

Coping with Trauma Passed Down from Your Family

Objective

To identify ways to cope with trauma that has been passed down through the generations of your family.

What to Know

Intergenerational trauma is trauma passed from a trauma survivor to their descendants. It is also referred to as transgenerational or multigenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma can be the result of racial trauma or other systemic oppression.

If you experience intergenerational trauma, you may have symptoms, reactions, patterns, and emotional effects from the trauma experienced by your relatives. This can contribute to poverty, poor parenting, attachment problems, chronic stress, and unstable living environments. It can also manifest as medical issues including heart disease, diabetes, stroke, substance use disorder, or early death. In addition to the physical impact, other symptoms of intergenerational trauma include:

- shame
- anxiety
- depression
- a heightened sense of vulnerability and helplessness
- low self-esteem
- dissociation
- hypervigilance
- distrust of others
- intrusive thoughts
- low self-esteem
- problems with relationships and attachment to others
- difficulty regulating emotions
- extreme reactivity to stress

Intergenerational trauma can bring some families closer, while causing other families to drift apart. It can affect families in these ways.

- disconnection
- denial
- detachment
- distance
- minimizing children's life experiences in comparison to parents' trauma
- trauma bonding (*emotional connection between an abuser and their target*)
- estrangement
- neglect

- abuse
- violence

So, what can you do to cope with intergenerational trauma?

Create a peaceful and nurturing environment in your home. Create a safe and peaceful space for yourself and your family.

Educate yourself. Learn about trauma, trauma responses, and intergenerational trauma.

Name it. The connection between intergenerational trauma—which is often worsened by the chronic stress of present-day discrimination—often goes unnamed.

Build resilience. Just as trauma can be passed down from one generation to the next, so can the capacity for building resiliency.

Acknowledge the impact of what your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and ancestors survived. Your relatives may not have had the tools, energy, modeling, support, or space to cope because of constant stressors and the trauma of historical oppression or struggle. Acknowledge the validity of the trauma and where it comes from.

Use practices and exercises that put you in tune with your body. You might get a massage, practice yoga, take daily walks, or any other activity that allows you to be present and in touch with your physical sensations.

Seek help. Trauma-informed interventions and therapy can help you manage symptoms, understand the impact of trauma, and equip you with tools to cope. You might seek a professional trained in:

- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)
- somatic therapy
- internal family systems (IFS)
- prolonged exposure therapy (PE)
- cognitive processing therapy (CPT)

Honor the story. Uncover the actual triggering event in your family history and identify the fears and reactions that stem from what happened.

Cultivate open and loving communication between family members to foster resilience and connectivity. When trauma survivors tell their stories—and when descendants deal with their ancestors' pasts—new lines of healing communication open.

Engage in an open dialogue about lived experiences and family history. Talk about whatever you know about what happened to your parents and your grandparents. When you discuss your family's history, it can be a great relief. In contrast, intergenerational trauma snowballs in families that avoid talking about trauma or keep secrets—leading to maladaptive behavior.

Notice any patterns or attitudes from your family that you continue to exhibit. Talk with a trusted friend, family member, pastor, or therapist and consider alternative ways of coping and communicating.

Create a new story. When you and your family speak up and process hurt, pain, and abuse from the past, you can create a new narrative for future generations.

Have compassion for your family and their struggles. Despite their flaws, many of your ancestors worked hard so you could have a better life. Acknowledge and celebrate that.

This worksheet will help you cope with trauma that has been passed down through the generations of your family.

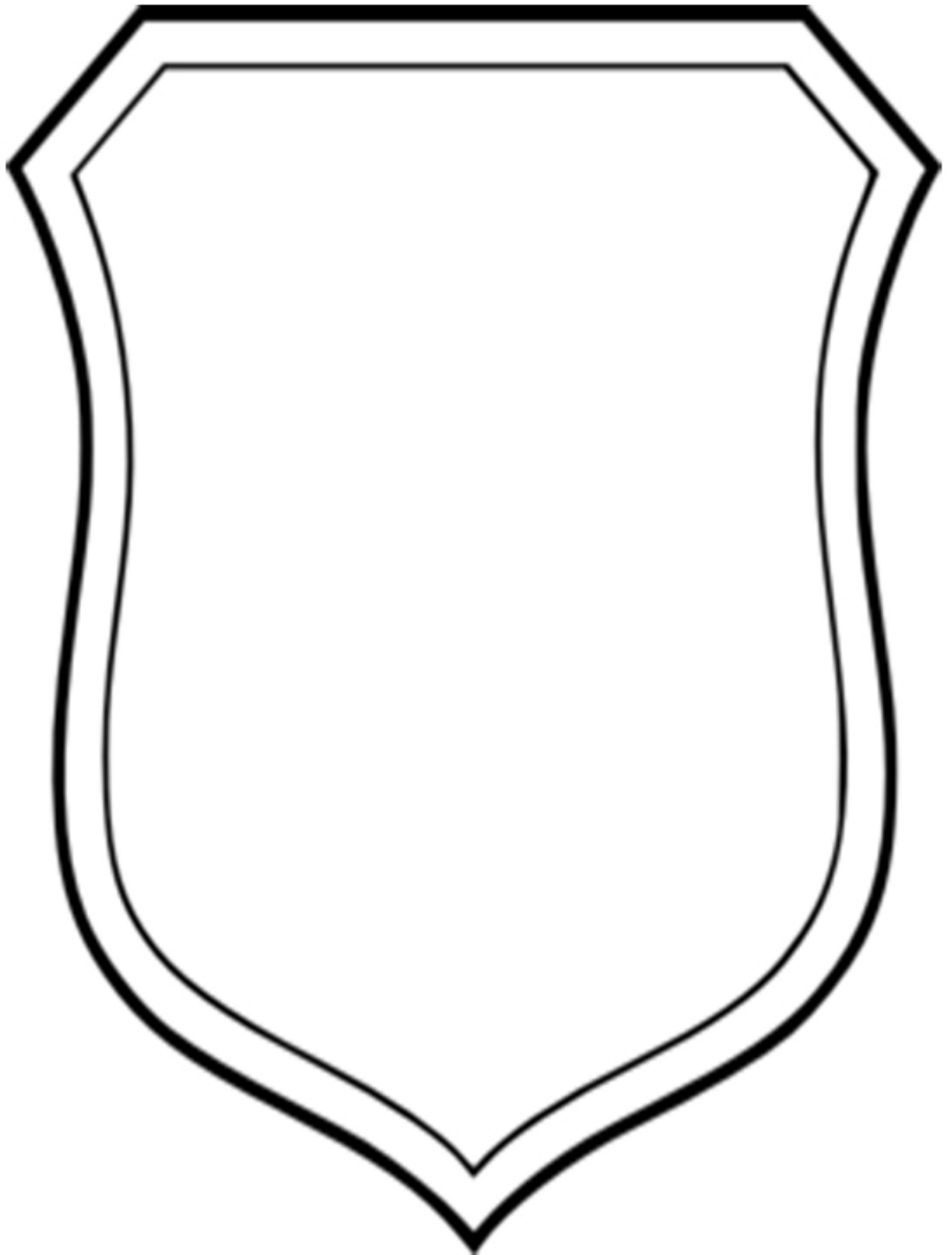
What to Do

First, recognize trauma symptoms you may have.

Is your experience the result of intergenerational trauma? Describe.

What was the triggering event, or events? Explain.

Referring to the above suggestions, what are some ways you can cope?



Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you cope with trauma that has been passed down through the generations of your family? Why or why not?

What else can you do to cope with intergenerational trauma?

Do you feel differently about yourself or your life now that you have completed this exercise? In what ways? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn in this exercise that was helpful?
