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Late-Life Manifestations of Ancestral Trauma

Abstract:

An increased number of offspring of Holocaust survivors (OHS) face the challenges of old age. A fascinating, yet underexplored question is whether OHS present unique patterns of aging. Therefore, efforts need to be allocated to understand and address the potential needs of aging OHS. These efforts will prove to be fruitful as they move from the general question of whether OHS are more or less resilient relative to comparisons, to more specific questions, asking in which families, and via which mechanisms, should we expect to see signs of trauma and its transmission on descendants' aging. Based on my findings as well as those of others, I propose an interdisciplinary, integrative model delineating when and how parental exposure to the Holocaust should relate to descendants' aging. In the model, the consequences of parental traumatic exposure on descendants' aging are conceptualized as the result of multiple pathways: psychological (e.g., psychological distress, perceptions of aging), biological (e.g., epigenetic modification), and behavioral (e.g., lifestyle behaviors). This model can serve as a platform that will guide and inspire prospective theoretical thinking and empirical investigation in the field. In addition, it may encourage practitioners to adopt an integrated approach designed to promote successful aging among OHS.