Transformational Healing

Understanding Cultural Intergenerational Trauma

Transformational Healing
CHANGING LIFE TRAJECTORIES, ONE PERSON AT A TIME
a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization

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Individual trauma reverberates across communities but also across the generations. The concept of historic trauma was initially developed in the 1980s by First Nations and Aboriginal peoples in Canada to explain the seeming unending cycle of trauma and despair in their communities. Essentially, the devastating trauma of genocide, loss of culture, and forcible removal from family and communities are all unresolved and become a sort of ‘psychological baggage… continuously being acted out and recreated in contemporary Aboriginal culture’.

Gregory Phillips

"Trauma is qualitatively different from other negative life stressors as it fundamentally shifts perceptions of reality. Negative stressors:

leave an individual feeling ‘put out’, inconvenienced and stressed. These experiences are eventually relieved with the resolution of the stressor. In contrast, trauma represents destruction of the basic organising principles by which we come to know self, others and the environment; traumas wound deeply in a way that challenges the meaning of life. Healing from the wounds of such an experience requires a restitution of order and meaning in one’s life.

• **Situational trauma** – trauma that occurs as a result of a specific or discrete event, for example from a car accident, murder or being taken away.

• **Cumulative trauma** – it is subtle and the feelings build over time, for example racism.

• **Inter-generational trauma** – if trauma is not dealt with adequately in one generation, it often gets passed down unwittingly in our behaviours and in our thought systems. For example, if you want to heal children and youth, you have to heal yourself as well to break the cycle.”
Professor Helen Milroy

"The transgenerational effects of trauma occur via a variety of mechanisms including the impact of attachment relationship with care givers; the impact on parenting and family functioning; the association with parental physical and mental illness; disconnection and alienation from the extended family, culture and society. These effects are exacerbated by exposure to continuing high levels of stress and trauma including multiple bereavements and other losses, the process of vicarious traumatisation where children witness the on-going effects of the original trauma which a parent or care giver has experienced. Even where children are protected from the traumatic stories of their ancestors, the effects of past traumas still impact children in the form of ill health, family dysfunction, community violence, psychological morbidity and early mortality."

Professor Judy Atkinson

"Professor Judy Atkinson argues that trauma becomes expressed as anger, violence and criminal behaviour, where ‘rage turns inwards, but cascades down the generations, growing more complex over time’. Anger, hopelessness, worthlessness and lack of genuine opportunities and disconnection run like a common thread through the experiences of both victims and perpetrators of violence."

Gregory Phillips

Healing is a process, it is not just a strategy and a nice formula of a funding program.

Healing is a spiritual process that includes recovery from addiction, therapeutic change and cultural renewal. It can’t just be one, it must be all of those things.

"What is striking about the definitions above is how healing is different from health services, housing, aged care, or family support. These are crucial services that can help establish the foundation for healing to take place and support people during the healing process, but they are not healing in and of themselves."

Healing and trauma

"Healing is a necessary response to address trauma experienced by individual and communities. So to understand healing we also need to understand trauma. Trauma is a ‘sudden harmful disruption impacting on all of the spirit, body, mind and heart’ that requires healing. Psychologically, trauma has been defined as:

...an emotional state of discomfort and stress resulting from memories of an extraordinary catastrophic experience which shattered the survivor’s sense of invulnerability to harm."
Healing is part of reconciliation. It is not about attributing blame or a 'black armband' view of history but honestly facing up to the mistakes of the past and acknowledging our shared history and shared future."

Another way of understanding the different examples of healing programs is looking at them through the ‘three pillars’ of healing that have been developed by the Canadian Aboriginal Healing Fund. The three pillars are: reclaiming history; cultural interventions; and therapeutic healing.

These three categories are not always mutually exclusive but do help distinguish between healing approaches and other social and emotional and therapeutic models:

- Reclaiming history involves learning about the impact of specific events in history such as forcible removals, and allowing individuals to understand their experiences and trauma in a broader social context.

- Cultural interventions are activities ‘that engage people in a process of recovering and reconnecting with their culture, language, history, spirituality, traditions and ceremonies to reinforce self-esteem and a positive cultural identity’.

- Therapeutic healing includes a combination of traditional and Western therapies to help individuals and communities recover from trauma. The success of these approaches seems to be the melding of cultural interventions and therapeutic work to facilitate healing.

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