



FAST FORWARD

# CAN TRAUMA BE PASSED FROM PARENT TO CHILD?



## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because your environment can change the way your genes are expressed in surprising ways.

By Rignam Wangkhang

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It wasn't until Amy Bombay was an adult that she found out her grandparents had survived an abusive system — government-sponsored religious schools designed to assimilate thousands of indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture. Even though she grew up off the reserve, Bombay, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Dalhousie University, says she was scarred by the pain of the past brought on by a dark legacy of Canada's residential schools. "Many parents would only talk about residential schools when they were drinking — and they would cry," Bombay recalls. "That was the only time we'd hear about it."

Recent studies on the science behind **intergenerational trauma** — between Holocaust survivors and their children, for instance — have discovered that trauma can be passed between generations. The epigenetic inheritance theory holds that environmental

factors can affect the genes of future generations. Chemical tags acting like Post-its can latch onto our DNA, switching genes off and on. A research team at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital led by Rachel Yehuda, a leading expert on post-traumatic stress and epigenetics, concluded that some of these tags could be transferred across generations. When Yehuda researched mothers who were pregnant and in the World Trade Center during 9/11, she discovered that **environmental fallout** could even leave an imprint in utero.

There is an upside, however. "The idea that we can be transformed by our environment gives us powerful tools for resilience building," says Yehuda. The plasticity of genes points toward the possibility of future transformation — though precisely how has yet to be determined. In the meantime, the Canadian Roots Exchange fosters cultural exchanges and dialogue between indigenous youth and high school students to promote understanding and reconciliation. Khmer Girls in Action, an all-female group in Long Beach, California, combats "historical forgetting" of the Cambodian genocide in the 1980s. By creating safe spaces for women to grieve and console one another and organizing public talks addressing the tragedy, collective healing is put into action.

## IF HISTORY IS ANY INDICATION, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ARE ENTITLED TO BE SKEPTICAL.

It has been scientifically proven that survivors of Canada's residential schools can't just "get over" the experience — because it's in their genes. From the late 1950s to 1970s, roughly a third of all indigenous children (more than 150,000) were taken from their families and subjected to oppressive conditions, forced labor and isolation. Many survivors reported being sexually and physically abused. At least 4,000 children died. The program, calculated to exterminate the identity of the indigenous population, is now widely considered cultural genocide. Survivors of the schools bear wounds that can take generations to heal and tend to manifest as post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and violence. "We're not static, we're dynamic," says Yehuda. "We respond in ways that create legacies that live past our own lives."



An apology for trauma: Former PM Stephen Harper presents a framed statement of apology to Crystal Merasty, a survivor of a residential school.

**SOURCE** MIKE CARROCCETTO / GETTY IMAGES

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada documented the residential school experiences of more than 6,000 indigenous women and men. For Ry Moran, director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, the TRC report reimagines a path for moving forward, starting with the re-indigenization of curricula. The University of Winnipeg has made it mandatory for students to take at least three credit hours in indigenous culture, while Lakehead University, in Thunder Bay, Ontario, requires students to enroll in at least one course with 50 percent indigenous content. Brock University, in St. Catharines, Ontario, has appointed an indigenous person as its chancellor, and the University of Regina amended its strategic plan to incorporate indigenization and establish an indigenous advisory council.

Influenced by postwar Germany's decision not to raze concentration camps, the TRC report recommends preserving the residential schools in order to memorialize the genocide. Funding for collective healing programs, community youth centers and indigenous mental-health provisions bookend the formal requests. "The only thing covered in mainstream health is a psychiatrist, who only focuses on medication," says Bombay. "Many indigenous peoples call for more holistic, spiritual approaches." This includes funding and access to indigenous mental-health practitioners and therapists who understand indigenous trauma and how to heal "soul wounds" — an indigenous term.

Other countries with a history of oppression may learn from Canada's efforts to rebuild in the wake of traumatic events, experts say. "We've seen different groups in different conditions work out well. Things can be made to change," says Hymie Anisman, Canada research chair of behavioral neuroscience. In Cambodia, memorial sites, documentation centers and human rights tribunals exist, but a truth commission and international commemoration might be necessary next steps to reconciliation. African-Americans continue to suffer residual trauma from the horrific legacy of slavery, wounds from Jim Crow-era laws, lynching and mass incarceration that biologically affect their mental and emotional well-being. To break the cycle, some argue, this must be acknowledged and fully reconciled — perhaps through **reparations to Black Americans** — before healing can begin.

Durable, inclusive policies are vital to an undertaking this vast and complex challenge — good intentions only go so far. A representative of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada stated that it is “working, in partnership with indigenous communities, to fully implement recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” But if history is any indication, indigenous peoples are entitled to be skeptical. Australia’s approach to reconciling with its indigenous “Stolen Generations” is a clear example of failure, serving as a reminder that political promises are frequently broken. And, in April, a state of emergency was declared in the remote northern Ontario reserve of Attawapiskat. Eleven people had attempted suicide in a single night, following more than 100 suicide attempts during the previous eight months.

Amid the darkness, Attawapiskat activist Jackie Hookimaw sees resiliency and strength: “I see hope,” she says. “Our youth said enough is enough, we don’t want to die anymore.” Over two days and 31 miles, the reserve’s youth held a healing walk across the ice river where their ancestors once canoed. They were transforming, and ushering in an era of post-traumatic growth.

## SEE BEYOND

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