

How the Family Unit Impacts the Mental Health of Teens when Intergenerational Trauma Due to

Racism is Involved

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Introduction

Racism is discrimination and prejudice towards people based on race and ethnicity. Historically, racism has been used to describe the unfair treatment, mistreatment, and abuse of certain races and ethnic groups. Family influences who we are by providing love and support, teaching us right and wrong, and teaching us how to interact with others. By helping one another, families can help create a strong and connected community. Exploring the dynamics within a family, including communication, support, conflict resolution, and parental mental health, significantly impacts the mental well-being of adolescents and provides a primary framework for this topic.

Additionally, when examining how positive family environments can act as a protective factor against mental health issues, it becomes apparent that negative ones can contribute to anxiety, depression, and other psychological problems. Now, after considering each of these factors, add in an additional complex layer of racism and its adverse effects. When intergenerational trauma caused by racism is present within a family unit, it can significantly impact the mental health of teenagers by creating a stressful and sometimes toxic environment, leading to increased risk of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, substance abuse, as parents may unknowingly pass on coping mechanisms or negative beliefs related to their own experiences with racism, impacting how their children perceive and navigate the world around them; it can also manifest in strained parent-child relationships due to difficulties communicating about race and related experiences.

Contextual Information

Before discussing the analysis of the essay more profoundly, the reader must understand terms that will be frequently used and crucial to understanding the research analyzed; therefore, these topics will be briefly defined and explained here before moving further. Family dynamics are like a pattern of interactions between relatives, the way they act and treat you, and the factors that shape their interactions. Since families depend on each other for physical and economic reasons, they are the primary source of relationships for security and stress. Secure relationships in the family provide love, care, happiness, and advice. In contrast, stressful family relationships are held down by arguments and stress, making them do things they don't want to do anymore. Interactions between family members can have a significant influence and impact on the mental health of the individual, good or bad. Researchers have identified flexibility, stability, clear communication, and warmth as the main factors leading to a healthy family dynamic. The factors contributing to unhealthy family dynamics are enmeshment, isolation, firmness, unclear communication, and role conflict. Understanding family dynamics is significant in the breakdown of the family unit.

The family unit differs from family dynamics in that it refers to the members in proximity. In previous generations, families usually stayed together and helped raise their children. Now, it's more common for families to be spread out geographically and have no connection with each other, and grandparents have less involvement in their grandchildren's lives because of their parents. With extended family not being close by, some consider their immediate family members as a core group. This family structure can change as families move locations. Unfortunately, though, it does not matter whether a family moves geographically; racism exists everywhere. Racism is prejudice and discrimination based on the race that you are. For example, when a person is treated worse than another, excluded, harassed, bullied, or

humiliated, it's because of their race and ethnicity. Experiencing or being close to those who experience racism can lead to intergenerational trauma in the future. Intergenerational trauma can be defined as the transference of both psychological and physiological effects of trauma across multiple generations of the family. This essay is specific to when a traumatic event or series of events involving racism were experienced by one generation and had a lasting impact on subsequent generations.

Intergenerational Trauma in the Family unit from Racism impacts teens' mental health by increasing:

The lasting effect of the traumatization of racism from one generation to the next has been shown to have an impact on adolescents' mental health. In an article from the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, the authors clearly state that “Indeed, there is a robust evidence base demonstrating the negative mental health and physical impacts of racial discrimination and internalized racial inferiority” (Hankerson et al. 3). Thus, it can be deduced from Hankerson et al.’s article “The Intergenerational Impact of Structural Racism and Cumulative Trauma on Depression” that due to what these authors call structural racism, can result in historical trauma, which includes intergenerational trauma at its core. It is abundantly clear that the link between racism, the family, and mental health cannot be denied, nor can it be broken. Historical trauma theory alludes to how the emotional consequences of mass traumatic experiences can be transferred to the following generations through physiological, environmental, and social pathways. At this point, Hankerson et al. state:

This results in an intergenerational cycle of trauma response, including physical (compromised immune system, endocrine impairment, adrenal maladaptation), social (domestic violence, child maltreatment, substance abuse, involvement in crime), and

psychological (depression, panic/anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder) (3-4). As the trauma is passed down cyclically, eventually, it surfaces in adolescents' mental health. As mentioned by Hankerson et al., various psychological factors will consequently result from intergenerational trauma. However, a focus on anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and substance abuse will be the primary focus.

Addressed first will be the result of anxiety in teens from intergenerational trauma due to racism experienced by the family. When these anxieties first manifest, they may look similar to other symptoms of anxiety: hypervigilance, restlessness, irritability, difficulty sleeping, and a tendency to withdraw from social situations (Raypole). Hypervigilance, restlessness, and irritability can look like a constant state of being on edge, anticipating potential threats or harm, or difficulty staying calm, feeling agitated, and quickly becoming frustrated or angered (James). Anxiety caused by intergenerational trauma due to racism can also cause difficulty concentrating, which makes it hard for teens to focus on small tasks, schoolwork, or other activities, leaving them feeling overwhelmed. A consequence of this state of overwhelming anxiety can be avoidance of specific places, people, or activities that trigger reminders of past trauma ("Race-Based Traumatic Stress"). Sometimes, teens end up having difficulty accepting cultural customs in public, which results in their attempt to present themselves as "racially innocuous" or invisible to avoid further trauma or stigmatization. However, the worst outcome of anxiety from intergenerational trauma of racism is internalized racism, where the teen identifies with negative self-beliefs and stigmas resulting from chronic societal devaluation.

The second main focus addressed is on depression. Depression is a common mental health problem that teens have, and you know they have it when they're in emotional distress, a change in sleep or appetite, Loss of interest, not being able to concentrate on anything, feeling

hopeless, self-destructive, or engaging in risky behavior, and many more. In the article “Racial Stress and Trauma and the Development of Adolescent Depression: A Review of Vigilance Evoked by Racism-Related Threat,” it was overlooked as how racism–related stress and trauma, known as (RST), can lead to depression, specifically for groups like African Americans, Latinas, Asians, and Native Americans which is known as “ALANA” (Woody). When the cause of depression can be caused by losing someone, being abused, or even bullied, what hasn't been recognized is that depression can also be caused by racism being involved during childhood trauma. Having to experience racism, whether it is coming directly from someone, people, schools, or a community, can cause emotional damage/pain, like anxiety and distress for a person (Woody). Over time, these situations can lead to long-term depression, which can be even harder to deal with in an ALANA group.

Another key reason why racism can lead to depression is because of something called vigilance or “hypervigilance”. Vigilance is when a person looks out for racist situations (Woody). This can make the person more stressed or anxious. Study shows that “During elementary school (6-11 year olds) learn that the color of their skin can impact how they are being treated by others and can influence their safety and security” The constant worry can cause emotional problems, making it so that depression is more likely to be caused. Vigilance can be voluntary, where someone is expecting a situation to happen, or involuntary, where they can feel like they are surrounded by racism even when nothing is going on. When expecting racism to happen or seeing others being in a situation can add more stress, especially when the ALANA group sees things on the news or things being spread around by other individuals about racial violence. As this group is constantly being exposed to racism directly and indirectly, it can make their mental health worse, leading to issues like anxiety, social withdrawal, and even substance abuse.

This article also talks about the chronic stress that a child can have with ongoing racism. This affects the brain and the body. This is a kind of stress that can tear the body down and can lead to serious health problems like depression: “Study also shows being stressed over racism can cause inflammation on the body and can also cause problems with the brain” (Woody). These are things that can be linked to depression. This article also points out that during the stage of becoming a young adult, they become more aware of their racial identity. This would mean that they are more vulnerable to the effects of racism. As the ALANA youth group is facing more racism problems, specifically in school, or around other peers, it will have a bigger impact on their mental health. This article is looking into more research into how racism can affect the body and brain; they are also looking into more programs and treatments to help the ALANA youth deal with the challenges of mental health due to the fact that racism is involved.

Addressed third will be the aftermath of affecting a teen's self-esteem when racism is involved. Teenagers may constantly put themselves down, thinking they are not good enough or feel like their worth is lower than others. They find it difficult to connect with others, due to their feelings not being the same, feeling ashamed, guilty, or fear of rejection, leading teens to social isolation. The study shows “ more recent researchers have begun to explore the effects of racial discrimination on child and adolescent populations. Results from a number of studies have linked experiences of discrimination and perceived racism to a range of psychosocial difficulties in African American youth, including low self-esteem and depressive symptoms” (Harris-Britt et al.). This article talks about the connection between discrimination and the self-esteem of African American teens, showing that the experience of racism, whether it happens every day or now and then, can hurt their mental health and lower their self-worth. Knowing that this is concerning for every race, the African American youth is more exposed to discrimination

because of their race (Harris-Britt et al). The study of this article explains how these situations can lead to low self-esteem and stress, and even make teens absorb negative thoughts about themselves because of the color of their skin (Harris-Britt et al.). Although this article doesn't just talk about how discrimination affects low self-esteem, it talks about how society should come together and be stronger. One way to protect against the harmful effects is a thing called racial socialization.

Racial socialization is when parents, families, and communities teach young people to understand the definition of race and how to deal with the challenges when facing racism due to their identity, and will and can embrace their cultural heritage. The article “ Perceived Racial Discrimination and Self-Esteem in African American Youth: Racial Socialization as a Protective Factor,” explains two key ways racial socialization helps: racial pride messages and preparation for bias. Racial pride messages are what people do to encourage young people to take pride in their African American cultural knowledge of their heritage. In the current study it I said that this study makes two important contributions to the research literature: “racial socialization is examined as a protective factor in the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem among young adolescents; and both linear and curvilinear effects of racial pride socialization and preparation for discrimination were tested” (Harris-Britt et al.). Meaning when the youth feels proud of their identity, they are more likely to feel more confident about situations when it comes to facing racism. These ideas help a person build a better self-image, so they aren't letting discrimination make them feel less of who they actually are. Another way to protect against the harmful effects is preparation for bias, which is about helping young people be prepared for the possibility of facing racism. This is about helping the young individuals understand that they can face fair treatment due to the fact that they are African American, and

can provide ideas to help them deal with it. This socialization helps the individuals recognize discrimination and teaches them how to handle it so that their self-esteem cannot be lowered.

Another important area for future research is to better understand how racial socialization occurs within African American families as the article states (Harris-Britt et al.). This research discusses that when the youth hear and learn about the two, they tend to have better self-esteem, more emotional strength, and their mental health is way better even when dealing with discrimination. This will help them feel stronger and more capable of dealing with the challenges of living in a life where they may not always be treated fairly. The article shows that positive racial socialization is important for African Americans and that getting them to stay mentally strong is essential. Knowing that racial discrimination is still a considerable problem, the article suggests that the African American youth should be taught to be confident in their color and be able to deal with the prejudice that can help with their self-esteem (Harris-Britt et al). Finally, this calls for families, communities, and schools to focus on giving young people the support they need to build toughness and be protected from the adverse effects of discrimination. By being able to teach racial pride and learning how to handle bias, together we can help people gain confidence and grow up to be proud of who they are.

Lastly addressed will be substance use, this type of mental health issue manifests as a form of self-medication, a coping mechanism, or a way to numb emotional pain, potentially leading to addiction and further exacerbating mental health issues. Trauma: related mental health issues- intergenerational trauma can lead to mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and PTSD, which can increase the likelihood of substance use as a form of self-medication, sometimes stemming from the initially prescribed medication to treat such conditions failing or pertaining to misdiagnosis. The article “The Intergenerational Trauma of Slavery and its

Aftermath” is about a Jewish woman who was a white journalist who was described as the distant cousin of one of the Holocaust victims who was also a child of an immigrant Jew. The woman's grandmother told her all these stories, which she still remembers today. She talks about how the effects of slavery still affect the issue of enslaved people even though they didn't necessarily experience it themselves. This study shows that slavery wasn't just about the abuse that people suffered, but it also caused emotional and physiological harm, and that harm was passed down through generations. This harm was never stopped when people were enslaved, but it was more or less passed down to their children and grandchildren. This ongoing trauma can be often referred to as intergenerational trauma. Slavery involved extreme violence, which can have a significant effect on someone's life. The people who were enslaved were not just physically harmed, but they were also emotionally and mentally damaged. Another way of addressing this trauma is that our society has not fully noticed the wrongs of the past, and they just carry on with it. Systematic racism, oppression, and economic inequality seem to continue to affect the issue of enslaved people, keeping the cycle of the trauma going. Without trying to fix it or taking action to make up for the damage, the trauma continues to hurt future generations. This article also discusses the importance of storytelling when dealing with this trauma. The Jewish journalist learned about her family history through her grandmother's stories; people affected by slavery must tell their stories. Society doesn't understand that to heal, we need not just to remember what happened, but we need people to recognize the pain, take accountability, and fix the issue. The effects of slavery didn't just stop when slaves were freed; this issue is still ongoing, and it's a problem that affects people's mental health, which can lead to anxiety, depression, Low self-esteem, or substance abuse.

Self-medication- may turn to substances like alcohol, drugs, or other substances to cope with emotional distress caused by intergenerational trauma, racism, and related mental health challenges. Experiencing or being in a stressful environment can be challenging for a teen, which can lead them to substance use like drugs, alcohol, or tobacco (Amaro et al) This can have a significant impact on mental health, especially because teens are still trying to figure out themselves, and their emotions and how to cope when being in tough situations. When teens face a lot of stress, they mainly turn to substances to help escape feelings of anxiety, sadness, or frustration, which can make them turn to substances even more; that thing is called addiction. Being addicted to substances is a thing teens struggle with, and being addicted to substances can possibly lead to relapsing (Amaro et al). Stressing how important it is to understand these factors, like where teens are staying or how others are even treating them, can affect their mental health and emotional well-being. When living in environments with high levels of poverty, being discriminated against, and not being able to talk about it with parents, violence, or neglect can make teens feel unwelcome. In situations like this, substances may be a way to escape reality or feel numb.

Additionally, issues like racial discrimination will make things multiple times worse, increasing the feeling of isolation and stress (Amaro et al.).Experiencing racism or discrimination is also another way that will lead teens to substance use. When teens are being mistreated because of their race, it hurts their feelings, making them feel less of themselves, angry, or like they have no control. More or so overtime, these feelings cause mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and loneliness, and that's when the substance use comes in. Racism is not just a thing that happens once in a while, and can be an ongoing thing that affects mental health negatively and makes teens more likely to use substances. However, these

challenges can add up and make things harder for teens. For example, a teen dealing with stress, growing up with a parent, and dealing with discrimination might even feel more pressure, which will lead to more substance use. These challenges do come separately, they just build on each other, making it harder for teens and their emotions. Without having healthy coping skills or having no support, substances can be a way to help escape from pain (Amaro et al). However, substance use may provide a source of relief; it ultimately makes the mental health problems worse, which leads to cycles of struggles, making decisions poorly, and overall making the mental health worse (Amaro et al). Substance use isn't just about feeling numb or getting high right in the moment, something like this can cause problems in the long run. Continued substance use can cause issues with a teen's brain development, making it impossible for them to focus in school or increasing problems with mental health like mood disorders or anxiety (Amaro et al). The article talks about how solving substance abuse problems needs more than just treating the problem itself. It's essential to look at the issue's root, such as figuring out why substance use happens in the first place. Programs designed to help stop or prevent substance use in teens need to address the factors and focus on helping create healthier environments and helping teens build a backbone (Amaro et al.). To fully prevent substance use and help teens with their mental health, the article states that approaching mental health care and support within the community, changing and addressing the issues within society, can help improve the community. This probably can reduce the long-term harm of substance use in teens' lives. This might include helping teens learn how to find a better way to cope, helping them build confidence, making the environment safer, and helping them feel supported. In conclusion, by addressing these challenges and offering guidance, society can help teens overcome this issue and help them from being at risk of substance use, helping their mental health and well-being.

What does this intergenerational trauma mean for future generations?

Carrying on trauma for future generations can lead to negative outcomes, which can include mental health issues in the long run. This article discusses trauma and how it can be passed down from generation to generation. It goes into detail about how, when parents go through trauma, especially when they're pregnant, it can affect their own mental health and also the mental health of their children. This happens through epigenetics, meaning that trauma can manage how genes work without changing genetic material. Changes like this affect how the brain reacts to stress, how emotions are controlled, and mental health. The idea of intergenerational trauma suggests that the emotional damage caused by trauma not only affects the person who experienced it, but it also affects their children, even their grandchildren. This has been shown in research, like with the Holocaust survivors, where their children experienced mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD. For example, the article "The Intergenerational Trauma of Slavery and its Aftermath" is about a Jewish white journalist who was described as the distant cousin of one of the Holocaust victims, who was also a child of an immigrant Jew. The woman's grandmother told her all these stories, which she still remembers today. She talks about how the effects of slavery still affect the issue of enslaved people, even though they didn't necessarily experience it themselves. This study shows that slavery wasn't just about the abuse that people suffered, but it also caused emotional and physiological harm, and that harm was passed down through generations. This harm was never stopped when people were enslaved, but it was more or less passed down to their children and grandchildren, which would be considered intergenerational trauma.

Understanding how trauma is passed down from one generation to another is really important because this cycle of trauma needs to be broken. If we notice that trauma can affect multiple people in many generations, the current generation can be helped by addressing the

mental effects early. This can typically involve giving families the right kind of information to help their mental health, teaching ways to manage stress, and using the trauma that they experienced to help with that. This article states that more research needs to be done to find more ways to help undo the damage that was done, maybe helping with treatments through the genes caused by it. The article also talks about being able to address the trauma early. If trauma can not only affect the people who experienced it but also their kids, then helping people who have been through it can stop the effects from being passed down to future generations. Breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma can help create healthier generations in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, intergenerational trauma doesn't just impact the person who goes through it, but also their children and their future children. It shows how trauma affects both the body and the mind, and how not being able to control either can be problematic. Addressing these issues can reduce the trauma being passed down and help future generations become stronger. Not addressing these issues or talking to your children about them can make situations worse and cause difficulties in the future for your child and their children, then it just carries on. Talking about these issues, getting your mental health stable, and learning about trauma will help prevent the cycle from being added to. When things are talked about among themselves and with their children, it gives them a better chance in the family to grow together and become stronger as one, emotionally and mentally. However, if these problems are ignored and never talked about, it can keep the pain going, cause confusion, and cause struggles not only for the person who experienced it, but also for the families as well. Without being helped, trauma does not go away, it stays, and it affects more people over time. It can only take one person to face the past and improve things for the future.

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