



THE NEXUS OF TRAUMA AND CULTURE:

Implications for Social Work Practice

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TRAUMA

Introduction

- Despite the significant transformation that South African society has undergone, the socio-economic conditions are still reflective of the country's discriminatory past.
- Colonialism and apartheid laid the foundations for a divided and segregated society where violence was accepted as a legitimate means of conflict resolution.
- Violent crimes have reached pandemic proportions and social workers are often required to assist traumatized clients and/or communities.
- Extensive empirical research conducted in predominantly Western countries has guided and dominated classifications of trauma as well as trauma intervention strategies.



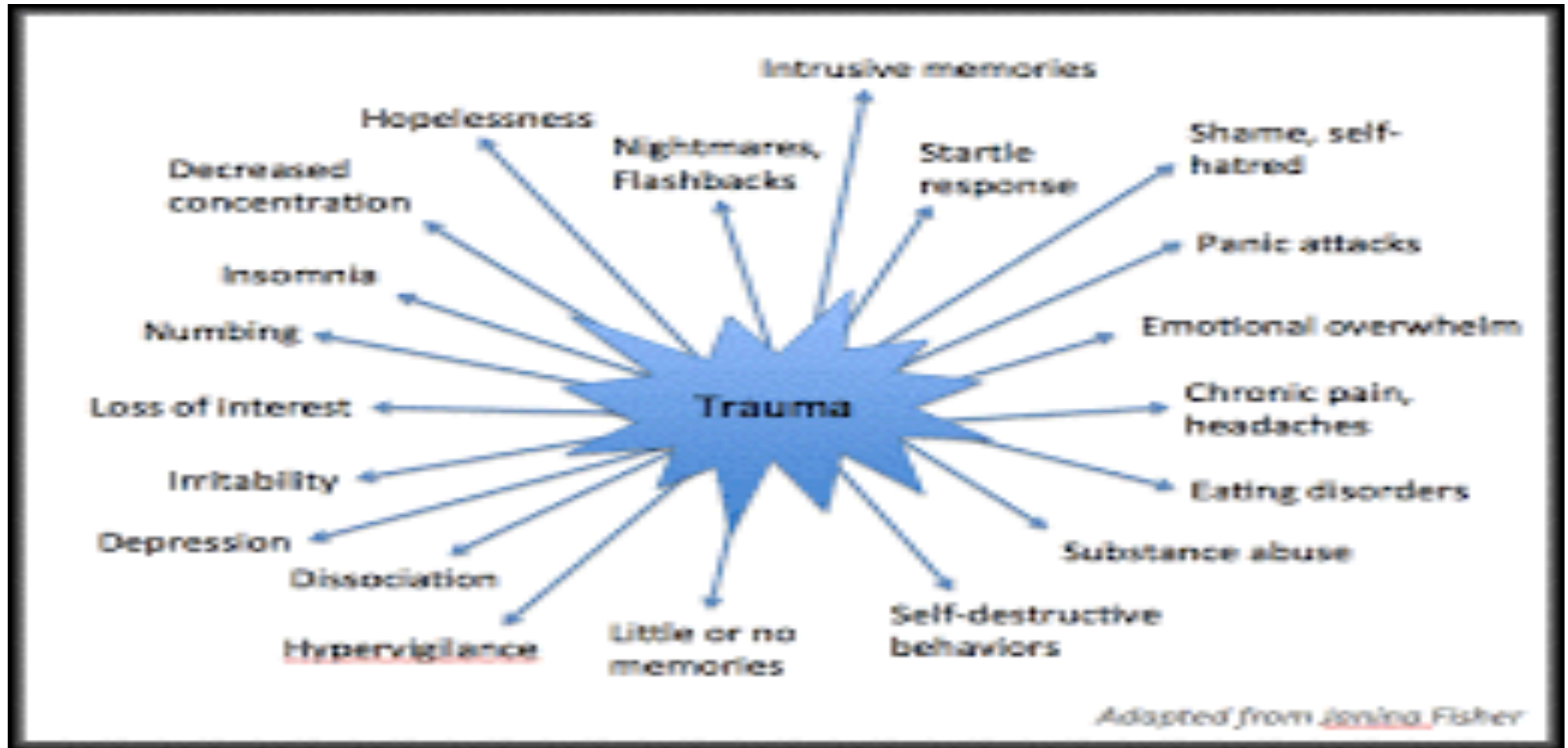


Defining Trauma ...Defining Culture

- The Word **Trauma** originates from the Greek work 'traumat' which means 'to tear' or 'to puncture'.
- Psychological trauma refers to the psychological wounding and penetration of unwanted thoughts, emotions and experiences into the psyche or being of a person (Kaminer and Eagle, 2010).
- Culture refers to the....the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all thought characteristic of a community or population.
- As Chemtob (2012) explains cultures are defined by being transmissible not only within a group but across time and generations.



Symptoms of Trauma

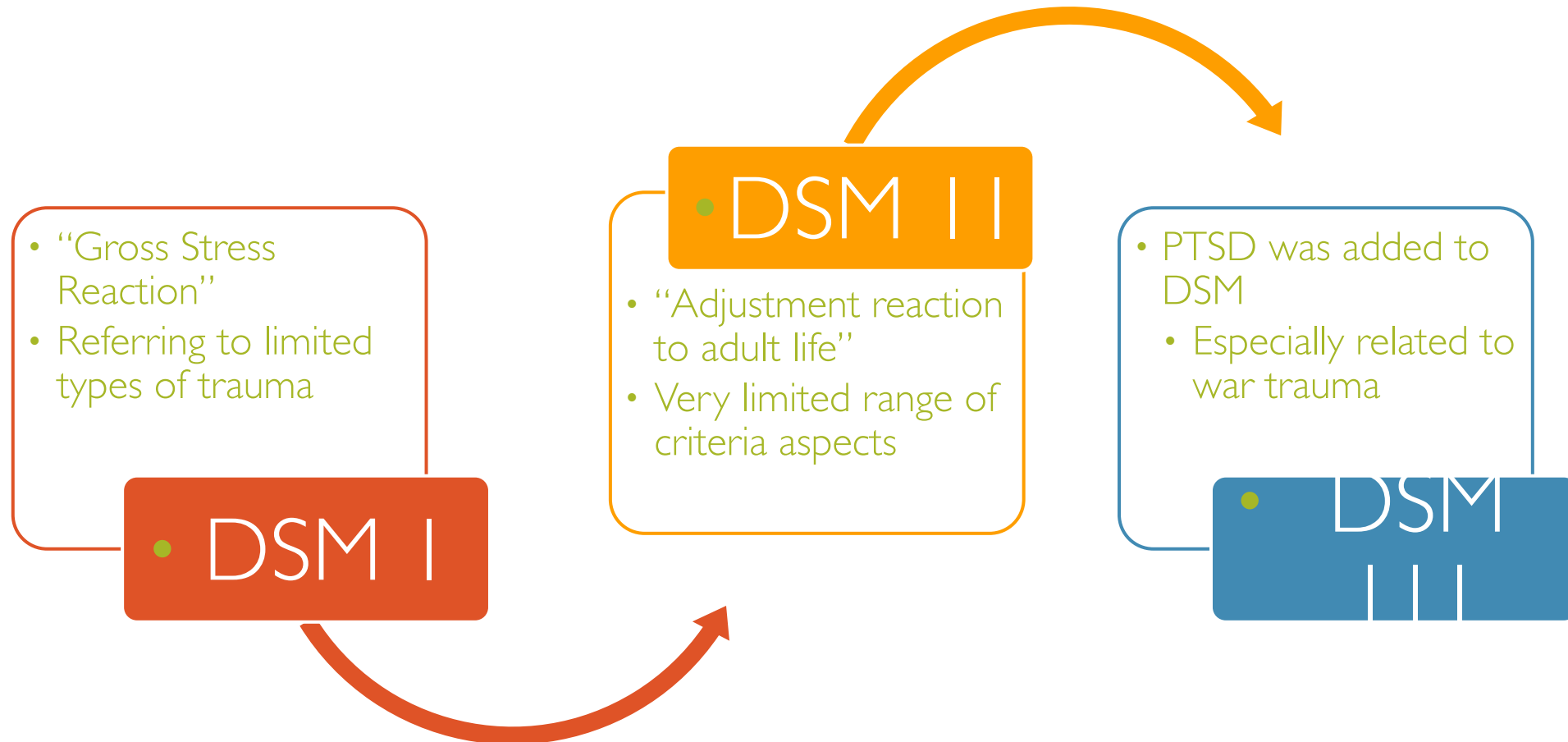


The History of Trauma

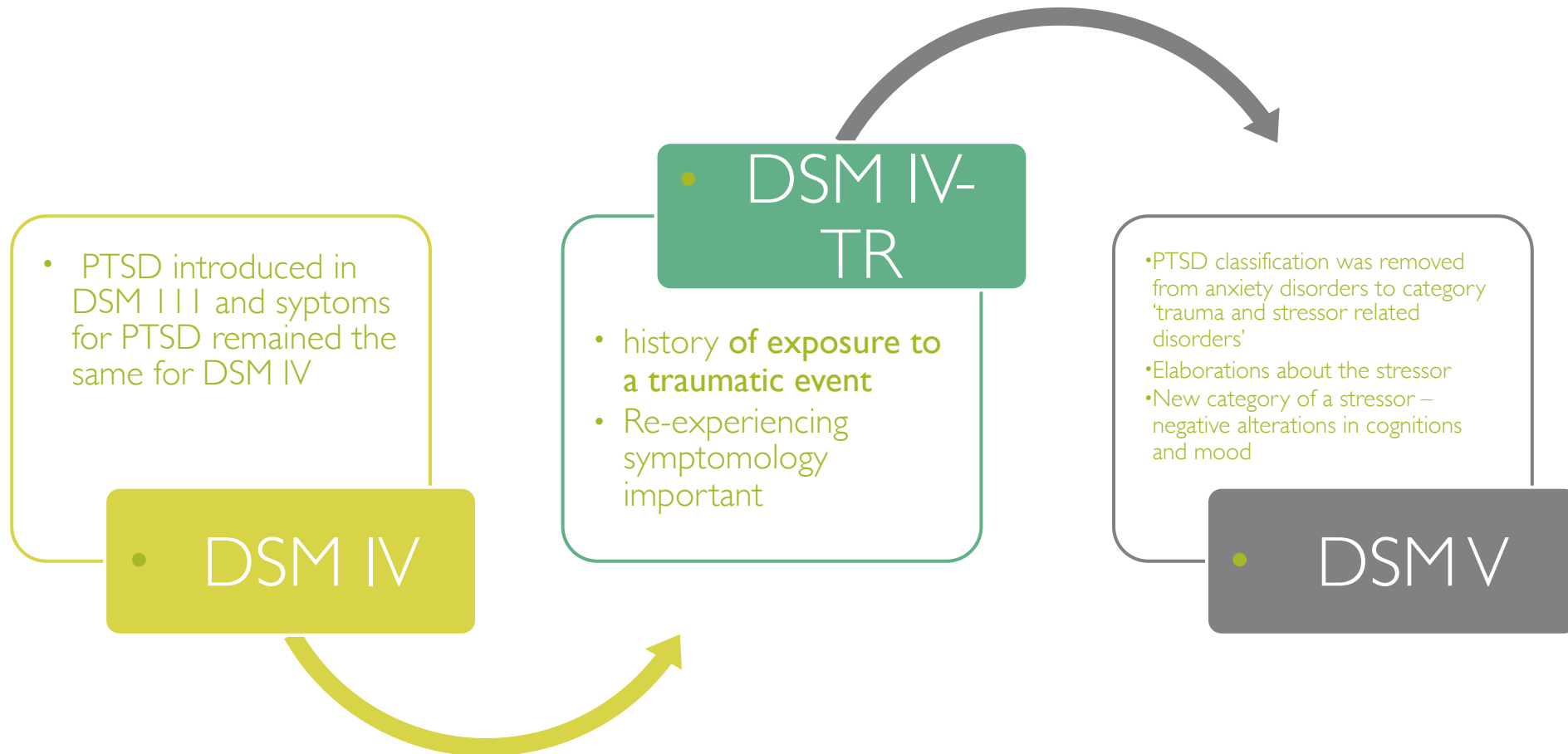


- Evidence of recorded trauma responses date as far back as the ancient Greeks.
- Political and theoretical influences have played a significant role in the history of understanding trauma and its impact on individuals and society alike (Bloom, 2012).
- Herman (1997) purports that only as it has suited society has society recognised different types of traumatisation. She explains how the study of psychological trauma has a curious history – one of **episodic amnesia**.
- As such the study of trauma confronts not only human vulnerability in the natural world but one also has to acknowledge the capacity for evil in human nature (Bloom, 2012; Herman, 1997).

DSM classifications of Trauma



DSM classifications of Trauma



Debates in Trauma Classifications

- What are the symptoms?

- What about the stressor?

- Subjectivity : Resulting fear, helplessness and horror

- Classifications of trauma are useful as they help mental health practitioners to make distinctions between normal life variations and psychiatric symptoms. Moreover they assist with accountability, record keeping, treatment planning and communication with other helping professionals (Wilkins, Owen & Kilpatrick, 2017).



PTSD and culture



- Many mental health practitioners understand post-traumatic problems as arising from a destabilizing effect on the meaningfulness of the survivor's world.
- Such an approach is rather limited and operates from the premise that the individual had a sense of order and purpose prior to an event and fails to acknowledge other types of traumatisations.
- As Bracken (2009) explains this type of understanding of trauma is based upon a Western understanding of reason and meaning.
- Foucault (1980) questioned how society responded to unreasonable people and how psychiatry had labelled and rejected 'unreasonable people' or people who responded 'differently' to situations.

Responding to Trauma Competently



- Trauma no matter how endemic is never generic and is a subjective experience.
- Each experience of a traumatic encounter is unique and is given unique meaning by the life history of the person to whom it occurs.
- Bracken (2002) suggests that traumatic experiences will effect different responses in individuals depending on the culture in which they live. Cultures differ in how they promote conscious or non-conscious ways of dealing with distress. He suggests that individuals experience and ensure suffering in different ways and have different symptomatic outcomes.
- Unique meaning rises from the cultural and group membership in which a person participates and from the multiple, intersecting identities defining each person's sense of selfhood.

Responding to Trauma Competently



- Responding to trauma in a culturally competent manner requires social workers to understand the added meanings that can be derived from context and identity and which contribute to the subjective nature of trauma.
- Furthermore culturally competent practice requires that social workers are aware of their own identities, biases and participations in cultural hierarchies of power and privilege, powerlessness and disadvantage (Brown, 2012).
- Social workers also need to be aware of their own personal trauma and woundings and be aware of countertransference responses, as well as secondary and vicarious traumatisation (Masson, 2016).

Responding to Trauma Competently



- One needs to take into account that core aspects of how trauma wounds includes that trauma induces powerlessness and the loss of protective and self-protective illusions of control.
- As such, we have a tremendous responsibility to ensure that we are sensitive and culturally appropriate when we assist trauma survivors as research has shown that the manner in which trauma survivors are responded to by their counsellors will contribute to the healing process (Kaminer and Eagle, 2010; Masson, 2016).
- If a social worker lacks cultural competence then they have a greater chance of inflicting additional trauma on the client, whereas conversely, a culturally sensitive social worker can ignite the healing process through honouring the inner and outer realities informing trauma and its meanings.

TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA



- Transgenerational trauma refers to trauma that is passed on from generation to generation, sometimes consciously but often unconsciously.
- Trauma can be assimilated as it was never verbally spoken about but remains hidden among unspoken family secrets (Schutzenberger, 1998).
- This type of trauma is explained by Young (2007, p. 342-345) in numerous ways:
- Firstly, **latency** – this theory postulates that individual and collective trauma are similar and that ‘latency or belatedness’ is an inevitable feature of individual trauma.

A clear example of this was the trauma of the Holocaust.

TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA



- Secondly, **Lamarckian memory** – this theory refers to the transmission of collective knowledge through *genetic inheritance*.
- Thirdly, **contagion** – traumatic memories are passed from one person to another in such a way that they are transmitted into the next generations' minds or consciousness. Contagion does not only have to occur from a generational perspective but can also refer to how therapists are traumatized vicariously.
- A traumatic emotion can be passed on to a successive generation, that is unattached to a verbalized memory experience. Often by the time traumatic affect is passed on to the third or fourth generation, it is without any cognitive framework to help the children understand what they are feeling.

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA



- **Collective trauma** is trauma that happens to large groups of individuals and can be transmitted transgenerationally and across communities. Collective trauma can be caused by genocide, slavery, war and natural disasters can cause collective trauma, which can be further defined as historical, ancestral, or cultural (Garrigues, 2017). In South Africa colonialism and apartheid have caused collective trauma.
- South Africa, a country with one of the highest trauma and violence rates in the world and with one of the highest Gini-coefficients in the world. Socio-economic issues often drive collective violence.
- Mogapi (2015) says we need to understand that our levels of violence are happening in the context of a country that has not dealt with its collective trauma. She suggests that we need to have those difficult conversations and talk about how we have internalized our past.

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA



- Alexander (2012) raises a particular discourse about collective trauma. He speaks about the social construction of collective trauma. He speaks about the progressive narrative and how America focused on the Holocaust in order to narrate its military involvement with a victorious ethical outcome.
- In the same way, he looks at Germany and looks at the discourse of how collective trauma was ignored and instead the focus was on building a new Germany with a new human rights culture.
- What Alexander advocates is that the emergence and stabilization of a trauma account depends on the interest of certain groups and who controls power.
- In the same way Collins (2015) looks at how the trauma narrative is constructed in South Africa: We have focused on human rights to the exclusion of structural forms of suffering (poverty, powerlessness, humiliation) and other forms of violence (domestic and criminal).



CONCLUSIONS



- As we deepen our understanding of the manifestations and effects of trauma, we come to understand that trauma itself does not determine the outcome.
- Do we as social workers truly understand the role that trauma plays as an etiologic factor in the evolution of both personal and social problems in South Africa.
- As social workers we need to move from an individualistic philosophy that holds each person accountable for their trauma response.
- The Hebrew concept 'teshuva' means *turn around* with connotations of repentance, reconciliation and atonement.

CONCLUSIONS



- We have to ensure that we move from an individualistic, reductionist and dichotomous belief system that explains traumatising and instead incorporates the complexities of collective and transgenerational trauma.
- We need to open spaces for genuine dialogue about the **transgenerational trauma and collective trauma** in South Africa that has occurred as a result of colonialism and apartheid. We as social workers have a fundamental role to fulfil in helping to provide what Sandra Blooms calls '**sanctuary**' so that we can authentically contribute to the healing of our country.

THANK YOU

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