

Study shows children of Holocaust survivors react differently to trauma

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Modern medicine usually considers trauma—both the physical and the psychological kinds—as unequivocally damaging. Now researchers at Tel Aviv University are lending support to a more philosophical view of suffering, finding that trauma, however terrible, may have distinct psychological benefits.

Last year, junior investigator Dr. Sharon Dekel and Prof. Zahava Solomon of TAU's Bob Shapell School of Social Work found that individuals with Holocaust-survivor parents may be less likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder in the wake of their own traumas. In a study published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, the researchers set out to see if so-called second-generation Holocaust survivors also undergo more post-traumatic "growth."

"Post-traumatic growth can be defined as a workable coping mechanism, a way of making and finding meaning involved in the building of a more positive self-image and the perception of personal strength," said Dekel. "We were interested in studying the effect of the Holocaust on the second generation's propensity for this kind of growth. If we can identify verifiably positive implications of trauma, we will be able to incorporate them into treatment and teach people how to grow after terrible experiences," she said.

Trauma's silver lining

Researchers have traditionally focused on the negative implications of trauma, and survivors have been shown to pass this burden onto their children. But a growing body of evidence suggests that trauma can have positive outcomes as well. Some survivors of traumatic events develop new priorities, closer relationships, an increased appreciation of life, a greater sense of personal strength, and experience heightened spirituality.

In an earlier study, Dekel and Solomon found that veterans of Israel's Yom Kippur War were less likely to experience [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) and related conditions many years after combat if they were also second-generation Holocaust survivors. The researchers proposed several explanations, including that children of trauma survivors may have acquired coping mechanisms from their parents that helped protect them from traumas in their own lives.

With this theory in mind, they returned to combat veterans of the Yom Kippur War for their latest study, funded in part by the Narsad Young Investigator Grant, which Dekel received from the Brain and Behavior Research Foundation with the sponsorship of Dr. Dylan Tauber. Using self-report questionnaires, the researchers assessed post-traumatic growth in the veterans 30 and 35 years after the war. They report that, contrary to their expectations, second-generation Holocaust survivors had consistently lower post-traumatic growth levels than non-second generation survivors across times.

The second-generation Holocaust survivors, therefore, don't experience their own traumas as "trauma virgins" would, since they are already conditioned by their parents' experience—and, therefore, themselves experience no growth.

Making sense of the incomprehensible

Dekel and Solomon offer several explanations for the fact that second-generation Holocaust survivors who fought in the Yom Kippur War apparently do not have higher rates of post-traumatic growth to match their lower rates of PTSD. The second-generation Holocaust survivors could have grown up in families that did not discuss trauma, inhibiting their post-traumatic growth. Moreover, they could have inherited their parents' guilt for having survived the Holocaust, making it difficult for them to associate trauma with growth and causing them to underreport post-traumatic growth in the latest study.

Another proposed explanation is that second-generation Holocaust survivors grew up constantly exposed to their parents' trauma, making war less stressful for them and lessening their post-traumatic growth, which is understood as the result of struggle with the trauma. The researchers dismiss the idea that no trans-generational transmission of trauma occurs at all, noting that both their studies on the subject show that second-generation Holocaust survivors respond differently to trauma than others.

Trans-generational transmission of trauma seems to limit offspring's positive adaptation following trauma, say the researchers. As for future research, Dekel, who is now affiliated with the Psychiatry Department of Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, plans to focus on identifying objective markers of post-traumatic growth in [trauma](#) survivors and their children, looking at things like stress-hormone levels, open-ended narrative descriptions, and reports by friends.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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