

What Is Generational Trauma? Here's How Experts Explain It

By Claire Gillespie¹

*Experts are learning more about who is vulnerable to it,
and how it manifests in families and communities*

Many things get passed down through families, like heirlooms, genetic conditions, and physical characteristics. In some cases, trauma can be inherited, too. Generational trauma (also known as intergenerational trauma or transgenerational trauma) is still a relatively new field of study, meaning researchers have a lot to discover about its impact and how it presents in people who suffer from it. Here's what we know so far, according to experts.

Defining generational trauma

Generational trauma is exactly what it sounds like: trauma that isn't just experienced by one person but extends from one generation to the next. "It can be silent, covert, and undefined, surfacing through nuances and inadvertently taught or implied throughout someone's life from an early age onward," licensed clinical psychologist and parenting evaluator [Melanie English](#), PhD, tells *Health*.

In 1966, Canadian psychiatrist Vivian M. Rakoff, MD, and her colleagues recorded high rates of psychological distress among children of Holocaust survivors, and the concept of generational trauma was first recognized.

A 1988 study, published in [The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry](#), found that grandchildren of Holocaust survivors were overrepresented by about 300% in psychiatric care referrals. Since then, Holocaust survivors and their progeny have been the most widely studied group, but in theory, any type of extreme, prolonged stress could have adverse psychological affects on children and/or grandchildren, resulting in clinical anxiety, depression, and [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD).

"Trauma affects genetic processes, leading to traumatic reactivity being heightened in populations who experience a great deal of trauma," child and adolescent psychiatrist and author [Gayani DeSilva](#), MD, tells *Health*.

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Who is vulnerable to intergenerational trauma?

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Everyone is susceptible to generational trauma, but there are specific populations that are vulnerable due to their histories. "Being systematically exploited, enduring repeated and continual abuse, racism, and poverty are all traumatic enough to cause genetic changes," Dr. De Silva says. "So African Americans in the United States and around the world are particularly vulnerable. And the families affected by catastrophes such as the 2004 tsunami in Asia will have traumatic reactivity for generations to come." People in countries that have endured years, even decades, of war may also have generational trauma, she adds.

Domestic violence, [sexual assault](#) or sexual abuse, and hate crimes are other acts that can result in generational trauma.

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How generational trauma presents

The symptoms of generational trauma may include hypervigilance, a sense of a shortened future, mistrust, aloofness, high anxiety, depression, panic attacks, nightmares, insomnia, a sensitive fight or flight response, and issues with self-esteem and self-confidence, says Dr. De Silva.

Experts are learning more about how trauma affects the immune system. "It may lead to a dysfunctional immune system—one that's either too active or not active enough," Dr. De Silva notes. "This can result in more autoimmune diseases or a greater propensity for illness."

Trauma also influences the microglia, the brain's immune system. "When in a high trauma reactive state, the microglia eat away at nerve endings instead of enhancing growth and getting rid of damage," Dr. DeSilva explains. "The microglia go haywire in the brain and cause depression, anxiety, and dementia. This can translate into genetic changes, which can be passed down to further generations."

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How generational trauma is diagnosed

There is no specific diagnosis of generational trauma, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5), which is the standard classification of mental disorders used by [mental health](#) professionals. But the phenomena of intergenerational trauma is well accepted.

"We know trauma can manifest itself through stress, anxiety, fight or flight, and other heightened alert systems in our brain and bodies, but intergenerational trauma can also mask itself through learned beliefs, behaviors, and patterns that become engrained,"

English says. "This kind of wiring impacts personalities, relationships, parenting, communication, and views of the world."

Dr. De Silva says she often sees the results of trauma in families where the trauma is repeated. "For instance, incest is often a traumatic experience which is repeated generation after generation," she says. "It becomes a horrid experience that is somehow accepted by the family because the family becomes desensitized and feels hopeless and powerless about the recurrence, and thus inadvertently enables the trauma to continue."

Treatment for generational trauma

There are no easy answers, but generational trauma can be resolved if a holistic, intense intervention is put in place. This often involves individual therapy, though group/family therapy is another option.

"Knowing you aren't alone or helpless and knowing that there may have been factors outside of your control might help process the trauma," Dr. English says. "When we process things and understand them, we can then often find coping mechanisms. When we find coping mechanisms, we can heal, redefine ourselves and reclaim a part of our life."

If the trauma or abuse is ongoing, it's crucial to stop the cycle, which may require a huge amount of encouragement and support. "Support groups, financial support, housing support, health care, education, nutritional support, community resources, spiritual connections, and individual therapy will all need to be addressed for successful cessation of generational trauma," Dr. De Silva says.