

Intergenerational Transmission of Hope: The Legacy of Trauma in the Face of Covid-19

Galit Atlas

Over the course of the last month, my patients who are second and third-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors are all bringing to therapy intense dreams and associations alluding to their family trauma. Now, more than ever, patients are recalling their ancestors' survival stories, imagining their devastation and helplessness and counting their losses, this time colored by a very particular present moment.

However, many of us are now more aware than ever of the legacy of trauma as a resource and not only as a psychological burden.

It was right after World War II that psychoanalysis first began examining the way trauma was unconsciously passed on from one generation to another, as emotional inheritance. Many of those analysts were Jews who had escaped Europe. Their patients were Holocaust survivors and later the offspring of those trauma survivors, children who carried some unconscious trace of their parents' pain.

After the war, Maria Torok, an analyst who was born in Hungary and moved to Paris, was known for her work with Holocaust survivors. In collaboration with Nicolas Abraham, and elaborating on Ferenczi's ideas on trauma, they identified the transgenerational aspect of trauma and introduced the theory of the phantom.

'What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others', (p. 171) they wrote in 1978, referring to intergenerational secrets and unprocessed experiences that very often don't have a voice or an image associated with them but loom in our minds nonetheless. Torok and Abraham emphasized the ways we carry emotional material that belongs to our parents and grandparents, retaining losses of theirs that they never fully articulated. We feel these traumas even if we don't consciously know them. Old family secrets live inside of us.

Starting in the 1970s, new empirical research analyzed the alteration of genes in descendants of trauma survivors. That research on epigenetics studied the non-genetic influences and modification of gene expression and examined the ways in which the environment, and especially trauma, can leave a chemical mark on a person's genes, which is then passed down from generation to generation. They found that healthy offspring of Holocaust survivors, war veterans and those whose parents experienced major trauma were more likely to present symptoms of PTSD after traumatic events or even after witnessing an interpersonal violent incident (See the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai by researcher Rachel Yehuda and her team).

Nevertheless, from an evolutionary point of view, the biological changes could be not only a way the body is damaged by trauma, but a forward-planning strategy to help the next generation survive. Epigenetic changes might prepare children for an environment similar to that of the parents. Perhaps this is a way to equip the next generation, helping it adapt to the challenges ahead.

Focused on the unconscious, psychoanalysis is familiar with the ways traumatic experience invades

the psyche of the next generation (See Harris, Klebanoff & Kalb's work on ghosts). The people we love and those who raised us live inside us; we experience their emotional pain, we dream their memories, we know what was not explicitly conveyed to us, and these things shape our lives in ways that we don't always recognize. In analysis, we often focus on the parts of ourselves that are kept in captivity by the secrets of the past, so it is especially interesting to realize that intergenerational trauma can also serve as a source of resilience.

Many therapists are observing that their most anxious patients are coping with the current crisis better than those who were not previously worried about 'the end of the world'. For those patients, external reality has caught up with their internal one; they were already afraid of potential catastrophe, so paradoxically, they now feel less anxious. For them, the hidden crisis that they always felt was just around the corner has finally arrived, and in some ways, it's easier for those patients to deal with the actual, present crisis as opposed to the one that they were constantly expecting.

When it comes to inherited trauma, though, there are additional factors that are in place.

It is through identification with the previous generations that we integrate past, present and future, not only as an ongoing sequence of trauma, but also of survival. The memory of the past is now re-enacted in symbolic daily acts and feelings. For example, for many children of survivors, being quarantined is an enacted memory of their parents hiding during the Holocaust. Some of my patients mention the empty shelves in the supermarket and the way it activates their identification with their ancestors' search for food during the war. Those are ways to live out their ancestors' history, only this time knowing that the end can lead to survival.

The intergenerational transmission then is not only of trauma and despair but also of resilience and hope, because the patient's own existence is the evidence that their family survived and that one can have a future. It is both a way to process and recall the past liberation and also look forward and anticipate the future redemption. Reliving our ancestors' pain allows us to reference the traumatic past as a way to imagine a possible future, a trajectory from chaos to order, from helplessness to agency and from destruction to re-creation.

References

- Harris, A., Klebanoff, S., & Kalb, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Ghosts in the Consulting Room: Echoes of Trauma in Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Harris, A., Klebanoff, S., & Kalb, M. (2017). *Demons in the Consulting Room: Echoes of Genocide, Slavery and Extreme Trauma in Psychoanalytic Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Torok, M. & Abraham, N. (1978). *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Yehuda, R., Schmeidler, J., Wainberg, M., Binder-Brynes, K. & Duvdevani, T. (1998). Vulnerability to posttraumatic stress disorder in adult offspring of holocaust survivors. *Amer. J. Psychiat.* 155:1163-1171.