

Therapists' Knowledge of Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma in Patients they see for Psychotherapy

Dr Kavitha Honsel, Dr Anabella Jevdovic, Dr Roopa Gopalakrishnan, Dr Sophie Stokes, Dr Moataz Abdelreheem, Dr Anne Patterson (Consultant Medical Psychotherapist) - Kensington & Chelsea Psychotherapy Service, London.

Introduction

Intergenerational transmission of trauma (ITT) is a well-known concept, documented in relation to families of Holocaust victims and also seen in enslavement, genocide, domestic violence, sexual abuse and extreme poverty.¹ A lived trauma becomes the unspeakable, the unnamable and the unthinkable as the trauma is passed down unconsciously through generations.² As such, is it a concept that is commonly thought about by therapists in an NHS setting?

The aim was to identify therapists' knowledge and awareness of the presence of ITT in their patients receiving psychodynamic psychotherapy. Therapists delivering therapy include psychiatrists, psychiatry trainees and therapists with a psychology background.

Method

Therapists were asked to complete an anonymous online survey using Google Forms.

Survey questions asked about presenting difficulties in patients and focus on therapist knowledge of trauma in their patients' family which may have been passed down from previous generations and takes a closer look at knowledge of unspoken family traumas, including war, genocide, racism, unexpected loss, sexual abuse, stigmatization (for sexual orientation, mental health, disability), addiction, migration and poverty.

"I believe some form of intergenerational trauma is present in most if not all of the cases we deal with in psychotherapy"

Psychotherapist, participant in this survey

Results

21 out of 31 therapists responded to the survey (response rate 67.7%)

Therapists who responded include Consultant Psychiatrists in Psychotherapy (9.5% of total respondents), Psychiatrists (9.5%), Psychiatry trainees (47.6%), Psychotherapists (19%), Honorary Psychotherapists (4.8%), Trainee Psychotherapists (4.8%), Art Psychotherapists (4.8%)

Asked about years of experience in psychotherapy, 42.9% had less than one year experience, 33.3% had 1-5 years experience and 23.8% had more than 5 years of experience.

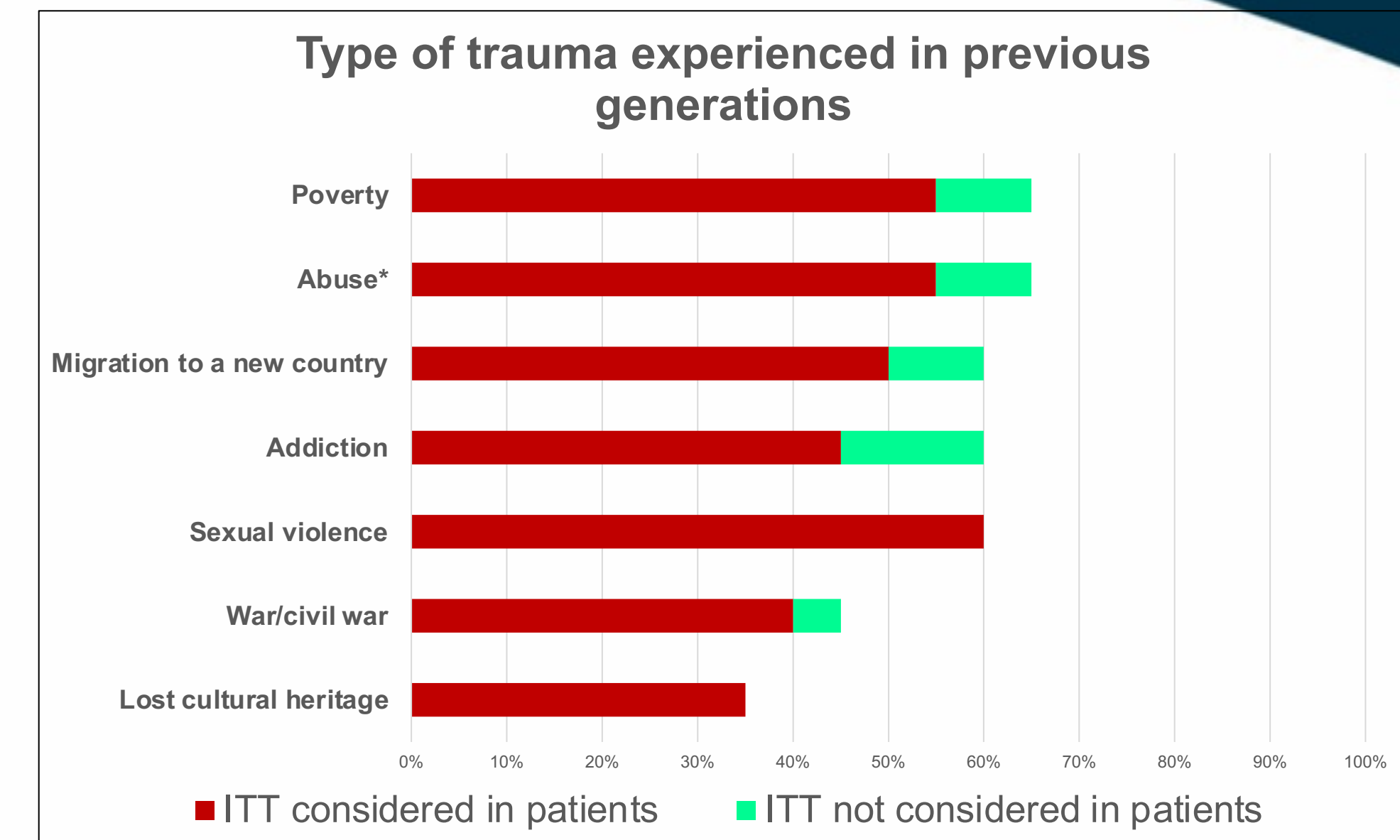
95.2% of respondents indicated that they had heard about the concept of ITT. Of these respondents, 70% thought ITT had occurred in their patients and 30% of respondents had not.

We asked about knowledge of individual traumata experienced by previous generations and looked at whether ITT was considered by these therapists or not. See graph.

ITT was considered by therapists in all cases of sexual violence and lost cultural heritage in previous generations.

Conclusion

The survey does show evidence that therapists in an NHS setting have heard about ITT and most therapists did consider presence of ITT in most of their patients being seen for psychotherapy. Some therapists did not consider ITT despite there being a history of trauma in previous generations. Was this because it was just not thought of or was it that the trauma had not been transmitted by a healed individual and the patient's trauma considered separately by the therapists?



*In the survey, "Abuse" was subcategorised into domestic, sexual, verbal, emotional and other. For the purpose of this graph, these are grouped together.

If ITT is a common occurrence in patients being seen for psychotherapy, then perhaps it should be considered in all patients with mental health difficulties and we will therefore explore psychiatrists' knowledge of ITT in their patients as a next step. Knowledge of ITT in their patients allows mental health professionals to make better suited formulations for therapy and address any treatment resistance.³ This identification also allows the patients to understand and process the unspoken, unthinkable trauma.

References

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