

Healing in the Shadow of Intergenerational Trauma

Rachelle Tri, Simon Fraser University

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My leg bounces unconsciously. Hush whispers nag my brain at 100 km/hour in a competition with my racing heartbeat. Sitting down in class, I know I'm having another anxiety attack.

I'm not surprised. This has happened before. My anxiety manifested from the terrors my parents faced after the Vietnam war.

They were boat people who fled to Canada in search of peace and freedom. But the trauma they experienced throughout their journey lingered. I still vividly remember my mom's downcast eyes as she recalled the time, she had to leave her sister's dead body behind to avoid gun fire while running towards a fleeing boat.

My dad rarely talks about his experience fleeing, but he did tell me once how he was caught three times and thrown in jail by Viet Cong soldiers. He said that he was so sick of suffering and running away from prison, that on his third time escaping his cell, he would have just let the guards kill him, had they caught him again.

These are but two, traumatic experiences that my parents endured. Their memories affected not only their lives in Canada, but also left an indelible mark on my older siblings and myself. We suffer from intergenerational trauma.

Growing up, I always felt like some imminent danger was lurking around me, and it all made sense once I learned about intergenerational trauma.

The way my parents were in constant survival mode made it seem as if they were still residing in the turbulent war-torn nation of their past. As a child, I thought their behaviour was normal, like how they were easily alarmed when someone knocked on our door or how they were extreme hoarders; nothing went to waste, whether food or clothes.

Worst of all, they were efficiency freaks. Something could always be done faster and better. We ensured we were first in whatever we did, as to not be a hindrance to those around us.

In the context of war, it all made sense. How could you feel secure when soldiers were constantly banging on your door demanding gold? How could you feel healthy when you never had enough to eat? How could you relax when you needed to beat everyone else to survive? It was a never-ending race for the boats.

Silently, their attitudes and habits negatively affected my juvenile brain. My paranoia and anxiety simply grew and grew, the physical manifestations of my anxiety getting more severe in high school.

Sharp chest pains would arise during a test, while walking in the halls, eating lunch with my friends, and many other times. I would try to hide it and hope nobody noticed my shortness of breath and panic in my eyes, as my heart felt like being squeezed by barbed wires.

I didn't reach out for help until one day in 2020 when the world felt like it was going to cave in, and my heart spiralled out of control. I crawled to my middle sibling's room, crying for help since my chest pains weren't subsiding after more than 20 minutes had passed and I was having a hard time breathing. The hospitals were packed with COVID-19 patients, so instead of calling 911, my eldest sister called 811, the number for non-emergency health advice. The nurse who picked up tried to assist us but, in the end, she suggested that I was probably fine and to visit my doctor as soon as I could, to find out what was wrong with me.

The pain went away after a brutal two hours. Looking back, I think the article I was reading on the increasing number of COVID-19 deaths was what catapulted my anxiety episode. Nevertheless, I was still convinced I had a cardiac defect and sought consult from my family doctor who referred me to a cardiologist.

After my examination, I learned that nothing was physically wrong with me; I had a mental health issue. My counsellor advised me that what I felt as a series of cardiac events were probably muscle spasms induced by my high levels of anxiety. Anxiety that I now believe is partly the result of my parent's survival mode parenting. Thankfully, I'm now equipped with strategies to ground myself during these attacks, but that was merely the first step. Subsequently, I had to confront the root cause of my feelings: my family's intergenerational trauma.

Since 2020, I experienced a tumultuous period of inner turmoil, bitterness, and frustration. As I grew older, my eldest sister's disclosure of the verbal, physical and emotional abuse she endured from our parents (as the eldest daughter, she bore the greatest burden) also provided insight on our unjust upbringing.

As I reflect on how we were brought up, I feel a strong sense of guilt and sadness. Considering this, I sometimes wish my parents had never had us. They were not adequately prepared to be capable parents due to their untreated trauma. However, although they've caused the bulk of my problems, I do love my parents, because I've seen how hard they've worked to raise us to the best of their ability, even if their methods were flawed.

Ultimately, I made a conscious decision to pursue my mental well-being, choosing not to live in a constant state of anger, resentment and anxiety. A big step towards breaking the cycle for me was to put myself into my parents' shoes and try to understand where they were coming from, instead of simply severing ties with them due to their past mistakes. I opted to listen to their perspectives and understand their experiences- only then did my perspective about them change, and I became less resentful, fostering a path toward healing.

I believe we all have the potential to be happy and healthy individuals if we can empathise and have compassion for those who have unintentionally harmed us.

Overcoming our trauma starts with acknowledging it, but we must also commit to putting an end to our unhealthy habits and, lastly, forgiving ourselves.

My siblings and I are still on our journey to recovery, which is a path that demands considerable patience, compassion, listening, and understanding... But I'm confident this cycle will end with us.



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