

The Amazing Spider-Man: Growth Over Grief

A review of the film



The Amazing Spider-Man

(2012)

Marc Webb (Director)



Reviewed by

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In early childhood, a young boy loses his parents to a mysterious plane crash. He's intelligent and benevolent and is taken in by his loving aunt and uncle, so he grows up in a generally healthy fashion despite the large void in his heart. He ages into adolescence and enters high school, where he's bullied for being a gentle and artistic individual. One day, the adolescent passively watches as a convenience store robbery takes place. He walks away from the scene of the crime. A few minutes later, his uncle attempts a citizen's arrest of the very same criminal and is tragically gunned down. The teen mourns the loss of his second father.

Up to this point, this is a rather bleak and disturbing story. It's a tale littered with social rejection, inexplicable loss, and trauma. It's also the first half of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the 2012 reboot of the Spiderman franchise and a reimagination of Peter Parker's origin story.

We all know what happens next. Our favorite underdog superhero gets bitten by a radioactive spider, develops a host of fun skills—superhuman strength and agility, a sixth sense for danger, and the ability to shoot webbing from his palms—and successfully fights

bad guys. And throughout the film's final hour and a half of well-orchestrated action sequences, this is precisely what happens. But it's an incredibly incomplete, even misguided, explanation for how Peter evolves from tragically traumatized teen to self-actualized superhero.

The spider bite explains his powers but little else. With such a soured world experience, it would have been understandable for Peter to marshal his abilities in the service of becoming an embittered villain, or at the very least a more apathetic figure akin to the superpowered high schoolers depicted in last year's *Chronicle* (Dodson & Trank, 2012). But he doesn't. Peter becomes a lovable and effective superhero. How does this happen? The answer, I believe, relates to a construct known as *posttraumatic growth*.

Posttraumatic growth, a relatively new concept in the psychological literature, aims to examine the psychological advantages of adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) and posits that great good can stem from great suffering. From this perspective, difficult life experiences are reconceptualized not just as threats to emotional health requiring resolution but also as challenges to identity that offer opportunities for growth and transformation of self.

The inklings of this idea emerged in qualitative research of autobiographical material coming from nonclinical samples—ordinary individuals' descriptions of their life stories. Researchers were surprised by the emergence of a common story line: A self-sufficient and morally steadfast protagonist grows and expands in response to personal suffering and setbacks; he or she triumphs over adversity and in so doing engenders a sense of enriched meaning that contributes to positive, long-lasting life outcomes (McAdams, 2001). Thus begins the empirical investigation of posttraumatic growth.

If approaching stress and conflict may lead not only to a resolution but also to unanticipated benefits, then what are those benefits? Some broad categories identified in the literature include increased appreciation for life, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life (Meyerson, Grant, Carter, & Kilmer, 2011). The gains that Peter makes on his obstacle-laden path of development are consistent with this organizational structure, as he grows to care about his community, meaningfully connects with Gwen and her father (Police Commissioner Stacy), develops a sense of confidence and efficacy in his abilities to fight crime, and draws upon the gratitude of those he saves.

Individuals can experience a vast array of responses to trauma. Posttraumatic growth is perhaps the most adaptive outcome that resides on a spectrum that includes clinically distressing mental disorders on the opposite pole (i.e., posttraumatic stress disorder, defined by a cluster of symptoms related to the trauma, including reexperiences, negative emotions, and avoidance behaviors). Consequently, researchers have begun to ask: What factors influence the development of posttraumatic growth versus distress?

The recipe, according to one model of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), is made up of multiple interlocking variables, ranging from environmental factors

such as social support to more unique and internal processes such as idiosyncratic cognitive habits. The Spider-Man in this film follows the model as if it were written into the script. With regard to social support, Peter chooses to reveal his stigmatized superhero identity to Gwen and Captain Stacy. It's a bold move rarely seen in superhero narratives, and it allows Peter to have a few trusted allies by his side who truly understand his experiences.

Peter also exhibits adaptive personality factors that underlie the way in which he perceives the traumatic events. An optimistic explanatory style—the tendency to frame the cause of a bad event as a fleeting setback, isolated to particular circumstances and surmountable with effort and ability (Seligman & Schulman, 1986)—is one of a few cognitive personality variables that have been tied to posttraumatic growth.

Early on in the film, Peter exhibits an unhealthy, pessimistic style as he blames himself for the destruction caused by the movie's villain, Curt Connors—a scientist who morphs into The Lizard after Peter helps him crack a scientific algorithm. But by the end of the film, with the help of his Aunt May's mantra of "You're a good boy, Peter," he has internalized a more optimistic explanatory style: He perceives himself as someone who nobly stops bad people from doing bad things.








The most pertinent theme in the film and, in turn, in his narrative of posttraumatic growth is not something currently identified in the literature—at least not yet. It's the character strength of kindness, which is defined as a habit of doing favors and good deeds for others, helping and caring for them in a generous and compassionate manner (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008). Kindness is a Parker family value. It's initially reflected in the actions of Peter's father and becomes a central theme in the interactions between Peter and Uncle Ben. Uncle Ben preaches kindness to Peter in person and in a voicemail on the fateful night of his death. Kindness even surfaces in Peter's budding romance with Gwen. We are introduced to Gwen when she righteously intervenes during Flash Thompson's schoolyard bullying of Peter. The object of Peter's affection is clearly a paragon of kindness. We watch Peter encode his highly cherished uncle's final words of wisdom, ideas that Gwen exudes and reinforces, and this value grows into the bedrock of Peter's Spider-Man identity.

Despite a nasty domino effect of traumatic events, which unleashes a wide range of intense negative emotions and existential questions, Peter evolves into a new-and-improved version of himself by the film's epilogue: He emotionally realigns with his sweet, culinary-savvy Aunt May and resolves the previously unresolved deaths of his parents and Uncle Ben. Further, he now engages in a well-adjusted teenage life by day while fighting crime at night (i.e., no longer obsessing over finding the criminal who killed Uncle Ben). He even healthfully processes the dying wish of Captain Stacy so as to live a life more in line with his values (i.e., Captain Stacy dies in Peter's arms—yet another traumatic moment—and requests that Parker stay away from his daughter Gwen; Peter initially respects this request but in the final scene decides to dismiss it as unfair and misguided).

Ultimately, *The Amazing Spider-Man* is a high-quality film. With deficiencies in plot and character development aside (the weaknesses that emerge are minor, especially in

comparison with most summer blockbusters), the chemistry between Peter (Andrew Garfield) and Gwen (Emma Stone) is top-notch, and the direction, soundtrack, choreography, and other stylistic elements are executed with skill. What enriches this entertaining experience is the fact that *The Amazing Spider-Man* is not just about the adventurousness of a nerdy, webbed superhero; it's also a rich commentary on posttraumatic growth and the character strength of kindness.

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