Intergenerational Trauma
Wendy Kovacs Cortes, Ph.D., LMFT

Learning objectives:
- Biological and relational components of intergenerational trauma.
- Epigenetics and ACES.
- How relational trauma is transmitted intergenerationally.
- How intergenerational trauma can impact parenting and how CASA workers can impact the intergenerational impact of trauma will be summarized.
Intergenerational Trauma: Biological

- Epigenetics: The study of changes in organisms caused by modification of gene expression rather than alteration of the genetic code itself.
- Chemicals tag DNA and activate/repress genes.
- Impacted by development, chemicals (environmental or substance use), aging, diet, etc.
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVqy8aF-PQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVqy8aF-PQ)

Epigenetics

- Animal studies have shown that environmental factors can cause changes in DNA, called "methylation," which then are passed down genetically.
- Environmental stress or emotional trauma can leave marks on the chemical coating of chromosomes. This becomes a "memory" within the cells of our body that may be linked to our own experience or the experience of parents, grandparents and beyond.
Epigenetics

- One study found that the experience of inattentive mothering in rodents caused an alteration of genes related to estrogen receptors in the brain. When those babies grew up, the decrease of estrogen receptors led them to be less attentive to their own babies.
- Another found a neurobiological basis for the transmission of PTSD symptoms from one generation to the next.

Intergenerational Trauma: Relational

- Intergenerational transmission of trauma refers to the psychological or emotional impact experienced by people who live with, or are raised by, trauma survivors.
- Distinct patterns of relating - including ways of coping and adaptation in response to trauma - are passed from parent to child across generations.
- Trauma and its impacts can exist across generations and within entire cultures.

Relational

- Hundreds of studies have found that the children of survivors (Holocaust survivors, war veterans, refugees, survivors of abuse and neglect, etc.) show a higher vulnerability for PTSD, trauma ADHD, depression, anxiety.
- Children and grandchildren of trauma survivors can experience PTSD-like symptoms, including anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, grief, fear, and somatic symptoms, specifically related to parents’ traumatic histories.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrMlDvZg50w
Relational
- Internal working models = unconscious/subconscious way that you view the world, relationships, and safety.
- Built based on how we are related to in early caregiving relationships.
  - Way of relating to the world
  - Sense of safety and connection to others
  - How you perceive yourself in relation to others

How Is Relational Trauma Transmitted?
- Have you worked with parents who...
  - Parent how they were parented?
  - Interact as if the trauma is happening now?
  - Are triggered by their children’s needs?
  - Have developmentally inappropriate expectations?
  - Have nonverbal communication that portrays anger, guilt, sadness?
  - Have a mental health diagnosis related to trauma?
  - Have unresolved grief and loss?
  - Respond to behaviors habitually without thinking?

Intergenerational Trauma and Parenting
- Because of their unresolved trauma parents may disengage or avoid, become angry or sad, or have difficulty relating to their children.
  - This may lead to problems with attunement, attachment and psychological development of their children.
- Longstanding family norms and cultural beliefs related to childrearing can reinforce negative or harmful parenting practices.
Birth Parents with Trauma Histories

- If unaddressed, traumatic stress in childhood can impact a parent’s ability to:
  - Regulate emotions
  - Maintain physical and psychological health
  - Engage in secure, trusting relationships
  - Safely or effectively parent
  - Maintain family stability
  - Maintain safety
  - Appraise danger
  - Cope with life stressors

Categories of ACEs

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Intimate partner violence
- Mother treated violently
- Substance misuse in household
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

- Relationship between the number of categories of childhood exposure and each of the adult health risk behaviors and diseases that were studied ($P < .001$).
  - ≥ 4 categories had 4- to 12-fold increased health risks for alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and suicide attempt; a 2- to 4-fold increase in smoking, poor self-rated health, 250 sexual intercourse partners, and sexually transmitted disease; and a 1.4- to 1.6-fold increase in physical inactivity and severe obesity and increased presence of adult diseases including ischemic heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, and liver disease.


BRFSS
- 2/3 of surveyed adults report at least one ACE, and more than one in five reported three or more ACEs.
- Increased ACEs linked to: myocardial infarction, asthma, mental distress, depression, smoking, disability, reported income, unemployment, lower educational attainment, coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes.

The Role of CASA
- TRAUMA INFORMED CARE!
  - Be a consistent observer.
  - Document what you see.
  - Talk to professionals aligned with the case.
  - Acknowledge when trauma is at the root of what you are seeing.
The Role of CASA

- Advocate for trauma screening or psychological testing and follow up clinical services for children.
- Advocate for trauma screening or psychological testing for parents and follow up clinical services.
- Educate the court system about the impact of intergenerational trauma through reports.
- Educate families about the impact of intergenerational trauma.
- Advocate for environments with lowered ACEs scores for children and families.

What does it all mean?

- The neurobiological model of trauma transmission gives us an optimistic view based on malleability of the brain.
- Just as traumatic experience can alter the brain, so too can positive experiences of safety, attachment and connection.
- Through effective psychotherapeutic intervention and positive parenting practices, the biological and relational effects of trauma can be mitigated.

References

- CDC link: https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html
- Siegel, Dan