



UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Trauma, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. The effects of trauma can be widespread, varied, and often manifest themselves in a multitude of ways. There is no definitive or right way that one responds to trauma and so what we can learn from those who have suffered trauma is limited.

Clinical studies of Holocaust survivors have shown a wide range of emotional symptoms from distrust of the world, impaired parental function, chronic sorrow, an ever-present fear of danger, separation anxiety, overprotectiveness, survivor syndrome (survivor's guilt), among many others. The effects of trauma can be elevated by multiple traumatic events, such as those of Holocaust survivors who were often victims of prolonged exposure to violence.

Holocaust trauma has had a psychological impact on the children and grandchildren of survivors too. Children often avoided open expression of negative emotions in order to not inflict further pain on their parents and showed lower tolerance for stress in adverse situations. There is some debate on whether trauma can be transmitted transgenerationally but some authors prefer to use the term "echoes of parental traumatic memory." The trauma of parents and grandparents do affect their offspring but with so many variables, the actual effect is hard to determine. Nevertheless, the observed differences characterizing the children of survivors remain within the normative range.

The effects of trauma on the offspring also include patterns of resilience and the ability to cope and overcome trauma. Again, there are many factors at play here, but some have been powerful vehicles to create healthy lives and stable relationships: Being emotionally available and aware of one's feelings, reaffirmation of identity, acceptance of life's realities and finding meaning in one's life, and opportunities to utilize one's potential, talent, and skills. In particular, the willingness and ability for Holocaust survivors to openly talk about their traumatic experiences can have a dramatic effect on their offspring in the promotion of resilience and strength-based coping. This can manifest itself in the descendants by high achievement, greater empathy, an inclination to work in professions of service, and an obligation to continue to tell their families' stories and protect the legacy of the Holocaust.

"I HAVE ALWAYS HAD THIS STRONG WILL TO SURVIVE...I WANTED TO LIVE FOR NOW AND I WANTED TO BRING UP MY CHILDREN. THEY SHOULD NOT HAVE THE SADNESS AND THE PAIN THAT I WENT THROUGH...I WANTED TO PROTECT THEM. BUT YOU KNOW WHAT? NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU TRY TO PROTECT YOUR CHILDREN THEY SEE THROUGH YOU...BUT, YOU KNOW, THIS IS WHAT LIFE IS. YOU'VE GOT TO ACCEPT WHATEVER IT IS. CAN'T CHANGE IT."

- Holocaust Survivor

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