Intergenerational Trauma : How The American Experience is Leading Today's Young Adults Deal With Unresolved Trauma From Their Ancestors

By Tatiana Ramirez

"When a baby is born, they're born grieving, and it shows how powerful and prevalent trauma is", says Celeste Dayrider, a 23-year-old living in Canada. "Even in newborns, who are very much fresh and new to this world, they can feel the trauma from their mothers when they are grown in the womb."

Dayrider is currently attending college in Alberta and decided to major in Indigenous studies to help out the next generation of Natives who feel lost in a world where 90% of their culture is eradicated.

"As an Indigenous woman myself, I am in the works of breaking that generational curse, so I'm the one standing in front of the line, making sure that it doesn't pass on to my kids," says Dayrider.

The young college student is sharing her opinion about intergenerational trauma; something we have informally labeled as "generational curses". However, intergenerational trauma is not a new psychological subject for study, this type of trauma has existed for centuries to those who have experienced high levels of mental distress and physical punishments.

Despite its psychological effects on current individuals experiencing trauma, those survivors can pass it down to future generations. The latest scientific connection found between trauma and illness is currently a new breakthrough for modern medicine.

According to a research study conducted by the National Library of Medicine, exposure to extreme adverse events impacts individuals to the extent that their offspring could potentially find themselves grappling with their parents' post-traumatic state. The connection between trauma and DNA can be found through epigenetics.

In layman's terms, this new finding in the science of epigenetics suggests that our genes carry memories of trauma experienced by our ancestors and influence how we react to trauma and stress.

As a result of these findings, dozens of medical researchers and professionals have labeled this generational trauma as a "public health crisis" in today's society. In order to somehow cure ourselves from a transgenerational transaction, we must understand the history of ethnic backgrounds and their treatment towards its' people within the United States.

The minority group experiencing the longest period of intergenerational trauma within the 50 states are the Indigenous people. Stripped away from their land in the 1500s, Indigenous tribes have been experiencing physical and emotional anguish as a result of colonization. Still seen today, Indigenous tribes have faced an endless battle of historical oppression, forced relocation, and land dispossession for centuries.

Comparing Native Americans to other ethics groups across North America, Native American people have endured violent trauma and dealt without fleeing their homeland. According to the American Psychiatric Association, Indigenous people have a higher risk of "substance abuse, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, and suicidal thinking" due to the brutality taking place on their land.

Dr. Kathleen Brown-Rice, a professor and researcher from Sam Houston State University, has spent years studying colonization's long-term effects on Indigenous individuals. In 2013, Brown-Rice has founded the theory of historical trauma stating that "a cross-generational transmission of trauma" has developed as a result of forced removal from native land and cultural suppression.

"It's nice to be around your own people but the only problem with the reserves is that there's a lot of substance abuse, drug abuse, there's a lot of misogyny," Dayrider explains, "there's also a lot of crime here, lots of violence, and there's even murder."

Indigenous people living in both the United States and Canada have experienced hardship while living on reservations. Based on a report by the National Congress of American Indians, Indian reservations nationwide face violent crime rates more than 2.5 times the national average and some reservations face more than 20 times the national rate of violence.

When it comes to crimes committed on Indigenous reservations, women are the number one target. The report concludes that more than 1 in 3 Indian women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes, and 2 in 5 women will face domestic or intimate partner violence.

The Department of Justice has found that non-Indians commit approximately 88 percent of violent victimizations against Indigenous women.

"So I believe the main problem with our reserve and something that does affect my family is substance abuse," says Dayrider. "On our reserve, we have had like 10 deaths in a week, and many of them are related to overdoses."

As a result of removing natives from sacred land and forcing settlement on reservations, Indigenous individuals have dealt with psychological, environmental-societal, and physiological problems that have been unknown to the community. Due to the constant hardship that Indigenous people face on reservations, researchers have found the Historical Loss Scale (HLS).

In 2004, Whitbeck and research colleagues constructed a standardized measure that assesses the frequency with which Indigenous individuals think about the losses to their culture, land, and people as a result of colonization. This new scale suggests that intergenerational trauma can be seen through "historical loss symptoms" such as depression, substance dependence, diabetes, dysfunctional parenting, and unemployment.

Dayrider shares how alcohol and substance abuse has affected her family due to intergenerational trauma, saying that her father "passed away when I was about nine years old from alcoholism."

"Since he was the head of the family, a lot of my family started going down the wrong paths," Dayrider adds, "because of my father's death, and the financial burden of it, my mother started to abuse alcohol, my siblings started and it was a really hard road to go down with them."

Besides alcohol and substance abuse, suicide is another major cause of death due to dealing with historic loss and the generational trauma that comes with it. In a report conducted by the CDC, suicide rates for Native Americans are higher than the national average, with suicide being the second leading cause of death for Indigenous people.

“My older sister, she committed suicide, because of how things were,” Dayrider says, “she was like me, she was a hard worker, she did not drink, she was not involved with drugs, she was trying to break that generational curse.”

Dayrider explains how her sister ultimately lost her life due to the loss of her cultural identity. “It was hard for her to find that because she didn't grow up with her culture … she was trying to navigate her way through the rest of the world and she felt isolated, in a sense, and she felt like she was alone.”

Alongside the physical exploitation that has occurred within the Indigenous group, the loss of spiritual practices and indigenous languages is a result of grief resulting from intergenerational trauma.

Whitbeck and his colleagues surveyed Native Americans and found that 36% had daily thoughts about the loss of traditional language in their community, and 34% experienced daily thoughts about the loss of culture. In addition, 24% reported feeling angry regarding historical losses and 49% provided they had disturbing thoughts related to these losses.

“I don't have my culture, I don't go to Sundances, I never learned how to dance. I never got to wear the regalia, I can't even speak my own language … how am I going to contribute if I have none of that culture,” Dayrider says.

The biggest consequence of colonization is the loss of ancestral history; so Dayrider spends time deeply connecting to her heritage in order to gain a clearer image of her ancestors and elders. There are more than 500 Indigenous nations throughout North America, all with their unique practices and traditions, hence Dayrider’s mission to find her true identity.

“I’m considered a reconnecting native ... I’m trying to find exactly where I'm from and who I'm from so I can a better sense of my identity,” says Dayrider.

On the Southern end of the United States, a 24-year-old Black woman from Florida discusses the root of her family’s trauma as a result of living in the South. “The main root of the trauma is related to slavery, but more so the effects of it,” says Zahria Tims.

“Intergenerational trauma can definitely be seen in my family through mental health issues,” says Tims, “a lot of our trauma manifests through depression and anxiety and how we basically try to express ourselves.”

For the Black community within the United States, the primary source of intergenerational trauma begins with slavery. From the moment they were taken from their homeland, multiple generations of Africans experienced grueling labor, physical violence, sexual assault, and constant malnourishment.

Due to the lack of basic human rights - and the lack of personification slaves received - mental and physical degradation continues to be passed down throughout generations. In today’s society, the Black community within the United States are dealing with the persistence of health problems, legacy of illicit drug use and mass incarceration, and a reoccurring cycle of poverty inheritance.

Michael J. Halloran has closely studied the African American community within the 50 states to find out more about the correlation between slavery and intergenerational trauma. Halloran concluded that the

cultural trauma experienced by Africans over 300 years of enslavement has been transmitted to the current generation and is related to their current general state of poor health.

The biggest correlation between African slave ancestors and today's black youths in America comes from a significantly higher chance of experiencing psychological stress, depressive symptoms, poor self-rated health, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"My mom's parents grew up during the Civil Rights Movement so I grew up listening to stories of racism and discrimination due to the color of our skin."

Living in a post-segregated world, many young individuals fail to acknowledge that the Civil Rights Act was passed less than 60 years ago today. For Black children and young adults in America, their childhood is filled with stories that have directly occurred to their family members who lived through segregated times not that long ago.

"My granddad is a storyteller so I grew up listening to stories about people looking at him crazy for trying to get served as a Black man walking into a white-owned establishment."

In 2018, Halloran sifted through past research studies related to the Black experience in America in order to conduct a grand study that looks into specific psychological effects slavery left on today's African Americans. It was found that racism increases arousal states such as anxiety, hypervigilance, and symptoms of PTSD, which in turn has negative effects on blood pressure.

The idea of fear solely based on an individual's complexation continues to be passed down through generations. In 2002, an African American researcher, Dee Watts-Jones, states that "whites commit prejudice out of sense of fear and anxiety" and that race-based anxiety among white Americans can lead to anxiety disorders among people of African descent.

"Just observing anxious and depressive behaviors of my family members and realizing how I also exhibit those same behaviors basically answered that those mental tendencies were passed down to me," says Tims.

In a 200-page dissertation written by Pamela Lynette Jenkins, she discusses the repercussions enslavement has on today's African Americans community. She found that research participants reported that slavery was not talked about in families, yet slave mentality is still present among Blacks and whites.

For Black Americans, slave mentality can be seen in many different ways in today's young adults - whether it be through financial worries, police brutality, or mental illness.

"I have issues with spending money and wanting to hold on to what I have," says Tims. She recalls that her mother would share stories of being bullied as a child due to living in poverty, "I do see a correlation in anxiety over little things from my mom and I think that's where our commonality lies."

Jenkins' findings proves yet again that intergenerational trauma has been around for decades; just because its effects have stayed within an ethnic group, it does not invalidate its existence.

"The first step is becoming aware of the trauma and I'm fully aware of it," says Tims, "by getting whatever help I need, I know I will be helping my future children by reducing any anxious or depressive issues that I have."

When it comes to the Hispanic / Latino community, there's a slew of traumas that have occurred to the ethnic group that could lead to intergenerational trauma. Both European colonization of South American nations and taking slaves from the Caribbean islands have led the community to experience intergenerational trauma; however, the biggest contributing factor is immigration.

In a study conducted in early 2021, it found that over 75% of migrants from Latin America to the United States report histories of trauma such as : pre-migration factors (war, terrorism, political persecution, and/or natural disasters); exposures during the process of migration (theft, kidnapping, rape, extortion, dehydration, and physical violence) and post-migration factors (neighborhood and domestic violence).

As a result of such traumatic events occurring consecutively, the migration process can be linked to forms of mental illness that may include depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance abuse, and increased rates of other health disorders. Moreover, Hispanic / Latino migrant women pose a greater risk to experience domestic, physical and sexual violence.

"I'm not the first person in my family to experience sexual assault," says Millaray Salazar, 19-year-old Latina living in New Jersey. "But I am the first one in the family to go to therapy for it," she said.

Salazar shares her stories that closely mirror women who came before her. "My grandmother got raped when she was 13 by her father and she had the baby," says Salazar, "my mother, on the other hand, was raped by a random person she didn't know."

When it came to seeking mental assistance after the traumatic event, Salazar comments that her female relatives "just shoved it under the rug." This type of response to trauma experienced by an individual from the Latino community is a common occurrence.

Research conducted by the National Association of Social Workers, it was concluded that the Hispanic / Latino community often perceives mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, as manifestations of physical or spiritual problems. As a result of this mentality, individuals from this ethnic group are more likely to seek treatment from a physician rather than a psychologist.

Looking specifically at rape culture in the Latino community, there is a high chance that women will become shunned if they chose to speak out about their assault. In a study conducted by Harriet P. Lefley and her colleagues, it was reported that Latin women are more likely to receive ostracism from their communities for sexual attacks.

The negative response towards victims is rooted in the machismo complex (toxic masculinity) that has plagued the community for centuries. Resulting of the lack of public support for victims of sexual violence, most Hispanic / Latin women have no outlet to discuss what has happened to them safely.

For Salazar, she has moved several times throughout the state of New Jersey in order to avoid her attackers and flee the looming expulsion that was created by adults in her neighborhood. "My mom was truly one of the only people who believed me … I was a child, why would I lie about that?", says Salazar.

Despite the constant stream of trauma she has experienced on American soil, Salazar is also the spearhead of the next generations' trauma due to her migration when she was 3 years old.

In 2006, Salazar's family made the decision to live a better life and leave their small town near the capital of Santiago. "I remember my mom buying me a bunch of new toys and taking me to the park right before we went to the airport," Salazar recalls.

When it comes to migration, individuals experience a new set of extensive trauma after arriving in the United States via inadequate living conditions, limited social support, racial discrimination, and healthcare barriers. High levels of stress accumulated from assimilating into a new nation, alongside previous stressors that occurred in their home nation, put Hispanic / Latino immigrants at a greater risk for the development of psychological problems.

Mentally balancing past and present trauma leads most immigrants to a state of shock. When it comes to Hispanic / Latino immigrants, the deterioration of their mental well-being often leads to a loss of cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems.

"All the traditions that I used to do in my country, we don't do it here," comments Salazar, "my mom stopped cooking cuisine from our country, we don't celebrate the Chilean Independence Day, and I just miss all the things we used to do."

When Salazar first came to the States, her mother immediately enrolled her in dance classes so she can assimilate into the American culture. Since the age of 3, Salazar spends most of her time dancing for amateur K-Pop groups when she's not working full-time at a childcare facility, alongside her mother. For Salazar, her passion for dancing means more than what one would see on the surface.

"Every time I get the opportunity to dance traditionally, I feel like I'm back in my country … I'm transported back home," Salazar says.

"I feel like it's preventable, like no matter how many precautions to take, it's going to happen maybe at least one time to you," says the New Jersey teen. This mentality seems to be passed on throughout generations - if it happened to your ancestors, then it's bound to happen to you.

After speaking with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds and upbringings, it's safe to state that intergenerational trauma from your ancestral past is still prevalent in today's younger generation living in the United States.

Black children are still reeling from the effects of slavery and directly learning how to combat racism from older family members who lived through the Jim Crow era. Indigenous children are still grieving the loss of their sacred land all while trying to put the pieces together about their cultural heritage. Latino children are still carrying the burdens that were placed on their relatives before they traveled to the States.

Despite relishing the hardship that comes alongside intergenerational trauma, the biggest commonality with them all is the word "healing".

"I'm still healing from as I live in the city is having a loss of identity, not feeling like you belong on the reserve, and not feeling like you belong in the rest of the world," says the Indigenous college student.

"I think the first step is becoming aware of where the issues lie and simply healing so I can stop it being passed down to the next generation," says the young African American woman.

“I dont know when I’ll fully heal but I definitely paved the way for mental health and how to learn to deal with the trauma,” says the Latin teenager.

While intergenerational trauma establishes a scientific connection via epigenetics, this is considered to be an active advancement in modern medicine. With that said, we, unfortunately, do not have a clear solution to stop intergenerational trauma from occurring to those next in line.

Not having a definite answer to end intergenerational trauma, today’s youth are actively doing everything they can to stop the passing of the trauma touch to future generations – the first step is simply having hope in the healing process.