

Intergenerational trauma evident in offspring caring for Holocaust survivor parents

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More than 70 years since the end of World War II, there are still signs of intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma that are manifested in the way adult offspring of Holocaust survivors care for their elderly parents, according to a new study by researchers at Bar-Ilan University.

To this day scholars debate whether intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma indeed exists. On the one hand, there are those who claim that [offspring](#) of Holocaust survivors demonstrate impressive resilience and do not differ in major health markers (such as symptoms of depression and anxiety) from those whose parents did not experience the Holocaust. Other researchers insist that survivors' suffering has lingered across generations, thereby affecting their offspring and other kin. In an attempt to bridge these contrasting views, another theory suggests that the offspring of survivors are generally resilient, yet their vulnerability is exposed when they are coping with continuous stress.

With the latter theory in mind, the Bar-Ilan University researchers conducted a three-part study examining the way in which adult offspring of Holocaust survivors deal with stress related to serving as caregivers to their elderly parents. Their findings were recently published in the journal *Aging & Mental Health* in a study entitled "Filial anxiety and sense of obligation among offspring of Holocaust survivors".

In the first study the researchers performed intensive interviews with ten

adult offspring servings as caregivers to their survivor parents. The offspring shared their concerns and worries regarding their parents' condition, and emphasized their desire to protect their parents from additional suffering. They also mentioned the unique difficulties involved in caring for traumatized parents, such as their resistance to being treated by Jewish physicians who have German names.

In the second study they interviewed 60 adult offspring, half of whose parents survived the Holocaust and half whose parents were not directly exposed to the Holocaust. Compared with their counterparts, the offspring of survivors reported a greater commitment to caring for their parents and experienced greater anxiety regarding their parents' condition.

In the third study 286 participants, comprised of 143 parent-child dyads (some with Holocaust background and some without) were interviewed. This study found that heightened filial obligation and anxiety were especially salient among offspring of survivors who suffered from [post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

"These findings have some important practical implications for practitioners assisting adult offspring of Holocaust survivors in caring for their parents," said Prof. Amit Shrira, of the Interdisciplinary Department of Social Sciences, who conducted the research with Dr. Moshe Bensimon, of the Department of Criminology, and their graduate student Ravit Menashe. "Practitioners should help both sides process negative emotions, resolve conflictual and problematic relationships, and improve their relationships. They should also facilitate offspring comprehension of, and empathy towards, complicated behaviors exhibited by the care recipient. Lastly, they should encourage offspring of Holocaust survivors to express their own needs and suggest other methods of care for their [parents](#) so that the burden doesn't fall entirely upon them."

More information: Amit Shrira et al, Filial anxiety and sense of obligation among offspring of Holocaust survivors, *Aging & Mental Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/13607863.2018.1448970](https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2018.1448970)

Provided by Bar-Ilan University

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