



# Intergenerational Trauma and Intergenerational Healing

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Presented through the Centre for Excellence in Indigenous Health  
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# Healing and Self care

- This can be an intense topic, particularly if your family or community has been impacted by trauma.
- Some signs to watch for:
  1. Feeling overwhelmed, angry or anxious
  2. Daydreaming
  3. Feeling numb
- Feel free to stop watching and take care of yourself. The discussion will be available on-line and you can come back and watch at any time
- Ways to take care
  1. Go outside and connect with nature
  2. Find friendly face and talk about what you are experiencing
  3. If you have a pet nearby, let it pet you:)

# Titration

- Peter Levine's concept
- Means connecting to traumatic experiences a little at a time, not pushing ourselves into overwhelm.
- This is one of the most fundamental and important concepts in healing trauma.
- And an important concept to helping protect the helper as well.

# Exercise

Think about a moment in your life when you were brave and took a step towards healing and there was someone there to help.

- Being welcomed in treatment
- Sharing a story with a supportive family member or friend
- Doing ceremony and feeling the support of the ancestors or Creator
- Connecting with a counsellor

What do you notice is happening in your body right now?

# What is Intergenerational Trauma?

How trauma effects not only the person who experienced traumatic events, but also the generations after.

This includes, but is certainly not limited to:

- Aboriginal people around the world
- Survivors of war
- Veterans
- Political Refugees
- People who have lived through natural disasters
- Survivors of child abuse or domestic abuse

# Survival: How Trauma Changes Us

Trauma changes the way our mind, emotions, body and spirit work.

These changes are most often not conscious changes, but are based on survival instincts. They were made to help us survive life-threatening events (or events that threatened our self or spirit).

This is a crucial distinction: these changes helped us survive at the time, even if they do not feel so helpful now.

# What do those changes look like?

## Mind

- Never speaking about what happened, possibly not even remembering.
- Having flashback memories that I can't stop or prevent and that feel like are happening right now, not in the past.
- Believing the world is a scary place, which our traumatic experience has demonstrated.

# What do those changes look like?

## Emotions

- Shutting down emotions, I may not be able to feel love or pain of anger or anxiety
- Being flooded by emotions and unable to stop or control them
- When stressed, making impulsive decisions based on emotion, not rational though.
- Flat affect, no emotion showing on my face



# What do those changes look like?

## Spirit

- Not feeling alive, feeling different than other people, like something is missing from life
- When stressed, feeling or acting like a much younger person, often the age at which the trauma happened. Momentarily losing the adult skills and abilities that I have worked so hard to achieve: communication skills, anger management skills, sobriety skills
- Feeling like part of self leaves when experiencing threat: like watching from above or hiding in a safer place

# What do those changes look like?

## Body

- Panic attacks or daily anxiety: the body's alarm system is on and not shutting off even we are safe
- Sleep disturbances
- Difficulty feeling hunger or satiety (fullness)
- Shutting down of body: may feel frozen, outside of body or like deep underwater and away from the world.
- Stress and trauma related illnesses like heart disease, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, GERD (Robin Karr-Morse, "Scared Sick")

# Exercise

- As you listen, you may be making some connections to yourself, your family or your clients.
- Please take a moment and check-in with yourself right now, in the present moment.
- Check in with your emotions. You might be feeling sad or excited or angry or distracted? Just notice.
- Check in with your body. You might be feeling heavy or tingly or jittery or numb. Just notice
- You might be having memories of your own life, your family's lives or even stories you have heard from clients or friends.

# Exercise continued

- And as you notice all these things, also take a moment to notice where you are. Are there trees, flowers, artwork, friendly faces?
- Can you hear the sounds of nature, of humans at work, children playing, silence?
- Can you feel the chair beneath you, the floor, the warm or cool air around you, the weight of your clothes?
- This is a great time to think about whether you have heard enough of our conversation for now and want to take a walk or visit a pet or chat with a friend.
- Remember not letting yourself get overwhelmed is an important part of healing. And we will all be here on-line later!

# How Trauma is Passed on Through the Generations

## Through Learning:

- In residential school, it was unsafe to express emotions: anger, fear, joy, concern. Those emotions would be seen by staff and trigger controlling and punishing behavior (abuse) by the staff.
- So many of the children stopped expressing emotions. Their faces became hard and unemotional.
- As adults, many survivors continued with this survival behaviour, particularly when in new or structured environments. And their children learned that behaviour by observing it.
- This behaviour is not particular to residential school survivors, we also see this kind of lack of emotional expression in people who have spent time in prison, prisoner of war camps and in homes where there is abuse.

# How Trauma is Passed on Through the Generations

## Through Trauma

- Let's go back to the lack of emotional expression. We can also see it from a physiological perspective.
- Many of you will be familiar with the idea of survival instincts: fight, flight, freeze and socially engage. By this I mean that in response to a threat we have 4 main instinctual responses:
  1. to fight back
  2. To run away
  3. To freeze or hide or shut down
  4. To look for others for help.

# How Trauma is Passed on Through the Generations

## Through Trauma continued

- For many survivors of residential school, freeze was an important survival strategy: one client describes becoming a "little grey stone," to protect herself from the predators around her.
- "Little grey stones" have little to no facial expression, this is a normal part of the physiological state of freeze. When in the freeze, we do not naturally move our facial muscles.
- Sometimes after a traumatic event, our body gets locked into a pattern of using one of these strategies, the one that helped them survive. So if I became a "little grey stone" as a child at residential school, I may do the same thing whenever I feel stress or threat.
- We can also be stuck in fight like a "Raging tigers," or stuck fleeing as like a "Startled Deer."

# How Trauma is Passed on Through the Generations

## Through Trauma continued

- So, lets imagine that I am a parent and I head to the first day of daycare with my child. I will be meeting new people, talking with teachers and my child will be “assessed.”
- I am certainly feeling stressed and whether I am conscious of it or not, dropping my child off at school will likely bring up feelings and memories of residential school.
- Because of that stress I am likely to move into the freeze state and become the “little grey stone.”
- Now my child is excited because she has heard how much fun daycare is from her cousins. But is also feeling anxious because she knows I will be leaving.



# How Trauma is Passed on Through the Generations

## Through Trauma continued

- She is looking to me to see if it is safe or not. And even though my head knows it is safe, all her cousins have loved it there, my body is still stressed and my freeze response is on.
- So when she looks at me for reassurance, she doesn't get the smile and laughter she needs to know she is safe. Instead she sees my "little grey stone" face and feels in her gut that she is not safe.
- So for children whose parents have had traumatic events connected to school there is a higher likelihood they will not feel safe at school. This is true for children of residential school survivors but also for the children of people who
  - Struggled at school, failed or didn't graduate
  - Have been abused by people in authority
  - Have been traumatized in numerous other ways

# Intergenerational Healing

We know that trauma can be passed through the generations by both learning and trauma. There are other ways it can be passed as well, but this is enough for our discussion today.

## **What does that mean for healing?**

The wonderful, hopeful thing that keeps me working with trauma survivors and teaching trauma healing is that the processes we just talked about also happens in reverse.

I am guessing we can all think of a grandparent who is able to laugh and smile and play with their grandchild in a way that they couldn't with their own children. This is evidence of the intergenerational healing of trauma.

It helps the grandparent, the grandchild and sometimes even helps the parent who can see that their parent is different now.

# Intergenerational Healing

Now lets look at how that might happen.

I'd like to tell a story here, a story of my family.

**Stoic:** a person who can endure pain or hardship without showing their feelings or complaining

# Keys to Intergenerational Healing

- Understanding that Intergenerational Trauma is real trauma, not a flaw in our character or something bad in ourselves. And it means that we are affected by the way our parents/grandparents/ancestors experienced and adapted to trauma. And it means that we can heal.
- Someone in the family has the courage to start the healing work. This is passed up and down the generations as healing strategies are shared, new boundaries are set and communication is opened. Often other family members will join the healing. So it is like that old commercial, “and they tell two friends, and they tell tow friends...”
- When we do good trauma work, we feel more safe in the world which means that we spend less time as “Little Grey Stone, “ “Raging Tiger” or “Startled Deer.” We can then spend more time as **our loving and kind and funny true selves**, and so can our family.
- Shame: if we are living with trauma, shame will live with us too. Understanding how survival behaviour helped us survive, even if it doesn't help us now, will help deal with shame. So will talking to others about our shame.

# Reflection

As you think about this idea of intergenerational healing, how do you see it happening in your family? Your community?

What are the signs of healing?

# Intergenerational Trauma and Intergenerational Healing

➤ Questions?