

From Punishment to Transformation: A Phenomenological Study on Post-Traumatic Growth in Former Prisoners

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Abstract. Trauma experienced after incarceration is a heavy burden for former prisoners during their reintegration into society. Apart from social stigma and economic difficulties, prisoners frequently face profound psychological pressure due to traumatic experiences during imprisonment. This study aimed to investigate the experience of PTG among former prisoners in Indonesia after their release. A phenomenological design was used and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 male former prisoners. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was also used to analyze participant responses. Participants' perceptions of PTG showed five key themes, namely (1) self-understanding and personal development, (2) relationships with family and social networks, (3) spirituality and relationship with God, (4) coping strategies and mechanisms, and (5) a greater sense of meaning in life. The results corresponded to Tedeschi and Calhoun's theory and introduced an additional theme regarding coping strategies and mechanisms. In conclusion, the development and implementation of psychosocial interventions should be prioritized for former prisoners.

Keywords: Post-traumatic growth, former prisoners, phenomenology

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Introduction

Former prisoners are human beings who deserve a chance, and this principle reflects the fundamental human right to live with dignity and humane treatment, including for those who have experienced incarceration (Kretmer & Klein, 2021). After serving sentences, former prisoners should be allowed to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society. However, the transition from incarceration to freedom often presents complex challenges, encompassing physical, psychological, social, and economic dimensions (Pękala-Wojciechowska et al., 2021; Harding et al., 2019). These individuals frequently face stigma, social rejection, heightened stress, and a profound sense of vulnerability (Meiyanti et al., 2019; Kyprianides et al., 2019), and may worry about acceptance from their families and society at large, with fears of rejection contributing to the risk of psychological distress, anxiety, and depression (Jasni et al., 2020; Mowen & Visser, 2015; Thomas et al., 2016). From an existential perspective, the experience of incarceration can also lead to a loss of life meaning and purpose (Vanhooren et al., 2017; Guse & Hudson, 2014).

The experience of incarceration can be profoundly traumatic, although its impact may vary across

individuals. The stress of confinement, loss of autonomy, and exposure to violence or abuse often produce both immediate and long-term psychological consequences (Liu et al., 2021; Facer-Irwin et al., 2019). Dehumanizing conditions such as overcrowding, lack of privacy, and prolonged isolation further exacerbate mental health difficulties, resulting in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and post-incarceration syndrome (PICS) (Grassian, 2006). van Ginneken (2016) found that unfamiliarity with the prison environment imposed an additional burden on first-time prisoners who struggle to adapt to an unfamiliar system while coping with separation from loved ones. Without adequate psychological support, these unresolved issues can significantly hinder individuals' ability to find meaning, restore self-worth, and achieve successful reintegration into society (Brooks et al., 2019; Vanhooren et al., 2018).

Socioeconomic barriers further complicate post-release life. Data from the Ministry of Law and Human Rights showed that Indonesia currently has 273,552 former prisoners, with 60% remaining unemployed in the first year of release (Pam, 2023). Negative societal perceptions and administrative requirements, such as SKCK (Surat Keterangan Catatan Kepolisian),

frequently obstruct employment opportunities (Sumpter et al., 2019). These challenges are compounded by structural issues in the prison system, such as overcrowding, where correctional institutions (LAPAS) operate at 189.9% overcapacity and detention centers (RUTAN) at 202.9% (SDP Publik, 2025). Overcrowded facilities often fail to provide sufficient rehabilitation programs, exposing prisoners to further criminal behaviors (ICJR, 2020). Consequently, a minimum of 25% of former prisoners face difficulties reintegrating due to a lack of skills, knowledge, and support (Belinda, 2022).

Amid adversity, some former prisoners demonstrate remarkable post-traumatic growth (PTG), a positive psychological transformation following significant trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 2017). In other words, individuals can also experience positive psychological change when facing traumatic events (Wu et al., 2019). PTG is marked by the development of personal strength, renewed appreciation of life, improved relationships, spiritual deepening, and the emergence of new life possibilities (Blevins & Tedeschi, 2022). For example, A.D., a former prisoner, founded Yayasan Anugerah Insan Residivis, which now empowers over 200 former prisoners across Indonesia (Yudatama, 2023; Yulistira, 2019). Another case is H. from Salatiga, who successfully developed a cassava-based business employing over 100 people (Hagiworo, 2025; Purnama, 2023). Studies have shown that social support, cognitive reframing, and meaning-making are crucial in fostering PTG (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014).

In the context of reintegration, PTG can emerge as individuals begin to recognize internal strengths such as hope, gratitude, and spirituality as factors that may support desistance from crime (Guse & Hudson, 2014). Despite its relevance, studies on PTG among former prisoners remain limited, particularly regarding the psychological mechanisms and social factors that promote growth. Studies that focus directly on former prisoners' subjective experiences, specifically in non-Western contexts, are still scarce (Hearn et al., 2021).

Several qualitative studies have provided initial insights into the manifestation of PTG among former prisoners. Guse and Hudson (2014), for example, conducted in-depth interviews with three South African former prisoners and found that PTG emerged through processes of personal development, deeper interpersonal understanding, and a redefined life philosophy. Similarly, van Ginneken (2016), using a narrative method with six formerly incarcerated women in England, conceptualized PTG as a gradual process comprising three stages, namely the initial shock of imprisonment, a subsequent search for meaning, and eventual personal transformation. Complementing these insights, Vanhooren et al.

(2015), through a mixed-methods study, showed that individuals with higher levels of PTG experienced lower psychological distress. The phenomenological analysis also confirmed thematic patterns closely aligned with those identified by van Ginneken (2016), reinforcing the notion that PTG among former prisoners follows a dynamic and reflective trajectory.

More recently, Maier & Ricciardelli (2022) conducted narrative interviews with over 50 male former prisoners in Canada, emphasizing incarceration as a catalyst for reflection and transformation. Despite these contributions, a phenomenological lens focused on former prisoners in Indonesia has to be thoroughly applied. In addition, many recent studies adopted a quantitative method (e.g., Hearn et al., 2021; Vanhooren et al., 2017), which might not capture the depth of emotional and cognitive shifts involved in PTG.

This study aimed to investigate and understand the lived experiences of PTG among former prisoners in Indonesia using a phenomenological method. The results were expected to provide valuable insights for the development of psychological interventions and rehabilitation programs. Furthermore, this study could serve as a source of inspiration for former prisoners to identify their personal strengths and discover pathways toward PTG.

Methods

This study used a qualitative phenomenological method. The method was specifically used to deeply explore participants' experiences of PTG and to obtain meaningful, valuable, and unique insights. This study further elaborated on participants' interpretations of life experiences, including personal strengths, new opportunities, relationships with others, and spiritual experiences. Moreover, the method produced unique, original, and subjective results and was not intended to be generalized to a broader population.

Participants were selected using a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive sampling. The selection criteria included being individuals who had been convicted of a crime and later cleared of those charges, not imprisoned for any reason other than conviction and sentencing by a recognized judicial system, at least 18 years of age, able to speak and understand Indonesian, having served a prison sentence of nine months or longer, and capable of providing informed consent. Each participant carried a different story behind their time and case in prison. Table 1 summarizes the demographic profiles and general offense categories of participants. Specific details have been anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via teleconference from February 2024 to February 2025. The interview process consisted of three stages, namely opening, core, and

closing. The study expert adhered to an interview guide containing open-ended questions focusing on participants' experiences of PTG, developed from the grand tour question. These initial questions were followed by probing questions evolving based on participants' responses while maintaining the primary focus of the interview. Examples of questions asked include *"Can you describe your experience after being released from prison?"*, *"How do you interpret the traumatic experiences you faced during incarceration?"*, *"What factors have supported your personal growth after leaving prison?"*, *"How has your relationship with close ones changed after your release?"*, *"How has your spiritual journey evolved following your time in prison?"*

The interview process was conducted in two separate online sessions with each participant, lasting 45 to 60 minutes per session. Repeated interviews or questioning were conducted to achieve data saturation. Before the interviews, participants were provided with an informed consent document in digital format to review and sign, which included assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Although this study was not submitted for formal ethical clearance, all participants were thoroughly informed about the study's purpose, procedures, their rights, and voluntary participation. The study expert also verbally reiterated the informed consent information at the beginning of each interview.

The credibility of the data was confirmed through member checking and triangulation methods to minimize potential bias. Investigator triangulation was implemented by involving multiple study experts in the analysis and interpretation of the data to reduce individual bias. Subsequently, reflective discussions were conducted with the study team to analyze participant data and identify any overlooked aspects. Data triangulation was also conducted by interviewing participants from different age groups and collecting data at different times to capture variation across contexts.

The collected data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative method that focuses on examining how individuals make sense of their life experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The analysis started with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to gain an overall understanding of each participant's experiences. Subsequently, the study expert produced descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments on participants' statements. From these annotations, emergent themes were generated and later clustered into superordinate themes. This analytic process was carried out for each participant before cross-case comparisons were made to identify convergent and divergent patterns.

A systematic coding format was applied to all verbatim excerpts presented in the results to maintain analytical consistency. The coding structure consisted of four components: (1) participant's initial, (2) the sequence of the dialogue, (3) the superordinate theme code, and (4) the emergent theme code followed by its order in the same dialogue. For example, the code (E1:AKD-01) represents participant E, dialogue number 1, superordinate theme A, emergent theme KD, and the first emergent theme identified in that dialogue. This coding system ensured transparency in tracing each excerpt back to its analytical context.

Guided by the phenomenological stance, this study did not start with any predetermined theoretical framework. Instead, the understanding of PTG emerged naturally through participants' own stories, stories filled with struggle, reflection, and rediscovery. As the narratives unfolded, it became clear that participants were not only describing their experiences of pain and confinement but also revealing strength, gratitude, and a renewed sense of life meaning. Only after these patterns were identified did the study expert recognize that their experiences resonated with the essence of PTG as described by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004).

Results and Discussion

Results

The results emerged from the lived experiences of six former prisoners, each with unique life paths and challenges after release, from rebuilding family relationships and restoring trust to rediscovering their faith and sense of purpose. A total of five themes were identified as domains (superordinate themes) closely related to the dynamics of PTG experiences among former prisoners after their release from prison. Key points that serve as anchors for personal growth, as identified through participants' narratives, include self-understanding and personal development; connection with family and social networks; spirituality and relationship with God; coping strategies and mechanisms; and a greater meaning of life. The relationships among these themes are shown in Figure 1.

PTG in this study focused on participants' experiences and interpretations related to positive psychological changes during traumatic periods and progressing toward self-growth after being released from prison. This growth varies depending on each participant's internal conditions and external influences. The names of participants involved are presented in initials. Specific emerging themes based on participants' experiences are presented in Table 2. These themes are further explained in the following sections.

Table 1
Participant's Characteristics

Subject	Initial	Sex	Age	Period of incarceration	Type of offense	Marital status	Children	Previous job
P1	E	Male	48	18 Months	White-collar allegation	Married	2	Commitment-Making Officer (PPK) & Provincial Office Secretary
P2	R	Male	26	12 Months	Drug-related offense	Single	0	Artist
P3	M	Male	30	9 Months	Drug-related offense	Single	0	Factory worker
P4	D	Male	53	12 Months	Media-related allegation	Married	2	Journalist
P5	H	Male	51	11 Years	Long-term major offense	Married	1	Odd-job worker
P6	K	Male	55	10 Months	Weapons-related offense	Married	1	Entrepreneur

*None of them returned to crime—each chose to rebuild their life in their own way.

Self-Understanding and Personal Development

For many participants, incarceration served as a pivotal point that prompted deep self-reflection and a reevaluation of who the individuals were before and who they aspired to become after freedom. This inward journey marked the starting point of their PTG.

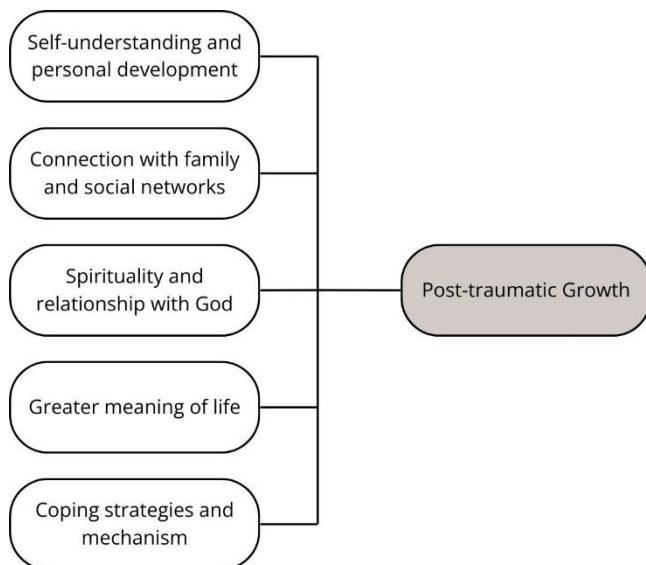


Figure 1. Flowchart of the Results

This theme emphasizes the values that motivate former prisoners to understand and self-develop during PTG process after being released from prison. A better understanding of oneself starts with the awareness of their crisis period. When former prisoners recognize their critical turning points, determination and drive emerge to work hard toward self-development and

escape those circumstances. This is reflected in K's statement:

Dari segi ekonomi keluar lapas sempat jatuh, jatuh tuh nggak punya apa-apa, tinggal keluarga dan rumah. Dari situ saya tergugah harus bergerak, karena yang merubah diri kita adalah kita sendiri, orang lain bukan. (K1:AKT-01; K1:DMM-01).

Economically, after leaving prison, I hit rock bottom and had nothing, only my family and home. That is when I was moved to take action, because the only one who can change us is ourselves, not anyone else. (K1:AKT-01; K1:DMM-01).

Awareness and a redefinition of self-identity in a more positive light form the next stage of self-understanding and development. This enables former prisoners to know themselves better, helping shape a more positive character. Coupled with learning from past experiences, this process facilitates more optimal personal development. This is presented in statements from D and M:

Setelah semua itu jujur saya lebih optimis, lebih siap untuk menerima apapun karena banyak hal yang tidak bisa diprediksi (D4:AKD-02).

After all those experiences, I honestly feel more optimistic and better prepared to face anything, as many things are unpredictable. (D4:AKD-02).

Dulu saya nggak suka berkecimpung di tetangga-tetangga atau anak-anak muda, tapi setelah keluar lapas, saya punya pemikiran untuk

melakukan hal-hal bermanfaat ke desa (M2:AKD-01).

In the past, I did not like mingling with neighbors or young people, but after leaving prison, I had a new mindset to do something meaningful for the village. (M2:AKD-01).

Personal development in the context of PTG among former prisoners is influenced by their openness to new opportunities. Making the most of these opportunities helps to grow more quickly and find personal well-being. This value is reflected in the statements of H and K:

Saya sudah lepas tangankan. Mau kerja ke daerah, ke masjid atau kemana. (H2:ATA-01).

I have let go of it all. I am ready to work anywhere, in the mosque, in the community, whatever job it is, I am ready. (H2:ATA-01).

Semua pekerjaan saya ikuti. Saya jadi krani itu sambil belajar, mulai mikir nggak mungkin saya selamanya begini, dari situ saya berpikir gimana caranya bisa buka usaha sendiri. (K1:ATA-01).

I took on all kinds of jobs, and from there I learned. I started thinking about how I could open my own business. (K1:ATA-01).

These values collectively form a solid internal strength to support former prisoners in understanding and developing during the process of PTG.

Connection with Family and Social Networks

Family and community relationships became both a turning point and a test, shaping whether former prisoners saw themselves as outcasts or as individuals worthy of a second chance.

One of the factors that emphasizes interpersonal relationships, both with family and the social environment, is the role these relationships play in PTG process after release. Emotional support, a sense of acceptance, attachment, and social connection help in confronting trauma and providing motivation for positive development. Conversely, poor relationships have the potential to become significant stressors.

The closest connection in an individual's life is the family. In the context of PTG among former prisoners, the family plays an important role as a support system and can even become the main reason for their growth. This is expressed by participant E:

Terpenting keluarga mengenali siapa kita, itu udah cukup buat saya. Anak-anak sampai sekarang seperti apa namanya- apalagi mereka sudah beranjak dewasa ya, sekarang kayak menjadi sahabat buat saya (E6:BPK-01).

What matters is that the family recognizes who we are, that is enough for me. My kids, specifically

now that they are growing up, they have become like friends to me. (E6:BPK-01).

Gue balik lagi ke keluarga. Keluarga gue paling bisa menerima gue dengan keadaan apapun. Itu sih yang gue bikin kayak wah emang keluarga tuh tempat paling nyaman. (R13:BPK-01).

I came back to a family that can accept me no matter what. That is what makes me feel like, wow, family is really the most comfortable place. (R13:BPK-01).

Besides family, the social environment plays a crucial role in supporting the growth of former prisoners, psychologically, materially, and in providing opportunities for reintegration. This support is reflected in R's statement:

Ada yang bener-bener welcome. Kayak, lu butuh apa-apa. Nanti hubungin gue. Kalo gue ada kerja, nanti gue hubungin lu (R9:BDS-01).

Some really welcome me. Like, 'When you need anything, contact me. When I have a job, I will call you'. (R9:BDS-01).

The social environment can create a stigma that disrupts the psychological stability of former prisoners. This becomes a challenge requiring the development of strategies to cope with the stigma. Some choose to ignore or avoid it, or prove they are not what the public perceives. As E stated:

Kalau kita berdaya, ya orang lain itu tenang tenang saja. Kita dihadapkan mereka bukan untuk menerima belas kasih, bukan, saya nggak mau, jadi ya sepanjang kita mandiri secra ekonomi, maka yang sosialnya pun bisa teratasi. (E7:BPS-01).

When we are empowered, others will be at ease. We face them not to receive pity. Therefore, as long as we are economically independent, the social aspect will also be manageable. (E7:BPS-01).

The experiences of former prisoners after release often bring new meaning to their social relationships. Their perspectives and patterns of interaction with others change, often becoming more positive. New lessons and viewpoints are also gained regarding their relationships. This reflection is shared by D:

Sekarang saya lebih mencoba memahami orang lain dari pada dulu yang lebih reaktif. (D2:BMB-01).

Now I try to understand others more, unlike before when I was more reactive. (D2:BMB-01).

Saya hanya mengutip perkataan dari Ali bahwa "orang yang dekat dan mengenalmu tidak perlu dijelaskan tentangmu". Sementara orang yang memang sudah berprasangka denganmu,

bagaimanapun kamu berapologi mereka tetap tidak akan percaya. (D4:BMB-01).

I learned that those who are close and truly know you do not need any explanation. While those who already hold prejudice against you, no matter how much you explain, still will not believe you. (D4:BMB-01).

Spirituality and Relationship with God

Faith served not merely as comfort but as a compass that guided their steps toward meaning and moral recovery. Spiritual conditions and an individual's relationship with God are among the strongest factors supporting PTG in former prisoners. Prayer and worship play a key role in building closeness with God, becoming a source of strength. This is reflected in the statements of participants H and K:

Mungkin belum ada jalannya, ada satu jalan tapi hasilnya kecil. Saya bilang ke istri, pasti nanti Allah yang ngasih, kita usaha dan berdoa. (H2:CPD-01).

Maybe the way is not open yet, there is one path but the result is small. I told my wife, Allah will surely provide, let's keep trying and praying. (H2:CPD-01).

Jangan lupa doa, tidak ada ceritanya doa tidak dikabulkan. Cuma ada yg dikabulkan langsung, ditunda, atau diganti dengan hal yang lebih baik. (K6:CPD-01).

Do not forget to pray. There is no such thing as unanswered prayers. Some are answered right away, some are delayed, or replaced with something better. (K6:CPD-01).

Belief in the power of prayer and that God determines people's sustenance motivates participants to keep striving and growing without hesitation. Participant E similarly expressed:

Saya akan membuat sesuatu yang terbaik menurut versi saya. Kemudian saya serahkan sama yang kuasa. Saya berusaha di dalam komplek perumahan yang jauh dari tempat umum, tapi hanya kuasa Allah yang mengerjakan orang berbelanja di tempat saya. (E5:CRD-01).

I will do my best. Then I leave it to the Almighty. I run my business in a residential complex, far from public spaces, regardless of Allah's will, people still come to shop. (E5:CRD-01).

An increased awareness of spiritual values gives energy, helping the participants feel calmer and more focused on personal growth. D's statement reflects this:

Semua itu rencana Allah agar kita menjadi manusia lebih berguna. Ajaran Quran dan hadist juga menyebutkan bahwa manusia paling baik

adalah manusia yang berguna bagi manusia lain. (D4:CMK-01).

All of this is Allah's plan for us to become more useful human beings. The Quran and Hadith also say the best people are those who are most beneficial to others. (D4:CMK-01).

Gratitude and inner peace are formed from these accumulated spiritual practices, strengthening participants' efforts to grow and overcome trauma. These feelings also cultivate sincerity in doing good. As expressed by R and K:

Gue ada bersyukur juga ketika keluar gue bisa mengadakan sebuah eksibisi, mengadakan sebuah pameran tunggal yang bertajuk, itu diri gue sendiri, itu gue sebagai syukuran. (R11:CKB-01).

I also felt grateful that once I got out, I could hold a solo exhibition, titled with my own name, as a form of thanksgiving. (R11:CKB-01).

Sekarang saya tinggal menikmati enakanya, kalau ada masalah ya saya senyum aja, alhamdulillah, pasti ada solusi. Itu adalah kunci kedamaian. Ketika kita komplain, kita hanya akan dapat keburukan. Sementara dengan Syukur dan tenang, inshaAllah, tujuan akan tercapai. (K3:CKB-02).

Any hardship is alhamdulillah, because that is the key to peace. When we complain, we will only receive bad things. When we are grateful and calm, inshaAllah, our goals will be achieved. (K3:CKB-02).

Coping Strategies and Mechanisms

Former prisoners use various coping strategies and mechanisms to overcome trauma and achieve growth. These strategies begin with self-acceptance of their past. Acceptance helps to make peace with it and focus on future growth. This was conveyed by D and H:

Terima, terima saja pahitnya. Saya tidak mau ini, pokoknya terima saja. (D4:DPT-01).

Accept, just accept all the bitter memories. I did not want this, but I just accepted it. (D4:DPT-01).

Tidak mau lihat kebelakang lagi sudah, dulu ya dulu sekarang ya sekarang, fokus membahagiakan keluarga udah. (H6:DPT-01).

No longer looking back, the past is past, now is now. My focus is on making my family happy. (H6:DPT-01).

Managing negative emotions is crucial to coping with trauma and avoiding the negative consequences of uncontrolled emotions. This aligns with M and E's ability to manage their emotions:

Saya tidak susah karena saya menganggap ini pembelajaran bagi saya. Ibarate iki nerokone dunyo, uduk akhirat. (M3:DEN-01).

I was not stressed because I took this as a lesson. It is like this is hell on earth, not the hereafter. (M3:DEN-01).

Saya tidak mengungkapkan kebahagiaan atau kesedihan yang berlebihan. Saya terlihat orang yang lebih tenang dalam segi tempramen, ya karna sama anak-anak pun saya tidak pernah memarahi secara verbal yang berlebihan. Saya ekspresinya biasanya kalau tidak sependapat saya diam. (E5:DEN-01).

I do not express excessive happiness or sadness. I come across as a more calm temperament; when I disagree with something, I usually just stay quiet. (E5:DEN-01).

In addition to managing emotions, participants develop positive thinking and belief patterns. These beliefs help them make peace with their trauma and continue growing. D explained a metaphor for positive thinking:

Metafora tentang diri kita itu kayak lihat pedang Damaskus, semakin tajam kalau sering ditempa. Semakin baik kalo semakin dapat cobaan. Kita harus menjadi lebih tenang dan pemaaf kalau ingin menjadi pedang yang lebih tajam. (D4:DKP-01).

Thinking of ourselves as a Damascus sword, the more it is forged, the sharper it becomes. The more trials, the better we become. We should be calm and forgiving if we want to be a sharper sword. (D4:DKP-01).

These thoughts and beliefs are later transformed into real actions through positive activities, reflecting personal growth. M stated:

Saya punya pemikiran untuk mengurangi narkoba dan miras pada anak-anak di desa Rejoagung. Akhirnya saya mendirikan sanggar literasi untuk mereka yang bermasalah, semuanya ditampung. (M1:DUM-01).

I had the idea to reduce drug and alcohol use among children in Rejoagung village. Therefore, I founded a literacy center to accommodate troubled children there. (M1:DUM-01).

Participants further show inner motivation to keep developing and striving for a better life. H said the greatest motivation was the wife and children, while K was driven by the desire to be useful to others:

Ya Allah berilah hamba sekali saja kesempatan untuk membahagiakan anak dan istri sebelum nyawa saya dipanggil Ya Allah. (H3:DMM-01).

Oh Allah, please give me just one chance to make my wife and children happy before You take my soul. (H3:DMM-01).

Kalau tujuan dan keinginan saya belum terpenuhi saya akan gerak terus. Kita harus menjadi orang yang bermanfaat, sekecil apapun. (K4:DMM-01).
When I have not fulfilled my goals and desires, I will keep moving. We should be useful people, even in the smallest way. (K4:DMM-01).

Greater Meaning of Life

Former prisoners undergoing PTG gain a deeper meaning in life. This begins with a more positive mindset and perspective. Participant E described a shift from being overly cautious to making decisions more swiftly:

Dulu saya sangat hati-hati mengeksekusi sesuatu. Tapi kalau sekarang di kita sebagai seorang yang berwirausaha, kita dikejar oleh waktu untuk memutuskan sesuatu. Jadi saya lebih cepat memutuskan sesuatu. (E5:EPP-01).

I used to be very cautious when executing something, but now, as an entrepreneur, I am pressed for time in decision-making, therefore, I make decisions more quickly. (E5:EPP-01).

Participants found positive values to guide their lives going forward. For example, D discovered the beauty of sharing, while M emphasized the danger of drugs:

Saya merasa saya hidup bukan untuk diri sendiri, ada keluarga. Ternyata ada banyak sekali kenikmatan jika kita bisa berbagi, ya berbaginya tidak seperti orang-orang kaya, tapi kalau ada orang susah ya kita coba membantu (D4:ENP-01).

I feel like I do not live just for myself, I have a family, and there is abundant joy in sharing. Not like the rich, but when an individual is struggling, I try to help. (D4:ENP-01).

Jangan pernah sekali-kali mengenal narkoba, karena narkoba bisa membunuhmu (M3:ENP-02).

Do not ever try drugs. Drugs can kill you. (M3:ENP-02).

A reflective attitude grows in former prisoners, helping to find meaning in all experiences. H reflected that God provides sustenance and help through various means, even through other people:

Mungkin Allah kasih jalan lewat Pak Darmawan. (H2:ESE-01).

Maybe Allah gave me a way through Mr. Darmawan." (H2:ESE-01).

Table 2

Emergent Theme Post-Traumatic Growth of Former Prisoners

Superordinate Themes	Emergent Themes
Self-understanding and personal development (A)	Awareness and redefinition of self-identity (KD) Openness to new opportunities (TA) Crisis and traumatic periods (KT) Learning from experiences (MP) Determination and hard work for self-development (TK)
Connection with family and social networks (B)	The role of family in personal growth (PK) Social support from the surrounding environment (DS) New meanings in social relationships (MB) Experiencing and coping with stigma (PS)
Spirituality and relationship with God (C)	The role of prayer and worship in personal growth (PD) Feeling close to God as a source of strength (RD) Increased awareness of spiritual values (MK) Feelings of gratitude and inner peace (KB)
Coping strategies and mechanisms (D)	Acceptance of the past (PT) Managing negative emotions (EN) Building a positive mindset and beliefs (KP) Engaging in positive activities (UM) Nurturing motivation for continuous growth (MM)
Greater meaning of life (E)	Changing mindset and perspectives on life (PP) Discovering positive values in life (NP) Developing self-reflective attitudes (SE) Finding joy in simple things (KS) Letting go of destructive past lifestyles (GD)

Sekarang setelah di jalan allah lebih wah ini ya sulitnya hidup tapi ada aja yang bantu dan pertolongan Allah. (H6:ESE-01).

Now that I am on Allah's path, it is like, 'wow, life is hard,' but somehow, help always comes. (H6:ESE-01).

Based on the overall emotional dynamics and meaning-making in the process of PTG, former prisoners typically managed to find happiness in simple things. This happiness was expressed by subject K who was able to contribute to village development and achieve the objective of being useful to society.

Saya punya kewenangan untuk membangun itu, dan saya happy aja meskipun cape. Jadi dukungan dari masyarakat dan keluarga sangat membantu. (K2:EKS-01).

I have the authority to develop the village, and I am happy even though it is tiring. Therefore, the support from the community and my family really helps. (K2:EKS-01).

Saya happy ketika apa yang menjadi tujuan saya bisa tercapai (K4:EKS-01).

I am happy when I can achieve my goals. (K4:EKS-01).

The final point related to finding a better meaning in life is letting go of destructive lifestyles. As a result, former prisoners can form or adapt to a more positive way of living. This was emphasized by subject M, who abandoned old behavior and built a better life:

Intinya sekarang saya sudah berhenti untuk menjalani kehidupan yang sangat kelam. suka narkoba. suka miras. (M1:EGD-01).

The point is, I have stopped living such a dark life. I used to like drugs, alcohol. (M1:EGD-01).

Dipenjara menjadi pengalaman terburuk bagi saya. dan saya ga akan ulang. (M3:EGD-02).

Being in prison was the worst experience for me, and I will never repeat it. (M3:EGD-02).

Various aspects can be identified that occur and play a role in PTG of former prisoners. These aspects vary among individuals and can influence one another.

Discussion

This study showed that former prisoners experienced PTG in various aspects of their lives, although the degree and nature of the growth differed among individuals. The results corresponded to PTG framework proposed by [Tedeschi and Calhoun \(2004\)](#), outlining five core dimensions, namely personal strength, relating to others, appreciation of life, openness to new possibilities, and spiritual change.

Most participants expressed a significant change from their former selves after being released from prison, describing a significant transformation in self-understanding and personal development. The emergence of a new identity often stemmed from reflections on their past hardships, consequently becoming a foundation for the development of more positive character traits and the discovery of new life opportunities. The results were consistent with [Jayawickreme et al. \(2020\)](#), claiming PTG could be

captured as positive personality change, even among those who had undergone severe traumatic experiences. Similarly, [Bechara et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasized the relationship between virtues, wisdom, and PTG, suggesting that individuals who experienced PTG tended to transform into better versions. An illustrative example came from subject K, emphasizing self-awareness as the primary driver of transformation, a clear reflection of how growth can emerge through introspection and learning from adversity.

Participants emphasized the importance of supportive relationships in the healing journey. Many cited family and social networks as critical sources of emotional support and acceptance. Subject E, for instance, described family as the key factor in their recovery. This underscores PTG dimension of relating to others, where social connectedness becomes essential to the recovery process. The results were in line with [Hearn et al. \(2021\)](#), who found that positive relationships with prison staff could also support the development of PTG. Moreover, [Gormley et al. \(2024\)](#), in their systematic review and meta-analysis, emphasized that supportive interpersonal relationships could foster new ways of thinking and behaving, further strengthening social and relational skills among former prisoners.

Spirituality emerged as another important dimension across all participants who consistently described their relationship with God and engagement in religious practices as a central source of strength during and after traumatic experiences. This reinforced earlier explanations by [van Ginneken and Vanhooren \(2022\)](#), emphasizing the psychological importance of spirituality in trauma recovery. [Tedeschi and Calhoun \(2004\)](#) also identified spiritual change as a core PTG dimension, wherein spirituality provides individuals with a deeper sense of meaning in the face of helplessness. For example, subject H mentioned that prayer and surrender to God (*tawakal*) were key motivators in their process of healing and continued growth.

Coping strategies and mechanisms played a significant role in participants' journeys toward growth, although not explicitly outlined as a core PTG dimension. The ability to regulate emotions, stay calm, and engage in positive activities was repeatedly mentioned as a factor that enabled personal development. The results were in line with [Acar et al. \(2021\)](#), stating that coping strategies contributed to the facilitation of PTG. Subject E reflected on the importance of maintaining emotional composure and avoiding negative emotional spirals as essential steps toward recovery.

Another important theme that emerged was the discovery of a greater meaning in life. Progressing through PTG process, individuals often find deeper

purpose and direction guiding them forward after trauma. This was in line with [Calhoun & Tedeschi's \(2014\)](#) assertion, where the search for meaning is a central element of growth, helping individuals connect more deeply and providing a renewed focus for their lives. All participants reported that the time spent in prison led to reconsidering the direction of their lives and discovering a sense of purpose to pursue a better future. In this context, [Vanhooren \(2015\)](#) also explained that in the process of coping with distress both inside and outside of prison, former prisoners often engaged in meaning-making efforts to see life from a more constructive perspective. An illustrative example was from Subject K, who expressed happiness in being able to contribute to village development and help others, reflecting a significant shift in how life goals and personal fulfillment were viewed.

This study provided a deeper exploration of PTG among former prisoners, contributing to the limited body of study on how former prisoners made meaning of their traumatic experiences, particularly through a phenomenological framework. There had been a lack of study in Indonesian context that specifically examined how former prisoners experience and interpret posttraumatic growth, typically leading to genuine personal development after their release. However, this study had certain limitations, including its exclusive focus on male participants. Future investigations would benefit from greater participant diversity and the use of data triangulation to improve the credibility and depth of the results.

From a phenomenological lens, PTG among former prisoners is not a fixed outcome but a continuing process of rediscovering humanity after loss, stigma, and isolation. This shows healing begins the moment an individual's story is heard, understood, and given space to be redefined.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provided a nuanced understanding of PTG among former prisoners in Indonesia through a phenomenological lens. Despite the significant psychological, social, and economic adversities encountered, participants showed the capacity to experience positive psychological transformation after incarceration. The five emergent themes, including self-understanding and personal development, relationships with family and social networks, spirituality and connection with God, coping strategies and mechanisms, and a greater sense of meaning in life, collectively affirmed the multidimensional nature of PTG. The results extended Tedeschi and Calhoun's theoretical model by emphasizing the salience of coping strategies as an integral component of growth in this specific population. The study showed PTG among former prisoners was not a linear or automatic outcome but a

dynamic and reflective process influenced by personal agency, social support, and the reframing of traumatic experiences. It also emphasized the necessity to implement and further develop psychosocial interventions as a strategic priority to empower former prisoners in reconstructing their identities, strengthening coping resources, and supporting successful reintegration into society. Future studies were recommended to explore longitudinal trajectories of PTG and examine how institutional, cultural, and policy-level factors could facilitate or hinder growth after incarceration. Typically, the stories showed that healing and transformation could arise even from the darkest experiences, when people are given the chance, support, and dignity to start anew. In this sense, PTG was not merely about recovery but about reclaiming humanity in a world that once denied it.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization: A.U.A., R.S.K.; Methodology: R.S.K., A.U.A.; Data collection and investigation: R.S.K., A.U.A.; Data analysis: R.S.K.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation: R.S.K., A.U.A.; Writing—Review & Editing: R.S.K., A.U.A.; Supervision: H.I.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing and grammar improvement.

Ethical Clearance

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to its minimal-risk nature. Informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants prior to the online interviews.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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