

The Coronavirus and Intergenerational Trauma by Margaret Gray MSW



Although the Coronavirus is currently a reality in many countries, our reaction to it is individual. It is deeply connected to our own experiences, and to the nature and extent of intergenerational trauma in our background.

The realization that trauma that be passed down in some form or other through the generations first came to light with studies of the effect of the Holocaust on the children and grandchildren of survivors. These studies later widened to other traumas experienced in past generations including war, sexual abuse, famines, torture and more...

Sometimes the effects on later generations are visible and clear, and often they are more subtle and unconscious, and only surface at times of extreme stress and fear.

The key common issue that usually awakens the trauma is a threat to one's survival. Of course this is frightening to everyone, but for some individuals who have unresolved intergenerational trauma, reactions can appear to outweigh the actual threat.

Although the risk of death is currently not very high with the recently diagnosed Coronavirus, it is particularly likely to trigger some powerful reactions from anyone whose intergenerational trauma was connected to times of scarcity and hunger. In Ireland many of us still resonate with the famine from past generations. In Europe many are only a generation away from the scarcity of food and the horrors of the 2nd world war, not to mention refugees who just recently escaped the terror of conflicts and loss of the lives of many of their loved ones.

Some of the possible trauma based reactions with the Coronavirus might include:

1. A sense of paralyzing terror for your survival and the survival of your loved ones – regardless of your level of risk
2. A panic that there will be no food whatsoever available, and a desperation to acquire and hoard as much food as possible immediately. However much you already have, it's unlikely to ever feel enough.
3. A reluctance to leave your home for fear of contagion and a sense of panic when you do so – regardless of the level of risk
4. Catastrophic thinking about the future of the world - for e.g. we are all doomed, the banks will collapse, there will be no transport, hospitals will be unable to deal with the crisis...
5. An extreme sense of powerlessness and hopelessness.

Some steps you can take:

1. Recognize with lots of self-kindness and compassion, that what's going on is a trauma reaction from something that is likely to have happened in past generations.
2. When you feel the panic and terror rising – stop, ground and breathe! Grounding yourself in your body and on the earth will help anchor you within yourself and calm the panic. Breathing helps our body and mind to relax. There are lots of ways to ground – for e.g.
 - 1) Sitting on a chair with both feet on the ground, imagine that you are a tree with deep roots going into the core of the earth.
 - 2) You can also look around you for 5 mins and choose 5 colors you see, 5 textures you feel, 2 smells, 5 shapes.
 - 3) Walking in grass and earth is naturally grounding.
3. Journal about your fears and then re-read them – see if a part of you can recognize the pain behind the fears. Use self-soothing skills to nurture and comfort yourself.
4. It's helpful to stay well away from tabloids and social media sites that are known for their dramatic depiction of issues. Ideally limit the amount of time you look at the 'News' from any source and best to avoid the 'News' at night before bed.
5. If friends are feeding into your trauma based reactions with their fears, it can help to gently steer the conversation in another direction.
6. Talk to friends who have a balanced view of current events.
7. Talking to a counsellor can help to work through the deeper trauma that you have inherited from past generations.

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Take good care and always be kind to yourself

- Margaret Gray, MSW