

Exploring Generational Trauma

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Generational trauma is a relatively new field of study that has gained immense popularity with various researchers and the rest of society. There are several contributing factors to generational trauma being explored and examined so researchers can reduce the effects on both parents and offspring, help families create a healthier living environment, and overall better people's mental health. This review aims to explore different articles and research to understand how relevant generational trauma is and the various effects it presents on both parents and offspring.

Abstract

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2021) describes Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) as trauma or a significant stressor that occurs during childhood, and trauma in itself significantly impacts families and individual functioning. Research is continuing to expand on various contributing factors of generational trauma to gain a better understanding of why generational trauma is so prevalent and impacting many families. There is speculation regarding generational trauma and its credibility due to limitations in research, but by examining more studies, researchers can evaluate and better their studies to gain a deeper and more credible understanding of generational trauma.

Introduction

With the increase in mental health awareness and a decrease in the stigma surrounding various mental health disorders, more people are attempting to reach out for help and confront unresolved trauma. Trauma is an event that causes emotional distress or impairment and can have long-term effects on people's lives (Reese et al., 2022). Generational trauma is behaviors or ideas acquired from previous generations that occur through trauma or stressful events (Colls, 2023). These patterns can potentially interfere with or disrupt functioning within an individual or family. Studies have shown significant correlations between parents with trauma or childhood trauma and the effects it poses on their offspring, as well as how to mitigate and reduce generational trauma. There are even studies using mice working to find how traumatic events can alter the mice's genes and affect how their offspring handle stress (Carey, 2018). Regardless of the debate over proof or skepticism of generational trauma, there are many aspects to it and valuable information to explore, such as how to combat it and improve functioning not just in offspring but in parents.

Effects on Offspring

Parents who have experienced trauma, ACEs, etc., can alter the relationship and even the behavior of their child unknowingly. When this trauma is not uncovered and worked through, it creates a cycle of repeated trauma, hence generational trauma. A typical pattern in most studies relates to a child's behavioral problems, dysfunction between the mother and child, and the child's internalizing symptoms (Fenerci & DePrince, 2018). Studies show that parents could have an abnormally regulated hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA) due to extreme exposure to ACEs (Zhu et al., 2022). The HPA mediates stress, and exposure to maternal stress early in life can disrupt the HPA axis and have lasting effects (Sheng et al., 2021). This change in the HPA can cause an alteration of the child's brain development, and this alteration can contribute to behavioral problems (O'Donnell et al., 2013).

Contact Information

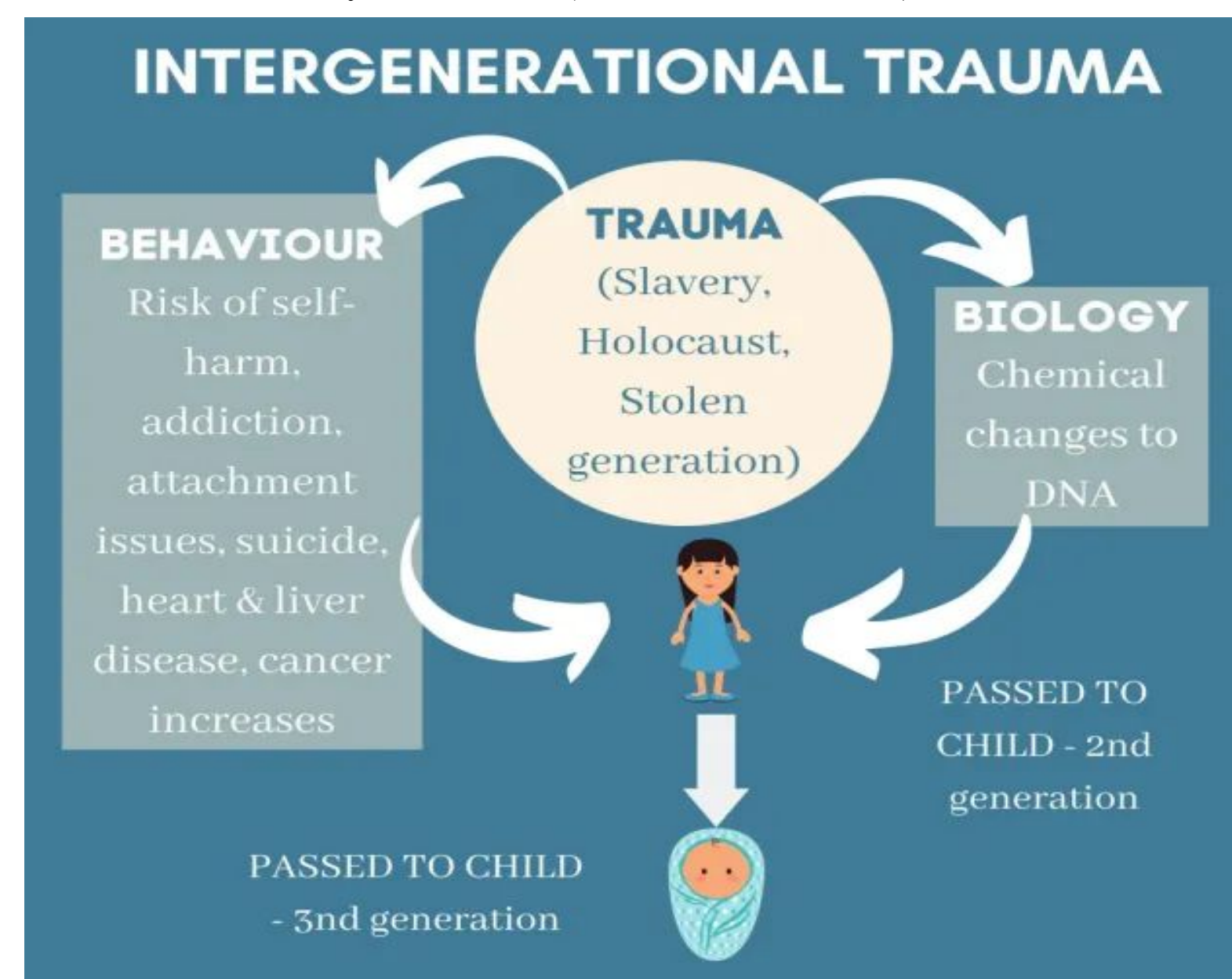
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The Role of Epigenetics

While the research on epigenetics and its role in generational trauma is relatively new and still developing, several studies are finding that certain environmental factors (such as life stressors), trauma, and the offspring's experience with a parent with ACEs might influence the offspring's epigenetics and gene function. Yehuda and Lehrner (2018) describe epigenetics as variations in the genome due to environmental factors that have the potential to be inherited. Genomic DNA can be affected due to these variations. They further explain that modifications to epigenetics can impact gene function and affect response systems associated with stress in offspring. If stress can change epigenetics and impact function, then a highly stressful traumatic event has to be just as influential on the changes in epigenetics in both parents and offspring.

Long-term Effects

Amos et al. explain a therapy technique called "Adult Exploration of Attachment Interview (AEAI)," which helps adults work through their trauma and past negative experiences so they can recognize, move on, and develop a more nurturing relationship with their offspring (2022, p. 1). Not only can this lead to significant changes in offspring and parental behavior, but hopefully lessen the long-term effects on the family as a whole. There are some cases where children get placed in a secondary home because of the effects of generational trauma. However, this gives parents the opportunity to use AEAJ therapy to work on themselves and create a safe and stable environment for the offspring (Malvaso & Delfabbro, 2020). The main idea of AEAJ therapy is to create an approach that benefits the parents and offspring to create a successful reunification and a more sustainable and positive environment for all family members (Amos et al., 2022).



Examining Research

A study examining Holocaust survivors blew up generational trauma and gave popularity to this topic of research. Yasmin (2017) explains researchers' concerns about the study due to minute or relevant observable changes in DNA. Not only did the Holocaust study experience limitations because of its small sample size, but factors that are considered essential and contributing to generational trauma, such as individuals with substance abuse problems or serious illness, were excluded from participating in the study. In many studies about generational trauma, there seems to be an emphasis on the effects between a mother and their offspring. In one study, they found that ACEs for fathers appeared to contribute more to an unhealthy family environment than mothers. However, not enough studies examine ACEs' effect on fathers and their family environment, which is crucial to understanding contributing factors of generational trauma (Reese et al., 2022).

The Credibility of Epigenetics and DNA

While there are some studies explaining the relevance or credibility of epigenetics and DNA in generational trauma, there is not enough. Especially when the article that created popularity around generational traumas' main claim was the significant role epigenetics and DNA have in generational trauma. However, Yehuda et al. (2016) explains how detecting epigenetic marks or DNA modifications early could help further develop strategies to prevent and address intergenerational trauma as a result of being exposed to trauma. The correct measures for methods and materials to support the validity of this research must be improved to spread accurate information.

Reducing Generational Trauma

Few articles evaluate different approaches to minimizing generational trauma and its impact on parents and offspring, but as more research is being conducted, more helpful techniques will be available. Reese et al. (2022) explained that several studies have shown how PCEs (positive childhood experiences) is more influential on family environments than ACEs. Studies have also found that an unhealthy marriage can also become a contributing factor in trauma for both the child and parents who might be dealing with trauma. However, a healthy marriage can reduce stressors and create a better environment for the whole family and can continue to be worked on through different therapeutic approaches, including AEAJ. Although it seems impossible to reduce the effect ACEs have on parents and offspring, there are ways, through therapy, to work through troubling situations these parents have experienced to better themselves and their families.

Conclusion

This topic of study is crucial for researchers to continue exploring and gathering evidence surrounding generational trauma to understand better and expand what we already know about it to attain better resources and tools to mitigate generational trauma. It is crucial for families who have experienced ACEs or trauma to seek help to better not only their mental health but also their children's.