

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA ON FAMILY DYNAMICS AND COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract - The intergenerational transmission of trauma is a well-established phenomenon with lasting effects on family relationships and psychological well-being. This paper examines how intergenerational trauma influences family dynamics and the coping strategies adopted by family members, using a narrative review of relevant literature. The review draws on studies of families affected by various forms of trauma, including historical trauma, war, displacement, and abuse. Findings indicate that traumatic experiences are often passed from one generation to another through parenting practices, communication patterns, and shared family experiences, resulting in ongoing emotional distress. Common outcomes include strained relationships, impaired communication, attachment difficulties, and confusion around family roles and identity. The review also identifies maladaptive coping strategies such as emotional withdrawal, substance use, and dissociation, which may further reinforce cycles of trauma within families. At the same time, evidence suggests that families who engage in supportive communication, therapeutic intervention, and community-based support are better able to foster resilience and recovery. The paper highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and family-focused interventions, noting that pathways to healing differ depending on social, cultural, and historical contexts. By synthesising existing research, this study contributes to a clearer understanding of how intergenerational trauma shapes family functioning and underscores the need for targeted interventions that promote healing and long-term well-being.

Keywords: Intergenerational trauma, family dynamics, coping strategies, resilience

Introduction

Intergenerational trauma, also referred to as transgenerational or multigenerational trauma, describes the process through which the psychological and emotional effects of traumatic experiences are transmitted from one generation to another within families. Rather than remaining confined to individuals directly exposed to trauma, its effects often extend to children and grandchildren, shaping family relationships, emotional functioning, and mental health outcomes. Early research on intergenerational trauma emerged from studies of large scale historical events such as the Holocaust, slavery, war, and forced displacement, but the concept has since expanded to include trauma related to abuse, neglect, and chronic adversity within family systems (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018; Danieli, 1998). Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises the family as a central context in which trauma is communicated, interpreted, and managed across generations.

The transmission of trauma occurs through interconnected psychological, social, and biological pathways. Parenting practices, emotional availability, communication patterns, and family beliefs all influence how traumatic experiences are conveyed to subsequent generations. Children of trauma survivors frequently exhibit heightened vulnerability to anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, and identity related challenges, even when they have not directly experienced the original trauma (Lehrner &

Yehuda, 2018). These outcomes are often intensified by maladaptive family dynamics, including rigid roles, impaired communication, emotional withdrawal, and unresolved conflict, which can limit families' ability to process trauma constructively and contribute to recurring cycles of distress (Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008; Kellermann, 2001). At the same time, families adopt a range of coping strategies in response to trauma, some of which promote adjustment and resilience, while others, such as substance use, dissociation, or aggression, may further entrench relational difficulties and psychological harm (Anda et al., 2006; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008).

Understanding how intergenerational trauma shapes family dynamics and coping responses is critical for identifying pathways to healing and recovery. Empirical and theoretical research indicates that trauma affects not only individual psychological functioning but also family communication patterns, parenting practices, and relational stability, thereby influencing the wellbeing of subsequent generations (Danieli, 1998; Kellermann, 2001). While some families draw strength from open communication, community support, and professional intervention, others remain constrained by unaddressed trauma that continues to influence relationships and emotional wellbeing across generations. Studies on family resilience suggest that supportive relational processes, shared meaning making, and effective coping resources can buffer the long term impact of trauma and promote recovery within family systems (Walsh, 2016; Masten, 2018). This paper examines the impact of intergenerational trauma on family dynamics and the coping strategies employed by family members through a narrative review of literature published between 2018 and 2024. By synthesising recent empirical and theoretical studies, the review highlights common patterns in trauma transmission, family interaction, and coping, while also emphasising the role of cultural, historical, and social contexts in shaping these processes (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018). By focusing on family level experiences and responses, this study contributes to the growing literature advocating family centred and culturally responsive approaches to trauma intervention. Research increasingly recognises that resilience is not only an individual characteristic but also a relational and systemic process influenced by family support networks and cultural resources (Walsh, 2016; Ungar, 2018). Recognising the family as a key site of both vulnerability and recovery, this paper underscores the importance of tailored interventions that support healthy communication, adaptive coping, and resilience. In doing so, it offers insights relevant to family therapy, community based support initiatives, and policy efforts aimed at breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma and promoting long term psychological wellbeing (Masten, 2018; Ungar, 2018).

Literature Review

Understanding Intergenerational Trauma

The transmission of trauma across generations has been widely documented in scholarly literature. Intergenerational trauma, sometimes referred to as transgenerational trauma, describes the process through which the emotional, psychological, and behavioral effects of traumatic experiences are passed from survivors to their descendants. Brave Heart (1998) explains that intergenerational trauma occurs when unresolved collective suffering continues to shape the identity, emotional wellbeing, and social functioning of later generations. Similarly, Danieli (1998) defines intergenerational trauma as the indirect transmission of trauma related pain and coping patterns through family relationships, parenting practices, and silence surrounding traumatic experiences. Yehuda and Lehrner (2018) further describe intergenerational trauma as the transfer of trauma related stress

responses across generations through both social influences and biological mechanisms, including proposed epigenetic pathways. These definitions emphasize that intergenerational trauma is not limited to individual suffering but is sustained through family systems, cultural memory, and community experiences. Intergenerational trauma can therefore be understood as the continuous inheritance of emotional wounds, maladaptive coping strategies, and disrupted relational patterns that originate from traumatic experiences and remain active within families and communities when healing and resolution have not occurred. This understanding highlights that intergenerational trauma is produced through interconnected psychological, social, cultural, and biological processes and is relevant to populations affected by war, displacement, slavery, colonization, abuse, and systemic oppression.

Research identifies parent child interactions as a central mechanism of transmission, as trauma exposed caregivers may display emotional unavailability, heightened anxiety, or hostile parenting styles that shape children's emotional regulation and behavioural development (Leen Feldner et al., 2013; Jensen, Holt, & Ormhaug, 2020). Cultural and social processes also play a significant role, particularly through the intergenerational transmission of collective memories, narratives, and rituals that embed traumatic experiences within family and community identity (Duran & Duran, 1995; Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014). In addition, biological explanations have gained prominence, with research suggesting that trauma related stress can influence biological stress regulation systems and may contribute to intergenerational vulnerability through complex gene environment interactions (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018; Bowers & Yehuda, 2016).

While the mechanisms of transmission are complex, existing literature consistently shows that intergenerational trauma is associated with heightened risks of psychological distress among subsequent generations, including anxiety, depression, and identity related challenges (Kellermann, 2001; Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008). Research further indicates that later generation descendants may develop coping responses distinct from those of first generation survivors, reflecting adaptation to trauma that is indirectly experienced rather than personally endured (Rosen, Perez, & Suarez, 2020). Collectively, these perspectives highlight intergenerational trauma as a multifaceted process shaped by relational, cultural, and biological factors, providing a critical foundation for understanding its effects on family dynamics and coping patterns.

Effects of Trauma on Family Dynamics

Families affected by intergenerational trauma often experience persistent relational and emotional difficulties that shape everyday interactions. Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of traumatic experiences and their psychological consequences from one generation to another. Danieli (1998) explains that intergenerational trauma occurs when the unresolved pain, fear, and emotional wounds of trauma survivors are unconsciously passed down to their children through family relationships, parenting patterns, and emotional communication. Similarly, Yehuda and Lehrner (2018) define intergenerational trauma as a process through which trauma related stress responses, coping mechanisms, and emotional vulnerabilities are transferred across generations through both biological and social pathways. These perspectives emphasize that intergenerational trauma is not only an individual experience but also a family and cultural phenomenon that influences behaviour, emotional functioning, and relational stability over time.

Research consistently indicates that trauma alters family dynamics by disrupting communication, attachment, and emotional regulation, with effects that frequently extend across generations. Studies of children of trauma survivors show increased risk of insecure attachment, emotional dysregulation, and relational instability when caregivers struggle with unresolved trauma (Deikel & Goldblatt, 2008; Leen Feldner et al., 2013). Trauma related parenting difficulties, including emotional numbing, overprotection, or hostility, may contribute to rigid relational patterns and reduced emotional openness within families (Jensen, Holt, & Ormhaug, 2020). These relational patterns often function as adaptations to instability but simultaneously constrain healthy communication and mutual understanding within the family system. Such findings support the argument that trauma is sustained not only through direct exposure but also through inherited relational dynamics, meaning that emotional and behavioural struggles within trauma affected families may reflect transmitted coping adaptations rather than isolated individual weaknesses. Examining intergenerational trauma within family interactions is therefore essential for understanding how trauma shapes long term relational functioning and emotional wellbeing.

Trauma also weakens family cohesion and perceptions of safety, as members may cope through emotional withdrawal, defensiveness, or avoidance. Research demonstrates that parental trauma symptoms, particularly avoidance and emotional numbing, are associated with reduced warmth and responsiveness in parent child relationships (Leen Feldner et al., 2013; Samuelson et al., 2017). Over time, impaired communication and unresolved emotional distress can leave family members feeling isolated or misunderstood, reinforcing cycles of conflict and emotional disconnection. Unresolved trauma in caregivers can therefore influence parenting styles, reducing emotional availability and increasing vulnerability among subsequent generations (Jensen et al., 2020).

In addition to relational disruptions, intergenerational trauma is closely linked with the development of maladaptive coping strategies within family systems. Coping strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals use to manage internal and external demands that are perceived as stressful or overwhelming (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) further describe coping as patterned responses individuals employ to regulate emotional distress and solve problems arising from stressful situations. These definitions clarify that coping is not inherently negative; its impact depends on whether the strategies adopted are adaptive or maladaptive. Maladaptive coping strategies are responses that may temporarily reduce emotional distress but ultimately reinforce dysfunction or create additional problems. For example, emotional avoidance, substance use, withdrawal, or denial may serve as short term mechanisms to suppress unresolved pain, yet they often intensify relational strain and psychological vulnerability over time (Anda et al., 2006; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008). Within families affected by intergenerational trauma, such coping behaviours may become normalised and transmitted across generations, shaping how stress and conflict are managed. Understanding coping strategies is therefore essential because trauma is sustained not only through direct experiences but also through learned patterns of emotional regulation and behavioural response. Examining coping processes within family interactions highlights that long term relational difficulties may reflect inherited coping adaptations rather than isolated personal failings, underscoring the importance of trauma informed and family focused approaches to healing.

Coping Strategies within Families Impacted by Intergenerational Trauma

Coping strategies refer to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts individuals and families use to manage stressors that are perceived as overwhelming or taxing their resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman conceptualize coping as dynamic processes that involve both problem focused strategies aimed at addressing the source of stress and emotion focused strategies aimed at regulating emotional responses. Similarly, Compas et al. (2001) define coping as conscious and volitional efforts to regulate emotion, cognition, behavior, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful events. Within family systems, Walsh (2016) expands this concept by describing coping as relational processes that families use collectively to adapt to adversity, emphasizing shared meaning making, communication patterns, and supportive belief systems.

Families affected by intergenerational trauma employ a range of coping strategies that can either support recovery or reinforce cycles of distress. Research on family resilience demonstrates that open communication, emotional support, and collaborative problem solving are protective processes that promote healing and adaptive functioning within trauma exposed families (Walsh, 2016; Masten, 2018). Open communication enables family members to share experiences, express emotions, and develop mutual understanding, thereby strengthening trust and emotional connection. Evidence based therapeutic interventions that involve caregivers and children have been shown to reduce trauma symptoms and improve relational functioning, particularly when families engage in structured emotional processing (Cohen, Mannarino, & Murray, 2011). Additionally, community and social support systems have been consistently associated with improved psychological outcomes and increased resilience among trauma exposed populations (Ungar, 2018). In contrast, maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance, emotional suppression, substance misuse, or silence surrounding traumatic experiences may perpetuate psychological distress and relational dysfunction across generations (Anda et al., 2006; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008).

Some families rely on coping strategies that provide short term emotional relief but ultimately intensify psychological and relational difficulties. Substance use, emotional withdrawal, and dissociation are frequently observed responses to overwhelming stress and trauma exposure (Leen Feldner et al., 2013; Samuelson et al., 2017). While these responses may function as protective mechanisms by dampening distress, they often inhibit emotional processing, disrupt family relationships, and reinforce patterns of avoidance within family systems. Empirical studies further show that caregiver emotion dysregulation is associated with harsher parenting and child adjustment problems, reinforcing pathways through which maladaptive coping becomes intergenerationally transmitted (Jensen, Holt, & Ormhaug, 2020). By contrast, interventions that strengthen emotional regulation skills, promote supportive communication, and encourage help seeking behaviors have been shown to improve family functioning and reduce trauma related symptoms (Cohen et al., 2011; Walsh, 2016). Supporting families in adopting adaptive coping mechanisms can therefore enhance resilience, strengthen relational functioning, and reduce the likelihood of trauma transmission to future generations.

Empirical Studies on Maladaptive Coping Strategies

Empirical research consistently identifies substance use as a maladaptive coping strategy in families affected by trauma. Trauma exposure has been strongly associated with increased risk of alcohol and drug misuse, particularly when substances are used to

regulate overwhelming emotional distress and trauma related symptoms (Hien et al., 2010; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008). In intergenerational contexts, parental substance misuse has been shown to disrupt caregiving practices, reduce emotional availability, and increase the likelihood of insecure attachment and psychosocial difficulties in children (Kelley, Lawrence, Milletich, Hollis, & Henson, 2015). These caregiving disruptions may create family environments in which children become more vulnerable to anxiety, behavioural problems, and later substance use, thereby reinforcing cycles of maladaptive coping across generations (Anda et al., 2006). Such findings support the argument that substance use may function as a short term emotional regulator for trauma survivors while simultaneously undermining family stability and increasing intergenerational vulnerability.

In addition to substance misuse, emotional withdrawal, avoidance, and dissociation have been empirically linked to trauma related coping within family systems. Research examining parents with post traumatic stress disorder indicates that trauma related avoidance and emotional numbing can significantly impair parent child interactions, often reducing warmth, responsiveness, and consistent emotional engagement (Leen Feldner et al., 2013; Samuelson et al., 2017). Yehuda and Lehrner (2018) further explain that trauma related stress responses can shape parenting behaviours and emotional regulation patterns, contributing to difficulties in children's emotional development even when children have not directly experienced the original traumatic event. Longitudinal evidence also suggests that parental emotion dysregulation mediates the relationship between caregiver trauma exposure and harsh or inconsistent parenting practices, which in turn predicts maladaptive coping patterns and adjustment problems among children (Jensen, Holt, & Ormhaug, 2020). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that avoidance based coping strategies may initially protect trauma survivors from distress but ultimately compromise relational functioning and contribute to the transmission of trauma related vulnerabilities within family systems.

Empirical Studies on Resilience and Adaptive Coping

Empirical research increasingly demonstrates that family based therapeutic interventions and supportive communication play a critical role in fostering resilience in families affected by intergenerational trauma. Trauma focused family therapies have been shown to improve emotional regulation, strengthen attachment security, and enhance constructive communication patterns within trauma exposed families (Cohen, Mannarino, & Murray, 2011). Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, when implemented with caregiver involvement, has been associated with significant reductions in child PTSD symptoms and improvements in parenting practices, suggesting that healing is most effective when caregivers actively participate in the recovery process (Cohen et al., 2011). Similarly, Walsh (2016) emphasizes that resilient families are characterized by shared meaning making, emotional openness, and collaborative problem solving, all of which buffer the negative effects of trauma exposure. Empirical research further shows that caregiver emotion regulation and supportive parent child communication reduce internalizing symptoms and promote adaptive emotional functioning in children exposed to trauma (Jensen, Holt, & Ormhaug, 2020). These findings support the argument that resilience is not merely an individual trait but a relational process cultivated through intentional therapeutic engagement and emotionally supportive family interactions.

Beyond therapy and communication, community involvement and culturally grounded practices have been empirically linked to adaptive coping and resilience in

trauma affected populations. Research among Indigenous communities demonstrates that participation in cultural traditions, collective storytelling, and community rituals strengthens cultural identity and psychological wellbeing, thereby mitigating the impact of historical trauma (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014; Pihama et al., 2019). Studies grounded in resilience theory further show that culturally embedded support systems and community connectedness function as protective factors in contexts of adversity (Ungar, 2018). In addition, social and religious coping has been associated with improved family functioning and reduced psychological distress among trauma exposed families (Hoffman, Marsiglia, & Ayers, 2019). Collectively, these findings highlight that adaptive coping extends beyond the immediate family unit and is deeply embedded in cultural continuity, communal solidarity, and access to supportive systems. Resilience in the context of intergenerational trauma therefore emerges from interconnected therapeutic, relational, community, and cultural resources that enable families to reconstruct meaning, restore emotional bonds, and interrupt cycles of trauma transmission.

Cultural and Historical Context in Trauma Transmission

Empirical studies strongly demonstrate that trauma transmission is shaped by historical and collective experiences of oppression, particularly in communities exposed to colonisation, slavery, forced displacement, and systemic discrimination. Research on Indigenous populations shows that historical trauma is not confined to past events but is sustained through ongoing structural inequalities such as poverty, racism, and social exclusion, which continue to affect family wellbeing across generations (Brave Heart, 1998; Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014). For example, Bombay et al. (2014), drawing on survey data from Indigenous communities, found that perceived historical losses and experiences of contemporary discrimination significantly predicted depressive symptoms and psychological distress. These findings support the argument that trauma transmission is reinforced through the interaction of historical memory and present day marginalisation. Similarly, research examining the long term impacts of residential school attendance in Canada demonstrates that children of survivors show elevated risks for mental health difficulties, partly due to disrupted parenting practices, emotional disconnection, and loss of cultural continuity (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2011). Together, these studies highlight how collective trauma becomes embedded within family systems, influencing parenting behaviours, emotional expression, and identity formation across generations.

Further empirical evidence suggests that cultural disruption and identity fragmentation are key mechanisms through which historical trauma is transmitted within oppressed populations. Research examining Indigenous family communication patterns indicates that trauma related silence, avoidance, or negatively framed narratives about collective suffering can influence children's psychological adjustment and contribute to distress across generations (Bombay, 2020). Findings indicate that culturally disconnected offspring report higher levels of depressive symptoms and weaker identity cohesion. Parallel evidence from studies of descendants of Holocaust survivors demonstrates that trauma may be transmitted through parenting behaviours, family narratives, and heightened stress reactivity, shaping vulnerability to anxiety and emotional dysregulation in later generations (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Collectively, this body of research underscores that intergenerational trauma is not solely a psychological phenomenon but a socio historical process maintained through systemic injustice, cultural disruption, and relational dynamics within families. Understanding trauma transmission therefore requires

careful attention to the broader historical and structural contexts that shape family coping responses, relational functioning, and long term wellbeing.

Research Gaps and Justification for the Current Study

Despite the growing body of literature on intergenerational trauma, several significant gaps remain. Much of the empirical research has concentrated on populations such as Holocaust survivors and Indigenous communities in Western contexts, while comparatively limited attention has been given to African and other Global South populations where historical trauma linked to colonisation, slavery, political violence, and socioeconomic instability continues to shape family systems. Foundational reviews of intergenerational trauma mechanisms have largely emerged from studies of Holocaust descendants and Western clinical samples (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018), which limits the cultural generalisability of current theoretical models. This geographical concentration underscores the need for context specific analyses that account for diverse historical and sociocultural realities. In addition, many studies emphasise biological and psychological pathways, including stress response systems and proposed epigenetic mechanisms, while comparatively fewer investigations integrate family relational dynamics and coping strategies within a unified framework (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018). As a result, the everyday relational processes through which trauma is maintained or disrupted within family interactions remain insufficiently examined.

Another important gap concerns the limited comparative synthesis of maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies within trauma affected family systems. Although empirical studies document the presence of substance use, emotional withdrawal, attachment insecurity, and harsh parenting among trauma exposed caregivers (Jensen et al., 2020), fewer studies systematically analyse how these patterns contrast with resilience promoting processes such as open communication, cultural continuity, and structured family based therapeutic engagement. Moreover, much of the existing research is cross sectional, restricting understanding of how coping strategies evolve over time and across generations. Walsh (2016) conceptualises resilience as a dynamic relational process shaped by contextual and developmental factors, yet longitudinal and culturally diverse examinations of these processes remain limited. Therefore, synthesising recent empirical literature from 2018 to 2024 is warranted to provide a more integrated understanding of how intergenerational trauma shapes family dynamics and coping responses. By combining psychological, relational, and cultural perspectives, this review contributes to the development of family centred and culturally responsive frameworks aimed at interrupting trauma transmission and promoting long term wellbeing.

Methods

This study employed a narrative literature review to examine how intergenerational trauma shapes family dynamics and coping strategies across generations. A narrative approach was selected because it allows the integration of findings from diverse trauma contexts (including historical trauma, war, displacement, and adverse childhood experiences) and supports thematic interpretation of both empirical and theoretical evidence. Relevant peer-reviewed studies published were identified through electronic searches of PsycINFO, PubMed, and JSTOR, using combinations of keywords such as *intergenerational/transgenerational trauma, family dynamics, parenting, communication, attachment, trauma transmission, coping strategies, family resilience, and community support*. In addition, reference lists of key papers were manually checked to locate further relevant sources that matched the review focus. Studies were included if they examined

trauma effects across two or more generations and addressed at least one family-level domain such as parenting practices, emotional regulation, attachment, communication patterns, or coping responses within families. Both empirical and theoretical works were considered to strengthen conceptual coverage and ensure the review captured mechanisms of transmission as well as pathways to resilience. Studies were excluded if they focused only on individual trauma outcomes without an intergenerational or family systems perspective. Extracted information included the trauma context, population focus, mechanisms of transmission, impacts on family functioning, and identified coping strategies. The literature was then synthesised using thematic analysis, with findings organised into recurring themes including trauma transmission pathways, disruptions in family relationships and roles, maladaptive coping (e.g., avoidance, withdrawal, dissociation, substance use), adaptive coping and resilience (e.g., therapy, supportive communication, community resources), and the role of cultural and historical context in shaping both risk and recovery.

Discussion of Findings

Transmission of Trauma

Findings from the reviewed empirical literature indicate that intergenerational trauma is transmitted primarily through parenting practices, emotional regulation patterns, and family communication processes. Research shows that trauma exposed caregivers often experience emotion dysregulation, heightened stress reactivity, and difficulties in providing consistent warmth and responsiveness, which in turn shape children's emotional development and vulnerability to psychological distress (Jensen et al., 2020). Studies of parents with post-traumatic stress disorder further demonstrate that trauma related avoidance and emotional numbing can significantly impair parent child interactions, reducing emotional availability and increasing the likelihood of insecure attachment patterns (Leen Feldner et al., 2013; Samuelson et al., 2017). These relational disruptions create family environments in which children may internalise maladaptive coping strategies such as emotional suppression or withdrawal. Over time, such coping patterns can become normalised within the family system, increasing the likelihood that trauma related responses are reproduced across generations.

Beyond relational mechanisms, empirical evidence also highlights biological and stress response pathways involved in trauma transmission. Reviews of intergenerational trauma research suggest that trauma related alterations in stress physiology may be transmitted through interacting social and biological processes, including proposed epigenetic mechanisms (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Consistent with this perspective, research indicates that children and grandchildren of trauma survivors may display heightened stress sensitivity, anxiety symptoms, and emotional dysregulation even when they have not directly experienced the original traumatic event (Rosen et al., 2020). Together, these findings support a multidimensional understanding of intergenerational trauma as sustained through interconnected mechanisms including parenting behaviours, family emotional climates, communication patterns, and stress response vulnerabilities.

Maladaptive Family Dynamics

The empirical literature consistently indicates that intergenerational trauma is associated with strained family relationships, impaired communication, heightened conflict, and weakened attachment bonds. Research examining families of trauma survivors shows that trauma exposed caregivers often struggle with emotional regulation and relational responsiveness, which can undermine family cohesion and trust (Dekel &

Goldblatt, 2008; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Studies of children of combat veterans and other trauma affected parents demonstrate increased emotional withdrawal, defensiveness, and relational mistrust within family systems, contributing to cycles of disconnection across generations (Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008). These relational patterns may initially function as protective adaptations to instability but can later constrain open emotional expression and mutual support. Broader attachment based research further confirms that unresolved caregiver trauma affects how parents engage emotionally with children, shaping long term relational stability and vulnerability to distress (Samuelson et al., 2017). Family dynamics appear particularly vulnerable when trauma related distress remains unprocessed and is managed through avoidance based coping strategies. Empirical studies indicate that parental PTSD symptoms, especially avoidance and emotional numbing, are associated with disruptions in parent child interaction and reduced emotional availability (Leen Feldner et al., 2013; Samuelson et al., 2017). These disruptions increase children's risk for internalising difficulties such as anxiety and depression, as well as behavioural problems. Additionally, research examining families exposed to mass trauma suggests that widespread traumatic stress can destabilise family functioning and compromise mental health across generations (Gewirtz et al., 2010). Overall, the reviewed evidence supports the conclusion that intergenerational trauma contributes to family dysfunction through emotional disengagement, restricted communication, insecure attachment processes, and maladaptive relational coping patterns that may persist across generations.

Maladaptive Coping Strategies in Trauma Affected Families

Empirical findings indicate that trauma affected families often rely on coping strategies that provide short term emotional relief but increase long term relational and psychological harm. Substance use is consistently identified as a trauma related coping response used to regulate distress and intrusive symptoms, yet it is associated with disrupted caregiving, reduced emotional responsiveness, and elevated psychosocial risk for children (Hien et al., 2010; Kelley et al., 2015). Longitudinal research further demonstrates that adverse childhood experiences and early victimisation are strongly associated with later substance misuse, risky behaviours, and poor mental health outcomes, suggesting that trauma exposure increases vulnerability to maladaptive coping across the life course (Anda et al., 2006; Widom et al., 2008). These findings support the conclusion that substance use may become embedded within family systems as a learned coping strategy, thereby reinforcing intergenerational patterns of risk and emotional dysregulation.

In addition to substance misuse, avoidance, emotional withdrawal, and dissociation are frequently observed trauma related coping strategies that limit emotional processing and weaken supportive family relationships. Studies examining parents with trauma exposure show that emotional numbing and avoidance are associated with lower parental warmth, inconsistent emotional engagement, and disrupted parent child interactions (Leen Feldner et al., 2013; Samuelson et al., 2017). Empirical evidence also indicates that caregiver trauma exposure combined with emotion dysregulation predicts harsher parenting practices and increased child internalising and behavioural difficulties (Jensen et al., 2020). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that maladaptive coping strategies are not solely individual responses to distress but relational patterns that can be modeled, reinforced, and transmitted within family systems across generations.

Resilience and Adaptive Coping Strategies

Findings indicate that resilience is achievable when families adopt adaptive coping strategies such as supportive communication, therapeutic engagement, and structured emotional processing. Family focused therapeutic interventions have been shown to improve emotional regulation and strengthen relational functioning, particularly when caregivers actively participate in treatment processes (Cohen et al., 2011). Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, for example, demonstrates significant reductions in child trauma symptoms and improvements in parenting practices when caregiver involvement is emphasized. Empirical evidence further suggests that supportive parent child communication promotes healthier emotion regulation and reduces children's vulnerability to distress within trauma exposed households (Jensen et al., 2020). These findings reinforce the view that resilience is not solely an individual trait but a relational process strengthened through intentional efforts to rebuild trust, emotional connection, and adaptive coping capacity within family systems.

Beyond the immediate family unit, research highlights the protective role of community based support, spirituality, and culturally grounded resources in fostering adaptive coping. Studies show that religious and social coping mechanisms are associated with improved family functioning and psychological resilience in trauma affected contexts (Hoffman et al., 2020). Research within Indigenous communities further demonstrates that cultural continuity, storytelling, collective rituals, and community engagement strengthen identity formation and psychological wellbeing, functioning as protective resources against the effects of historical trauma (Pihama et al., 2019; Narvaez et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings suggest that resilience emerges through interconnected supports operating at therapeutic, relational, community, and cultural levels, reinforcing the importance of multilevel approaches to interrupting cycles of intergenerational trauma.

The Role of Cultural and Historical Context

The findings confirm that trauma transmission is deeply shaped by cultural and historical realities, particularly in populations affected by collective oppression. Empirical studies among Indigenous communities demonstrate that historical trauma remains active through ongoing structural inequalities, racism, and socioeconomic marginalisation, which continue to predict psychological distress and depressive symptoms across generations (Bombay et al., 2014; Brave Heart, 1998). Research examining the intergenerational impacts of residential school attendance in Canada further shows that trauma exposure is associated with disrupted parenting practices, emotional disconnection, and identity related struggles among survivors' children (Bombay et al., 2011). These findings illustrate how historical trauma becomes embedded within family systems and suggest that trauma transmission is intensified when collective historical suffering intersects with persistent social disadvantage and discrimination.

In addition, empirical evidence indicates that family communication about collective trauma significantly influences psychological outcomes. Trauma related silence, avoidance, and constrained emotional expression can limit opportunities for meaning making and cultural identity development, while negatively framed or unresolved narratives may heighten distress and reinforce vulnerability (Bombay, 2020). Parallel findings from research on descendants of Holocaust survivors suggest that family narratives, heightened stress reactivity, and trauma linked parenting patterns contribute to anxiety and emotional dysregulation in later generations (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Collectively, this body of evidence demonstrates that intergenerational trauma cannot be

fully understood without accounting for cultural disruption, historical injustice, and ongoing discrimination as active mechanisms sustaining trauma within family systems.

Implications for Intervention and Policy

Addressing intergenerational trauma requires integrated intervention approaches that strengthen both individual psychological wellbeing and family functioning. Empirical evidence from trauma informed practice suggests that family focused therapies create structured opportunities for family members to process traumatic experiences, rebuild trust, and improve communication and emotional support within the household (Cohen et al., 2011; Walsh, 2016). Since trauma is often sustained through disrupted relational patterns, emotional avoidance, and maladaptive coping strategies, interventions that involve both caregivers and children are more likely to interrupt trauma transmission pathways than approaches that focus solely on individual treatment (Jensen et al., 2020). In addition, culturally responsive interventions are particularly important for communities affected by collective and historical trauma, where healing processes are strongly connected to identity, cultural continuity, and shared meaning making. Studies indicate that culturally grounded programs that integrate local values, narratives, and traditional healing practices can improve engagement, enhance resilience, and reduce barriers to mental health support (Pihama et al., 2019; Narvaez et al., 2020).

At the policy level, there is a need to develop trauma informed systems that expand access to mental health services while addressing the structural stressors that intensify family vulnerability. Policies that improve the availability of trauma informed care in primary healthcare facilities, schools, and community settings can enhance early identification and intervention for trauma exposed families. Strengthening social welfare programs, economic support systems, and access to quality healthcare can also reduce chronic stressors that compound trauma exposure and limit families' coping capacity. Schools remain critical sites for prevention because they provide consistent access to children and adolescents and can implement programs that promote emotional regulation, coping skills, and supportive peer relationships (Klasen et al., 2020). Community based support systems, including faith groups and peer support networks, also contribute significantly by reducing isolation and providing collective resources that enhance resilience and recovery (Hoffman et al., 2020). Overall, a coordinated approach that integrates family focused therapy, culturally sensitive intervention, and trauma informed social policy is more likely to foster resilience and disrupt cycles of intergenerational trauma than fragmented or isolated strategies.

Conclusion

Intergenerational trauma shapes family life through long lasting effects on communication, attachment, emotional regulation, and the development of coping strategies. The literature reviewed in this study demonstrates that trauma can be transmitted through parenting practices, disrupted emotional responsiveness, and family communication patterns, with later generations often experiencing psychological distress even without direct exposure to the original traumatic event. Families affected by trauma frequently exhibit relational difficulties such as emotional withdrawal, conflict, and rigid role patterns, which may weaken cohesion and reinforce distress across generations. The findings also show that maladaptive coping strategies such as substance misuse, avoidance, and dissociation can provide temporary relief but often deepen family dysfunction and increase vulnerability over time. At the same time, the review confirms that resilience is achievable when families adopt adaptive coping strategies and gain

access to supportive resources. Therapeutic interventions, open communication, and community based support can strengthen relationships, enhance emotional regulation, and promote recovery within family systems. Importantly, cultural and historical contexts influence both trauma transmission and healing pathways, meaning that interventions must be tailored to social realities and cultural strengths rather than applied uniformly. Overall, this study highlights the need for trauma informed and family centred approaches that integrate therapeutic support with culturally responsive and policy driven strategies to reduce risk, strengthen resilience, and promote long term wellbeing across generations.

Suggestions

Efforts to address intergenerational trauma should focus on strengthening family functioning through interventions that promote healthy communication, emotional safety, and adaptive coping skills. Family based therapeutic approaches should be encouraged to help individuals process unresolved trauma collectively and reduce the transmission of maladaptive coping patterns to younger generations. Community support systems such as peer groups, faith based organisations, and culturally grounded networks should also be strengthened to reduce isolation and provide shared resources for healing. In addition, policies should improve access to affordable trauma informed mental health services and integrate preventive programs within schools to support emotional development and resilience among children and adolescents. Finally, further research is needed to expand empirical understanding of intergenerational trauma in diverse cultural settings and to examine how coping strategies evolve over time across generations.

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