Generational Effects of Trauma

“When I was a kid I used to think about which of my parents I’d let the Nazis take to the ovens if I could only save one of them…I did have nightmares about S. S. men coming into my class and dragging all us Jewish kids away…sometimes I’d fantasize Zyklon B coming out of our shower instead of water…I guess it’s some kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did. *Sigh*. I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams” (Spiegelman, 1980/2003). This excerpt from *Maus* by Art Spiegelman shows some of the generational effects of trauma. Art’s father, Vladek, was a Holocaust and Auschwitz survivor, and *Maus* was written about his experiences. Even though Art was born after the war, we can see in this excerpt that he still experienced trauma from it that affected how he grew up and related to his parents, such as feeling guilty for not going through the Holocaust. Because Vladek did not properly deal with his trauma from the Holocaust, it affected Vladek’s parenting style and how Art grew up, causing generational trauma. However, this is not something unique to survivors of the Holocaust and their children. When a parent has unresolved trauma, it can affect their entire family, especially their children.

A parent may be under the impression that they are over their trauma, even if their trauma is still affecting their parenting. David Shemmings, a professor at the University of Kent and a specialist in attachment theories, says that having a young child can “activate” someone’s trauma because “the infant’s vulnerability reminds the adult of their own” vulnerability when they experienced their trauma (Carson, 2011). Erin Emmanuel, a mother and therapist, has experienced this firsthand. While she thought her trauma had been “laid to rest,” after having a baby she was reminded of her childhood trauma, and her hypervigilance became more intense. She describes becoming panicked and experiencing flashbacks in reaction to her daughter’s tantrums. While specific things may trigger a parent, such as when their children cry or throw tantrums, Emmanuel says it is usually “the accumulative effect of change, challenge, and bodily deprivation” that lead to a trauma recall. This can make it difficult for a parent to be present for their children (Emmanuel, 2022). A parent’s trauma can have adverse effects on their children. Jim Walker, a social worker and psychotherapist, even says that if a parent “has not been able to come to terms with their traumatic experiences,” then parenting problems, like abuse or neglect, are more likely to occur (Carson, 2011). When a parent has unresolved trauma, trauma that has not been properly processed, it can affect their parenting style. There are four main parenting styles that can result from trauma: avoidance, overly sheltering their child, overly controlling, and neglecting the emotional needs of their child (Kelloway, 2021).

Avoidance is when a parent avoids feelings, memories, or situations that remind them of their trauma. This could include becoming uninvolved in their child’s life or could lead to substance abuse. Parents with an avoidant parenting style may also limit their children’s involvement in activities that they would prefer to avoid (Kelloway, 2021). This is described by a few veterans in the study “Veterans’ Perceptions of the Impact of PTSD on Their Parenting and Children.” They talk about “being supportive but…not physically there.” One of them even saying, “So I don’t go out; I don’t do anything; So even socializing with my kids, it’s really hard…” (Sherman, et al., 2016). The avoidance parenting style can limit a child’s experiences or take them away from an activity they enjoy (Kelloway, 2021).

The overly sheltering parenting style can be caused by a parent attempting to protect their child from what they themselves experienced. For example, a child who is molested by a friend’s parent when they stayed at that friend’s house may not allow their own children to visit a friend’s house, sheltering their child from that experience. This parenting style has a few negative consequences. It limits a child’s experiences. A child may begin to build a wall between themselves and their parents as they explore things that their parent has tried to shelter them from. Or, as the child grows up and attempts to assess different situations on their own, “they may grow up overly anxious and avoidant themselves” (Kelloway, 2021).

When someone has a complete loss of control in a traumatic situation, they may have an overly controlling parenting style. Parents who have this type of parenting style are overcompensating for that loss of control by attempting to control everything. Children raised by an overly controlling parent can become rebellious. These children may also struggle with independence; since their parents control everything, they have no practice at independence. Children of overly controlling parents are also at a higher risk for eating disorders and substance abuse (Kelloway, 2021).

The fourth parenting style, neglecting the emotional needs of their child, is when a parent emotionally separates themselves from their children, neglecting the emotional needs of their children (Kelloway, 2021). This can be caused by parental dissociation, which is a common reaction to trauma (Carson, 2011). The veterans in “Veterans’ Perceptions of the Impact of PTSD on Their Parenting and Children” also talked about this. One said, “I felt like I was watching my own life happen around me and I was just stuck…I wasn’t actually participating in my own life….” Another described looking at her son but not feeling anything; “I look at him like he’s ‘a’ child. I don’t look at him like he’s ‘my’ child….” The veterans described feeling like they “weren’t really there” (Sherman, et al., 2016)**.** Parents who have the parenting style of neglecting the emotional needs of their children tend to avoid any vulnerable emotions, such as sadness, guilt, or love. Children raised by parents who neglected their emotional needs can struggle with vulnerability or regulating their emotions. They “tend to be needy, attention-seekers, or emotionally withdrawn” (Kelloway 2021).

There are also signs that a parent’s trauma can lead to the parentification of their children. Parentification is when a child has to support their parent, instead of the other way around. This can be anything from physically taking care of a parent or sibling, paying bills, or having to emotionally support a parent. Parentification can be a type of neglect or even abuse that leaves the child with their own trauma. Parentification can be caused by a parent having a substance abuse disorder, experiencing childhood abuse or neglect, or suffering from mental illness (Monroe, 2019). As was mentioned when talking about the avoidance parenting style, parents suffering from unresolved trauma are at a higher risk for substance abuse, so substance abuse disorder is both a symptom of unresolved trauma and a possible cause of parentification (Kelloway, 2021). Childhood abuse or neglect, another possible cause of parentification, can lead to a parent having unresolved trauma. Mental illness, which includes PTSD, can also be a possible cause of parentification. Due to the overlap in these symptoms and causes, if a parent has unresolved trauma, then that household is at a higher risk for parentification. In the study “Veterans’ Perceptions of the Impact of PTSD on Their Parenting and Children,” some of the veterans shared that their children would help take care of them and provide emotional support to help with their PTSD. These kids would help ground their parents, remind them of appointments, or even tell their parents which events they may or may not be able to handle (Sherman, et al., 2016). While these kids are trying to help their parents, this role reversal can lead to mental health and eating disorders, and these children may struggle with boundaries as they get older (Monroe, 2019).

Children whose parents suffer from unresolved trauma are more likely to experience increased anxiety, depression, stress, and substance abuse. These children may act out or have trouble with relationships (How a parent’s PTSD, 2020). And these effects do not stop at one generation. The study “Psychosocial Functioning of the Second and Third Generation of Holocaust Survivors” looked at the effects of trauma not just on a parent’s children, but also their grandchildren. It found that mothers whose parents had survived the Holocaust had “higher levels of psychological distress, and their parenting representations were less positive than mothers with no Holocaust background.” This study also found that children whose mother and father were both children of Holocaust survivors “perceived their parents as less accepting and autonomy granting.” This third generation “portrayed themselves with the lowest self-perception compared to others.” This study also asked the third generation’s peers to report about their coping efficiency, and the peers reported that the children who had a mother and father that were children of a Holocaust survivor had “inferior emotional, instrumental, and social functioning” (Scharf. 2007). This study showed that unresolved trauma does not only affect one person but can affect three generations.

In conclusion, a parent’s unresolved trauma can affect their parenting style and can detrimentally affect their children, and even their grandchildren. If a parent is dealing with unresolved trauma, they should be in therapy to help them cope, but family therapy would also be beneficial. As can be seen in the interviews with the veterans and even Artie in *Maus*, children are suffering from their parent’s trauma, whether or not their parents realize.

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