

Intergenerational Transmission of Traumatic Memories: Mechanisms, Effects and Interventions

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Abstract: The intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories is manifested in the emotional connection between individuals and the inheritance of family culture. For example, collective traumatic events such as wars and natural disasters often leave a deep psychological mark on the family, affecting the psychology and behavior of future generations. This study aims to explore the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories, analyze its psychological mechanism, evaluate its impact on individuals and families, and propose corresponding intervention strategies. The in-depth research on intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories not only helps to understand the transmission mechanism of psychological trauma, but also provides a new perspective and theoretical support for psychotherapy. Using methods including literature review, case analysis and empirical research, this study reveals the complexity of intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories and verifies the effectiveness and feasibility of intervention strategies.

1. Introduction

In the long history of mankind, traumatic memories pass through time from one generation to the next. The phenomenon called “intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories” is a trending topic in individual psychology research and a key to understanding the development of family, society and even national spirit. Traumatic memories refer to those that can cause psychological, emotional and even physiological abnormalities. In the field of psychology, traumatic memories and their intergenerational transmission have always attracted much attention. In addition to the mental health of individuals, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories also involves the stable development of families and society. Hence, with the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories as the theme, this study explores its mechanisms, influences and interventions, so as to contribute to psychotherapy and social stability.[1]

2. Main Manifestations of Intergenerational Transmission of Traumatic Memories

2.1 Transmission of Psychological Symptoms

Psychological symptom transmission is one of the most direct manifestations of intergenerational

transmission of trauma memory. Traumatized ancestors may indirectly affect the mental health of their offspring through the unconscious expression of psychological states such as emotional reactions, nightmares, fear, anxiety or depression. These emotional states may recur in the family environment, causing the offspring to unconsciously absorb and internalize these emotions and exhibit similar mental health issues. For example, a child may often feel restless, irritable, or hypervigilant, all of which may be indirect reactions to unresolved traumatic memories in the family.

Under the extreme pressure of trauma, a person may involuntarily separate their thoughts or imagination from their physical feelings and emotions in order to survive under unbearable circumstances. Traumatic physical memory appears later, which is triggered by sensory stimuli similar to those in traumatic events. In turn, physical memory will activate signals, physical feelings and behavior patterns (see Figure 1), which will turn survivors into the experience of traumatic situations.

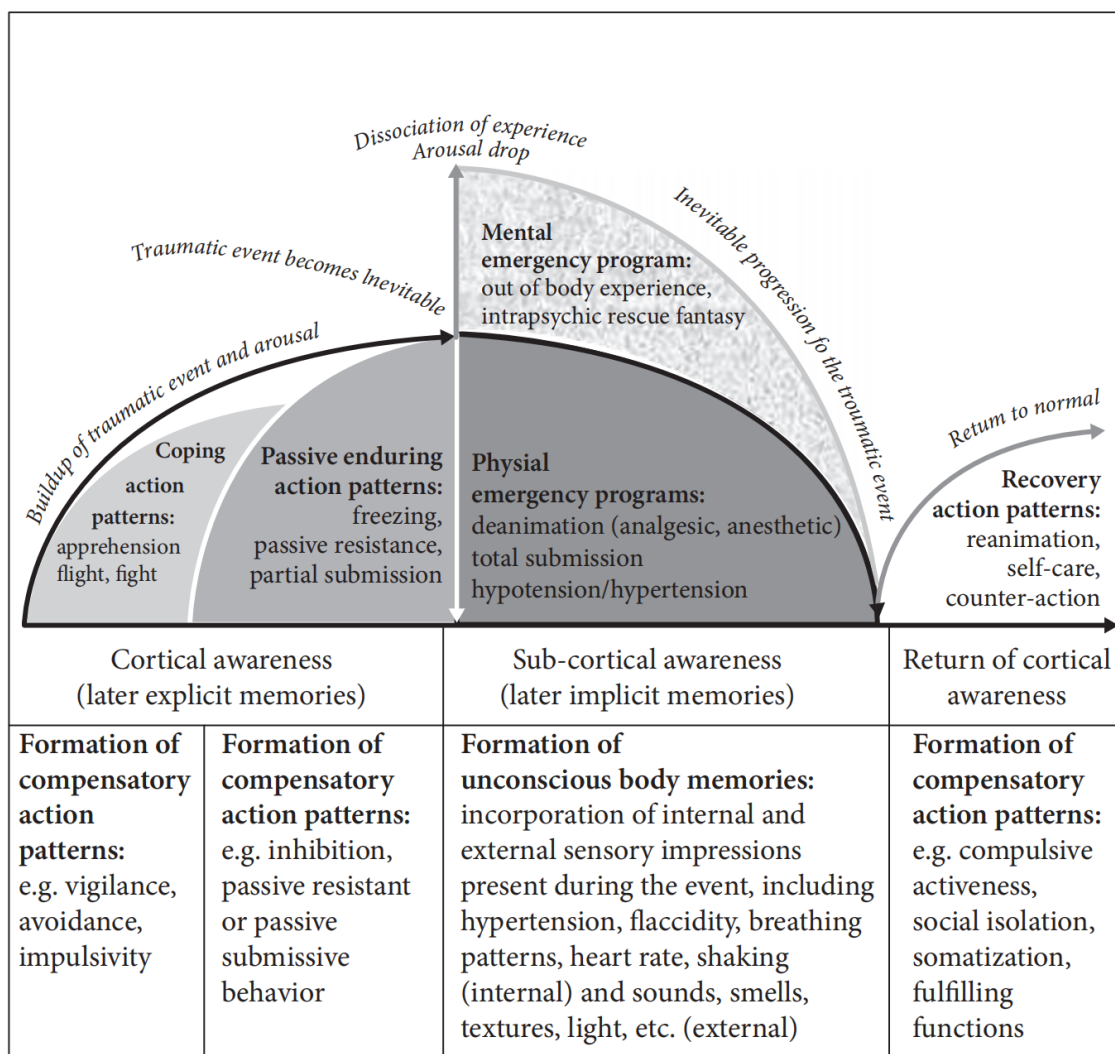


Figure 1: The formation of traumatic body memory and action patterns[2]

2.2 Impact of Behavioral Patterns

The intergenerational transmission of behavioral patterns is another distinguishing feature. Individuals who have experienced trauma may adopt specific, maladaptive patterns of behavior when coping with stress, dealing with conflict, or building relationships. These patterns may be imitated

and learned by offspring, creating similar behavioral tendencies. For example, parents who tend to avoid problems or are overprotective as a result of past trauma may have children who exhibit the same behavioral patterns, making it difficult to develop healthy social and intimate relationships.[3]

2.3 Interpersonal Disorders

Traumatic memories may also lead to intergenerational interpersonal barriers by affecting an individual's social skills and ability to express emotions. Individuals who have experienced trauma may have difficulty trusting others, expressing feelings, or establishing stable emotional connections, and these barriers are passed on in the family, exposing offspring to similar interpersonal challenges. They may feel uneasy in close relationships, detached or have difficulty maintaining long-lasting friendships and partnerships.[4]

2.4 Impaired Cognitive Function

Prolonged trauma may also negatively affect an individual's cognitive functioning, and this effect may likewise be passed on intergenerationally. For example, memory problems, difficulty concentrating, decreased decision-making ability, and learning disabilities may be indirect consequences of traumatic memories. When these cognitive problems are perpetuated in the family, offspring may experience additional difficulties in school, work, or daily life, affecting their overall development.[5]

2.5 Intergenerational Emotional Resonance

Intergenerational emotional empathy is a subtle but powerful phenomenon in the transmission of traumatic memories. Despite not directly experiencing the traumatic event, offspring can emotionally resonate with their forebears, feeling the pain and fear that they experienced. This empathy may stem from genetics, family environment, or shared life experiences, allowing the offspring to have an extraordinary understanding and feeling of the traumatic memories of their forebears.

3. Analysis of the causes and mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories

3.1 Cognitive Factors

Intergenerational transmission of trauma memory is a complex and profound phenomenon in which cognitive factors play an important role. On the one hand, individuals who have experienced trauma tend to maintain a high degree of sensitivity and alertness to dangers and threats, and this internal mode of operation may be transmitted to offspring through genetic or environmental factors. Offspring may also exhibit the same sensitivity and overreaction when confronted with similar situations. At the same time, prolonged trauma may lead individuals to develop an automated victim mindset, i.e., a tendency to view themselves as helpless and vulnerable. This mindset not only affects an individual's behavior and decision-making, but may also be passed on to future generations through the family environment and educational style, making them more inclined to adopt a negative attitude in the face of challenges. On the other hand, cognitive development in childhood is immature and easily influenced by the external environment. If parents or other primary caregivers have experienced trauma, their emotional states and behavioral patterns may interfere with children's normal cognitive development, resulting in impaired or deviated cognitive functioning. Traumatized individuals may develop specific cognitive schemas, such as "the world is dangerous" and "others are

untrustworthy". These cognitive schemas may be passed on to future generations through family education and environmental influences, resulting in similar perceptions and responses when faced with similar situations.

3.2 Emotional Factors

There is a deep emotional connection between family members, especially between parents and children. When parents experience trauma and carry unprocessed emotions, this emotional state may be transmitted to their children through daily interactions, nonverbal expressions (e.g., facial expressions, body language), and family atmosphere. As children grow up, they unconsciously absorb and internalize these emotions and form their own emotional response patterns. In terms of imitation of emotional expression, children have a strong ability to imitate not only their parents' behavior, but also their emotional expression. If parents use emotional coping strategies such as repression, denial, or overreaction after a traumatic experience, these strategies may also be learned and imitated by their children and become the way they deal with similar situations. In addition, individuals who have experienced trauma may choose to repress painful emotions internally out of a need for self-protection. However, this emotional repression does not mean that it has disappeared completely, but may be triggered at some inadvertent moment and expressed in a more intense form. In the family, this repressed emotion may be passed on indirectly to future generations through parent-child relationships, family conflicts, etc.

3.3 Biological Factors

Biological factors are an important component in the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory, which involves a complex interaction of genes, epigenetics, and biological mechanisms. First, epigenetics is the study of heritable changes in gene expression when the DNA sequence remains unchanged. Studies have shown that trauma can leave chemical marks (e.g., DNA methylation, histone modifications, etc.) on an individual's genes that do not change the DNA sequence but alter the pattern of gene expression, thereby affecting the physical and psychological characteristics of the offspring.[6] Such epigenetic marks can be passed on to the next generation through reproductive cells (sperm and eggs), causing the offspring to exhibit similar response patterns to their forebears when faced with similar situations. Second, certain genetic variants that may make individuals more sensitive to traumatic events, thereby increasing their risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other psychiatric disorders, may be passed down through the family genetically, resulting in offspring that are more susceptible to similar traumas when faced with them. Finally, traumatic experiences alter an individual's biological stress systems, including the activity of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, neurotransmitter balance, and more. These alterations have lasting effects within the individual and may be passed on to offspring, including through maternal-fetal communication (e.g., hormones and immune factors passed on by the placenta). Offspring may inherit the biological stress characteristics of their forebears during development and exhibit similar response patterns when faced with similar situations.

3.4 Family Environment Factors

On the one hand, family emotional climate is the result of emotional communication and interaction among family members. When family members, especially parents, have experienced trauma, their emotional state may be characterized by anxiety, depression, anger, or alienation. These negative emotions can create a tense atmosphere in the family and have a subtle effect on children. And parents who have experienced trauma may take a different approach to parenting. They may be

impatient, overprotective, or overly strict because of their own emotional distress. These changes in parenting styles may result in children growing up with a lack of security, self-confidence, or independence. On the other hand, traumatic experiences may lead to a decrease in the number or quality of interactions between family members. Parents may have difficulty investing time and energy in developing good communication and relationships with their children because of their own pain. This lack of interaction may lead to children feeling emotionally isolated and neglected. Finally, in some families, traumatic experiences may lead to the entrenchment of family roles.[7] For example, a child may be defaulted into assuming the role of emotional supporter in the family and prematurely take on the responsibility of caring for other family members. This role solidification may hinder the child's normal development and cause him or her to repeat this unhealthy pattern in future relationships.

4. Analysis of the impact of intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories

4.1 Impact on Individual Mental Health

The intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory mainly affects the mental health of the next generation indirectly through the family atmosphere, parents' behavioral patterns, personality traits and so on. The impact of this transmission on individual mental health is far-reaching and complex, and can be analyzed from multiple perspectives. First, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories may lead to the emergence of various psychological disorders in the offspring, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, depression, etc. Symptoms of PTSD include intrusive memories, nightmares, avoidance of relevant stimuli, mood swings, and feelings of nervousness, which can seriously affect an individual's daily life and mental health. Second, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories may also affect an individual's interpersonal relationships and social functioning. Individuals who have experienced intergenerational trauma may exhibit behavioral patterns such as withdrawal, mistrust, or overdependence in interpersonal interactions, making it difficult for them to establish and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Finally, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories also affects individuals' self-perceptions and values. Offspring may become confused and ambivalent about their own identity and values in the course of growing up, leading to confusion about self-identity and distortion of values.

4.2 Impact on Individual Emotions

The intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories may lead to an emotional lack of trust in offspring. They may have difficulty trusting others, be skeptical of relationships, and even develop a fear of intimacy. This lack of trust can affect their social skills and emotional expression, making it difficult for them to build stable and healthy relationships. In addition, individuals affected by traumatic memories may experience difficulties in emotional expression. They may not be able to express their emotional needs effectively or may adopt an overly defensive communication style. This barrier to emotional expression can further exacerbate their feelings of emotional isolation and detachment. Moreover, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories may disrupt an individual's pre-existing emotional regulation mechanisms. They may not be able to effectively manage and regulate their emotions, resulting in high mood swings, irritability, and sadness. This impaired emotion regulation may affect their mental health and quality of life. Finally, individuals affected by traumatic memories may lack effective emotional coping strategies. They may not be able to find appropriate ways to cope with their emotional distress and instead adopt poor coping styles such as avoidance, denial, or repression. These approaches, while temporarily relieving distress, can cause more damage to their emotional health in the long run.

4.3 Impact on the family, social and spiritual levels of the nation

Intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories has positive or negative impacts on the individual and family levels. On the positive side, intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories may make family members more united and strong to face difficulties together. However, the negative aspects are more significant. The intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories may lead to psychological problems such as anxiety and depression in individuals, as well as family tension and communication difficulties. Tension and disharmony in the family atmosphere may affect the relationships between family members, especially parent-child relationships. Children may feel pressure and insecurity from their parents, which in turn affects their self-identity and interpersonal skills. At the social level, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories may trigger a series of social problems such as violent tendencies and criminal behavior. In addition, for groups who have experienced traumatic events, their cultural identity may be affected by the traumatic experience. For example, Jewish Holocaust survivors and descendants may feel ambivalent about their Jewish identity, desiring to integrate into mainstream society while fearing exclusion and discrimination.

5. Intervention Strategies for Intergenerational Transmission of Traumatic Memories

5.1 Enhancing self-awareness

The first step in intervening in the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories is to enhance the individual's awareness of his or her own emotional state, thinking patterns and behavioral patterns. Through psychological counseling, mental health education, or self-reflection exercises, we can help individuals identify and understand the traces of traumatic memories they may carry, and recognize how these memories affect their decision-making, emotional responses, and interpersonal relationships. On the one hand, emotional recognition and management skills are taught through mental health education programs. On the other hand, we can help individuals explore their inner world by providing professional psychological assessment and counseling services, while encouraging the use of self-reflection tools such as diaries and meditation to promote inner awareness, and effectively enhance self-awareness by building a diversified social network that includes family members, friends, and co-workers, and by setting up or participating in support groups to share and communicate with people who have similar experiences. Finally, cultivate healthy professors and encourage the adoption of positive and healthy coping strategies, such as problem solving, emotion regulation, and relaxation techniques, to replace unhealthy response patterns such as avoidance, aggression, or over-dependence.[8]

5.2 Passing on positive values

During the intervention process, through positive guidance and education, emphasize the importance of positive values, such as love, hope and courage, to help the offspring establish a healthy psychological framework and resist the negative impact of traumatic memories. The main implementation methods include integrating positive values education in family and school education; utilizing stories, film and television works and other media to disseminate positive stories; and encouraging participation in volunteer services and public welfare activities to cultivate a sense of social responsibility and empathy. In addition, emphasis should be placed on raising public awareness of traumatic memories and their intergenerational transmission, reducing misunderstanding and prejudice through education and publicity, and creating a social environment of understanding and support.

5.3 Strengthening community intervention

Social support plays an important role in alleviating the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories. The government and social organizations should strengthen their attention and support to mental health problems and provide necessary help and support to traumatized individuals and families. In addition, the media should actively publicize mental health knowledge to increase public awareness and understanding of mental health problems. Comprehensive interventions should be implemented at the community level, including the establishment of a safe and friendly community environment, the provision of community resources and services, and the promotion of mutual help and support among neighbors, in order to alleviate the pressure on individuals and families, and to block the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories. For individuals who have already suffered from traumatic memories, psychological treatment should be carried out in a timely manner in order to alleviate their psychological pain and restore their mental health, and psychological treatment includes cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychodynamic therapy, and other methods, so that the appropriate treatment can be chosen according to the individual's situation.

6. Conclusion

Intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory is a complex and profound phenomenon, which involves multiple dimensions such as individual, family, society and nation. By deeply understanding and coping with the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories, we can promote individual psychological health, family harmony, and the stable development of society. Let's pay attention to and strive to address this challenge together and contribute to building a healthier and more positive social environment.

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