

Understanding Intergenerational Trauma and Its Effects on Mental Health

The passage of emotional pain from one generation to the next

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Intergenerational [trauma](#) refers to trauma that is passed from a trauma survivor to their descendants. It can also be referred to as transgenerational or multigenerational trauma.

People experiencing intergenerational trauma may experience symptoms, reactions, patterns, and emotional and psychological effects from trauma experienced by previous generations (not limited to just parents or grandparents).

What Is a Trauma Response?

Humans have survived for thousands of years by evolving the ability to adapt. If you live with chronic stress or have lived through a traumatic event, certain responses activate to help you survive—these are known as trauma responses.

Although these responses are helpful for short-term survival, being in that “survival mode” headspace is harmful to both physical and mental health in the long term. When your brain learns the adaptive behavior necessary to keep yourself and your family safe/alive, these adaptations may be passed on to future generations and can be challenging to un-learn.

Remaining in “survival mode” can limit one's ability to thrive, as living in survival mode is founded in response to fear/trauma/scarcity. Thriving is possible when there is a developed sense and lived experience of safety and security, which people suffering from intergenerational trauma may not have a model/cellular knowing or foundation for.

Someone who has experienced trauma might struggle to feel calm in situations that are objectively safe due to anxiety that another traumatic event will occur. When this occurs, the trauma response can be harmful rather than adaptive.

For example, someone may have grown up in a household where there were generations of yelling and shouting at their children in anger, stemming from a place of [unresolved trauma](#) and pain. In order to understand intergenerational trauma, it is important to acknowledge the impact of what the parents/grandparents/great-grandparents/ancestors/etc. survived that resulted in their yelling or shouting.

This may have been because yelling or shouting was adaptive behavior for survival or they had their own parents yell at them because those parents and those before them didn't have the tools, energy, modeling, support, or space to speak kindly/gently/lovingly to their children due to constant stressors and the trauma of historical oppression/struggle.

The impact of intergenerational trauma in this case would be descendants continuing to shout/scream at their own children, from a place of unresolved intergenerational trauma/stress.

What Does Intergenerational Trauma Look Like?

Those affected by intergenerational trauma might experience symptoms similar to that of [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD), including [hypervigilance](#), anxiety, and [mood dysregulation](#).

However, because the individual did not directly experience the trauma themselves, they will not experience [flashbacks](#) or intrusive memories. They experience trauma symptoms and trauma responses from events that did not occur to them; rather, the response is inherited genetically.

Because stress responses are linked to more [physical health issues](#), intergenerational trauma can also manifest as medical issues including heart disease, stroke, or early death.¹

[Intergenerational Trauma in AAPI Communities](#)

What Causes Intergenerational Trauma?

Intergenerational trauma occurs when the effects of trauma are passed down between generations. This can occur if a parent experienced [abuse as a child](#) or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs),² and the cycle of trauma and abuse impacts their parenting.

Intergenerational trauma can also be the result of oppression, including [racial trauma](#) or other systemic oppression. The effects of intergenerational trauma have been documented in descendants of refugees,³ residential schools,⁴ and Holocaust survivors,⁵ demonstrating that this type of trauma continues to impact populations for generations after a collective traumatic event has occurred.

Genetics and Intergenerational Trauma

Although research differs and a definitive number is not presently known, it is estimated that human beings have more than 25,000 genes present in our DNA.⁶ The way that our genetic material manifests in our bodies, or the way that our genes determine everything from how we look to what diseases we may be predisposed to, is called epigenetics.⁷

Some genes are dormant when we are born but activate based on our environment. This is one way that we adapt to our environment and survive.

When someone experiences trauma, their DNA responds by activating genes to help them survive the stressful time. Genes that prime us for things like a [fight, flight](#),

[freeze, or fawn response](#) will activate to help us be ready for future dangerous situations. We then pass these genes onto our offspring in order to prepare them for possible traumatic events.⁸

Our genetics do a great job of keeping us safe even if this does not mean keeping us happy. When genes are primed for stressful or traumatic events, they respond with greater [resilience](#) to those events, but this constant state of anticipating danger is stressful. The trade-off of being constantly prepared to keep us safe increases our body's stress levels and impacts our mental and physical health over time.

If your parents or grandparents experienced trauma, their DNA coded itself to have a survival response that helped them get through those events, which then passed down through generations.⁹ This “survival mode” remains encoded and passed down for multiple generations in the absence of additional trauma.¹⁰

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Treatment and Coping for Intergenerational Trauma

As noted above, intergenerational trauma persists for multiple generations if additional trauma is not present. However, research shows that children of parents with higher ACEs scores are at higher risk for their own adverse childhood experiences.¹¹

If you experience intergenerational trauma, [trauma-informed interventions](#) and [therapy treatment](#) can help you cope with your own symptoms, understand the impact of intergenerational trauma, and equip you with tools to help change deeply embedded patterns and heal yourself and generations after you.

Even if you do not have your own memories of the trauma, a trauma-informed approach to care can help you manage your body's physiological response to intergenerational trauma.

There are many resources available to those dealing with trauma, both personal and intergenerational. Recognizing trauma symptoms, even if they are inherited rather than related to a personal trauma, is vital in coping and seeking support for intergenerational trauma.

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Healing Intergenerational Trauma

Because intergenerational trauma is inherited across generations, it can be fully healed by creating an environment where additional trauma does not occur for multiple generations. It can be healed even in the context of continuing stressors with the tools, inner resources, and support needed to care for symptoms and heal the root cause of the intergenerational trauma on physical/somatic, emotional, mental, cellular, and ancestral levels.

Support and resources for trauma survivors and those living with intergenerational trauma are essential for preventing future traumas.

This means both providing education about trauma, trauma responses, and intergenerational trauma to providers, teachers, and parents, as well as addressing systemic issues that perpetuate trauma in minoritized populations.

It also means acknowledging how intergenerational trauma impacts those who have not personally experienced a traumatic event. This understanding is the first step in treating intergenerational trauma in individuals as well as preventing future intergenerational trauma.

Press Play for Advice on Healing Intergenerational Trauma

This episode of [The Verywell Mind Podcast](#), featuring Holistic Psychologist Mariel Buqué, shares how you can stop the cycle of intergenerational trauma. Click below to listen now.

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Keep in Mind

If you are experiencing the effects of intergenerational trauma, please know that therapy can be a helpful tool to help you overcome and navigate trauma responses. A therapist can also teach you healthy coping mechanisms that you can employ if you encounter a trigger. Please remember that you are not alone and that there's no shame in reaching out to a professional!

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