

Historical Trauma and Intergenerational Trauma

Historical trauma is a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations emanating from massive group trauma. These collective traumas are inflicted by a subjugating, dominant population. Examples of historical trauma include genocide and colonialism (e.g., residential schools, slavery, surviving terrorism, and war). Intergenerational trauma is an aspect of historical trauma.

Intergenerational trauma describes the psychological or emotional effects that can be experienced by people who live with trauma survivors. Coping and adaptation patterns developed in response to trauma can be passed from one generation to the next.

There are several ways that **trauma can be passed on through generations**. Experiencing trauma can lead to maladaptive ways of coping with the unresolved emotions about the event. These coping mechanisms such as hypervigilance, hyperarousal, or avoidance may appear as anger, panic, isolation, anxiety, or depression. This, in turn, will affect relationships. The emotional responses of the parent will affect the developing brains of their offspring because the human brain develops in direct response to the environment. Trauma can produce neurochemicals in the brain that will alter brain functioning. These neurochemical changes can also be passed on.

Intergenerational trauma such as slavery, genocide, surviving terrorism, and warfare have been widely studied. Individual trauma such as rape, physical abuse, and extreme neglect can have long-lasting effects in families over generations too. People who live through these events often go untreated. Most are **unaware that they carry trauma or that it can pass on to future generations**.

In Canada, the devastating impacts of systemic racism, discrimination, and colonization of Indigenous peoples are the most pressing example of intergenerational trauma.