postevent changes in psychological characteristics is a core component for studying PTG in the first place. When using this higher standard to establish PTG, demonstrations of the phenomena are few and far between, although not unprecedented (and likely depend on many study-related characteristics).

Altogether, there have been many previously identified methodological challenges to studying PTG within individuals—how PTG is measured and how error and change are operationalized. We familiarize readers with these existing critiques of PTG studies among individuals because they are also implicated in the study of couples navigating adversity. In fact, in addition to the traditional methodological challenges to studying PTG, several more become relevant when evaluating whether PTG can occur in the context of close relationships.

Methodological Challenges in Studying PTG in the Context of Relationships

In a way, measuring how adverse and traumatic events experienced by one person affects their romantic partner might seem less prone to some of the critiques mentioned in the previous section, given that there is some psychological distance from the experience afforded that might enable partners or the relationship to experience change or at least to reflect on the experience (Dorfman et al., 2022; Grossmann & Kross, 2014; Selcuk et al., 2012). However, the current state of the literature makes it relatively difficult to assess whether and how PTG happens in close relationships. For example, the few studies to date on PTG in couples are also cross-sectional, and many use the same cognitively taxing retrospective measures that have obscured the literature among individuals (Zhang et al., 2021; Zwahlen et al., 2010), although some assessments of couple-level stressors exist (Witting & Busby, 2022). Further, some studies that seek to

assess questions around PTG in the context of close relationships—including how relationship dynamics might facilitate growth—will only ask *individuals* about how they and their relationship have changed in response to trauma and adversity (Heintzelman et al., 2014; Scrignaro et al., 2011). Among the studies that have asked people to reflect on how their relationships have changed from the past (similar to how PTG has been traditionally measured), people likewise give a prototypical "growth response." Specifically, they often report their relationship satisfaction and quality as having increased to recent peaks from earlier lows despite prospective data suggesting their relationship satisfaction and quality have declined from earlier levels (Frye & Karney, 2002; Karney & Frye, 2002; Peetz et al., 2022). Historically, psychology has risen to the challenge of collecting dyadic data when examining dyadic questions (Kenny et al., 2006). However, the regular practice of collecting longitudinal dyadic data for examining stress-related processes and adaptation in a longitudinal context is relatively rare (Gil-González et al., 2022). Rather, what is more commonly seen—similar to what is found in the individual literature—is an invocation that growth is possible or present despite being measured only after an event, even when information from both dyad members is collected (most often seen in the caregiving literature; Bassi et al., 2016; Maguire & Maguire, 2020; Neate et al., 2019; Rajachandrakumar & Finlayson, 2022; Tramonti et al., 2019; Wawrziczny et al., 2021). Importantly, examinations of dyadic data outside of the PTG and personality change literature suggest that, for many relationship-relevant outcomes, actor effects are often much stronger than partner effects (i.e., the most important person in determining the outcomes of a given individual is that person themselves; partners play relatively small roles in comparison; Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Orth, 2013; Weidmann et al., 2023). If any sort of partner effect of PTG does indeed exist, it would likely be smaller—and more difficult to detect—than an actor effect.

An added source of confusion in characterizing growth in the context of close relationships is the idea that change can occur at different units of analysis, such that individuals may have their own outcomes but that their relationship has a shared or "common fate" (Gonzalez & Griffin, 1999; Ledermann & Kenny, 2012, 2017). In such common fate models, couple members' scores on a variable are yoked together. Specifically, external events are assumed to exert an equal influence on individuals' attributes because couple members' scores serve as indicators of a dyad-level latent variable (rather than modeled individually and covaried with each other; Gray & Ozer, 2019). In other words, is PTG in close relationships most evident if one person grows, both people grow, or the relationship continues and/or thrives? To date, most studies have operationalized PTG in terms of two people's independent scores on a PTG measure. However, there is a whole host of relatively underutilized dyadic methods that can be leveraged to advance both the PTG literature and make broader conclusions about social influence in the context of adversity (Kenny, 1996; Kenny et al., 2006). For example, particularly when *one* partner experiences a tragedy, models of mutual influence can distinguish the direction of influence and change over people's outcomes (Guntzviller et al., 2017).

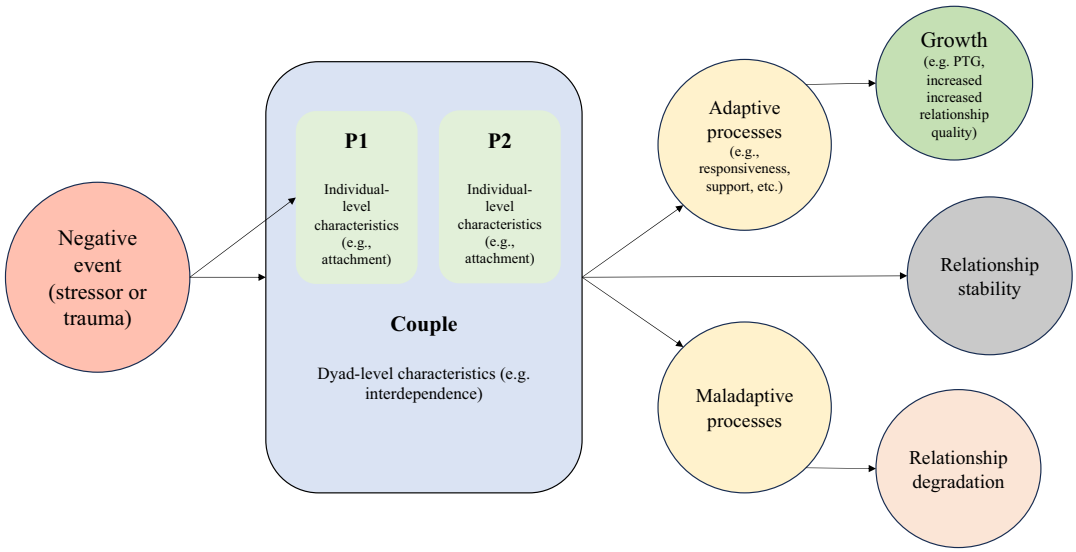
There is also an approach where the unit of analysis is the *dyad* (rather than the individuals), and researchers can become creative in modeling how couple members' shared characteristics might change in the face of adversity (Ledermann & Kenny, 2017). Yet another way is to consider how relationships—and the individuals in them—change in response to adversity and to examine whether relationship growth is possible even if growth is not apparent among individual couple members (i.e., can aspects of a relationship change following adversity, even if the constituent individuals' characteristics do not dramatically change?). For example, a dyadic longitudinal study by Gray and Ozer (2019) demonstrated that the most informative way of modeling changes in life satisfaction is to focus on individual dyad members and then consider how they covary over time (in dyadic growth curve models). However, when considering a variable like relationship satisfaction, it is often more informative to track dyad members' shared perceptions of the relationship and how it changes over time. Importantly, model comparisons allow researchers to empirically test how PTG can best be represented following adversity—as a phenomenon experienced by individuals or one that is only seen in the bond between them.

In Figure 1, we have outlined one potential dyadic model of PTG. Here, many of the mechanisms discussed above are envisioned at different levels of the model. For example, attachment, an individual trait, is positioned as a person-specific variable, whereas interdependence, a dyad-level trait, is positioned as a couple-specific variable. Here, support and responsiveness are envisioned as adaptive processes that ultimately facilitate PTG (leading to growth instead of relationship dissolution or stability). Indeed, it may be informative for future models of PTG to consider the dyad, as well as each couple member, as a unit of analysis.

Opportunities for Diversifying PTG Research by Taking Relational Contexts Into Account

Finally, developing a science of PTG in the context of close relationships has great potential for characterizing the contextual effects of adversity on individuals and their relationships. The PTG literature has often struggled to recruit diverse samples and characterize PTG in non-Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) environments (Jayawickreme et al., 2021). This is unfortunate given the many studies that have characterized sources of resilience and strengths in marginalized

Figure 1
A Hypothetical Dyadic Model of PTG



Note. In this scenario, the negative life event is experienced both by (a) one member of the couple and (b) the couple itself, while growth could be experienced by any unit in the box (i.e., by P1, P2, or the couple). PTG = posttraumatic growth; P1 = Partner 1; P2 = Partner 2. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

communities. For example, one framework, the shift-and-persist model, speculates that individuals in precarious positions are able to effectively navigate stressful environments by identifying positive role models that help them with emotion regulation and persistence, stress reappraisal, and cultivating meaning and purpose (a relational process at its heart; Chen & Miller, 2012). Some studies of introspection suggest that non-WEIRD populations might not experience stress—and its negative effects—in the same way (Jayawickreme et al., 2021; Splevins et al., 2010), and some of the resilience seen in some racial/ethnic groups might be attributable to how they effectively navigate their social relationships (Cahill et al., 2021).

And, although the relationships literature has also independently struggled to diversify its samples (Williamson et al., 2022), there are increasingly more illustrations of relationship processes among diverse couples using longitudinal data (e.g., Williamson & Lavner, 2020) and a whole host of relationship theories that have implications for modeling stress- and growth-related processes in the context of close relationships (e.g., the vulnerability–stress–adaptation model; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Neff & Karney, 2009). Some psychological and many sociological articles have provided a bedrock of studies of stress-related processes among racially and ethnically diverse couples (Ajrouch et al., 2001; Lavner et al., 2018; Orbuch et al., 2013). Minoritized couples are more likely to report relationship difficulties and stressors and are more likely to dissolve over time (Manalel et al., 2019; Trail et al., 2012). However, relatively neglected is a strong knowledge base of the various factors that might predict relationship longevity and growth among those couples that survive and thrive. Unfortunately, the vast majority of studies have adopted a stress-as-deficit model in the study of close relationships, with only a few, mostly qualitative studies adopting a stress-as-opportunity model among diverse couples (Marks et al., 2008). Moving forward, a study of PTG in relationships can continue diversifying samples of couples, follow couples longitudinally as they navigate adversity, and adopt a perspective that growth may be one of the many possible consequences emerging from this adversity.

Conclusion

Theoretically, partners can be powerful sources of strength and facilitators of growth in times of need. The current literature offers some preliminary evidence that PTG and close relationships are linked and offers some potential explanations for this connection (e.g., in the forms of partner support, responsiveness, and attachment). However, to draw the correct conclusions about how and when close others can facilitate personal growth after trauma, the correct tools and methodologies need to be utilized. While much of the current work has relied on cross-sectional, individual-level data in WEIRD populations, ultimately limiting the conclusions one can confidently draw about PTG within the context of romantic couples, the tools to answer these questions in a better way (e.g., longitudinal data, dyadic analysis, non-WEIRD samples) are currently accessible and can be used to accurately examine partner-influenced PTG in future research.

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