Generational Trauma in African Americans

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What is Trauma?

Trauma is a boundary violation which disturbs one’s sense of safety. It produces a distressing, overwhelming, psychophysiological response.

What is generational trauma?

Generational trauma is the transmission of traumatic experiences and reactions through active and passive processes. As it is passed down, it becomes engrained in the psyche and in familial patterns.

Why and How Generational Trauma?

Chattel slavery and systemic oppression
Persistent economic, political, and social disenfranchisement
Stigma and insular communities
Vamik Volkan on Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma

- "When a whole society has undergone massive trauma, victimized adults may endure guilt and shame for not having protected their children. The by-product of such trauma is a perennial, collective mourning over the loss of group dignity, self-esteem, and identity. The mourning is characterized by conscious and unconscious communications passed down to generations in an attempt to mourn the group's losses and remove the collective sense of victimization."

Component Parts

- Emotional Devaluation
- Persistent Lack of Safety
- Opportunity Deficit
- Systemic Oppression and Disenfranchisement

(Adapted from DeGruy Leary, 2005)

Systemic Oppression

- Racism and Race-related Stress
- Poverty and Joblessness
- Deficits in Educational Attainment

Persistent Lack of Safety

- Cultural Paranoia
- The World is Unsafe
- Financial and Social Resources
### Opportunity Deficits

- Work twice as hard to get half as far
- Awareness and impact of tokenism
- In-group competition

### Emotional Devaluation

- Emphasis on physical over emotional/relational needs
- Secret keeping
- Few opportunities for public emotional expression

### Impacts

- Less likely to name “trauma” as trauma
- Difficulty with self-assessment - emotional ignorance or excess
- Resilience and grit
- Powerful, persistent value systems

### Clinical Strategies

- Attend to the body
- Protection of family and its norms
- Explore and reflect on patterns
- Name without blaming
- Capitalize on strengths
Attend to the Body

- Assess for presenting somatization
- Use body to explore emotion
- Attend to intuition and gut responses
- Explore familial patterns of chronic illness

Protection of the Family

- Treat secrets as sacred
- Be patient
- Be careful with pathologizing language

Explore and Reflect on Patterns

- Genograms
- Detailed family history including extended family
- Explore common characteristics and experiences

Name without Blaming

- Families have good intentions
- Families do their best
- Families do what they know to do
Capitalize on Strengths

- Lean on value or faith systems
- Articulate strengths and resilience
- Emphasize adaptation and thriving

Managing Stigma

- Explore helpfulness of cultural norms
- Explore consequences of not seeking help
- Affirm help-seeking behaviors
- Share stories

References


