The transgenerational transmission of trauma: can anyone really tell your story except you?

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STARTTS Clinical Master Class, 30th March 2016
Demographic information - Seetha

- Gender: Female
- Age: 48
- Country of birth: Sri Lanka (Vanni district)
- Religion: Christian
- Marital status: Married
- Education: High School Advanced Level
- Visa status: Bridging visa
- Languages: Tamil, English
- Date of arrival: November 2013
- Date of referral: June 2014
- Number of sessions to date: 42
Genogram: Seetha

X 1985

X 1997

X 2009

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17
1958: Anti Tamil riots, displacement, discrimination

1968: Birth

1976 – LTTE forms

1985: Tensions increase, displacement

1987: Indian Peace Keeping Army

1988: Father’s death

1990: Civil war

1998 – 2001: War rages in the north and east

2008: Displacement

2010: Refugee camp

2011: Husband is tortured

2012: Asylum journey to Australia

2015: Mother-in-law’s death

2016: Husband is injured at work

2019: Final war begins, death of sister-in-law

# Transgenerational trauma history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Gen: Seetha’s parents 1930-1997</th>
<th>2nd Gen: Seetha 1960-current</th>
<th>3rd Gen: Seetha’s children 1990- current</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil war</td>
<td>Civil war</td>
<td>Civil war</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>Persecution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persecution</td>
<td>Persecution</td>
<td>Asylum journey</td>
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<tr>
<td>States of emergency</td>
<td>Witness to violence</td>
<td>Forced displacement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Systemic trauma</td>
<td>Systemic trauma</td>
<td>Witness to violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of husband</td>
<td>Deprivation</td>
<td>Traumatic Loss</td>
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<td>Traumatic loss</td>
<td>Tsunami</td>
<td>Interruption to schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced displacement</td>
<td>Forced displacement</td>
<td>Loss of friends and peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class divisions</td>
<td>Asylum journey</td>
<td>Asylum journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worsening economic conditions</td>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>Adapting to a new environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Presenting problems

• Psychological
  ▫ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (re-experiencing, avoidance, negative cognition and mood, arousal)
  ▫ Anxiety (difficulty concentrating, irritability, sleep disturbance)
  ▫ Depression (diminished interest, low mood, reduced appetite)

• Spiritual – abandoned by God, by her faith

• Physical – psychosomatic pain, headaches, lethargy, fatigue
Common idioms of distress

• Individual level
  ▫ Enkadai Thalaivithi (This is my fate)
  ▫ Naangal enna paavam seythom? (What sins have we committed?)

• Family level
  ▫ Yatrayo naruru (Someone’s evil eye)

• Community level
  ▫ Ketkirathuku orutharum illai (No-one is left to ask questions)
Formulation
Transgenerational trauma and family

- Genetic
  - Epigenetic inheritance (passed down to children)
  - Biological pre-disposition

- Environment
  - Oral traditions e.g. ‘the world is a dangerous place’ (taught to children)
  - Denial of identity
  - Institutionalised racism
  - Economic deprivation
Formulation
Transgenerational trauma and community

- Despair vs hope
- Senselessness vs meaning
- Senselessness vs meaning
- Secrecy vs sharing

Loss of communality
Alienation

Uprooting
Displacement

Destruction in traditions, culture and institutions

Collective trauma
Polarisation of community

Passivity vs taking charge/taking control back
Case Formulation: Complex Interaction

- International event stressors
- Trauma reactions
- Exile, migration, resettlement stressors, cultural transition
- Normal life cycle stressors
- Recovery environment stressors

Protective factors (internal and external)

Aroche and Coello, 1994

Cultural / Religious Aspects
Social Political Background
Interventions overview

- Narrative Exposure Therapy
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy strategies
- Exploring rituals, traditional methods of mourning and healing
- Identifying cultural idioms of distress and patterns of survival
Interventions

- Common idioms of survival
  - Nadukirathu nadakattum (What ever happens, let it happen)
  - Enkalukum oru kalam varum (Our time will also come)
  - Pillaihalukkaha valathan venum (We have to live for our children)
Interventions – springboard for therapy

• If you had a magic wand and you could change the impact the traumatic event had on your family in any way you wanted to, how would your family look? How would your relationships between family members be different? What would be the same?

• How do you believe that your family’s cultural background, social values, religious/spiritual values impacted your ability to cope with the traumatic events? How are they helping you now?

• Many have great stories of both success and struggles. What is your story? What were the challenges on your path to success? How did you cope with the struggles?
Treatment progress

Safety and rapport (psycho-education)

Assessment (family trauma history, family of origin, nuclear family, understanding cultural and historical values)

Skills and tools (psycho-education, narrative therapy, CBT strategies, culturally appropriate work)

Self compassion
Self acceptance
Self care

Reconnection (family, community, society)
Conclusion & outcome

• Outcomes
  ▫ New ways of thinking and reviewing traditional boundaries
  ▫ Changes in parenting style
  ▫ Reduction in anxiety

• Challenges
  ▫ Survivor guilt and transgenerational trauma
  ▫ Uncertainty regarding future

• Where to from here?
  ▫ Anxiety reduction
  ▫ Rebuilding and strengthening identity through meaningful social connections
References

Thank you

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