TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA IN HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR FAMILIES

BY DEBORAH NAOMI WATERS, LMSW

This month marked the fourth meeting in the series, “Survivor Families: Our Parents, Ourselves, Our Changing Lives,” organized for children of Holocaust survivors by Bikur Cholim Chesed Organization and held at the Boro Park Y. Led by Dr. Irit Felsen, the discussion focused on the intergenerational transmission of trauma from survivor parents to their children, and how the parents’ experiences shaped the motivations, choices, and overall outlooks on life that their children carried into adulthood.

Dr. Felsen, who summarized the materials she covered during the meeting on her blog (https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/), described the intergenerational transmission of trauma as “latent,” in that its effects are not evident in the functional abilities of children of survivors, but rather in their inner subjective perspectives, such as in their memories of childhood experiences, their unique psychological concerns, and in the development of their relationships.

The diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder had yet to exist in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and studies assessing the mental health and psychological well-being of survivors were sparse. Among those who did report symptoms, however, prevalence was high of symptoms that today would constitute a diagnosis of PTSD. Indeed, recent studies of survivors of the Holocaust show elevated symptoms of PTSD even 60 years later. It has also since emerged that along with the more well-known symptoms of avoidance, numbing, hyper-arousal and intrusive memories, living through trauma may also result in long-lasting changes in one’s personality and belief system. This is particularly true among survivors of complex trauma, where the individual is exposed to repeated traumatic events over a long period of time with no possibility of escape. Delayed onset of post-traumatic reactions, such as when facing a new loss or in response to illness or aging, is common.

Despite persistent post-traumatic reactions, Holocaust survivors have shown indisputable productivity and success, and against all odds, raised a highly achieving generation. With similar repressive coping, they have imbued their children with the capacity to tolerate significant hardship and pain has been described as “hardening,” the willingness to engage with trauma-related triggers, and a capacity, due to the family environment, to not engage on an emotional basis.

These findings, while seemingly at odds with one another, can be attributed to the display of similar coping mechanisms to those of their survivor parents, such as repression. Survivors, whose parents reported higher comparative levels of feelings of well-being. These findings, while seemingly at odds with one another, can be attributed to the display of similar coping mechanisms to those of their survivor parents, such as repression. Survivors, whose parents reported higher comparative levels of feelings of well-being, have also reported more health problems in middle age than their non-second-generation peers, particularly true among survivors of complex trauma, where the individual is exposed to repeated traumatic events over a long period of time with no possibility of escape. Delayed onset of post-traumatic reactions, such as when facing a new loss or in response to illness or aging, is common.

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However, the experiences of those who grew up in survivor families have continued to influence their subjective inner worlds, inform their feelings and responses to places and situations, and impact their relationships.

In the next meeting in this series, set for November 15th at the Boro Park Y from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m., Dr. Felsen plans to address some of the unique themes in the recollected childhood experiences of children of survivors, and their influence on their relationships with spouses, partners, children, and other significant people in their adult lives.

“Our Parents, Ourselves, Our Changing Lives” is made possible by a grant from the Jewish Federations of North America through their Center for Advancing Holocaust Survivor Care. For more information, please contact Mrs. Deborah Naomi Waters at (718) 438-2020, extension 7452.

Deborah Naomi Waters, a social worker who works with older adults, is a member of the project staff for the ongoing series, “Survivor Families: Our Parents, Ourselves, Our Changing Lives.”

OHEL INSTITUTE FOR TRAINING WIDENS SCOPE

The Mol and Phyllis Zachter Ohel Institute for Training is one of the first institutions to be recognized by the New York State Education Department’s State Board for Mental Health Practitioners as an Approved Provider of Continuing Education for both Licensed Mental Health Counselors and Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists. These practitioners can now join social workers in fulfilling their New York State requirements by attending the Institute’s trainings, confident that they will gain the knowledge and skills needed to meet diverse challenges facing our communities.

When New York State instituted continuing education requirements for Licensed Social Workers in 2015, Ohel’s Institute for Training was one of the first educational institutions to be recognized by the state as an approved provider of such training. Since then, thousands of social workers have flocked to the institute to learn from renowned experts, enhancing their professional development and skills while meeting state requirements.

Ohel CEO David Mandel comments, “OHEL’s Institute for Training continues to be a leader in advanced professional education, and this accreditation is further recognition of the clinical excellence and value the workshops, seminars and conferences provide to clinicians, educators, mental health professionals and the wider community.”

Ludmir - Esrogim

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כ tung וhוגים
מלתבש בחר או améric
פנילום המרובך
ולא ילוותי
ותחת מחוזק
ובכל ימי התורה
לולכי דרי
וגדים מיוחדים
מחוזק 미וחדים
ולפיים
ולולבי דרי
המוחזים ממהגאון המהרי"ל דיסקין זיע"א
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