

Inheriting Trauma and Vicarious Exposure: Ramifications for Adolescents

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Introduction

People are complex. They are an amalgamation of a historic journey through an evolutionary process. While living in the present, they are custodians of the past, genetically and psychologically. Individuality arises from their unique experience of home environments, upbringing and experience blending with individual characteristics. At the same time, the land to which they belong, or migrate to, eventually leads to a collective psyche, or a common heritage [1].

Each individual in the land of Pakistan actually carries a history. This history goes back to his ancestor's time. Whatever he may be today, his past is always with him. Carrying the weight of Muslim origins and history, each individual is laden with several kinds of trauma. One is the spiritual trauma - of the massacre of the Holy Prophets' (PBUH) grandson at Karbala; later the breakup and demise of the Ottoman Caliphate. Closer to home, is the burden of living for generations under British rule, followed by the trauma of Partition in 1947, compounded by the debacle of East Pakistan. The first generation of Pakistanis experienced direct pain and loss of loved ones in the riots following 1947. They lost parents and relatives, home and livelihoods. These losses ensured that there was no turning back. They focused on rebuilding lives and raised a generation [2]. They underwent expulsion and migration from ancestral lands only to face a bloody dismemberment of the country three decades later. To date, the horrors of East Pakistan are engraved on the hearts of many of the elders and too painful to talk about.

The past is glorified and heroic deeds are praised, the generation which fought for and achieved Pakistan, chose not to talk of personal pain. Individuals and societies have their own mechanisms and systems for adapting, resisting and surviving; thus, these people coped in their own way too. This denial, at individual and collective level has continued to date, and suppression of emotions is the preferred way of life. This has rendered expression of all ranges of emotions, except anger, as undignified and unacceptable. Temporarily this is effective. However, the most serious consequence has been an undermining of the importance of mental health and the role it plays in general well-being. While the violence of the Partition is well-documented in literature or art, discussion about the effects of trans-generational trauma in this context is rare [3]. The present generation inheriting detachment and denial, has grown up with its share of trauma as survivors of terrorist attacks, along with earthquakes and flooding - all compounding human misery. The subject of trans-generational trauma in the Sub-continent has yet to be raised in local research. Overall, the focus of researches has been short-term and the need is to explore the multi-dimensional phenomenon of terror attacks and trauma from a Pakistani perspective [4]. Thus in addition to the need to understand effect of direct exposure to violence or natural disasters, the vicarious effects in general population the world over have yet to be acknowledged [5]. Repeated exposure to traumatic material, changes perception of reality, listening to explicit accounts of traumatic event, or even explicit knowledge, leads to the experience of serious, prolonged anxiety in varying degrees [6].

Vicarious trauma due to indirect exposure was investigated in an exploratory study conducted by the author as part of doctoral research,

on adolescents aged between 14-17 years [7]. In the sample (n=1074) which consisted of 44% girls and 56% boys, average indirect exposure to violent events was found to be higher than the rest of the world [8-10]. An Events Exposure Questionnaire developed by the researcher found that 83% of the sample had indirect exposure to traumatic events occurring up till two years ago, while rest had been exposed to older events. Majority of the adolescents reported one time exposure to an event which had occurred more than a year earlier. The Impact of Events Scale (Weiss and Marmar, was administered to determine presence of moderate level of PTSD symptoms. Students whose standard scores were around the mean were considered to be experiencing mild, moderate symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and 54% percent of adolescents were found in this category [11]. This lends support to the findings that indirect exposure to traumatic events can lead to the development of moderate yet chronic symptoms of PTSD, which can persist for years [12,13]. This also highlights opportunities for further research; such as effect of indirect exposure due to parental or familial trauma on adolescents. Identified and referred students are highly likely to be experiencing PTSD with delayed onset, indicating a need for intervention in school environments. The study also found that 44% of sample had been indirectly exposed to a traumatic event in which someone they knew had either been kidnapped or was a victim of a bomb blast, the rest of the sample had varying ranges of exposure to natural and manmade traumatic events. High exposure was found to two passenger airplane crashes in the country during the time period under analysis [14]. Although the crashes had occurred at a gap of six months, their impact had persisted for more than a year. The crashes were national tragedies and mourned across the country. This also has implications for vicarious trauma occurring through media and role of parents [15]. The culture of violence and aggression needs to be countered with large doses of education and then some more education. Psychologists, particularly educational and school psychologists are desperately needed to step into the vacuum and work with the youngsters. Serving as a bridge between the school and the parent, their role in identifying, assessing, counselling and intervening can eventually restore the balance [16]. A traumatised generation needs guidance in order to live fully and be ready to handle the demands of the future. The focus of this paper has been to identify and highlight areas for future research. Social scientists need to venture into hitherto unexplored arenas and seek solutions, interventions and remedies for an ailing culture. In the culture of the Indian sub-continent, patience, stoicism and religious faith, and belief in fate are the main reasons for which individuals when traumatized, live with it. At the same time,

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people undergo changes in personalities, in interpersonal dealings, and child rearing, which can have profound implications for loved ones, relatives and society in general. It can be denial and dissociation, among other factors which enables people continue to live their lives detached and oblivious to life around them. Collective responsibility requires that communities work together for common goals. Culturally relevant interventions are lacking and while the traumatic responses may be universally same, cultural differences compound matters when identification and treatment is required [17-19]. Trauma is an inevitable part of human life, but rather than transmitting its negativity for generations, focusing on building resilience and fostering posttraumatic growth can lead to healthier minds and lifestyles.

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