

23
August

EUROPEAN DAY
OF REMEMBRANCE
FOR VICTIMS OF
TOTALITARIAN REGIMES

WHEN THE PAST LIVES ON: Understanding Intergenerational Trauma



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WHAT IS Intergenerational Trauma?

Intergenerational trauma – also called **transgenerational trauma** – is the transmission of traumatic experiences from one generation to the next.

It occurs when the **psychological wounds** of one generation affect the well-being, behaviours, and emotional patterns of their children and grandchildren, even if those descendants have not directly experienced the original trauma.

Traumatic events **echo** through families, communities, and even nations, shaping how people think, feel, and relate to the world.

This form of trauma is especially common in the aftermath of war, repression, forced displacement, political persecution, or systemic violence – all of which were tragically **common under totalitarian regimes across Europe in the 20th century.**

These experiences, once considered part of the past, are painfully relevant today in the context of ongoing wars and humanitarian crises that continue to displace and **traumatise individuals and communities across generations.**



HOW Trauma Is Passed On

Trauma doesn't always stop with the individual who experiences it. Trauma can be passed across generations through a combination of emotional, social, and even biological mechanisms. It might appear in:



Family stories and silences.

When traumatic events are never discussed, they still shape relationships and family atmosphere.

Overprotection or emotional distance.

Parents who carry trauma may become either overly cautious or emotionally unavailable to their children.

Inherited fear or distrust.

Especially toward authority, strangers, or a social system.

Unspoken grief or shame.

Passed down like a shadow over daily life.

Epigenetic changes.

Studies suggest trauma can leave molecular traces that affect how stress is processed in future generations.

These patterns may seem unrelated to historical events at first glance – but they are often their silent legacy.



What Might Intergenerational Trauma Look Like TODAY?

Sometimes the signs are not obvious. You might recognise them in your own life or others' through:

A deep **fear** of conflict or change

Strong emotional **reactions** to injustice or loss

Struggles with identity, trust, or emotional closeness

A constant feeling of **anxiety** or danger, without clear cause

Feeling **disconnected** from personal or family history

Testimony

*‘But her [grandmother’s] experience during the war and after had not made her bitter, had not made her give up. **Cilly’s refusal to become dominated by her traumatic experiences had a profound effect on me.** With her stories of a lost home and the survival in the camps, with her resilience she became a key inspiration for me. I continue to find traces of her in the shadows of the past.’*

– from **Marcel Krueger**’s testimony written for the historical contest **‘Grandparents. Grand Stories’** organised by the ENRS.



From Memory to Meaning: **TURNING PAIN INTO PURPOSE**

Though intergenerational trauma carries pain, it can also contribute to:



Greater empathy

for those who suffer in silence today.

Stronger civic responsibility

a deep-seated desire to stand up against injustice.

Cultural resilience

trauma has inspired powerful artistic, literary, and educational responses.

A clearer sense of history

and the need to protect democratic values.

Pain can be transformed. Memory can become action. And silence can give way to dialogue.

Remembering is HEALING

Healing from intergenerational trauma is not about forgetting – it's about **reclaiming your story** and rewriting its meaning. While trauma may echo through generations, it is not a life sentence. There are ways to break the cycle and foster recovery:

Education and remembrance

Learn about the past. Visit memory sites. Share what you learn.

Creative expression

Write, paint, sing. Art can give form to what words struggle to express.

Open dialogue

Ask questions and listen across generations. Silence feeds trauma.

Psychological support

Seek trauma-informed therapy or community support groups.

Healing begins with awareness

– and with the courage to confront what was once unspoken. Healing is a long journey – but no one has to walk it alone.



The background is a paper-cut style illustration. A map of Europe is cut out of a dark blue layer, revealing a lighter blue layer underneath. The map is detailed with small cutouts of cities and landmarks. In the foreground, a group of silhouetted figures are walking across the map. From left to right, there is a woman, a man, a couple holding hands, a man, and a woman holding a child's hand. The scene is set against a backdrop of stylized clouds and trees, also in a paper-cut style.

Why It Matters TODAY

Many families in Europe carry the invisible inheritance of totalitarianism. The grief, fear, and disorientation caused by political oppression have shaped not only individuals but entire communities – and still do.

By recognising these patterns, we move closer to understanding ourselves and our societies. We also begin to understand that **memory** is not just about the past – it's **a tool for justice and healing in the present.**



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‘Remember. August 23’

On 23 August we commemorate the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Totalitarian Regimes. It marks a dark legacy of repression, fear, and silence. But remembering is not only about those who suffered – it is also about those who inherited their pain, their strength, and their unfinished stories.

By acknowledging the ongoing impact of totalitarian trauma, we honour not only the past, but also the resilience of the present – and the hope for a more just future.

An illustration in shades of blue and grey depicting three stylized human figures sitting in a forest. On the left, a man and a woman are seated close together, facing right. On the right, another woman is seated, facing left towards the other two. They appear to be in a deep conversation. The background features large, dark trees and rolling hills, creating a serene and contemplative atmosphere.

What Can You DO?

Ask an elder in your family about their memories.
Be patient and gentle.

Share your own story
– even fragments can be powerful.

Support initiatives
that preserve historical truth and human dignity.

Take part in
memorial days like **23 August**
to stand in solidarity.

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Want to Learn More?

Explore resources, personal stories,
and tools for educators and families at:
Remember. August 23 | ENRS

Because *memory lives in us all* –
and every story remembered is a step
towards healing.

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