

generational *trauma*

With relatives who have lived through **horrifying social movements** and **events**, some unsavory ideals and behaviors can get carried across generations due to what they went through in their lives. Though there are ways to **reflect** and **grow** from these traumas, all wounds **take some time to heal**. Therapy and other mental health tools help tackle all forms of **generational trauma**.

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Her heart in her throat. That's how a University of Miami sophomore biology major said she feels as she approaches each day.

The stories of the horrific deaths of her family members haunt her even though the atrocities of the Rwandan genocide slaughter that lasted three months and occurred before she was even born.

But her parents and surviving family remember. She too feels the grief more than seven thousand miles away from the Central African country nearly, 40 years after five of her family members were brutally killed.

"It was never me," she said. "I was not the one who had to fear for my life, nor worry about if I was to be killed next. Yet, it still haunts me to this day. It feels like ... like I'm being followed all the way to Florida," she said.

She explained that she had been physically but not emotionally distanced from her country since coming to Fort Lauderdale during her junior year of high school.

The genocide occurred during the Rwandan Civil

War when armed Hutu tribe militias brutally killed up to 662 thousand Tutsi. The genocide was sparked by the assassination of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu, in April 1994. Hutu extremists, including the Rwandan Armed Forces, believed the Tutsi had orchestrated the assassination and used it as an opportunity to target Tutsi civilians.

Through planned campaigns promoted on radio broadcasts, Hutus were urged to kill Tutsis. Roadblocks were set up and Tutsis were targeted with machetes, guns and other weapons. Rape and other atrocities were also used as weapons of terror against Tutsi women and girls.

"Even now, I have nightmares and flashbacks of these events," the student said. "I still struggle to form meaningful relationships with others and find it difficult to trust people after what I have witnessed."

The Rwandan native is experiencing what professional psychologists call generational trauma, an insidious cycle that perpetuates

the emotional scars of past traumas from one generation to the next.

Students and Struggles

For college-aged students, the effects of generational trauma can be particularly challenging as they struggle to cope with the emotional baggage of their parents and grandparents while facing their own unique challenges and struggles.

"It's one of those things where you know it exists, but it's not really talked about as an issue because everyone in your social circle has the same problem," said a UM senior economics major whose Jewish ancestors fled Eastern Europe during the Holocaust.

"You don't have to go that many generations back to know that either a family member or an aunt or an uncle or someone was killed in the Holocaust or was kicked out of Russia or was kicked out of the Middle East because they were Jewish," he said.

The Jewish population in Eastern Europe was singled out by the Nazi German government for persecution and death. An estimated six million Jews were murdered during World War II from 1939 to 1945.

A common symptom that victims of generational trauma say they experience is fear, a feeling of "looking over your shoulder and making sure that no one's kind of looking at you funny for fear of something bad happening," he said. "And that's something that was taught to me by my grandparents who had to flee."

Kisha Bazalais, a psychologist at UM, said generational trauma victims operate from a traumatic stance.

Victims have the sense of "being scared, kind of constantly checking to see like what's going on," Bazalais said.

Miguel Barillas, a South Florida therapist specializing in trauma, said the impact of generational trauma can often lead to one believing that there is no hope for the future.

"I have worked with people that have been the children of veterans or people that have been exposed to war, grandkids that have been raised by a mother who was a survivor of the Holocaust," Barillas said. "And I see that there's a lot of anxiety."

Beyond systematic genocide, other generational traumas include oppression,

racism and addiction. These experiences can be incredibly isolating and debilitating as they manifest in a range of mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression and addiction, psychology professionals say.

A graduate student majoring in finance at the Miami Herbert Business School comes from a household riddled with alcohol addiction involving her father and grandparents. Her father grew up in a volatile environment, she said.

"When my grandma was drinking, things could get hairy for them," she said.

The student said her father uses alcohol as a coping mechanism for his own anxiety, and she too struggles with anxiety.

"I'm just anxious about being like him and how would it affect my future plans," she said. Although anxiety does impact her daily life, "most of the time I keep myself busy and away from those things."

Navigating Trauma

Natalie Boone, a licensed clinical social worker in Austin, Texas, highlights the necessity of family therapy for members suffering from generational trauma.

"Through therapy, individuals can gain a better understanding of their trauma, learn coping skills to manage their symptoms and work toward creating healthier patterns of behavior and thought," Boone said. "Additionally, therapy can help individuals break the cycles of generational trauma, leading to positive changes in their families and communities."

Barillas, a therapist at the Terra Counseling Center in Miami, said a number of therapies are targeted to help those suffering from generational trauma, including ensemble therapy.

This form of therapy allows therapists to work with all members of a family or community, including those who may have been directly impacted by trauma, as well as those who have been indirectly affected, Barillas said.

Claire Gillespie, an experienced health and wellness writer, said generational trauma is treatable through intense holistic intervention techniques and potentially individual-level therapy.

A holistic intervention for generational trauma might involve a combination of therapy, mindfulness practices, physical exercise, nutrition counseling and other alternative therapies. For example, yoga and meditation can help people to manage stress and improve emotional regulation, while group therapy can provide an opportunity for individuals to share their experiences and learn from others who have gone through similar challenges.

"Family therapy can also be an effective holistic intervention for generational trauma, as it allows families to work together to address issues that have affected them across generations," Gillespie said.

It can also help to create a supportive environment in which family members

▼ **WHILE IT CAN BE DRAINING**, you're not alone. Finding a close friend or a trusted family member to confide in can help the healing process.



feel safe and encouraged to communicate openly, leading to improved relationships and a greater sense of connection.

At UM, Bazalais encourages students to come in for counseling, acknowledge the trauma, practice self-care and have dialogues with the family to start the healing process.

"Those are some of the key things, but also being able to kind of grieve," Bazalais said. "And to let it go."

The sophomore Rwandan student said she has tried therapy and has found it useful.

"Although it is hard to face the shadows of my family's past in the Rwandan Genocide, I feel that intervention and the use of therapy has helped me to come to terms with a lot," she said.

For many college students, the weight of generational trauma can make it difficult to form relationships or feel like they belong. Some may also feel hopeless or unmotivated, questioning if their future can be any different than their past. Yet it is crucial not only to acknowledge but also to continue to support and normalize the experience of

generational trauma, psychology experts say.

"We must create diverse and inclusive spaces where students can receive healing and care for the unique traumas they have experienced," Boone said. "By identifying the root causes of these intergenerational patterns, we can help young adults break free from the cycles of trauma and chart a healthier and more hopeful path for their future." 📍

If you struggle with generational trauma and need help, contact UM's counseling department by visiting <https://counseling.studentaffairs.miami.edu>.