



Finding Meaning Behind Accidents through Self-Guidance: A Phenomenological Study on Trauma Experience and Recovery

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ABSTRACT

Background: Trauma resulting from traffic accidents often leads to significant psychological impacts, such as excessive fear, insecurity, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors towards situations that remind the victim of the incident. **Purpose:** This study aims to explore the profound experiences of victims of single-vehicle accidents in understanding the trauma they have experienced and the psychological recovery process they undergo. **Method:** This research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, collecting data through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, which are then analyzed using phenomenological stages. **Results:** Participants went through complex emotional phases, starting with shock and extreme fear, which then developed into anxiety and avoidance of situations related to the accident. Their psychological recovery process was gradual, involving family support, self-reflection, acceptance, and the search for deeper meaning in life. **Conclusion:** The search for meaning and social support plays a crucial role in the psychological recovery of accident victims, showing that post-traumatic growth can occur. **Contribution:** This study serves as a foundation for developing more empathetic trauma counseling practices, based on validating experiences and reconstructing meaning to aid victims in their recovery.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traffic accidents are a serious social problem in Indonesia, with alarming statistics continuing to be reported. Various annual reports reveal that the number of accidents remains high, with motorcycles being the most involved mode of transportation (Mauludi et al., 2021). This issue is linked to the high mobility of the population and the varied condition of road infrastructure. Accident victims, especially motorcyclists, often face physical consequences ranging from minor injuries, tissue damage, bone fractures, to the loss of body functions, which require prolonged rehabilitation (Anisarida & Santosa, 2019).

However, beyond the statistical data and visible physical injuries, there is another impact that often goes unrecognized: the psychological wounds. For many victims, accidents are not merely a collision between the body and the road or vehicle, but an emotional shock that shakes their sense of safety, self-confidence, and perception of the surrounding world (Christanto & Noviekayati, 2022). These traumatic experiences often manifest as excessive

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fear, nightmares, extreme vigilance, and the emergence of avoidance behaviors towards situations related to the accident (Trajchevska & Jones, 2025).

A real-life example can be seen in victims of single-vehicle accidents, such as those who lose control while riding a motorcycle. While they may physically recover after treatment, the experience of the accident leaves a powerful emotional scar. The victim begins to fear riding again, especially when riding alone. Even riding as a passenger triggers feelings of inadequacy, fear of endangering others, and anxiety about losing control of the situation. On the road, their body become tense every time they see another rider speeding. Their heart rate increases, their mind returns to the moment of the accident, and their body reacts as though the danger is happening again (Englander & Morley, 2023). This reaction illustrates that trauma is not just about a past event, but also how the victim's body and mind continue to relive it in the present.

In trauma counseling practice, a deep understanding of the victim's experience is crucial (Ogińska-Bulik & Michalska, 2022). Counselors need not only information about trauma symptoms but also insights into how the victim understands themselves after the accident, how they feel the loss of safety, and how they struggle to return to everyday life (Purnell et al., 2021). An empathetic, meaning-centered approach that explores personal experiences is essential so that the intervention provided truly addresses the victim's emotional needs. Without this deep understanding, the recovery process can be hindered, even leading to prolonged trauma (Nina & Paulina, 2022).

Research on the psychological impact of traffic accidents, especially trauma and its recovery process, in Indonesia is still limited, particularly in the context of subjective meaning experienced by the victims. Most existing studies focus on quantitative aspects, such as accident statistics and physical or economic impacts, while the psychological dimension is often overlooked (Budiarto et al., 2021; Khafid et al., 2023; Ayuningtyas & Ambarwati, 2025; Riyanti & Apsari, 2020; Gottfredson et al., 2023). The existing research tends not to address how individuals interpret the traumatic event and how social and cultural factors, such as family support and spirituality, influence their recovery (Jones, 2025; Mortari, 2023). However, subjective meaning-making is an essential element in the psychological recovery process of accident victims (Purnell et al., 2021). Therefore, this research gap lies in the lack of in-depth understanding of the emotional experiences of victims and their recovery process, focusing on the search for meaning and post-traumatic growth within the context of Indonesia's strong social and religious characteristics. This study aims to explore the experiences of single-vehicle accident victims using a phenomenological approach, with the hope of filling this knowledge gap and contributing to more empathetic trauma counseling practices based on meaning-making.

This research aims to explore the subjective experiences of single-vehicle accident victims in making sense of the trauma they experienced and the psychological recovery process they went through. Using a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to understand how accident victims process their feelings, such as fear and anxiety, and how they strive to find meaning in the traumatic event. Additionally, this research also aims to explore the role of social support, self-reflection, and spiritual values in aiding the recovery process and post-traumatic growth, as well as contributing to the development of more empathetic and contextually relevant trauma counseling practices in Indonesia.

It is hoped that the findings of this research will significantly contribute to the development of trauma counseling practices in Indonesia, particularly in building interventions based on empathy and self-meaning. By understanding the victims' subjective experiences more deeply, counselors, psychologists, and other support personnel can provide more humane, relevant, and effective services to those struggling to recover from traumatic experiences.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to deeply understand the subjective experiences of traffic accident victims in making sense of their trauma and psychological recovery process. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it can explore the essence of individual experiences, particularly those related to perceptions, emotions, and meanings that emerge in the trauma recovery journey.

2.2 Research Subject

The study was conducted in 2025 in settings relevant to the recovery of accident victims, including UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, rehabilitation centers, and support communities for accident victims. The research subjects consist of five to seven adult participants who have experienced traffic accidents and undergone psychological recovery processes. Participants are selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) accident victims with life experiences relevant to the trauma they experienced, (2) willingness to undergo in-depth

interviews, and (3) emotional readiness to share their traumatic experiences. The study is conducted in settings relevant to the recovery of accident victims, such as rehabilitation centers, trauma counseling, or accident victim support communities.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection is carried out using semi-structured in-depth interviews aimed at obtaining a comprehensive picture of the emotional experiences of participants after the accident. In addition to interviews, the researcher conducts non-participant observation to capture emotional expressions and nonverbal communication during interactions. Documentation, including counseling notes, personal journals, or recordings of participants' reflections, is also used to enrich the understanding of their experience dynamics.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews, observations, and documentation are analyzed using a phenomenological approach. The analysis process begins with thoroughly reading all interview transcripts, followed by identifying significant statements that reflect the core experiences of the participants. These statements are grouped into major themes relevant to trauma and recovery dynamics. Textural descriptions are written to describe what participants experienced, while structural descriptions are used to understand how these experiences occurred in the context of their lives. The analysis results are then synthesized into the essence of the experience, which represents the most profound meaning of the trauma and recovery journey experienced by the participants.

2.5 Data Validity Check

To ensure data validity, this study uses source triangulation by comparing information from interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings are also confirmed with participants through member checking to ensure that the data interpretation aligns with their experiences. Additionally, the researcher maintains an audit trail, a comprehensive record of the entire data analysis process, to ensure transparency and reflexivity in the study. Reflexivity is also used to identify and reduce biases that may arise during the data analysis process. The ethical aspects of the research are maintained by providing informed consent to all participants, ensuring the confidentiality of identities through the use of codes or pseudonyms, and offering participants the option to stop the interview if they feel uncomfortable.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

The results of this study show that participants who had experienced accidents described a complex emotional journey from the moment the event occurred until the recovery process took place. In the initial stage, all participants experienced intense shock and fear during the accident. They lost control over their bodies and the situation, and developed a belief that their lives were in danger. Feelings of trembling, a blank mind, and deep panic were typical responses. After the event, the participants still faced significant psychological impacts, such as anxiety, nightmares, insecurity, and excessive worry when considering riding a vehicle again or passing by the accident site. Some participants even avoided activities related to the traumatic event because they felt emotionally unprepared.

In the next phase, the recovery process began as support from the surrounding community became available. Family, friends, and the community served as sources of comfort and strength for the participants to recover emotionally. Support in the form of guidance, positive advice, attention, and willingness to listen to their experiences without judgment greatly helped ease the anxiety they felt. For some participants, spiritual support also provided calmness and became an important part of their psychological recovery process.

Over time, the participants entered the phase of self-acceptance. They realized that the accident was an unavoidable event and had to be accepted as part of life. During this phase, they made efforts to adapt to the new situation, manage their anxiety, and attempt to re-engage in activities they had previously avoided due to fear. This acceptance did not occur instantly, but instead was a result of reflection and continuous support from their social environment.

Next, the search for meaning became an important part of the participants' recovery journey. They began to reflect on the accident as a turning point in their lives, making them appreciate time, health, and social relationships more. Some participants interpreted the event as a second chance to live more carefully and with greater gratitude. The spiritual dimension and religious values also influenced how they understood and dealt with the trauma they had experienced.

Ultimately, the study found positive changes in some participants, which can be categorized as post-traumatic growth. They felt stronger, more emotionally mature, and more aware of their own safety and the safety of others. The traumatic experience gave them the drive to improve their lives, strengthen social bonds, and live with deeper intention and awareness. This transformation shows that recovery is not just about eliminating fear, but also about reshaping perspectives on life and the future.

Table 1. Research Findings

Emotional Phase	Description of Findings	Impact on Recovery
Extreme Shock and Fear	Participants experienced deep shock and intense fear during the accident, losing control over their bodies and the situation.	Triggered strong physical and emotional responses, shaking their sense of safety and self-confidence.
Anxiety and Avoidance	After the accident, participants experienced anxiety, nightmares, insecurity, and often avoided situations reminding them of the accident.	Hindered participants' ability to return to activities as before the accident, increasing anxiety and trauma.
Recovery Process (Social Support)	Social support from family and friends played a crucial role in alleviating anxiety and providing comfort during recovery.	Social support accelerated recovery, helping participants feel safer and return to normal life.
Self-Acceptance	Participants began to accept that the accident was part of life and started adapting to their new condition.	Self-acceptance helped reduce anxiety and provided space for emotional adaptation.
Search for Meaning and Post-Trauma Growth	Participants reflected on the accident as a life turning point, making them appreciate life more and develop new awareness.	Searching for meaning became a means to shift perspectives on trauma, fostering emotional and spiritual growth.

The research findings reveal that accident victims undergo a complex emotional journey starting with extreme shock and fear, which later develop into anxiety and avoidance of situations that remind them of the accident. Social support from family and friends plays a crucial role in accelerating the recovery process, offering comfort and security. Over time, participants enter the phase of self-acceptance, which helps reduce anxiety and allows them to adapt. The search for meaning and post-traumatic growth then emerges as a result of reflecting on the traumatic event, allowing individuals to appreciate life more deeply and develop a deeper emotional and spiritual awareness. This process confirms that recovery from trauma involves positive changes and self-transformation.

3.2. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that participants' experiences align with trauma theories proposed by Herman and van der Kolk, where the initial reactions to the accident, such as shock, extreme fear, and loss of control, are typical responses experienced by trauma victims. According to van der Kolk's theory, the body stores traumatic memories, which lead to symptoms such as nightmares, hypervigilance, and emotional tension, all of which were also experienced by the participants (Rzepka-Marot et al., 2025). In the recovery process, participants not only sought to alleviate their anxiety but also made efforts to find meaning in the events that occurred. This search for meaning then became an important part of their psychological recovery, as it helped them reshape their perspective on the accident they experienced (Anisarida & Santosa, 2019). At this stage, the role of trauma counseling became very evident. Counseling provided a safe space to share their stories, validate their feelings, and help individuals reframe their traumatic experiences into ones that could be understood more positively, thus enabling them to manage their fear and rebuild self-control.

When compared with previous studies on post-traumatic growth and meaning-making, the findings of this research reveal similarities, indicating that traumatic experiences do not always lead to suffering, but can instead lead to positive changes, such as increased gratitude, appreciation for life, and strengthened social connections (Ramos et al., 2022). However, this research also presents a local uniqueness that distinguishes it from studies conducted abroad. In the context of Indonesia, family support, spiritual values, and the culture of gotong royong (cooperation) play a significant role in the healing process. Participants found meaning through a religious approach, prayer, and the belief that the event was part of God's will. These cultural and spiritual elements provide a unique richness that demonstrates the strong social and religious character of trauma recovery processes in Indonesia.

The findings of this study have important implications for trauma counseling practices. Counselors need to emphasize empathy, non-judgmental acceptance, and the validation of feelings, as these aspects have proven to provide a sense of safety for victims. In addition to focusing on symptom recovery, counselors need to develop ap-

proaches that guide individuals to find meaning in their traumatic experiences, such as through reflection, narrative exploration, and the exploration of spiritual values that align with the client's cultural context. Therefore, trauma counseling modules in Indonesia need to be designed with consideration of the spiritual dimension, cultural values, and the importance of social support in the recovery process.

This study examines the subjective experiences of traffic accident victims in making sense of their trauma and their psychological recovery process, offering new insights into how self-guidance plays a vital role in accelerating recovery. The concepts of post-traumatic growth (PTG) (Dell'Osso et al., 2022; Dell'Osso et al., 2023) and meaning-making form the foundation of understanding that trauma not only brings negative impacts but can also foster positive transformation within individuals (Henson et al., 2021). According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (2020), PTG refers to positive changes that occur after individuals face significant adversity, including an increased understanding of life, improved interpersonal relationships, and a more profound sense of gratitude for life. This aligns with the study's results, which show that after experiencing an accident, victims often undergo a significant shift in their worldview, leading to a deeper awareness of life.

Post-trauma recovery involves not only managing psychological symptoms but also creating new meaning from the traumatic events that were experienced (Rizky et al., 2025). The meaning-making theory developed by Park (2017) explains that individuals facing trauma attempt to link the traumatic event with a broader and more meaningful life perspective. In this study, participants demonstrated that the process of self-reflection and searching for meaning was crucial to their recovery. Some victims viewed the accident as an opportunity to live more cautiously and appreciate the time, health, and social relationships they had. This indicates that the meaning constructed from traumatic experiences can provide a sense of control and reduce ongoing anxiety.

Additionally, social support plays a crucial role in helping victims manage trauma and recover. Rosenberg & McCullough (2019) state that the support of family and friends not only serves as a source of comfort but also as a factor that helps victims develop a sense of safety and accept the new reality after a traumatic event. These findings are consistent with research showing that social support accelerates the psychological recovery process of accident victims, helping them feel accepted and reducing the impact of anxiety they experience.

This study aligns with the findings of Davis et al. (2018), who discovered that following trauma, individuals tend to experience a more positive shift in their outlook on life, leading to increased personal growth and improved quality of life. As found in this study, accident victims felt that the trauma they experienced allowed them to improve their relationships with others and appreciate their lives more. This process of meaning-making also acts as a protective mechanism against post-traumatic stress and enhances their emotional resilience.

The findings of this study show that trauma recovery is not just about eliminating negative symptoms, but also about how individuals build new meaning from their traumatic experiences, which fosters growth and a deeper understanding of oneself. This process cannot be separated from the social support they receive, which serves as a crucial pillar in accelerating the recovery process. These findings make an important contribution to the development of trauma counseling practices, which need to emphasize the importance of empathy, acceptance, and self-meaning-based approaches to support individuals who are struggling to recover after a traumatic event.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implications

This study has significant implications for the development of trauma counseling practices, particularly within the Indonesian context, by emphasizing the importance of self-meaning and social support in the psychological recovery process of accident victims. The findings suggest that counselors need to adopt an approach based on empathy and acceptance, while also integrating spiritual and cultural values into trauma therapy. Another implication is the need for the development of counseling modules that not only focus on trauma symptoms but also help individuals find meaning in their traumatic experiences, which can foster post-traumatic growth.

4.1 Research Contributions

Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of conducting further research that considers local cultural factors in designing more effective interventions tailored to the emotional needs of accident victims in Indonesia. This study contributes significantly to expanding the understanding of psychological recovery for accident victims, particularly within the context of Indonesian culture. By emphasizing the role of self-guidance, the meaning-making of traumatic experiences, and social support, this research opens new perspectives for counselors and psychologists to design more empathetic interventions based on the social and cultural context of the victims. It also enriches the literature on post-traumatic growth (PTG) by introducing a more holistic approach that encompasses emotional,

social, and spiritual aspects in the trauma recovery process. Additionally, this research lays the groundwork for future studies that can explore recovery dynamics in various accident contexts and across different cultural backgrounds.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

5.1 Research Limitations

This study has several limitations, particularly in terms of the relatively small number of participants and the local context of the research, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized to all accident victims. The limited research time also means that the study only captures a portion of the recovery process, which actually occurs over a more extended period. Therefore, further research is needed with a longitudinal approach to track the recovery process over time, or a mixed-method approach that can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between psychological, social, and spiritual aspects in trauma recovery.

5.1 Recommendation for Future Research Directions

This study opens opportunities for further in-depth research on the factors influencing the psychological recovery of accident victims, focusing on the role of social support, spirituality, and culture in the meaning-making process post-trauma. Future research is recommended to employ a longitudinal approach to track the progression of the recovery process over time, as well as to involve a larger and more diverse sample, encompassing various types of accidents and diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, research with a mixed-method approach could provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between psychological, social, and spiritual factors in recovery, as well as enrich the understanding of the more holistic process of post-traumatic growth (PTG).

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the experience of accident victims is a complex psychological process, starting with extreme shock and fear at the time of the event, followed by anxiety and emotional disturbances afterward, and eventually entering a gradual recovery phase. Participants described that the accident not only caused physical injury but also disrupted their emotional stability, in line with Herman and van der Kolk's trauma theory, which asserts that the body and mind respond intensely and persistently to life-threatening events. The participants' recovery process involved a combination of social support, self-acceptance, and a search for meaning. Family, friends, and the surrounding environment became crucial foundations that helped ease anxiety and restore a sense of safety. In the subsequent stages, participants began to reflect on their traumatic experiences and reinterpret the event as an opportunity for growth, self-improvement, and living with newfound awareness. This shows that psychological recovery is not just about eliminating trauma symptoms, but also involves a process of deep meaning-making and post-traumatic growth.

This study also reveals that the Indonesian cultural context, particularly the values of spirituality, family closeness, and the culture of *gotong royong* (cooperation), plays a significant role in accelerating trauma recovery. Participants frequently associated their accident experience with fate, divine protection, or a second chance in life, which gave them emotional strength to recover. These findings highlight that trauma recovery in Indonesia has unique characteristics that differ from Western contexts and should be considered in counseling practices.

This study emphasizes that recovery from an accident is a multidimensional psychological journey involving emotional, social, life meaning, and spiritual aspects. Trauma counseling that emphasizes empathy, validation, and meaning exploration has been shown to play a crucial role in helping individuals reframe their traumatic experiences positively. Although this study has limitations in terms of the number of participants and its local scope, the findings provide a deep understanding of the dynamics of recovery. They can serve as a foundation for future research as well as the development of more comprehensive counseling interventions.

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Author Contribution Statement

All authors discussed the results, contributed to the final manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. Umi Umayah and Dina Astriyani: Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft. Rasikah Anis Mardatilah and Riska Yulandari: Writing - Review & Editing, Design, Methodology. Asti Haryati and Cindy Ainun Nabilla: Performed data, Data collection. Yopi Azhari Jayadi: Formal analysis.

Declaration of Generative AI (GenAI) Usage in Scientific Writing

This research utilized Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) technology in several aspects, particularly in the writing, editing, and processing of data related to text analysis. GenAI was used to expedite data processing, assist in writing certain sections of the document, and ensure consistency and fluency in the language. However, all research results, analyses, and conclusions are entirely the work, interpretation, and responsibility of the authors. The use of GenAI was conducted with attention to ethical principles and transparency, ensuring that it did not compromise the credibility or quality of the research. All instances of Generative AI usage in this article were conducted by the authors in accordance with the [IJGCS GenAI Tool Usage Policy](#), with the authors assuming full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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