



ביקור חולים  
CHESED ORGANIZATION  
GUARDIANS OF THE SICK

***Survivor Families: Our Parents, Ourselves, Our Changing Lives***

# A MANUAL FOR FACILITATORS OF DISCUSSION GROUPS

by

**Irit Felsen, Ph.D.**

Clinical Psychologist and Adjunct Professor of Psychology, Yeshiva University

Member of the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress

Co-Chair of the NGO Committee on Mental Health in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations

*Based on Original Content in a Series of Lectures by Irit Felsen, Ph.D.*

*At Meetings of the Discussion Group for Children of Holocaust Survivors*

Boro Park, Brooklyn

2016 – 2017

*With Facilitator Guidelines Developed by*

**Khaya Eisenberg, Psy.D.**

*Editorial Assistance:*

**Romy Felsen-Parsons**

**Devorah Naomi Waters, LGSW**

© Dr. Irit Felsen, 2016



The Jewish Federations®  
OF NORTH AMERICA

Center for Advancing  
Holocaust Survivor Care

This program was made possible by a grant from  
The JFNA Center for Advancing Holocaust Survivor Care.

Social services for Jewish survivors of Nazi persecution have been supported by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

# About this Manual

---

This facilitator's manual is designed to help you prepare for and facilitate a series of discussion groups for adult children of Holocaust survivors. Based on a series of presentations by Irit Felsen, Ph.D., this manual includes presentation scripts and key points to discuss, handouts to share with participants, and resources for the facilitators' own further learning.

Each session is described initially in a brief paragraph, followed by a list of learning objectives. Instructions for preparation for the session are provided, including a list of materials to photocopy for distribution. Where applicable, a list of resources for further learning is offered as well. The "Session at a Glance" table serves as a more detailed overview of the session, with segment names and descriptions.

The content of the session itself is organized into sub-topics. At several points, discussion questions are suggested for facilitators who would like to encourage a more interactive session. Facilitators are also welcome to add or substitute their own questions as they see fit if they feel this will enhance the dialogue. Alternatively, facilitators who prefer to present in lecture format can base full-length lectures on the content provided and, if desired, simply open the floor for questions at the end.

The discussion meetings on which these sessions are based were each 90 minutes long, allowing for both lecture and audience participation. Facilitators whose meetings will be shorter are free to divide the sessions as written into briefer segments.

Additionally, facilitators may choose to emphasize particular topics based on participants' preferences and feedback.

Facilitators are also encouraged to consider the possibility of working with a co-facilitator. Sharing the responsibility with a co-facilitator can add interest to the group and make the experience more enjoyable for all.

Finally, facilitators are encouraged to distribute and collect evaluation forms (see below) after each session as a means of gathering participant feedback. This manual is meant to be used flexibly, and collecting feedback from participants will create the possibility of tailoring the sessions to the preferences of the audience as the original facilitator did.

**Second Generation Family Caregivers Group  
Participant Feedback**

How did you hear about our program? \_\_\_\_\_

**Please take a minute to share your feedback about tonight's discussion.**

Was tonight's information relevant to your experience as the child of a survivor?

4	3	2	1
Very Much	Somewhat	Not Much	Not at All

Please explain:

Did tonight's discussion improve your understanding of how the Holocaust may have affected your parent?

4	3	2	1
Very Much	Somewhat	Not Much	Not at All

Please explain:

Did tonight's discussion help you feel more sympathetic toward your parent?

4	3	2	1
Very Much	Somewhat	Not Much	Not at All

Please explain:

Did tonight's discussion help you feel validated as a child of a survivor?

4	3	2	1
Very Much	Somewhat	Not Much	Not at All

Please tell us what you found most valuable in tonight's discussion.

Additional comments, including topics you'd like to see addressed in future programs.

Your name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone or E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

# Session 1

---

## **Second Generation Family Caregivers Group: Introductory Session**

### **The Session in Perspective**

The session is intended to introduce participants to the Second Generation Family Caregivers Group. The facilitator will first gather information about participants' goals in attending the group. The facilitator will then discuss the potential challenges for members in wanting to respect their parents and their parents' traumatic experiences while acknowledging the challenges of being raised by a Holocaust survivor. The facilitator will also educate participants on the ways that trauma may have affected their parents and how this, in turn, may have impacted on their own adaptation and current functioning. Finally, the facilitator will offer the audience a positive reframe for understanding some of the conflict they may have experienced growing up as a child of a survivor or survivors.

### **Session Objectives**

After completing the session, participants will understand:

- Some commonalities of group members' various experiences and concerns as Second Generation members
- How the research on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can inform their understanding of the ways that their parents may have been affected by their experiences
- A few of the specific ways that PTSD can affect brain chemistry
- How PTSD might affect a parent's relationship with their child
- The dual reality experienced by children of survivors
- Psychological adaptation for children of survivors

### **Session Preparation**

#### *Materials:*

Photocopied handouts (see end) – outline; "Playing the Holocaust Card"; resources for further learning.

#### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the following resources:

#### Books:

- Kichka, M. (2016). *The second generation: The things I didn't tell my father*. Paris, France: Dargaud.

- Levi, P. (1988). *The drowned and the saved*. New York: Summit Books.
- Levi, P. (1991). *If this is a man and the truce*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Sapolsky, R. (2004). *Why zebras don't get ulcers*. New York: Holt Paperbacks.
- Sigal, J. J., & Weinfeld, M. (1989). *Trauma and rebirth: Intergenerational effects of the Holocaust*. New York: Praeger.
- Spiegelman, A. (1996). *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books.

#### Films:

- *Because of That War* (1988). A documentary where Israeli rock musicians Yehuda Poliker and Yaakov Gilad describe their childhood experiences as children of survivors, directed by Orna Ben-Dor Niv. The film is described here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because\\_of\\_That\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because_of_That_War). More information about the film is available on the database "Jewish and Israeli Music in Films," at <http://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/because-war>.

#### Online Resources:

- Spiegel, V. (2016, May 4). Playing the Holocaust card. Retrieved from <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/playing-the-holocaust-card/>.
- Felsen, I. (2016, May 11). Comments on the first monthly group meeting for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/05/11/comments-on-the-first-monthly-group-meeting-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park/>.

## Session at a Glance

Segment	Description
Introduction	The facilitator will introduce the group and have participants introduce themselves, as well as stating their reasons for attending the group.
"Playing the Holocaust Card"	The facilitator will distribute and read from the article "Playing the Holocaust Card," which discusses the possible impact of having a Holocaust survivor parent on one's experiences.
Research findings on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its effects on Holocaust survivors	The facilitator will discuss some of the research findings on PTSD in general, and then with regard to Holocaust survivors' experiences in particular.
Neurological effects of PTSD	The facilitator will discuss some of the ways in which PTSD can affect a survivor physiologically.
PTSD and parenting	The facilitator will discuss some of the ways that parents who suffer from post-traumatic reactions might behave differently with their children.
The dual reality experienced by children of survivors	The facilitator will discuss the two opposing facets of children of survivors' experiences, i.e., living in a presumably safe world while remaining aware of the potential for large-scale catastrophes.
Psychological adaptation for children of survivors	The facilitator will discuss some of the ways that children of survivors might adapt to their experiences.
Conclusion	The facilitator will help participants positively reframe certain potentially negative aspects of their experiences as children of survivors.

# Introduction

---

Welcome members to the group. Introduce the purpose of the group. Distribute session outline and briefly review with participants.

*Discussion question for the audience: What brings you to this group? What issues in your lives might be relevant to address in this forum?*

Go around the room and encourage participants to state their name and, in 1-2 sentences, their reasons for attending the group. If a participant begins to share too much detail, politely but firmly interrupt them and remind them that in the interest of time, their response needs to be brief and limited to just their name and a sentence about what they would like to see addressed in the group.

The facilitator is encouraged to keep a record of people's reasons for joining the group. Awareness of participants' expectations can guide the facilitator to emphasize points of greater interest to the group. Additionally, at the termination session, having these responses available can help facilitate a discussion about whether participants feel their original goals in attending the group were realized.

Below is a list of responses from previous participants that the facilitator might expect to hear:

- I want to learn how to deal with my aging survivor parent.
- I experienced physical/emotional/sexual abuse by my survivor parent and would like to understand this better.
- I would like to learn more about how having a survivor parent affects my current functioning.
- I would like to learn whether my experiences growing up as a child of a survivor(s) were typical.
- I want to learn how to deal with my survivor parent's mental illness.
- I want to help the third generation understand the Holocaust experience and recognize its significance.
- I want to learn how to cope with my guilty feelings with regard to my relationship with my survivor parent.
- I want to learn how to set boundaries with my survivor parent.
- I want to learn how to reconcile my mandate to honor my survivor parent with my need to insist that they receive care, sometimes against their wishes.
- I want to learn how I can forgive my survivor parent for my upbringing.

# “Playing the Holocaust Card”

---

Distribute the article “Playing the Holocaust Card” (see resources at the end).

Read the following excerpt aloud:

*“Here’s the thing about ‘playing the Holocaust card.’ For me, and many like me, children and grandchildren of survivors, the Holocaust is not a card, it is the hand that we were dealt, and Holocaust remembrance is not a day, it is a lifetime. Let me say upfront that I would not, Heaven forbid, compare our suffering to that of our parents and grandparents, whose numbers are dwindling... like most 2nd Gs, what we children of survivors call ourselves, I woke up as a toddler and throughout my childhood to the screaming nightmares of my parents. I rifled through the lingerie drawer of my mother’s best friend, who promised herself as a teen that if she survived Auschwitz, she would buy only the best. And I watched her roll up a piece of wedding cake in the hem of her dress when Alzheimer’s forced her to relive the Holocaust until her death.*

*“I was raised by parents who feared authority, sickness, starvation, cold, heat, crowding, isolation, and the other: that is to say, anyone who did not hail from a decimated family like my own. The enemy could be anyone in a uniform: a policeman, a ticketing agent at the airport, a server in a restaurant, or a ranger in the park. A cold could turn into typhus; a crowd could become murderous; a person speaking German on the bus could be a cue to get off at the next stop, regardless of where we were going. I was raised with no evidence of my history: no heirlooms, no photographs, no grandparents, no ancestral home.”*

Ask the audience to share their reactions to this excerpt. Reflect their words, commenting or asking questions if doing so will enhance the discussion.

Explain why this article serves as a good introduction, noting that it describes the experience of many Second Generation members. Also note to the audience that learning about the experience of being a Second Generation member is not only about dealing with one’s survivor parents while they are still alive. It is also relevant to understand who one is as a Second Generation member, how this affects one’s coping style, and how this affects one’s way of experiencing things even if the parent is no longer with them.

Optional: display the cover of the book *The second generation: The things I didn’t tell my father* by Michel Kichka. Note to the audience that in the drawing, the author is standing on top of a cap from the concentration camp. Ask them for their reactions. The facilitator can point out, if the audience does not, that this drawing may symbolize the fact that, for the author, the Holocaust and Auschwitz are the stage on which his life evolved and took place.



# Research Findings on PTSD and Holocaust Survivors

---

Introduce participants to the importance of research. Note that, in addition to focusing on individual experiences, this group will also be discussing information from the research literature about survivors and their children. The reason for this is that when examining people's individual experiences, it can be difficult to determine which aspects of their experience are idiosyncratic and unique to them as opposed to being related specifically to the Holocaust experience. Through examining large groups of people and making systematic and methodical comparisons, researchers can observe that certain qualities characterize one particular group and not the other. Once these differences are noted consistently in large groups of over 100 people, researchers can draw firmer conclusions about the relevance of the Holocaust to these differences.

Share the following general research findings on PTSD. Note that, for PTSD sufferers, 1/3 improve spontaneously after several years. (Define improvement as no longer meeting criteria for PTSD.) In contrast, 1/3 may experience a chronic and complex PTSD at different levels. For example, a PTSD sufferer in this category may function well overall but be easily triggered to cry, lose their temper, and even behave aggressively at times. The last 1/3 is an in-between group, not fully recovered from PTSD but not meeting the full criteria for chronic and complex PTSD either.

Discuss PTSD among Holocaust survivors. First, explain the term "meta-analysis," i.e., a type of research in which the results of several research studies are statistically analyzed as a large group in order to yield results based on a very large sample. Then, tell the group about one meta-analysis of Holocaust survivors that examined their total adjustment, physical health, psychological well-being, post-traumatic stress symptoms, cognitive functioning, and stress-related physiology. This study found that survivors resembled the general population in most respects except with regard to post-traumatic stress.

Offer the example of one therapy patient who reported that her father functioned very well and raised a healthy family, but tended to cry at the drop of a hat. This may suggest that this man, despite his overall good functioning, continued to struggle with acute post-traumatic symptoms throughout his life. This was found to be common among the Holocaust survivor population, even those who were not considered to be mentally ill. (You can share with the audience that while the initial studies of Holocaust survivors focused on individuals with a diagnosed psychiatric illness, later studies which focused on non-clinical, community-residing survivors also found a great deal of post-traumatic symptomatology.)

*Discussion question for the audience: Does this information connect in any way with your experience with your survivor parent?*

Have participants share their experiences as time and comfort allows, while remaining mindful of the need to continue providing information and to balance participation among group members.

## PTSD and Neurology

---

Introduce the fact that the natural physiological response to stress can be adaptive: Professor Robert Sapolsky wrote a book about anxiety called *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. (You can note that this book is listed on participants' resource list.) The book's title refers to the fact that, in the wild, the natural stress response is far better controlled for animals than it is for humans living in society.

For example, let's imagine a zebra who sees a tiger. The zebra recognizes the tiger as a threat, and his physiology responds accordingly. The stress response kicks in, and all of the body's energy is diverted away from its various nonessential systems (e.g., the digestive system) to focus exclusively on the fight-or-flight response. Once the zebra flees and is in a safe place, the body deactivates the stress response and the zebra's physical functioning returns to its normal state (e.g., normal digestion, etc.).

People, meanwhile, respond differently. After a traumatic response, our bodies don't necessarily immediately recover. Rather, our brains continue to think about the traumatic experience. We might ask ourselves repeatedly what we could have done, what we should have done, how we might be to blame, etc.

Essentially, rather than bouncing back immediately, stress related to the trauma might continue to impact us and have long-term effects on both our cognitive and physical health. For example, PET scans have found that when patients in a normal state of functioning are triggered to think about a traumatic event, parts of the brain shut down entirely even though the event is in the past and they are not in a state of danger currently.

Clearly, then, PTSD affects the brain, although we are still in the process of discovering exactly how. For example, autopsies of people who exhibited post-traumatic symptoms show that their hippocampus tends to be smaller and have less volume. However, the directionality of this relationship is not self-evident, as it raises a bit of a chicken-and-egg question: Were these individuals born with smaller hippocampi and therefore more vulnerable to experiencing the effects of PTSD, whereas others who experienced the same events might not? Or did the stress hormones triggered by their traumatic experiences kill brain cells over time, resulting in smaller hippocampi?

In addition to the influence of PTSD on the brain's physical structures, researchers are also examining the relationship between PTSD and cognitive decline in later life. Among veterans of the Yom Kippur War, those with more severe PTSD symptoms displayed age-related

physiological and cognitive decline and demonstrated higher incidence of dementia at an earlier age than did those who did not suffer from PTSD. American war veterans exhibited a similar pattern.

We can ask a similar question to the one we asked earlier: does PTSD's effect on brain cells make people more vulnerable to developing dementia at an earlier age? Or do dementia or some factors that predispose certain individuals to it reduce an individual's ability to exercise coping mechanisms that inhibit their PTSD symptoms, so that those with earlier dementia appear to be more traumatized?

In fact, both of these appear to be true.

Often, Holocaust survivors with dementia increasingly revert to their post-traumatic memories in later life. Dr. Felsen shared an anecdote about her father, a survivor, who received anesthesia for an operation. Before receiving the anesthesia, he appeared fine, but as he recovered from the anesthesia, he became fearful that he was surrounded by Nazis. Older Holocaust survivors can be easily triggered into reliving their Holocaust memories, and it can be difficult to re-stabilize them.

Evidently, post-traumatic reactions can be both a cause and an effect of cognitive decline. While cognitive decline itself impairs one's ability to suppress bad memories, there is evidence that the effects of PTSD damage the brain and body long-term.

Have participants share their experiences as time and comfort allows, while remaining mindful of the need to continue providing information and to balance participation among group members.

## PTSD and Parenting

---

Now that we've discussed PTSD and the brain, we'll move into discussing how PTSD might have impacted the way that a survivor parent or parents related to their children.

*Discussion question for the audience: What is the "fight-or-flight response?" What are some of the ways that your body and brain might prepare itself to act quickly in the face of danger?*

Elicit response from the audience. Note that the possibility of danger causes the brain and body to go into high alert, constantly scanning one's surroundings for possible threats. Also encourage the audience to note that when one is in this mode, even small noises and other triggers that seem minor can cause an intense reaction.

Illustrate for the audience the connection between needing to be on constant alert to threats and some of the post-traumatic reactions they might have seen in their survivor parent(s). For example, many survivors bring a constant state of alert and hypervigilance into daily life, where these reactions might not be appropriate. Survivors might startle easily or have a disproportionate fear of anything that could seem dangerous.

Many individuals with PTSD develop fears of anything that might in any way remind them of their traumatic experiences. As such, as parents, they might be avoidant of things that, for most people, would be considered everyday experiences. In a situation where a survivor parent might be unable to avoid these triggers, they might overreact to them in a way that could seem frightening to the child when unexplained. Additionally, individuals with PTSD might be more vulnerable overall to or easily overwhelmed by anxiety, including the inevitable anxiety that comes with raising children.

Many individuals with PTSD become emotionally constricted because their brains have difficulty remaining open to positive emotions while shutting out intrusive negative emotions. While some survivors, as mentioned earlier, might react in frightening and intense ways to everyday situations, other survivors go to the other extreme and strive to control their emotional responses to the extent that they come across as cold or emotionally unavailable to their children.

*Discussion question for the audience: How do you think the experience of having a parent who is struggling with these challenges might affect a child?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Note that the typical experiences children have of developing increasing autonomy are different for those with survivor parents. When a child has a parent who believes the world is very dangerous, the child can internalize this view and become excessively fearful in their own right. In contrast, some children might reject their survivor parents' fears and do what they want to do despite the distress it causes their parents. Studies have found that girls tended to be more compliant with their survivor parents' expectations.

Also note that in larger community studies of Jewish descendants of the Holocaust, Second Generation members were found to resemble the broader population with the exception of one interesting finding: Second Generation members reported a larger incident of sibling suicide. Introduce the topic of abuse as a highly sensitive topic. Acknowledge that people often feel offended when abuse by survivor parents is mentioned, and that this topic was even overlooked in the professional literature for a long time, until the early 2000s. It has long been recognized that survivor parents frequently experienced anxiety and depression, and tended to overprotect or overvalue their children in ways that could be burdensome for the child. Speaking about abuse by survivor parents, however, tends to be more threatening for audiences.

One of the reasons for this appears to be that criticizing survivor parents might be viewed as "blaming the victim." However, this can be reframed. Rather than blaming survivor parents for abusive behavior, the blame for this lies with those who victimized the parents. Discussing abuse highlights the fact that the damage of the Holocaust doesn't end with the first generation. Note that, unfortunately, abuse by survivor parents was actually a widespread problem. (If a participant has already mentioned this, their bravery in coming forward should be validated). While many survivor parents were loving and kind, many were abusive and this group is intended to be a safe place where this, too, may be constructively and safely discussed.

# The Dual Reality for Children of Survivors

---

Transition from the discussion of being parented by a survivor to the discussion of the dual reality: Note to the audience that being parented by a survivor likely made the child more aware than their peers of the fact that the world can change drastically and unexpectedly.

Meanwhile, children of survivors most likely grew up in a world that was ostensibly safe, certainly outside their home. They were expected to follow social rules that apply to life under optimal conditions in safe and socially ordered societies, e.g., wait your turn and let someone else go first, be polite, etc. In this world, people were pleasant, there was no imminent danger, and children of survivors were expected to live successful lives. At the same time, these children remained aware of a palpable other reality.

Dr. Felsen suggests the metaphor of a glass floor. Children of survivors operate in a world that seems predictable and safe, but underneath them is the *unterveld*, the world of the Holocaust. The barrier separating them from this world is transparent, and the conditions of that world are visible to them even if they are not actively affecting the world they are functioning in.

Children of survivors are aware of how people behaved during the Holocaust, including of the unspeakable things people did. This can include not only the deeds of the victimizers, but also the behavior of good people whose conditions forced them to engage in desperate activities such as stealing bread from someone else in order to feed their own child.

Primo Levi, in his book *The Drowned and the Saved* (see resource list), wrote a precise and unwavering description of what he witnessed in Auschwitz. Levi described the actions of the perpetrators as well as the behavior of the victims who were subjected to inhumane conditions. In sharing these painful memories, Levi aimed to raise awareness of what can happen to even reasonably good people in terrible situations, and to ensure that no one could deny the atrocities of the Holocaust. Levi's book challenges the false assumption that the Holocaust was an isolated incident that can or will not be repeated, and highlights the responsibility that all of us have to prevent conditions where even average people can become desperately monstrous.

Being the child of trauma survivors means that at least some of the parent's trauma is transmitted to the child. Being raised with the reality of the glass floor, in the case of Second Generation members, creates a ripple effect on the children: Just as a stone thrown in the water creates multiple ripples, some immediately surrounding the stone and others more far-reaching, so, too, does growing up with survivor parents have ramifications that can extend into many areas of life and personal functioning.

# Psychological Adaptation

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What are some of the ways in which children of survivors might be affected by their continuous awareness of their parents' pain?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then, explain that the continuous awareness of one's parents' pain becomes internalized by the child of the survivor, often evolving into an accentuated focus on empathy. Although this heightened empathy can be a positive force, it can also create a situation whereby the child feels the need to constantly adjust themselves to accommodate the pain and needs of the parent, even to the detriment of their own needs. Through this process of psychological adaptation, children might feel the need to carry themselves only in accordance with what their parents can tolerate, while neglecting their own drives, interests, and needs.

*Discussion question for the audience: What are some examples of ways that this can manifest in someone's personality or life choices?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then, note that children of survivors might lose certain aspects of themselves and their identity in efforts to be what their parents perceive as acceptable.

Additionally, when parents lack the ability to cope constructively with confrontation because of post-traumatic symptoms, their child might feel compelled to protect the parent and later have difficulty learning how to assert themselves with others in their lives, e.g., a spouse, a boss, a friend, etc. This is an important skill for healthy relationships which is missing or underdeveloped in many Second Generation members.

In order to truly mature and reach a place of health at this stage of life, we need to be able to truly understand our parents as people and understand that they did the best they could in the impossible situation in which they were placed. At the same time, we need to be able to extend a similar degree of comprehension and compassion to our younger selves, and to make allowances for what our younger selves needed to do in their situation to maintain their lives and vitality. Ultimately, in order to heal we must be able to examine the results of our parents' behaviors without blaming them, to identify areas in which our necessary adaptations might have led us to certain difficulties in our adult lives and to take steps to remedy them when these adaptations are no longer applicable or beneficial.

# Conclusion

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What kind of parent do you think your parent might have been had they not been impacted by post-traumatic symptoms?*

Elicit responses from the audience.

Discuss the fact that for the most part, even abusive survivor parents loved their children. These parents suffered PTSD and were unable to control their reactivity; they experienced terrible rage outbursts in which they acted horribly. Yet, they loved their children and would have wanted their children to be well-adjusted and healthy, happy and successful. Many Second Generation members continue to feel guilty about the pain they caused their parents growing up—yet it is important to have compassion for our younger selves, to recognize that the behavior that might have been difficult for our parents was often necessary for our own development and growth.

## Wrap-up

---

The facilitator can wrap up the session by reviewing the session's objectives and what was discussed -- some commonalities of group members' various experiences and concerns as Second Generation members; how the research on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can inform their understanding of the ways that their parents may have been affected by their experiences; a few of the specific ways that PTSD can affect brain chemistry; how PTSD might affect a parent's relationship with their child; the dual reality experienced by children of survivors; psychological adaptation for children of survivors; and ways to reframe some of the conflict that might have characterized upbringing by a survivor parent.

The facilitator can then ask the audience to name particular insights that stood out for them. If time allows, the facilitator can ask the audience if they have any further questions or if anything was unclear.

Finally, the facilitator can distribute the handout with resources for further learning and announce the date and topic of the next meeting.

# Handout 1: Session Outline

---

- Introduction; learning about group members' goals for the group
- Some commonalities of group members' various experiences and concerns as Second Generation members
- How the research on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can inform their understanding of the ways that their parents may have been affected by their experiences
- A few of the specific ways that PTSD can affect brain chemistry
- How PTSD might affect a parent's relationship with their child
- The dual reality experienced by children of survivors
- Psychological adaptation for children of survivors
- Conclusion – toward a positive reframe of growing up with a survivor parent



## Handout 2: “Playing the Holocaust Card”

---

[The facilitator is advised to print out sufficient copies of the article to distribute. The article is available at <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/playing-the-holocaust-card/>.]

# Handout 3: Resources for Further Learning

---

## Books:

- Kichka, M. (2016). *The second generation: The things I didn't tell my father*. Paris, France: Dargaud.
- Levi, P. (1988). *The drowned and the saved*. New York: Summit Books.
- Levi, P. (1991). *If this is a man and the truce*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Sapolsky, R. (2004). *Why zebras don't get ulcers*. New York: Holt Paperbacks.
- Sigal, J. J., & Weinfeld, M. (1989). *Trauma and rebirth: Intergenerational effects of the Holocaust*. New York: Praeger.
- Spiegelman, A. (1996). *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books.

## Films:

- *Because of That War* (1988). A documentary directed by Orna Ben-Dor Niv, where Israeli rock musicians Yehuda Poliker and Yaakov Gilad describe their childhood experiences as children of survivors. The film is described here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because\\_of\\_That\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because_of_That_War). More information about the film is available on the database "Jewish and Israeli Music in Films," at <http://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/because-war>.

## Online Resources:

- Spiegel, V. (2016, May 4). Playing the Holocaust card. Retrieved from <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/playing-the-holocaust-card/>.
- Felsen, I. (2016, May 11). Comments on the first monthly group meeting for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/05/11/comments-on-the-first-monthly-group-meeting-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park/>.

# Session 2

---

## PTSD and Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Resilience

### The Session in Perspective

The session is intended to improve Second Generation members' knowledge of the existing research with regard to their parents' reactions to trauma as well as the impact of these reactions on their own experience. The discussion will focus on both after-effects of trauma and on the survivors' remarkable resiliencies. In addition to educating and validating Second Generation members with regard to facets of their childhood experiences and how this continues to impact them as adults, this session will provide a forum where participants feel comfortable enough to share thoughts, feelings, and insights and ask sensitive questions.

### Session Objectives

After completing the session, participants will understand:

- Defining characteristics of PTSD
- Unique aspects of Holocaust trauma, in contrast to other traumatic experiences
- How traumatic reactions are transmitted from parents to children
- How growing up with a survivor parent can affect development
- Resilience and its intergenerational transmission from survivor parents to their children

### Session Preparation

#### *Materials:*

Photocopied handouts (see end) – outline; “Could Have” by Wisława Szymborska; resources for further learning.

#### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the following resources:

#### Books and Articles

- Bloom, S. L. (2013). *Creating sanctuary: Toward the evolution of sane societies*. New York: Routledge.
- Felsen, I. (1998). Transgenerational transmission of effects of the Holocaust: The North American research perspective. In Y. Danieli (Ed.), *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma* (pp. 43-68). New York: Plenum Press.
- Helmreich, W. B. (1996). *Against all odds: Holocaust survivors and the successful lives they made in America*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Karam, E. G., et al. (2014). Cumulative traumas and risk thresholds: 12-month PTSD in the World Mental Health (WMH) surveys. *Depression and Anxiety*, 31(2), 130-142.

- Kichka, M. (2016). *The second generation: The things I didn't tell my father*. Paris, France: Dargaud.
- Levi, P. (1991). *If this is a man and the truce*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Norris, F. H., Friedman, M. J., Watson, P. J., & Kaniasty, K. (2002). 60000 disaster victims speak: Part I and II. An empirical review of the empirical literature, 1981–2001. *Psychiatry*, 65(3), 207-239.
- Russell, M. D. (2005). *A thread of grace*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Spiegelman, A. (1996). *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books.

#### Films:

- *Because of That War* (1988). A documentary directed by Orna Ben-Dor Niv, where Israeli rock musicians Yehuda Poliker and Yaakov Gilad describe their childhood experiences as children of survivors. The film is described here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because\\_of\\_That\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because_of_That_War). More information about the film is available on the database “Jewish and Israeli Music in Films,” at <http://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/because-war>.
- *Fugitive Pieces* (2007). A film directed by Jeremy Podeswa, about a child who escapes from Poland during World War II and first heads to Greece before coming of age in Canada. The film is described here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fugitive\\_Pieces\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fugitive_Pieces_(film)). The film is available for rent or purchase on Amazon video.

#### Online Resources:

- Barel, E., Van IJzendoorn, M. H., Sagi-Schwartz, A., & Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2010). Surviving the Holocaust: A meta-analysis of the long-term sequelae of a genocide. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(5), 677-698. Retrieved from [http://depts.washington.edu/bcpt/docs/Barel et al, Surviving the Holocaust Psych Bull 2010 136 5 677 698.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/bcpt/docs/Barel%20et%20al,%20Surviving%20the%20Holocaust%20Psych%20Bull%202010%20136%205%20677%20698.pdf).
- Felsen, I. (2016, July 20). Summary of the 2nd meeting of discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/07/20/summary-of-2nd-meeting-of-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors/>.
- Felsen, I. (2016, September 16). Thoughts from the fourth meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park, Tues. 9/13/16 [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/09/16/thoughts-from-the-fourth-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park-tues-91316/>.
- Havvnfk. (2012, August 9). Epigenetics in Nova Science [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4boKud1MRk>.
- Szymborska, W. (1996). Could have [Poem]. Retrieved from <https://www.english.upenn.edu/~traister/szymborska.html>.
- Tronick, E. [UMass Boston]. (2009, November 30). *Still face experiment* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>.

### Session at a Glance

Segment	Description
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	The facilitator will discuss some defining characteristics of PTSD.
General effects of PTSD	The facilitator will review some behavioral effects of PTSD, such as avoidance and constriction.
PTSD, personality changes, and complex trauma	The facilitator will discuss the long-term effects of PTSD on personality, as well as its heightened effects in the context of complex trauma.
Unique aspects of Holocaust trauma	The facilitator will discuss some of the distinct characteristics of the Holocaust as a particular traumatic event.
Intergenerational transmission of trauma	The facilitator will discuss some of the ways that parents inadvertently transmit their traumatic reactions to their children.
Effects of growing up with a survivor parent	The facilitator will discuss some of the ways that growing up with a survivor parent can impact on development.
Resilience and its intergenerational transmission	The facilitator will define resilience, describe it in the context of Holocaust survivors, and discuss how resilience, like trauma, is transmitted intergenerationally.

# Introduction

---

Distribute session outline and briefly review with participants. Explain that this discussion will focus on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a means of helping participants better understand their parents' experiences. It will then turn to a discussion of ways that both trauma and resilience are transmitted from survivor parents to their children.

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

---

We now know that people can be profoundly affected, sometimes for a very long time, by traumatic events. However, this recognition is relatively recent. It actually took until 1980 for mental health professions to recognize Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a disorder that is specifically related to having been exposed to a traumatic event or to extremely stressful circumstances. The diagnosis of the disorder was based on the identification of a set of consistent symptoms including hyperarousal or hypervigilance, numbing and detachment, a marked startle reaction, and intrusive phenomena such as flashbacks, nightmares, and unbidden memories of the trauma. After having experienced a serious trauma, many people continue to experience a psycho-physiological stress response that persists long after the threat has passed. In these cases, the entire body maintains a very high level of stress and a chronic state of perpetual scanning for danger. This can last decades or the duration of a lifetime, and is an aspect of PTSD which is often resistant to treatment.

A beautiful documentary about Yehuda Poliker and Yaacov Gilad and their Holocaust survivor parents (see resource list) provides an excellent example of the both the emotional constriction and the hyper-reactivity that can be caused by post-traumatic symptoms. In the film, Yehuda Poliker's father describes his son's bar mitzvah, which was supposed to be a happy event. However, Yehuda's father was emotionally aroused by the experience, with the sight of the beautifully set tables evoking images for him of the family members who should have been in attendance. As a result, he experienced a very upsetting episode, in which he lost control of his behavior, kicking tables and throwing things. Throughout the documentary, the manner of speech of Poliker's father manifests detachment in the flat affect in which he describes such painful memories.

Once the diagnosis of PTSD was accepted, it facilitated a large number of studies that examined and confirmed the adverse effects of PTSD in various populations exposed to trauma.

*Discussion question for the audience: What do you think defines an event as traumatic?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that in order for an event to be characterized as traumatic according to the definition in the DSM-III, it needs to have involved a direct threat to one's life or to one's body integrity and wellness, or to have involved having witnessed another person in serious danger. Meanwhile, SAMHSA defines a traumatic event as one that causes a

great disruption in one's life and has a lasting effect. According to this definition, trauma is not only defined by features of the initial exposure but by the event's long-term effects on the individual.

Of course, PTSD is not the only possible psychological reaction to trauma. Some survivors of trauma develop depression or an anxiety disorder, and often both. In addition to mental health effects, many people exposed to disasters develop health problems and/or chronic problems of living. A meta-analysis of multiple samples totaling 60,000 disaster victims from around the world (Norris et al., 2002; see resource list) showed high prevalence rates of psychological disorders, health problems, non-specific psychological distress, problems in day-to-day living, and the loss of ability to access resources.

## General Effects of PTSD

---

In some cases, people with PTSD will try to avoid anything related to or reminiscent of their trauma. This avoidance can sometimes expand over time so that the person with PTSD avoids more and more experiences that are related, even distantly, to the trauma. This avoidance can become its own problem, since as people constrict their experiences they have fewer opportunities to make positive new experiences to counterbalance their bad experiences

For example, one therapy patient who had worked as a photographer for Israeli TV was shot in the face. At first, he was unable to tolerate hearing anything about shooting incidents in Gilo, the location in which he was shot. But later on, he became unable to tolerate hearing about anything remotely related to that experience. Later still, it became very difficult for him to be in any social situations, as, in Israel, discussing the news and daily incidents of violence was commonplace.

*Discussion question for the audience: Would anyone like to share their own observations of avoidance in their parents' reactions?*

Elicit responses from the audience, remaining mindful of the need to balance time constraints with offering multiple participants a chance to share.

In addition to attempting to avoid activities, places, and people who might remind them of traumatic memories, people with posttraumatic symptoms will sometimes also constrict emotionally in an attempt to avoid the painful emotions associated with the trauma. However, such constriction might end up leading to an over-all emotional numbness, as emotion is wired in the brain so that people can either be emotionally open and responsive, or else entirely shut down. There is no good mechanism in the human brain that allows for a selective process, i.e., being less emotionally open and responsive to negative emotional experiences while continuing to remain emotionally open and responsive to positive experiences.

As a result of defensive constriction, survivor parents might appear to have a subdued reaction to happy events in the lives of their children. These and other aspects of a survivor parent's trauma can have a strong impact on a child's development.

## PTSD, Personality Changes, and Complex Trauma

---

The original definition of PTSD included three major components: intrusive memories, emotional numbing/detachment, and hyperarousal. In 2013, the definition of PTSD was expanded to reflect a wider range of trauma-related reactions. It was noted that in addition to the symptoms mentioned, some people exposed to trauma go on to experience long-term pervasive personality changes and altered views of themselves and of the world.

Trauma survivors often report that "I'm not the same person that I was. I don't feel the same way about myself; I don't feel the same way about the world." Beyond the symptoms of PTSD, this description refers to profound changes in how trauma survivors experience themselves, their world, and their relationships. These personality changes are particularly evident among survivors of complex trauma, i.e., prolonged or repeated traumatic events. Personality traits such as difficulty trusting others, fear of being unloved or abandoned, and difficulties regulating emotion can have a strong effect on relationships even when they're not terrible or extreme.

In a study by the World Health Organization (Karam et al., 2014; see resource list) it was observed that the occurrence of more than four traumatic events constitutes a "trauma threshold," whereby individuals exposed to more than four traumatic events are at risk for more severe distress and more significant functional impairment.

Holocaust survivors suffered prolonged, multiple, complex traumas, exceeding this threshold every day during the war years. The impact of such intense, prolonged, and multiple traumatic experiences is extensive. In fact, the relatively good functioning of survivors of the Holocaust after the end of WWII is extremely surprising in light of the findings from the World Health Organization study and others.

The next part of the discussion will focus on some of the unique traumatic characteristics of living through the Holocaust.

## Unique Aspects of Holocaust Trauma

---

*Discussion question for the audience: In what way was the Holocaust different from other traumatic experiences someone might live through, e.g., surviving a car accident, assault, or a natural disaster?*



Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that one way in which cumulative mass trauma like the Holocaust differs from other traumas is that all of the resources, support systems, and infrastructure that preceded the event were lost. People who had lived through the Holocaust had no one to help them, and often no one to whom to return. In contrast, in the wake of 9/11 for example, the infrastructure for supporting victims was in place throughout.

Additionally, it is important to distinguish among natural disasters and trauma perpetrated by humans upon others, or “malignant trauma.” Trauma caused by an accident or natural disaster is very different from traumas such as the Holocaust, genocide, political persecution, or other interpersonal traumas. When trauma is interpersonal in nature, there is an added element of malevolent intent, which is the idea that another person wanted to hurt the victim and acted on this desire. The particular added characteristic of malignant trauma has the potential to shatter survivors’ worldview, or views of mankind, justice, G-d, etc.

## Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

---

Many studies of populations with PTSD demonstrate that parents’ PTSD affects their children. The responses of parents who suffer from PTSD to experiences that trigger painful memories or feelings are difficult for their children to tolerate. Parents might appear frightened, become explosive, or shut down and appear unavailable to their child. When Second Generation members are affected by their parents’ experiences, this influence is not necessarily related to information or stories about the Holocaust that their parents imparted to them directly; rather, the influence takes place through witnessing and experiencing their parents’ reactions or worldviews.

Trauma of the magnitude of the Holocaust destroys the basic assumptions that people have about the world in normal circumstances--the assumption that there is justice, humanity, or some predictability and relationship between one’s actions and reactions. The shattering of such assumptions is reflected in the title Primo Levi chose for his book: *If This is a Man*. Once one has experienced an event like the Holocaust, one’s realizations of what man is capable of leaves survivors with a forever changed and precarious view of the world.

In addition to an awareness of man’s capacity for evil, many survivors also find their worldview altered by an awareness of the blind and fickle luck that determined who survived and who died in the Holocaust. Distribute the poem by Wisława Szymborska (see handouts). “I survived because I stood here or stood there.” “We were hiding in the barn and the Nazis came and looked for us, but luckily the sun was so strong that day that it blinded them even though they were looking right at us.” So many tiny factors determined one person’s survival or someone else’s death. The awareness of this fact similarly creates a feeling that the world is an unsafe place, which can be transmitted through the relationships with the parents to the children of survivors.

*Discussion question for the audience: Did anyone feel, growing up, that their survivor parent was excessively worried about safety?*

Elicit examples from the audience. Then share the following examples:

One Second Generation therapy patient who used to call her father every morning reported that if the weather was a little too warm, or a little too cold, or lightly raining, her father would warn her not to go out.

Dr. Felsen shared that she was raised in Israel to be very free, but she remembers coming home late at night and always seeing her father's silhouette in the window. Although her father didn't want to forbid her from staying out late, he couldn't go to sleep until she returned home safely.

Many such aspects of growing up with a survivor parent can impact a child's development, as will be discussed in the next section.

## Effects of Growing Up with a Survivor Parent

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What impact might growing up with a survivor parent have on a child's development?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then explain that a child who grows up with that kind of reaction has two choices. They can internalize their parents' belief that the world is very dangerous and subsequently feel that they are vulnerable to these dangers. Or they can reject this view, going out and doing the things they wish to do anyway, but suffer the price of knowing that they are causing their parents a lot of anxiety. This might cause the child to feel that they are a "bad" and "uncaring" child, or create guilt feelings about their pursuing their own "selfish" needs.

Some Second Generation children, boys in particular, tended to rebel against overprotective survivor parents in order to maintain a sense of self and develop some independence and assertiveness. This rebellion and the autonomy that it allowed some children to achieve came at great cost, though, because when parents manifested anguish at the behavior of the children, some of these children internalized a sense that they were being bad by being assertive, or by putting their needs ahead of another person's. This view might in turn complicate one's ability to balance one's own needs and the needs of others in later relationships in life.

*Discussion question for the audience: Has anyone here observed or experienced different reactions for boys and for girls growing up with survivor parents?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then explain that gender interacts with all experiences. In our society, girls are generally taught to be accommodating and to take care of others. Men, in contrast, are encouraged to define themselves and to accomplish things in the world. These differences are often accentuated in families with a traumatized parent or parents. Survivor parents are perceived as needing consideration and care, which often becomes the role of the daughter in the family, who might put her own needs aside in an effort to take care of her parents. Meanwhile, studies have shown that Second Generation sons have higher achievement motivation and higher actual socioeconomic accomplishments than daughters, and they often express that their high motivation to succeed was driven by their need to fulfil their survivor parents' expectations and hopes.

In other cases, sons experienced fathers with PTSD who were so controlling that the father-son relationship became toxic. Some of these men became impaired in their ability to go out into the world and work in a productive, consistent way, often despite considerable talents. In the context of society's expectation that males behave assertively and confidently, this impairment was particularly damaging.

In contrast to men, women who are less ambitious and assertive are not necessarily viewed as dysfunctional by their social environment, and daughters who are very dependent on their parents might transfer this dependency onto their husbands, which can be viewed as acceptable. However, just because caring for her family can be an "alibi" for a woman who would have wanted to have a career but is not assertive enough to pursue it, this does not mean that this lack of assertiveness did not have detrimental effects on her life. Meanwhile, a man who is dependent on his parents is openly considered much less functional.

While some children of survivors became overly accommodating to their parents' controlling attitudes, others became rebellious. Since any small act of self-assertive behavior was reacted to by the parents as "bad," a relationship of mutual hurt and hostility escalated and they became the "problem child."

*Discussion question for the audience: Did anyone have an experience growing up where their parents compared their current struggles to what they had endured during the Holocaust?*

Elicit answers from the audience, then note that for some survivors, the stuff of normal life was so small relative to what they had been through. To illustrate this, the facilitator can display a page from *Maus* depicting a scene where Art, as a boy, had been playing with friends. Art fell and his friends continued running and didn't wait for him. Art then came home crying about the incident. After telling his father what happened, his father said to him: "Friends? Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... Then you could see what it is, friends!"

Many Second Generation members experienced similar reactions from their parents. This wasn't meant badly; it was simply an intrusion of the parent's life experience into everyday life.

Reactions like these impact the child's view of their own reality, creating what was discussed previously as the trauma reality that lies underneath the "glass floor."

Survivor parents sometimes attempted to comfort their children by encouraging them to keep their difficulties in proportion. However, they often did that by reminding the children of the insignificance of their particular problems compared with the catastrophic reality their parents had lived through. For children, it is not helpful to feel that whatever is happening in their own life is not of great significance in comparison to this harsher reality. Such a comparison only serves to create a sense in the child that their own life, their own experiences, are of no consequence, and that their pain or disappointment in reaction to negative events of a normative life are insignificant.

For example, one child of a survivor was sharing an apartment with a friend while attending college. One day she came home to find that the roommate had moved out without telling her anything. This was a shocking and hurtful event for the young woman, who then called her mother, seeking comfort. The mother's response seemed to her daughter entirely callous: "So what – so she moved out. What is that next to what we went through?" Another therapy patient who wanted very badly to have a child experienced a D&C. Her survivor mother similarly responded with, "So what?"

This emotional "hardening" as a result of extremely difficult experiences, and the appearance of a lack of empathy to the trials and tribulations of their children, is captured in the epilogue for the novel *A Thread of Grace* by Mary Doria Russell (2005). The book describes the story of a very young woman who survived the Holocaust in the mountains of Northern Italy with the Partisans.

In the epilogue, the rabbi/chaplain who met the woman at the end of her life, as an elderly patient, describes how all of her children experienced her as lacking in empathy. One remembered their mother's cold response when they divorced; one remembered their mother's detachment when she had a miscarriage. We, the readers, who have gotten to know her and identify with her suffering and her losses as a young woman, understand why she might have become this way and been experienced as such by her children. However, children of survivors were not present to witness this chapter of their parents' lives. Even if they could have been, or if they are familiar with some of their parents' experiences, perceived or actual parental unavailability nevertheless was and might continue to be extremely painful for their children.

*Discussion question for the audience: When we mentioned survivors' tendencies toward emotional constriction earlier, did that resonate for anyone? Does anyone remember a time when they experienced a significant event and felt that their parent was not emotionally present?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Note that many Second Generation members describe a certain numbness and detachment that they experienced with their parents at significant events in their lives, especially at happy events.

Introduce and show the video of the still face experiment (see resource list). This video depicts an experiment with mothers interacting with their infants, who are just a few months old. Upon receiving a signal from the researcher, the mother is instructed to make her face still and remain unresponsive for a full minute. In the video, we see the baby try to engage the mother by smiling, gesturing, shrieking, etc., to no effect. The baby quickly becomes very distressed. This experiment demonstrates what happens when caregivers are preoccupied and unfocused on their infants, as is the case of parents who are depressed or suffering from PTSD, which can cause them to be triggered unexpectedly and become preoccupied by a traumatic memory. Many survivor parents experienced moments where they were triggered or intruded upon by memories, and continually had to push away depressive thoughts and emotions.

Another factor to be considered is the impact of chronic sleep deprivation as a result of the sleep disturbances often associated with the disorder. Remember how difficult it was for any of us as parents to function during the day when we had an infant who did not sleep for several nights. Remember how impatient one could feel with the infant by the second or third or fourth day. Survivor parents suffered sleep disorders for decades – many of them didn't sleep, or slept poorly, for many years. Additionally, the body's stress response takes an inordinate toll on the body's neurobiology across a variety of systems. As a result, survivors were often chronically drained.

As mentioned earlier, many survivor parents were also overly reactive. Many Second Generation members report having experienced moments where their parents were very distressed, which was very frightening for them as children.

The movie "Fugitive Pieces" (2008) by director Jeremy Podeswa (see resource list) is about a child who was rescued from Poland by a Greek archaeologist, who then raised the child. One scene depicts the funeral for the Greek archaeologist, years later. The child who was rescued, now an adult, is sitting with a neighbor who is also a survivor and with the neighbor's young son. The father is very affectionate, sitting with his young son on the sofa, and the feeling between them seems very loving. At some point, the boy, who had been eating an apple, tires of the adult conversation and goes off to play, leaving the half-eaten apple behind. The survivor father erupts in a rage over the child's having wasted half an apple. Clearly, this is a moment when the survivor father was triggered and reacted in an explosive way to the memory of his starvation in the concentration camp.

This interaction captures what happens when a child experiences a very frightening reaction from the person who is the source of their security, and how destabilizing it is for a child to not know when and what might trigger their parent into going from warm and loving to threatening and terrifying. The fright in the child's eyes is obvious, and later in the movie, it is revealed that the child has grown to be estranged from his father.

When children frequently experience their parents as either frightened (a reaction which can be easily triggered for a traumatized parent) or frightening (as we see in the eruption in the movie),

this can threaten the parent-child relationship. In fact, this is one of the primary mechanisms that mediates the transmission of effects related to parental trauma.

*Discussion question for the audience: Earlier, we discussed the experience of having parents who seemed overprotective. Did anyone here, growing up, feel the opposite – that it was their responsibility to protect their parents at all costs?*

Elicit responses from the audience. Note that, in contrast to parents who tended to be detached, some parents were over-involved and over-reactive, to the point where their children couldn't share anything with them for fear of causing their parents worry or upset.

In one example, a son of survivors in Israel didn't tell his parents that he was in the hospital after having suffered a heart attack. Instead, in order to protect them from worry, he told them that he was busy entertaining important business visitors from abroad and would call as soon as he could.

Another woman never shared with her parents the fact that she was diagnosed with cancer and was undergoing chemotherapy. A third individual went bankrupt and never informed her parents that she was working three jobs in order to survive.

Of course, although many Second Generation members viewed their parents as fragile, Holocaust survivors were remarkably resilient in many ways. The next section will focus on the resilience of survivor parents, and the ways by which it has been transmitted to their children.

## Resilience and its Intergenerational Transmission

---

Despite the complex trauma of the Holocaust, Holocaust survivors were able to maintain a fairly good level of functionality alongside their symptoms. This is in sharp contrast to studies of other survivors of complex trauma, who were found to manifest a high degree of dysfunction and impairment.

For example, according to William Helmreich's interviews with survivors across the country (see resource list), by 1953 only a miniscule percentage of survivors were receiving public assistance. In fact, the average income for Holocaust survivors as a whole was already higher than that of their American peers only a few short years after the Holocaust. This attests to the surprisingly high level of functionality in this group, and to its resilience.

*Discussion question for the audience: How would you define resilience?*

Elicit answers from the audience, then note that there are many definitions of resilience. Dr. Felsen prefers to define it as a person's capacity to consciously choose to pursue a meaningful goal despite their negative experiences and any after-effects.

It is important to emphasize that resilience is not defined by the absence of symptoms. A person can experience a great many symptoms and still be described as resilient. Indeed, many survivors managed to achieve a great deal while experiencing both physical and psychological after-effects of their trauma.

Resilience is also not a binary concept, something that one either "has" or does not have. The same individuals can be resilient at certain times and not at others, or in certain situations or aspects, but not in others.

Surviving the war required a capacity to persevere in the face of terrible adversity. In the years that followed the Holocaust, survivors' willingness to engage in life and rebuild despite their experiences further attests to their resilience, even as they continued to experience the negative after-effects of their trauma. Despite the already noted general lack of social support or mental health services, survivors managed to raise a generation apparently free of any serious psychopathology which, as a group, manifests high educational and socio-economic achievements.

It was previously observed that children of survivors are affected by their parents' trauma in a number of ways. The pathways for this transmission of effects are embedded in their relationship with their parents, their parents' modeling of hyperarousal, their communication of a frightened or frightening attitude about others and about safety in the world, and their inability to attend to their children in a consistent way. At the same time, children of survivors do also have the benefit of having internalized their parents' resilience, having the capacity to cope adaptively when confronted with adversity.

One might argue that, as Jews, all of us have some of the effects of trauma and some of the resilience of survivors of trauma in our makeup. Sandra Bloom makes this claim in her book *Creating Sanctuary* (see resource list for description), stating that the effects of traumatic experiences trickle down throughout many generations. Despite its exposure to historical trauma, pogroms, and riots, the Jewish population continues to persevere.

The field of epigenetics takes a particular perspective on genetic transmission relevant to this discussion. [If desired, the facilitator can show the audience the following clip listed in the resource list, Epigenetics in Nova Science [Video file], available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4boKud1MRk>. Alternatively, the facilitator can simply reference the clip and encourage participants to watch it on their own.]

According to epigenetics, although our DNA itself is constant and unchanging, external conditions can influence and change the expression of our DNA.

We might conceptualize our genetic code as a piano. Traumatic experiences impact the DNA as if some of the keys on the piano were taped down or jammed, so that they cannot be played. Now, with some of its keys taped down, the piano will make sounds that are different than those it would make if all of the keys were free to be played.

Both traumatic reactions and qualities of resilience may be transmitted epigenetically from parent to child, and indeed, there are strong indications that this is the case. For example, due to the years of starvation that survivors endured, it appears that the children of survivor mothers are more susceptible to various health risks due to epigenetic pre-natal programming.

Children of Holocaust survivors have inherited a legacy of pain, strengths, resiliencies, and various ways of coping, some more adaptive and some less adaptive when applied in the circumstances of normative life. We must remember that each family of survivors was different, and every child adapts differently to their unique family environment. Even siblings within the same family often display disparate patterns of accommodating and adjusting to the particular challenges of their family life. However, research has identified some characteristic experiences of growing up in Holocaust survivor families. These experiences continue to inform and influence the perspective and worldview of adult children of survivors and to impact their relationships in later life.

## Wrap-up

---

The facilitator can wrap up the session by reviewing the session's objectives and what was discussed -- defining characteristics of PTSD; unique aspects of Holocaust trauma, in contrast to other traumatic experiences; how traumatic reactions are transmitted from parents to children; how growing up with a survivor parent can affect development; and resilience and its intergenerational transmission from survivor parents to their children.

The facilitator can then ask the audience to name particular insights that stood out for them. If time allows, the facilitator can ask the audience if they have any further questions or if anything was unclear.

Finally, the facilitator can distribute the handout with resources for further learning and announce the date and topic of the next meeting.



# Handout 1: Session Outline

---

- Defining characteristics of PTSD
- Unique aspects of Holocaust trauma, in contrast to other traumatic experiences
- How traumatic reactions are transmitted from parents to children
- How growing up with a survivor parent can affect development
- Resilience and its intergenerational transmission from survivor parents to their children

## Handout 2: “Could Have,” by Wisława Szymborska

---

It could have happened.  
It had to happen.  
It happened earlier. Later.  
Nearer. Farther off.  
It happened, but not to you.  
You were saved because you were the first.  
You were saved because you were the last.  
Alone. With others.  
On the right. The left.  
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.  
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck — there was a forest.  
You were in luck — there were no trees.  
You were in luck — a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake,  
A jamb, a turn, a quarter-inch, an instant . . .

So you're here? Still dizzy from  
another dodge, close shave, reprieve?  
One hole in the net and you slipped through?  
I couldn't be more shocked or  
speechless.  
Listen,  
how your heart pounds inside me.

# Handout 3: Resources for Further Learning

---

## Books and Articles:

- Bloom, S. L. (2013). *Creating sanctuary: Toward the evolution of sane societies*. New York: Routledge.
- Felsen, I. (1998). Transgenerational transmission of effects of the Holocaust: The North American research perspective. In Y. Danieli (Ed.), *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma* (pp. 43-68). New York: Plenum Press.
- Helmreich, W. B. (1996). *Against all odds: Holocaust survivors and the successful lives they made in America*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Karam, E. G., et al. (2014). Cumulative traumas and risk thresholds: 12-month PTSD in the World Mental Health (WMH) surveys. *Depression and Anxiety*, 31(2), 130-142.
- Kichka, M. (2016). *The second generation: The things I didn't tell my father*. Paris, France: Dargaud.
- Levi, P. (1991). *If this is a man and the truce*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Norris, F. H., Friedman, M. J., Watson, P. J., & Kaniasty, K. (2002). 60000 disaster victims speak: Part I and II. An empirical review of the empirical literature, 1981–2001. *Psychiatry*, 65(3), 207-239.
- Russell, M. D. (2005). *A thread of grace*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Spiegelman, A. (1996). *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books.

## Films:

- *Because of That War* (1988). A documentary directed by Orna Ben-Dor Niv, where Israeli rock musicians Yehuda Poliker and Yaakov Gilad describe their childhood experiences as children of survivors. The film is described here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because\\_of\\_That\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Because_of_That_War). More information about the film is available on the database "Jewish and Israeli Music in Films," at <http://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/because-war>.
- *Fugitive Pieces* (2007). A film directed by Jeremy Podeswa about a child who escapes from Poland during World War II and first heads to Greece before coming of age in Canada. The film is described here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fugitive\\_Pieces\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fugitive_Pieces_(film)). The film is available for rent or purchase on Amazon video.

## Online Resources:

- Barel, E., Van IJzendoorn, M. H., Sagi-Schwartz, A., & Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2010). Surviving the Holocaust: A meta-analysis of the long-term sequelae of a genocide. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(5), 677-698. Retrieved from [http://depts.washington.edu/bcpt/docs/Barel et al, Surviving the Holocaust Psych Bull 2010 136 5 677 698.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/bcpt/docs/Barel%20et%20al,%20Surviving%20the%20Holocaust%20Psych%20Bull%20136%205%20677%20698.pdf).

- Felsen, I. (2016, July 20). Summary of the 2nd meeting of discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/07/20/summary-of-2nd-meeting-of-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors/>.
- Felsen, I. (2016, September 16). Thoughts from the fourth meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park, Tues. 9/13/16 [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/09/16/thoughts-from-the-fourth-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park-tues-91316/>.
- Havvnfk. (2012, August 9). Epigenetics in Nova Science [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4boKud1MRk>.
- Szymborska, W. (1996). Could have [Poem]. Retrieved from <https://www.english.upenn.edu/~traister/szymborska.html>.
- Tronick, E. [UMass Boston]. (2009, November 30). *Still face experiment* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>.

# Session 3

---

## The Second Generation Experience

### The Session in Perspective

The session is intended to improve Second Generation members' understanding of their parents' traumatic reactions and how these reactions influenced their development. In addition to educating and validating Second Generation members with regard to facets of their childhood experiences and how these might continue to impact them as adults, this session will provide a forum where participants feel comfortable enough to share thoughts, feelings, and insights and ask sensitive questions.

### Session Objectives

After completing the session, participants will understand:

- That the existence of a Second Generation experience has been validated
- Some of the research findings about Second Generation members
- Common ways in which growing up with a survivor parent could have affected one's personality, outlook, and relationships as an adult
- The importance of discussing and processing one's experiences as a Second Generation member in order to manage their impact in the present

### Session Preparation

#### *Materials:*

Photocopied handouts (see end) – outline; resources for further learning.

#### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the following resources:

#### Books and Articles:

- Baider, L., Goldzweig, G., Ever-Hadani, P. and Peretz, T. (2006). Psychological distress and coping in breast cancer patients and healthy women whose parents survived the Holocaust. *Psycho-Oncology*, 15, 635–646.
- Baider, L., Goldzweig, G., Ever-Hadani, P., & Peretz, T. (2007). Breast cancer and psychological distress: Mothers' and daughters' traumatic experiences. *Supportive Care in Cancer*, 16(4), 407-414.
- Kichka, M. (2016). *The second generation: The things I didn't tell my father*. Paris, France: Dargaud.

- Scharf, M., & Mayseless, O. (2011). Disorganizing experiences in second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors. *Qualitative Health Research*, 21(11), 1539-1553.
- Solomon, Z. (1998). Transgenerational effects of the Holocaust: The Israeli research perspective. In Y. Danieli (Ed.), *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma* (pp. 69-84). New York: Plenum Press.
- van IJzendoorn, M.H., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M.J. & Sagi-Schwartz, A. J. (2003). Are children of Holocaust survivors less well-adapted? A meta-analytic investigation of secondary traumatization. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 16(5), 459-469.
- Wiseman, H. (2008). On failed intersubjectivity: Recollections of loneliness experiences in offspring of Holocaust survivors. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 78(3), 350-358.
- Wiseman, H., & Barber, J. P. (2008). *Echoes of the trauma: Relational themes and emotions in children of Holocaust survivors*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

#### Online Resources:

- De Botton, A. (2016, May 28). Why you will marry the wrong person. *New York Times*. Retrieved from [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html?_r=0).
- Felsen, I. (2016, July 20). Summary of the 2nd meeting of discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/07/20/summary-of-2nd-meeting-of-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors/>.
- Felsen, I. (2016, September 16). Thoughts from the fourth meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park, Tues. 9/13/16 [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/09/16/thoughts-from-the-fourth-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park-tues-91316/>.

## Session at a Glance

Segment	Description
Is there such thing as the Second Generation?	The facilitator will introduce the question of whether there is a unique Second Generation experience and briefly note research supporting its existence.
Research findings on children of Holocaust survivors	The facilitator will review some of the research describing distinguishing characteristics of Second Generation members.
Subjective vs. objective effects	The facilitator will differentiate between objective differences and subjective experiences with regard to unique characteristics of Second Generation members.
Loneliness	The facilitator will discuss the sense of loneliness reported by many Second Generation members.
Dysregulation and conflict resolution	The facilitator will discuss responding to conflict in a regulated way as a challenge for many Second Generation members.
Resilience	The facilitator will discuss inherited resilience in the Second Generation.
Coping, and catastrophizing	The facilitator will discuss an interesting combination of adaptive external coping with serious crises alongside a subjective tendency toward catastrophizing displayed by Second Generation members.
Importance of understanding the Second Generation experience	The facilitator will discuss the value of understanding the Second Generation experience.

# Introduction: Is there such thing as the Second Generation?

---

Distribute session outline and briefly review with participants.

*Discussion question for the audience: Is there such thing as a particular Second Generation experience?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Note that some deny the existence of a Second Generation experience because many survivor parents functioned well in society. While it is true that some survivor parents functioned well in all areas, others might have been very successful in some respects but struggled in others (e.g., intimate relationships and family life). Still others functioned poorly across the board.

Over the years, as clinicians wrote about survivors and members of the Second Generation who were met as therapy patients, critics challenged the relevance of therapy patients' experience to that of the broader population. At this point, though, strong research findings provide evidence that many children of Holocaust survivors share commonalities related to their experiences as Second Generation.

## Research Findings on Children of Holocaust Survivors

---

*Discussion question for the audience: Based on your observations and experiences, what are some of the ways in which Second Generation members might be different from their counterparts in the broader population?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Note that people often casually observe and comment on the effects of the Holocaust on the Second Generation. For example, Second Generation members' behavior can be described by their non-Second Generation spouses as, "You know, my husband is the son of survivors, so he reacts this way when we have fights."

Of course, such statements are based on anecdotal cases; even clinical observations might not accurately represent the general group of children of survivors. The discussion that follows will explore empirical research findings, which are based on more representative samples of children of survivors.

In the early 1960s, some clinical studies began to offer observations about survivors and their children. The 1970s saw the publication of a few empirical studies, such as one comparing a



group of children of survivors with a group of Ashkenazi children who were not children of survivors. These studies were later criticized for methodological flaws, such as having biased samples.

Additional studies of better quality were published in the 1980s, and in the 1990s, researchers began to try to synthesize the results of multiple studies to see what their collective results revealed about children of survivors. (The resource list references two such reviews, one by Dr. Felsen and one by Dr. Z. Solomon, published in an edited book called *The International Handbook of Legacies of Trauma*.)

The early empirical findings suggest that there might have been patterns of communication particular to families of survivors. Some examples of this might include guilt-inducing communication, parents' refusal to talk about the Holocaust, or conversely, their discussing the Holocaust too much. These and other communication patterns were observed to be associated with negative influences on the children's well-being.

Later studies found that children of survivors who were born after the war showed greater frequency of Holocaust thoughts, associations, dreams, and a tendency to be easily triggered to think of Holocaust themes. One study actually found that for children of survivors, the Holocaust plays a more prominent role in their psychological world than do events occurring in their own personal lives. For example, one son of Holocaust survivors reported that when deciding to marry his wife, one of the positive traits that he found himself appreciating in this woman was the fact that it seemed to him that should they ever have to flee with children, she was the type of person who would be able to cope with this situation. Such a thought was clearly not a typical one for non-Holocaust-related American peers, but related to his parents' traumatic experiences.

Differences between children of survivors and peers were also noted during adolescence and young adulthood, particularly with regard to differentiating oneself from one's parents and achieving a separate sense of and establishing one's own identity. Compared with their peers, children of Holocaust survivors had greater difficulty going away to college—many stayed living geographically close to their parents—and they also had more difficulties making independent decisions with regard to choosing romantic partners, their degree of religiosity, and other lifestyle choices.

Children of survivors were also found to have lower views of their own independence and self-sufficiency compared to their peers, despite the fact that objectively, as a group, they were high achievers. Lastly, they also displayed a higher and harsher degree of self-criticism compared to others. A study by Dr. Felsen examined children of survivors' descriptions of their personality and asked them to also rate their mothers, their fathers, and their own ideal self according to the same personality traits. Many children of survivors viewed themselves in actuality as more similar to their mothers, but expressed a wish to be less similar to her, while their ideal selves resembled their fathers.

# Subjective vs. Objective Effects

---

Second Generation members are the most well-researched group of children of traumatized parents, since empirical research has studied them for over 40 years. Studies examining “matched samples,” which compared children of survivors with members of groups representative of the general population who were similar demographically but not children of survivors, found that with regard to pathological symptoms and psychiatric disorders, there were no significant differences. As a group, children of survivors resembled the general population when it came to severe psychopathology.

However, the study found that Second Generation members do have more *elevated* scores on a variety of dimensions, e.g., tendency toward depressive symptoms, anxiety, hypervigilance/slight paranoia, or hypersensitivity to difficulties regulating aggression (overly passive when needing to be assertive, or overly aggressive). Children of survivors, in comparison to their peers, also express greater difficulties in intimate relationships, including marriage and parenting.

While these scores are significantly elevated for Second Generation members, they don’t actually cross the line into what would be considered pathological. Rather, within the normal range, they are simply significantly higher than the scores observed in groups of non-Holocaust-related individuals. With regard to functionality in the world, children of survivors are no different from others, despite the reported differences in terms of subjective thoughts and feelings.

These findings support the idea that the intergenerational transmission of effects related to the Holocaust is manifested primarily in the subjective experience of children of survivors, rather than in external measures of their external functioning. In other words, the effects of growing up with survivor parents are more apparent in the children’s internal world, in their feelings and responses to places and situations, rather than in measures of their external coping or accomplishments. More recent studies (e.g., Scharf, 2011; Wiseman, 2008; see resource list) using more sophisticated methods of analyzing interview data identify unique concerns and psychological themes that are particularly common in the reports of children of survivors regarding their childhood experiences in their families and which characterized their relationships with survivor parents.

## Loneliness

---

When children of survivors are asked about their childhood memories (these samples are non-clinical samples, as there would be a bias if researchers only examined individuals who were seen in psychotherapy or only children of people who were psychiatric patients), they generally share that although their parents were very focused on their children’s well-being and needs, even working three jobs to make sure children had what they needed in terms of physical and

material needs, in the interpersonal domain Second Generation members report having grown up with a sense of loneliness. They were often left alone as parents worked long hours. Many parents also had difficulties connecting with their children's experiences due not only to their intense work schedules but also due to the emotional constriction and other post-traumatic symptoms previously discussed. Many Second Generation members recall a lack of parental emotional support and a sense that their parents were not emotionally available to them, at least not in a consistent and predictable manner.

Hadas Wiseman & Jacque Barber's (2008) book, *Echoes of the Trauma* (see resource list), describes the empirical findings from the authors' study of the Second Generation and the overall sense of loneliness and perceived lack of parental emotional support that was observed. Some Second Generation members report feeling that their parents were intrusive and overinvolved; some report that their parents were overly detached; and some, paradoxically, report both tendencies.

## Dysregulation and Conflict Resolution

---

Many Second Generation members have difficulty regulating aggressive or even assertive behavior. Some tend to over-regulate this behavior and have difficulty expressing something like "I didn't like it when you did that to me" or "I don't want to do this." Others "fly off the handle" in response to anything and everything. They are determined not to be victims. They will also over-react when they cannot get through to someone immediately because of sensitivities to not being heard and not being understood. Of course, these recurring patterns often surface in marital and family relationships.

Differences of opinion are inevitable for couples. For some, though, it can be very difficult to deal with these differences and to navigate conflicting needs. For those who are thrown into emotional dysregulation when they feel they are not managing to get through to the other person or that the other person doesn't really get them, it can be very hard to work on marital relationships.

There was an article in the *New York Times* published on May 28, 2016, titled "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person" (see resource list). According to this article, if you expect to marry the perfect person, someone with whom you'll forever be able to navigate and negotiate everything politely and who will answer all of your needs, you are likely to be very disappointed. Anyone who expects this level of accord of a spouse will feel they married the wrong person, since their spouse will inevitably disappoint, upset, annoy, and frustrate them at times. No one can serve as a psychological clone, nor should this be the goal, for reasons we will discuss in later sessions. With any spouse, partners will have to work to resolve differences, but this demand in long-term intimate relationships might be particularly difficult for Second Generation members.

# Resilience

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What are some positive aspects of growing up with a survivor parent? Might having a survivor parent have any positive ramifications for a child's development?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that not all transmission related to trauma is negative. Second Generation members inherited an enormous array of resiliencies from their parents.

Resilience was a prerequisite for surviving the Holocaust. Although luck was admittedly an enormously determining factor (not every resilient individual who experienced the Holocaust survived), those who survived were clearly not the weak, the incompetent, or the unintelligent. While survivors might ultimately have been hurt by their terrible experiences, and might have gone on to struggle with posttraumatic symptoms, the fact of their survival attests to tremendous resilience in character. Those resiliencies also exist in these survivors' children.

Some of the manifestations of the resiliencies that were transmitted to the Second Generation are themselves double-edged, because these individuals have the capacity to persevere where others would find it very difficult. Yet persevering under any circumstances is not always a positive thing. For example, one therapy patient had been in a terrible marriage for 39 years. She persevered because she was not accustomed to considering her own distress as a good enough reason to leave. She was used to trying hard, and then trying even harder, as she had learned from her parents, and she was unable to let go although it would have been a more rational choice. Persevering in the wrong direction can be negative if it makes one remain in a bad relationship, in the wrong job, or in other situations which, unlike the Holocaust, one has the choice to leave.

## Independence, Coping, and Catastrophizing

---

Many Second Generation members developed resilience because they felt the need to be self-reliant rather than upsetting their parents. This self-reliance could contribute to a sense of pride and independence, knowing that they had done it alone and managed well. At the same time, Second Generation members often develop an internal working model or internal schema of self-sufficiency to the point of believing, "I don't need anybody; I deal with things myself." This can be very problematic at times, as it might prevent Second Generation members from connecting with important people in their lives, and it does not allow real mutuality and closeness to develop. In the interest of protecting others, some members of the Second Generation do not always know how to accept and use support.

While children of survivors are resilient and cope well, their anxieties and expectations of catastrophe are also higher. Tamar Peretz, an oncologist in Israel, studied women diagnosed with cancer and compared daughters of Holocaust survivors with other women who were at the exact same stage of illness and coping with the same diagnosis. In examining patients' actual coping, daughters of survivors coped as well as or even more effectively than others. But with regard to patients' subjective experience of the problem, daughters of survivors viewed their illness as more catastrophic than others did.

More significantly, among the cancer patients from the general population, those whose mothers and husbands were still alive experienced this as a source of support. Among daughters of survivors, though, those whose mothers and/or husbands were still alive were *more* distressed, because the stress that their cancer created for their loved ones was a source of additional stress for them and not a source of support. The flip side of the profound sense of self-sufficiency of children of survivors is their inability to allow others to help and to accept their support.

## Importance of Understanding the Second Generation Experience

---

*Discussion question for the audience: Why is it important for us to learn about and talk about the Second Generation experience?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that one reason to discuss the Second Generation experience is that aging interacts with a prior history of trauma. For survivor parents, their trauma has made their aging more painful in many ways. Similarly, Second Generation members' experiences can also make their aging more painful if they do not reach a sense of internal continuity and coherence, or a state of inner harmony. Continuity of self means the capacity to feel that, despite how much one has changed throughout life, there is a continuous sense of being the same person. Coherence means that all parts of yourself are somehow compatible, related, not jarringly different and inconsistent with one another. Trauma survivors often feel that the self that they recall before the trauma is no longer who they have become after their traumatic experience. The struggle with traumatic memories, which often involves moments of extreme emotional dysregulation, even dissociation, creates parts of one's experience of self that are not in good coherence with each other.

Reaching coherence and reflective understanding of one's experiences in a new way allows people to achieve security in their relationships and to gain abilities necessary to handle challenges in more positive ways. Studies of mothers with histories of childhood trauma show that such traumatic experiences tend to impact the well-being of the children born to them. However, processing one's traumatic experiences can prevent even early childhood trauma from being passed on to the next generation.

Achieving coherence changes the way we interact and what we pass on to our children. This is another reason why it is important for Second Generation members to discuss and understand their experiences – in many families there is some transmission of trauma to the third generation. Even though our children might be adults now, intergenerational influences do not end when children reach the end of childhood. We are still models who continue to influence the lives of our adult children, and through that, their parenting and the lives of our grandchildren. We can overcome many of the vulnerabilities of the Second Generation experience by thinking about it, talking about it, learning, and reflecting on it.

Simply living through an experience is not the same as reflecting upon it. For example, one therapy patient who was a Second Generation member was raised by a mother with severe PTSD who was never able to provide containment for his own anxiety. When he feels triggered, he reports that needs his wife to be emotionally available for him even if she is busy caring for their children. His need at such times is extreme and irrational, interfering with the appropriate parenting and availability of his wife to their children and creating tremendous stress in the marital relationship.

Because this man is simply living through his experiences without reflecting on them, he is unaware of what he is doing or why he is doing it. He does not understand that he is being triggered in the moment and that he is responding with an anxiety that is rooted in the past. He does not realize that no spouse can provide the internal ability to regulate one's own anxiety, the way his mother ideally would have been able to do when he was a young child. Instead, this patient assumes unequivocally that his wife is to blame for not being sufficiently kind and available to him at all times.

In order to overcome his experiences, this man would need the opportunity to reflect on them and reach a healthier and more realistic conclusion. For example, with sufficient reflection he might recognize that his wife is not his mother, that his wife is actually more responsive to him than his mother was, that his wife's lack of immediate responsivity to his needs as she is caring for their children is legitimate. Furthermore, he might realize that, unlike his younger self during childhood, at this point he has achieved sufficient maturity and capability as an adult to be able to tolerate her temporary lack of availability and to regulate his anxiety himself.

Psychoeducation, which is the purpose of this discussion series, provides us with the opportunity to examine our experience in a more removed way. We can figure out what we are experiencing and why we are responding the way we are, and we can learn that some of our reactions are common among Second Generation members as a group. This knowledge allows us to step out of our own experience as we're living it and to understand that we are responding this way because of the particular context in which we grew up and what we learned.

Most importantly, we can recognize that what we learned in the context of our childhood might have been adaptive, or inevitable, in that context, and that we are not blaming ourselves for them. However, we can understand that those responses are most often no longer appropriate

in the current context in which we live. We can recognize that although this was our lived experience then and there, it is not appropriate for the here and now. We can intentionally focus on learning new patterns so that we can respond differently and with intentionality. We can recognize what our “hot buttons” are and have intentional focus on what we need to do differently when faced with them. This is what it means to achieve relational maturity.

## Wrap-up

---

The facilitator can wrap up the session by reviewing the session’s objectives and what was discussed -- that the existence of a Second Generation experience has been validated; some of the research findings about Second Generation members; common ways in which growing up with a survivor parent can affect one’s personality, outlook, and relationships as an adult; and the importance of discussing and processing one’s experiences as a Second Generation member in order to process and manage their impact on one’s present life and relationships.

The facilitator can then ask the audience to name particular insights that stood out for them.

If time allows, the facilitator can ask the audience if they have any further questions or if anything was unclear.

Finally, the facilitator can distribute the handout with resources for further learning and announce the date and topic of the next meeting.

# Handout 1: Session Outline

---

- The existence of a Second Generation experience has been validated
- Some of the research findings about Second Generation members
- Common ways in which growing up with a survivor parent can affect one's personality, outlook, and relationships as an adult
- The importance of discussing and processing one's experiences as a Second Generation member in order to manage their impact on one's life and relationships in the present.



# Handout 2: Resources for Further Learning

---

## Books and Articles:

- Baider, L., Goldzweig, G., Ever-Hadani, P. and Peretz, T. (2006). Psychological distress and coping in breast cancer patients and healthy women whose parents survived the Holocaust. *Psycho-Oncology*, 15, 635–646.
- Baider, L., Goldzweig, G., Ever-Hadani, P., & Peretz, T. (2007). Breast cancer and psychological distress: Mothers' and daughters' traumatic experiences. *Supportive Care in Cancer*, 16(4), 407-414.
- Kichka, M. (2016). *The second generation: The things I didn't tell my father*. Paris, France: Dargaud.
- Scharf, M., & Mayseless, O. (2011). Disorganizing experiences in second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors. *Qualitative Health Research*, 21(11), 1539-1553.
- Solomon, Z. (1998). Transgenerational effects of the Holocaust: The Israeli research perspective. In Y. Danieli (Ed.), *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma* (pp. 69-84). New York: Plenum Press.
- van IJzendoorn, M.H., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M.J. & Sagi-Schwartz, A. J. (2003). Are children of Holocaust survivors less well-adapted? A meta-analytic investigation of secondary traumatization. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 16(5), 459-469.
- Wiseman, H. (2008). On failed intersubjectivity: Recollections of loneliness experiences in offspring of Holocaust survivors. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 78(3), 350-358.
- Wiseman, H., & Barber, J. P. (2008). *Echoes of the trauma: Relational themes and emotions in children of Holocaust survivors*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

## Online Resources:

- De Botton, A. (2016, May 28). Why you will marry the wrong person. *New York Times*. Retrieved from [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html?_r=0).
- Felsen, I. (2016, July 20). Summary of the 2nd meeting of discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/07/20/summary-of-2nd-meeting-of-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors/>.
- Felsen, I. (2016, September 16). Thoughts from the fourth meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park, Tues. 9/13/16 [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/09/16/thoughts-from-the-fourth-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park-tues-91316/>.

# Session 4

---

## **Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Second Generation Members**

### **The Session in Perspective**

The session is intended to improve participants' understanding of some of the strengths and vulnerabilities that often characterize members of the Second Generation and their reactions to people and situations. Gaining awareness of their unique sensitivities, as well as particular abilities and skills gained through their relationships with survivor parents, can help Second Generation members utilize their strengths toward new growth in their relationships and in their own personal development.

In addition to educating and validating Second Generation members with regard to various aspects of the experience of being a child of survivors and with regards to the effects of their experiences on current responses and relationships, this session will provide a forum where participants feel comfortable enough to share thoughts, feelings, and insights and ask sensitive questions.

### **Session Objectives**

After completing the session, participants will understand:

- How the same quality can be both a strength and a vulnerability.
- The importance of recognizing and understanding the particular strengths and vulnerabilities of Second Generation members
- Second Generation members' remarkable capacity to continue functioning despite distress or even pain, and how this can be both an asset and a liability.
- The meaning of post-traumatic growth: the impact that traumatic experiences can have on one's appreciation for life.
- The elevated anxiety experienced by many Second Generation members and some of the ways in which it affects them, which can be useful but can also detract from the ability to relax.
- Second Generation members' tendencies toward self-denial and possible reasons for these tendencies.
- Resourcefulness and perseverance as common qualities among the Second Generation, and some of the positive and negative aspects of a tendency to make the best of a difficult situation.
- The characteristic tendency among the Second Generation to put others' needs ahead of their own, and the price they may pay for neglecting their own desires.
- The powerful need many Second Generation members experience to humanize and connect with others, noting the roots of this need and some of its associated pitfalls.

- Some of the reasons why Second Generation members might have difficulty recognizing their own strengths, and why doing so is critically important.
- The impact of the past in the present day-to-day interactions and relationships of the Second Generation, and on the future with regard to the Third Generation.

## **Session Preparation**

### *Materials:*

Photocopied handouts (see end) – session outline

### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the following online resource:

- Felsen, I. (2016, November 19). Strengths and vulnerabilities of children of Holocaust survivors: Summary of the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors, Boro Park Y [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/11/19/strengths-and-vulnerabilities-of-children-of-holocaust-survivors-summary-of-the-5th-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-boro-park-y/>.

## Session at a Glance

Segment	Description
Introduction: Strengths and Vulnerabilities – Two Sides of the Same Coin	The facilitator will introduce the concept of the dual nature of many common characteristics of Second Generation members.
Hardening/Steeling	The facilitator will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of Second Generation members' capacity to work hard, postpone gratification, and ignore difficulties.
Post-Traumatic Growth: Appreciation for the Preciousness of Life	The facilitator will discuss the dual impact of trauma in the survivor parents' generation and in the second generation, the co-existence of post-traumatic stress reactions and also post-traumatic growth, a heightened awareness of what is truly meaningful in life.
Anxiety	The facilitator will discuss the elevated anxiety experienced by Second Generation members, noting its benefits and drawbacks.
Self-Denial	The facilitator will discuss Second Generation members' tendencies toward self-denial, exploring its possible roots as well as its impact and associated dangers.
Resourcefulness and Perseverance	The facilitator will discuss Second Generation members' extremely useful ability to cope well with challenging and difficult situations, while noting the potential consequence of persevering in situations which would be better terminated.
Working in Service of Others' Needs Rather than One's Own	The facilitator will discuss Second Generation members' tendency to put others first and be highly empathic, often at the expense of focusing on their own needs.
A Deep Need to Humanize the Other	The facilitator will discuss Second Generation members' sometimes intense desire to connect with others, its roots and its ramifications for social interaction, as well as some of the dangers associated with needing social connection too much.

The Challenge and Importance of Recognizing One's Strengths	The facilitator will discuss some of the challenges of growing up in a survivor home and how they can impact one's ability to recognize one's strengths, as well as the importance of doing so.
Impact of the Past on the Present	The facilitator will discuss broad patterns of relating that might have been learned while growing up as a child of survivors, and the value of becoming more aware of these patterns.
Impact of the Past on the Future: The Third Generation	The facilitator will briefly discuss effects of intergenerational transmission of trauma on the Third Generation after the Holocaust.
The Importance of Understanding Second Generation Strengths and Vulnerabilities	The facilitator will discuss the benefits of increasing awareness of common Second Generation characteristics so as to choose one's response more consciously rather than automatically.

# Introduction: Strengths and Vulnerabilities – Two Sides of the Same Coin

---

Distribute session outline and briefly review with participants.

Different individuals, as well as different groups of people, are characterized by particular strengths and vulnerabilities. For example, someone with a schizoid personality might be very adept in intellectual areas such as working with numbers, but less competent interpersonally. Someone with this profile might be very desirable as a banker or accountant and perhaps less so in a role in which there are expectations for closeness and intimacy. The relative strengths and weaknesses in this case lie in different areas of personality functioning.

Contrary to the example above, our strengths and vulnerabilities as children of survivors tend to be two sides of the same coin. For example, we have seen that the higher the level of post-traumatic stress symptoms, the higher the post-traumatic growth, a heightened awareness of what is truly meaningful in life. This means that distress might in fact propel people to search for meaning and for the values that are most important to them. Remarkably, many people who survive horrific situations (e.g., POWs, Holocaust survivors) manage to take something good out of the experience despite its overall negative impact on them.

One patient illustrates this dichotomy. The patient, an Orthodox man, was repeatedly molested by two peers while attending a yeshiva as a child. He kept this experience a secret for 30 years. Since this was not addressed during his childhood or adolescence, he never learned the tools to cope with it maturely.

Thirty years later, supported by his therapy, this man was able to disclose his experiences to his wife and has made great improvements since. The man later confronted his Rosh Yeshiva and felt disappointed when the Rosh Yeshiva did not acknowledge his pain or apologize for what had happened.

Though it was painful to be denied a validating response from his Rosh Yeshiva, the man made the decision to view the situation positively, as an indication that he can validate himself rather than depend on the validation of others. He chose to feel empowered rather than bitter. Although this man has been tormented by intense guilt over what happened to him and in the past suffered from a variety of post-traumatic symptoms, he was eventually able to experience a great deal of relief and even growth once he finally began to process his traumatic experiences.

The potential for relief from old, painful symptoms and for continued personal growth is there for Second Generation members as well as for other groups of people who have been exposed to traumatic experiences. This discussion will focus on some of the dual aspects of common Second Generation characteristics.

# Hardening/Steeling

---

*Discussion question for the audience: When you think about your parents and their ability to survive all sorts of adverse circumstances during the war, what quality, do you think, allowed them to persevere in spite of the pain they were experiencing?*

Elicit answers from the audience. You might receive a variety of responses, all of which should be acknowledged, but make sure to highlight the response that is most relevant to this topic and to use it as a segue into the discussion.

Those who managed to survive the Holocaust generally had the capacity to work very hard, postpone gratification, refuse to indulge in whining, and do whatever needed to get done. This might be described as the ability to “harden” oneself. This hardening was what allowed survivors to work as hard as they did after the war as well, often maintaining two or three jobs in order to support their families and rebuild.

*Discussion Question for the audience: What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of having developed this particular quality?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that the flip side of hardening oneself in order to survive adversity is that one develops the habit of ignoring any experiences of suffering, physical or emotional, e.g., fatigue, backache, grief, etc. Ignoring such signs of physical or emotional distress can lead to problems in the longer term.

For example, research shows that as children of survivors reach middle age, they have higher levels of physiological problems. There are a variety of hypotheses about why this might be.

For those who were born in the early years after the war, it is possible that their mothers experienced an elevated level of stress hormones during their pregnancies, as well as the after-effects of starvation. These factors could be tied to a higher prevalence of diabetes and other physical problems later in life because of what is called “fetal programming.” This programming creates intra-uterine changes that affect the physiology of the baby so that he or she will be better able to survive starvation, since that is what is detected in the pregnant mother. However, when such a baby is born into an environment that offers an abundance of nourishment, they might suffer ill-effects from their body’s tendency to conserve food.

That being said, another possible explanation for the higher prevalence of health problems among middle-aged children of survivors is that the tendency for children to be stoic, like their parents, results in their failure to attend to the earlier symptoms of a physical problem. As a result, the problem then becomes exacerbated in middle age.

Another aspect of hardening is that the tendency to ignore one's own fatigue, aches, pains, and emotional distress can make one intolerant and insensitive to the difficulties or complaints of others, including of their children. This type of stoicism can also mean a lack of attunement, empathy, and responsiveness to one's children when they are struggling with something.

On the positive side, hardening is an important aspect of resilience, which contributes to the capacity for sustained effort, consistency, and focus in the face of hardship and challenges.

## Appreciation for the Preciousness of Life

---

*Discussion question for the audience: How might growing up with a survivor parent affect one's attitude about the time one has on this earth?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that, as discussed in previous sessions, awareness of one's parents' traumatic experiences can certainly elevate one's anxiety and concerns about the precariousness of life and safety. At the same time, there is a positive value to this. Recognizing the fragility and preciousness of life can also drive one's search for meaning, focus, and clarity around personal values and priorities.

## Anxiety

---

We have already acknowledged that children of survivors have elevated levels of anxiety.

*Discussion question for the audience: What are the positive and negative aspects of being a person with more anxious tendencies?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that in many ways, anxiety can be useful. Anxiety drives us to be highly prepared for every eventuality and to spot potential mistakes before they happen.

At the same time, a high level of anxiety detracts from one's ability to simply relax and enjoy the present moment instead of preparing alternative scripts for negative things that might happen.

Paradoxically, anxiety can be a necessary ingredient for a sense of safety. For example, many children of survivors say things like, "When I really relax, that's when I'm afraid the other shoe will drop." Metaphorically speaking, there's a fear that if the "alarm system" is turned off, the burglar will enter. A certain amount of anxiety provides security in the sense that the alarm is on, scanning for any danger, and that consequently the person is ready to deal with the unexpected should it arise. People get used to this state of anxiety, and perpetuate it even when it is not realistically helpful.



For example, a woman whose son went on a trip to South America (before cell phones) said, “I know it is useless, I know I cannot do anything from here, but I have to stay; it feels as if I cannot leave my post.” In this sense, for better or for worse, anxiety provides a false sense of reassurance, which in this case does not have any use in reality, but causes unnecessary distress for the mother and most likely, a burden of guilt for the son.

## Self-Denial

---

Many children of survivors have a tendency toward self-denial. They might be afraid of overindulging themselves in the present, feeling instead that they must save and prepare for the future.

*Discussion question for the audience: Where do you think children of survivors' tendency toward self-denial comes from?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that for some, this may be about identification with their parents, who worked so hard and gave themselves so little. This identification can create a strong sense of guilt in enjoying material things. Self-denial can also be expressed in ways that are not rational, i.e., in a need to deny oneself almost in order to prove to oneself that one can do without, like a small private, inner sacrifice on the altar of identification with the suffering of one's parents.

For example, Dr. Felsen recalls a story told by her mother about a Polish nobleman her family knew whom once a week, required that his family eat very simple, cheap food even though he could afford better. When asked why, the nobleman stated that even though things were alright for him at that time, there was no guarantee for his children's future. Therefore, one day a week, he fed his children poor food so that they would know they could survive hardship if they needed to.

The tendency to deny oneself does not have to be negative, but it can cause marital discord for couples where only one spouse is the child of a survivor. For example, a wife might wonder why her financially successful husband appears so stingy in certain petty ways, or a husband might resent the fact that his wife does not allow him to enjoy the kind of vacations or outings he can afford to pay for.

## Resourcefulness and Perseverance

---

One Second Generation patient stated half-jokingly, “I can make a meal from dust!” Children of survivors are able to make the most of whatever is in front of them, to take situations that are far from optimal and somehow make them work.

*Discussion question for the audience: Are there any possible negative aspects to such a capacity? What, do you think, are the positive and negative aspects of being a more resourceful and persistent person?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that the upside of this quality is that it can be an incredible asset when one is faced with a situation from which there is no escape. For example, a child of survivors who is a parent of a child with special needs will tackle the whole school system if necessary and will not stop at any obstacle, sometimes to a degree that overtakes all other aspects of life, in order to advocate for that child (this is also related to hardening, the capacity to work tirelessly and deny oneself rest or gratification in the service of a purpose or a goal.)

The downside of this quality is the tendency to try to force things to work even in situations that can be escaped and that would be better abandoned. Not every job is worth staying in; not every marriage is worth saving at all costs.

For a child of survivors, leaving a bad situation can be difficult when their way of responding is automatically dictated by the tendency to try to make things work no matter what. If they do not have the insight to understand where this persistence is coming from and to calibrate and control this automatic tendency, they risk being enslaved by it and unable to make a conscious decision that accounts for all the realities of their present situation.

## Working in Service of Others' Needs Rather than One's Own

---

Extensive research has shown that children of survivors tend to put the needs of their parents ahead of their own. Empirical studies show role-reversal in children of Holocaust survivors and in other families where parents suffered massive traumatic experiences. For example, similar tendencies for role-reversal were observed among children of survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia. According to research, parents who have suffered greatly consciously or unconsciously instill in their children an inordinate concern for their parents' wellbeing. Aware of their parents' past suffering and present hard work making ends meet, children of Holocaust survivors learned not to burden their parents with their own needs. The manifestations of this tendency vary, however, particularly by gender.

In general, daughters of survivors often have great difficulty permitting themselves to apply their talents and abilities in service of their own needs or career ambitions, more than sons of survivors. This might still also be a "cohort-effect," a result of differences in the socialization of boys and girls in the time when Second Generation were raised. For example, a daughter of survivors might be responsible for running a school or company, but she might not demand the salary or job title commensurate with her level of actual responsibility. Her title might simply be

“secretary” with a salary to match, as opposed to receiving the title and salary of an “assistant director.” Nor would she aspire to become the director, even if she recognizes that she is doing a director’s job, de-facto. In contrast, sons of Holocaust survivors have been shown to have higher professional achievements in comparison with non-Holocaust related peers, which will be discussed in a moment.

For children of survivors, particularly women, following your own needs and fulfilling your ambitions often evoked a critical reaction from their parents along the lines of, “Why do you have to do that? Why can’t you stay closer to home?” Thus, daughters of survivors learned to sacrifice their own wants and needs and often face continuing difficulties with asserting these wants and needs in later relationships.

In contrast, with regard to boys, even survivor parents who were highly anxious usually encouraged their sons to go out into the world and achieve. When this was not the case, and in families where the survivor parents actually attempted to keep their sons close the way they would with their daughters, these sons often ended up more psychologically burdened than any other subgroup of children of survivors. In our society, a male’s inability to launch himself into the world is a far more visible failure in his own eyes and in the eyes of those around him. When a woman remains close to her parents and even financially dependent upon them or upon her husband, or does not develop a career, it is still seen in a much more accepting way as one of the normative options. When a son sacrifices his career to stay closer to home, meanwhile, he is seen as weak or incapable.

*Discussion question for the audience: What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of being someone who puts others first?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that the tendency to focus on the needs of others is a manifestation of empathy, which is an inordinate strength among children of survivors. Unsurprisingly, the Second Generation is overrepresented in the helping professions relative to the group’s proportion in the general population.

At the same time, empathy needs to be monitored and managed so that we are able to respect our own wishes as well as those of other people. The downside of focusing primarily on others is that it makes it difficult to connect with one’s own talents and strengths when it comes to focusing on one’s own ambition or promotion. Someone who is highly focused on the needs of others can apply their skills to helping others but might find themselves paralyzed and unable to take initiative or assert themselves when trying to fulfill their own goals.

Magnets are a useful metaphor for Second Generation members’ capacity for empathy.

Magnets are internally organized to have a positive side and a negative side. But when a small magnet is placed next to a large magnet, the power of the magnetic field of the bigger magnet influences the small magnet. Consequently, the positive and negative fields of the small magnet get rearranged according to those of the large magnet.

This process symbolizes Second Generation members' tendency to sense the needs of others – parents, spouses, children, friends, colleagues, etc. – and to automatically rearrange their own desires so that they are in accordance with those of the other person. This process happens quickly, outside of conscious awareness, before the person can figure out what they themselves want. This empathic and altruistic tendency can then be internalized as a value, particularly when Second Generation members are given positive feedback for being obliging and accommodating.

One therapy patient quoted her parents as saying, “You’re like the cow that gives a lot of milk, but then, once in a while, kicks the bucket over.” This is one of the dangers of being highly focused on the needs of others at the expense of one’s own needs. When someone doesn’t recognize their own boundaries, and how much accommodating is too much, they are in danger of always surrendering to the needs of others. However, they might also over-react and “spill the bucket” unexpectedly, not necessarily at the right occasion or in the right way, because they lack the capacity to set appropriate boundaries and eventually explode in frustration at not having their needs met or respected.

It is important for Second Generation members to become more intentionally aware of their internal cues, learn to notice when some requests or expectations are not commensurate with their own well-being, and dare to set appropriate limits on their accommodating tendency. There is a time and place to say, “I’m sorry; I can’t; this won’t work for me.”

## A Deep Need to Humanize the Other

---

Sophisticated neuroimaging techniques reveal what happens inside the brain when someone is asked to think about particular things. For example, there is a particular part of the brain that focuses on social cognition and our thoughts about other people, as opposed to objects. When someone is shown a picture of a person (an actor) who was purposely made to look disgusting, reacting with disgust is an automatic and very rapid process. This reaction likely developed over centuries, a legacy from earlier periods when humans had to be on constant alert for signs of danger such as dead animals, symptoms indicating someone is dirty or ill, rotten food, excrement, and other things that might have been detrimental to one’s health.

When someone is disgusted by a person’s image, instead of processing the image of this person in the prefrontal cortex, where social cognitions are processed, the brain processes this particular image in a different location, one which categorizes both people and objects. The reaction of disgust is thus a very powerful one: a person who evokes disgust is relegated by automatic brain categorization processes to the level of an object, not quite human.

This process underlies dehumanizing behavior. When we no longer think of someone as a person, we no longer acknowledge that they have their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and it is then easier to do things that will cause them pain or suffering. This can be

a particular issue in the medical profession when doctors and medical staff view patients this way. Holocaust survivors were all the victims of such dehumanizing behavior, as is evidenced by Nazi rhetoric from the time, and thus know firsthand the terrible dangers associated with it.

Probably as a response to this, both children of survivors and their parents have a tendency to personalize every relationship, particularly when there are formally defined roles or some sort of a power hierarchy. For example, many survivors and their children will compliment authority figures—clerks in offices, government officials with whom they come in contact, and even less influential others in an official role—as a way of stepping outside anonymity and creating a more personal connection.

Creating this connection makes it more likely that the other person will recognize your humanity, and less likely that they will dismiss you, mistreat you, or dehumanize you. They might even be more open to going the extra mile for you. Many survivors recount that they had the good fortune of having been helped by someone, for example by someone who hid them during the war or provided them with food. Survivors know the potential protective benefits of connecting with the “other,” especially the other who is in charge or at an advantage, and this tendency was transmitted to their children.

*Discussion question for the audience: What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of the tendency to try to humanize others in all relationships?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that while this is a great asset in many ways, the downside of this quality is a driving and intense need to connect with someone else as an individual, on a personal level. This need, which is motivated by anxiety and a strong desire for safety, can be overwhelming or out of proportion at times.

This need also stems in part from the additional effort that children of survivors had to make to create a sense of synchronicity, of togetherness, in their relationships with their own parents, who were often distracted by work, fatigue, and post-traumatic reactions. For a child of a survivor, trying to connect with someone else can be about more than simply being nice or pleasant. This behavior was critically important for many children in creating the sense of connection with trauma survivor parents who were burdened with post-traumatic symptoms.

Unfortunately, sometimes connecting with someone is just not possible. No one can reach every person. But children of survivors will work harder at it, perhaps using humor or making personal comments, giving compliments, offering candy, trying to share a story, sometimes to the point where it is inappropriate. And when these efforts to connect fail, their internal reactions can be disproportionate. The person might feel deeply upset or highly enraged, perceiving even a small degree of unfriendliness or unresponsiveness as a personal slight.

This overreaction can take place in the context of various relationships, including marriage, friendship, and even business relationships. For example, one therapy patient was a contractor. He was also a heavy man who was trying to diet. He came to one therapy session distraught,

reporting that he had experienced an episode of binge eating that he could not explain. Gradually, he realized that he had driven past a job for which he had interviewed and saw that someone else got the contract and was working on the job. What triggered his distress was not the loss of income but his “failure” in the connection with the interviewer. He had thought that he and the potential employer had connected very well, and was deeply and disproportionately devastated to learn that this had apparently not been the case.

Children of survivors need to increase their awareness that failing to achieve a desired connection with someone, while disappointing, is not a mortal danger. The person with whom we are trying to connect is not a Nazi trying to kill us nor a parent who is emotionally unavailable for their young child. The disappointment caused by failure to connect with this person in the current reality likely does not warrant such an intense emotional reaction. The reaction experienced is more an echo of the past, and recognizing it should help to gradually learn not to take these automatic emotions at face value.

## The Challenge and Importance of Recognizing One’s Strengths

---

As we have noted at length, the unique qualities that characterize many children of survivors create both strengths and vulnerabilities. Both aspects need to be acknowledged, particularly one’s strengths. Yet recognizing one’s strengths can be difficult for someone who grew up with survivor parents for a variety of reasons.

In the most extreme case, some children growing up with survivor parents suffered abuse. There is relatively little research data about this aspect of the experience of the Second Generation, perhaps because it was difficult to talk about it for a long time. However, studies in various groups, including combat veterans and civilian populations exposed to trauma, show that parents with PTSD often have poor emotional control, which can lead to violent behavior.

Children of survivors who were abused by their parents suffered not only from the typical challenges of growing up in a survivor home but also needed to cope with abuse. Children whose survivor parents abused them were also most often silent about their parents’ behavior, accused of victim blaming if they described their parents’ behavior as abusive, and often disbelieved. Survivor parents who were abusive often presented as highly competent and appropriate individuals in the outside world, making things even more complex for their children. This kind of a frightening, confusing experience can make it difficult to trust others, to trust oneself, or to assert oneself confidently.

Less extreme but more prevalent in survivor homes was emotional neglect, a sub-category of abuse, or its milder form, prenatal emotional unavailability. Survivor parents often shut down emotionally in order to cope and continue functioning in the face of enormous pain. This entailed

feeling a general sense of numbness and detachment as parents, which interfered with survivors' capacity to be attuned to their child's emotional needs, to be interested in the daily events in the child's life, or to respond with excitement and joy to the child's little accomplishments.

As a result of these and other experiences of growing up with survivor parents, children of survivors often have difficulty connecting with their own internal needs in later life. This disconnect poses a challenge because in order to choose a goal or ambition that will be truly personally satisfying, it is necessary to be aware of one's individual combination of talents, skills, and internal needs.

Positive psychology, a relatively new focus in the field, advocates for focusing on well-being rather than on problems. Positive psychology asks questions like, What does it mean to live a good life? What distinguishes between people who feel happier and people who feel less happy? What facilitates greater happiness for people? According to Martin Seligman, who developed positive psychology, identifying and using one's signature strengths is an important aspect of increasing one's happiness.

All individuals can benefit from delving into our own personal, unique talents and abilities. Second Generation members as a group share a plethora of common strengths, some of which we have discussed. It is always useful to ask ourselves, What do I do well? What abilities should I try to use more because they will enhance my sense of well-being?

## Impact of the Past on the Present

---

All people, whether or not they are children of trauma survivors, have a tendency to react to present triggers in a way that is rooted in past experiences. Our past, and particularly the relational context in which we grew up, affects every step we take. It informs the way we view ourselves, the way we view our relationships, and our definition of what is and is not lovable about ourselves.

Whatever we learn about life, we learn in a specific relational context based on our particular parents and families and their unique idiosyncrasies. As children, we learn what are useful behaviors for our particular context – we try to do more of what will elicit a positive response, and less of what will elicit a negative response.

Dr. Felsen describes some of her experiences as a research assistant in a behavioral psychology lab:

During my undergraduate studies at the University of Haifa I had the privilege of doing research at the laboratory of professor Richard Schuster. My job was to train rats to run through a box that had three chambers. When the rats exited the first two doors together, ran together at the same pace along the entire length of the middle chamber,

and entered the two other doors together, they received a reward. When the rats were not coordinated—when one of them ran ahead of the other, left the first chamber or entered the third chamber first—the two rats did not receive any reward. This was an experiment in collaboration, examining whether the pairs of rats could learn that they needed to work together in order to gain the reward.

As the rats learned that they must be coordinated in order to be rewarded, it became clear that sometimes, the coordination of the pair was entirely due to one of the rats. Often the rat who appeared to be the “leader” went at his own pace, not noticing what the other was doing. The second rat, appearing to be the “follower,” kept looking at the other and was visibly pacing itself to coordinate with him. In doing so, it was visible that the “follower,” in some ways the smarter rat, understood that he would only be rewarded if he matched his pace to that of his peer, i.e., if he would accommodate.

Similar processes of accommodation take place in families. Children learn which responses will get their needs met and which responses will be ineffective, or worse, will beget negative responses. As a result, and over time, some aspects of the child’s personality which are not encouraged by the parents might be undeveloped.

Consider one patient, a 21-year-old student struggling with high anxiety. The patient, who lives at home, reported that whenever she wants to invite a friend over, her mother objects, saying each time that “Today is not a good day because the house isn’t clean.” Feeling guilty about further burdening her mother, who is already overwhelmed with other family concerns, the patient usually gives up on having her friend over.

Unfortunately, one of the reasons why this patient sought therapy has been her social anxiety and her depression with regard to feeling socially deficient. Part of the work of therapy was educating the mother about the message that she was inadvertently communicating to her daughter, which was that she needed her daughter to refrain from burdening her with her needs, and in particular, with her social needs. This message did not allow her daughter to develop her social skills and ‘taught’ her that in order to be considerate and not overburden, her needs must always take the back seat in her relationships with others.

This parental message is similar to the message many Second Generation members internalized as they were growing up. For example, a child who wanted to go on an overnight school trip might have been told, “No, I’ll be so worried; I won’t sleep for three days until you get back.” Many children of survivors describe that they would decide to forego such a trip or other exciting and age-appropriate activities they wanted to participate in.

In the process of making this and other similar choices, the child is relinquishing not only the trip but the opportunity to follow their own developmental needs. Doing something that seems desirable or fun becomes fraught with guilt. Consequently, following one’s own desires and going on exciting new adventures might become underdeveloped or forbidden aspects of the self, limiting one’s personal and professional development.



*Discussion question for the audience: What do you see as the value in becoming more aware of the impact of growing up as a Second Generation member?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that becoming aware of our particular triggers and tendencies allows us to avoid having our reactions dictated by patterns developed in our pasts. Resilience training programs refer to these patterns as “icebergs in the deep” – beliefs and patterns deeply ingrained in us that are expressed in automatic responses.

By making ourselves aware of these “icebergs,” we can stop and reassess before reacting, asking ourselves: Is this reaction still relevant? Is this old pattern appropriate in this new situation? Did I respond proportionately to what just happened in the here and now, or did I respond because the iceberg deep within me from the past was triggered in some way?

Many Second Generation members seek therapy with a variety of interpersonal problems and do not recognize the connection between their current difficulties and their experiences as children of survivors. A therapist who doesn't help such patients to see this connection can do some good work with them, but helping a client who is a child of survivors connect their difficulties with the experience of having a survivor parent can facilitate faster and deeper changes in therapy.

## Impact of the Past on the Future: The Third Generation

---

During Second Generation group meetings, many participants voice questions about whether the Third Generation is similarly affected by the intergenerational transmission of trauma. It seems that while Third Generation members might be impacted in similar ways, the effects appear to be less profound. Members of the Third Generation are further removed from their grandparents' Holocaust experiences and are often less aware of their influence in their own lives.

Research does support some effects for Third Generation members. A large study in Israel followed a cohort of adolescents who graduated from high school and entered basic training in the Israeli army. This study relied on multiple sources of information, including the adolescents' own reports, reports from their parents, and ratings by peers. Results suggested that Third Generation members with two Second Generation parents felt less autonomous in comparison to their peers, experienced their mothers as intrusive and overprotective, and had more difficulty adjusting to basic training. However, these effects were diluted by having one parent who was not a child of survivors. Grandchildren of survivors who had one Second Generation parent were indistinguishable from non-Holocaust related peers.

# The Importance of Understanding Second Generation Strengths and Vulnerabilities

---

The Holocaust impacted a large group of people. Some were incredibly damaged; others remained surprisingly healthy and positive; and many fell somewhere else along this spectrum. Despite great individual variability, some similar characteristics have been observed among people affected by the Holocaust. Although the intensity of these characteristics varies, their existence has been demonstrated robustly in research findings from all over the world.

When an individual wonders about whether a particular reaction of theirs is caused by their experience as a child of survivors, it is never possible to say definitively that it is. This was one of the criticisms of earlier reports, which focused more on individuals or on small groups of children of survivors who had been seen in psychotherapy. It was argued that these samples do not represent the general population of children of survivors, as they were comprised solely of members in therapy. To learn about possible characteristics that are common in this group as a whole, it was necessary to conduct studies that examined large groups within the Second Generation. Studies over the recent couple of decades have indeed done so, looking at large groups of children of survivors who were not sampled from within psychotherapy settings.

When a large number of Second Generation members are found to display similar reaction patterns or to be significantly different in some characteristic from peers who are not Holocaust-related, we can claim more confidently that this is a common characteristic of Second Generation members as opposed to a characteristic of a particular individual, or even of a particular type of individual (i.e. a Second Generation member who sought out psychotherapy).

Of course, while Second Generation members might experience similar reactions to similar triggers, their degree of reactivity will be different. Some are more capable of recognizing their triggers and the impulses they evoke and of overriding them, while others have more difficulty regulating these responses. The capacity to choose one's reaction mindfully, rather than allowing habitual patterns of relating to play out automatically and thoughtlessly, is what will determine the impact of the Holocaust both on one's own life and on the Third Generation. This is why it is so important even at this point in the life of the Second Generation, and even if our survivor parents are no longer with us, to reflect upon our unique experiences and understand how they might continue to manifest in our lives today.

## Wrap-up

---

The facilitator can wrap up the session by reviewing the session's objectives and what was discussed:

- how the same quality can be both a strength and a vulnerability;

- Second Generation members' tendency to function despite distress and ignore emotional or physical pain, and how this can be both an asset and a liability;
- the impact that traumatic experiences and intergenerational transmission of such experiences can have on one's appreciation for life;
- the elevated anxiety, guilt, and hypervigilance experienced by Second Generation members, and how these affect their behavior;
- Second Generation members' tendency toward self-denial, and possible reasons for this tendency;
- resourcefulness and perseverance as common strengths of the Second Generation, and some of the positive and negative aspects of a tendency to persevere and make the best of a difficult situation;
- Second Generation members' tendency to put others' needs ahead of their own, and the price they might pay for neglecting their own desires;
- the powerful need many Second Generation members experience to humanize and connect with others, noting the roots of this need in the dehumanization suffered by the survivor parents and perhaps also in the need experienced by the children of survivors to be responsible for the emotional synchronicity in the relationships with parents who suffer from symptoms of PTSD;
- the impact of the past, both on the present in Second Generation members' day-to-day interactions, and on the future, with regard to the Third Generation; and the importance of recognizing and understanding the particular strengths and vulnerabilities of Second Generation members in order to be able to choose more consciously and intentionally our way of being in the world today.

The facilitator can then ask the audience to name particular insights that stood out for them.

If time allows, the facilitator can ask the audience if they have any further questions or if anything was unclear.

Finally, the facilitator can announce the date and topic of the next meeting.

# Handout 1: Session Outline

---

- How the same quality can be both a strength and a vulnerability.
- Second Generation members' tendency to function despite distress and ignore signs of emotional or physical pain, and how this can be both an asset and a liability.
- The impact that traumatic experiences and intergenerational transmission of trauma can have on one's appreciation for life.
- The elevated anxiety, guilt, and hypervigilance experienced by Second Generation members, and some of the ways in which it affects them.
- Second Generation members' tendency toward self-denial, and possible reasons for this tendency.
- Resourcefulness and perseverance as common strengths for Second Generation members, and some of the positive and negative aspects of a tendency to persevere and make the best of a difficult situation.
- Second Generation members' tendency to put others' needs ahead of their own, and the price they might pay for neglecting their own desires.
- The powerful need many Second Generation members experience to humanize and connect with others, noting the roots of this need and some of its ramifications.
- The impact of the past, both on the present in Second Generation members' day-to-day interactions, and on the future with regard to the Third Generation.
- The importance of recognizing and understanding the particular strengths and vulnerabilities of Second Generation members in order to enhance our lives and relationships at this point and going forward.

\*Participants are encouraged to review the following blog post by Dr. Felsen as a supplement to this discussion:

Felsen, I. (2016, November 19). Strengths and vulnerabilities of children of Holocaust survivors: Summary of the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors, Boro Park Y [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/11/19/strengths-and-vulnerabilities-of-children-of-holocaust-survivors-summary-of-the-5th-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-boro-park-y/>.

# Session 5

---

## Sibling Relationships in Survivor Families

### The Session in Perspective

The session is intended to improve Second Generation members' understanding of their relationships with their siblings and how these relationships might have been impacted by their parents' trauma-related reactions. In addition to educating and validating Second Generation members with regard to understanding and accepting the paths that different siblings might have chosen, this session will provide a forum where participants feel comfortable enough to share thoughts, feelings, and insights and ask sensitive questions.

### Session Objectives

After completing the session, participants will understand:

- The importance of the sibling relationship
- Aspects of emotional development within the family of origin, both as an individual and as a sibling
- Common sibling differentiation patterns in survivor families
- The different reactions that every child in the family might have developed in response to parental trauma and dysregulation, and their effects on the individual and on the sibling relationship
- The importance of placing sibling patterns in their proper context and working toward mutual acceptance

### Session Preparation

#### *Materials:*

Photocopied handouts (see end) – session outline

#### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the following online resource:

- Felsen, I. (2016, July 31). Adult siblings in Holocaust survivors' families [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/07/31/adult-siblings-in-holocaust-survivors-families/>.
- The facilitator is encouraged to read the paper by Dr. Felsen, entitled "Adult Sibling Relationships in Holocaust Families" in *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 2018.

## Session at a Glance

Segment	Description
The sibling relationship	The facilitator will discuss aspects of the sibling relationship that are universally relevant and explore some of the ways that siblings adopt different roles.
Individual development: Differentiation of self	The facilitator will explain how individuals develop both autonomy and connectedness in the context of their family of origin.
Development as a sibling: The process of sibling differentiation	The facilitator will explain how children carve out their own unique niches in the family and differentiate themselves from their siblings.
Sibling differentiation in survivor families	The facilitator will describe a common sibling pattern in survivor families, discussing how it represents different responses to parental trauma and dysregulation.
Long-term effects of the roles taken by each sibling on their individual lives	The facilitator will discuss some of the potential effects of having adopted a particular role in one's family of origin on one's own adult life.
Long-term effects of sibling roles on the sibling relationship	The facilitator will discuss some of the potential ramifications of sibling patterns for adult sibling relationships and for the extended family as a whole.
Toward a more nuanced understanding of sibling differences in survivor families	The facilitator will discuss the importance of placing a sibling's choices in perspective and working toward an improved connection with the sibling, at least for the benefit of the Third Generation.

# Introduction: The Sibling Relationship

---

Distribute session outline and briefly review with participants.

*Question for the audience: By a show of hands, how many of you grew up with at least one sibling?*

Note the number of participants who indicate having grown up with a sibling. Note how common it is to have grown up with a sibling, and the fact that this experience will be the focus of the current discussion.

Until recently, psychology has focused a great deal on the parent-child relationship and far less on the relationship between siblings. However, this has begun to change and there is now a growing recognition of the importance of the sibling relationship. For those of us who have siblings, our relationship with them is actually a significant aspect of our family life. It is also the longest relationship we will ever have. Our relationship with our siblings is longer than our relationships with our parents, our spouses, and our children.

Studies show that, just like attachment relationships form between children and their parents, attachment relationships also form between siblings. During difficult times in the family, siblings can provide security and protection for each other when parents are unable to do so because of parental illness, marital conflict, etc. Later in life, when people feel vulnerable again as they age and lose significant others, siblings can provide important support systems for each other, serving as a source of socialization, support, and assistance. A positive sibling relationship can serve as an important resource.

It is important to understand the sibling relationship so that we can nurture it both for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren and their siblings. It is also useful to recognize factors that can interfere with the quality of the sibling bond. Parental trauma is one such factor, as we will be discussing in this session. First, though, we will speak about some normative aspects of both individual and sibling development within the family.

## Individual Development: Differentiation of Self

---

Within all families, differentiation of self is an important aspect of individual development. Part of becoming an adult, for every person, is developing both one's individuality and one's connectedness to others, e.g., to family members, to one's social group, and to the broader culture.

Developing one's individuality and developing one's relatedness to others represent two poles, both of which are aspects of normative development. However, each of these lines of development can be taken to an extreme or overemphasized at the expense of the other. Individuals who overemphasize developing their autonomy, i.e., on being themselves and on being self-sufficient, at the expense of relatedness, can become isolated and suffer as a result. Conversely, someone who is overly focused on their relatedness to others, accommodating to the wants and needs of others at all costs, can end up sacrificing aspects of their development. These individuals might suffer from the consequences of their inability to assert their own needs and wishes and set limits to the demands others place on them, which have been previously discussed.

Optimal development means balancing each of these aspects. At times, life demands a greater focus on autonomy; at other times, it can be more important to focus on one's connections with others. For example, an infant initially needs to be connected and attached to its mother in order to ensure its survival. Later, though, the infant needs to develop more autonomy, walking and exploring the world. If these opportunities are blocked, it would be detrimental to the infant's development.

This back-and-forth between developmental tasks that involve either an emphasis on autonomy or on relatedness continues throughout life. In adolescence, teenagers begin to develop their own self-identity, which sometimes means doing things that upset their parents. While parents might be offended by this or wish that their relationships with adolescent children would not be as trying, the process of rejecting parental demands and rebelling against them is a necessary part of the teenager's developing a sense of self. In young adulthood, as individuals seek to find partners and establish families, the developmental task shifts again to a focus on relatedness, as individuals need to create a healthy sense of intimacy with another person. In middle adulthood, the emphasis shifts to finding one's way of utilizing one's talents and skills occupationally and financially and being a productive member of society (for a more detailed review of the developmental phases, see "Erikson's psychosocial stages").

Cultures vary in the degree to which they emphasize individuality relative to connectedness. Some cultures focus mostly on connectedness with others, while others focus more on self-development and individuality. Even within the same culture, expectations vary. Some families emphasize individuality and autonomy of each member, at times creating relationships that are too distant and that lack in emotional intimacy. In families that over-emphasize relatedness, meanwhile, there might be excessive involvement of family members whereby each member is profoundly affected by the other's emotions and needs. An excessive degree of enmeshment between children and parents can be experienced as intrusive and can limit the personal development of individual family members. Because it is difficult to express personal differences or negotiate conflicting needs within enmeshed families, the struggle to establish one's own autonomy might lead to a break, or total estrangement in the relationship.

Achieving true differentiation of self means being neither enmeshed with family members nor estranged from them. Someone who has achieved differentiation of self, or relational maturity, is



able to assert themselves appropriately with loved ones and balance being true to themselves with accommodating the needs of those they love. Someone who struggles with this might feel that they need to either accommodate the other entirely without any regard for their own needs, or else completely disregard the other's wishes. The inability to strike a balance creates two unattractive options: total surrender to the demands of the other, or a complete severance of the relationship.

When parents have suffered terrible traumatic experiences and losses and consequently struggle with post-traumatic symptoms, children must adapt to the stressor of having a traumatized parent. As we have discussed, one way in which they do so is by learning to avoid certain triggers, even if this entails sacrificing their own needs. If asserting yourself with your parent immediately results in a very strong negative emotional reaction by them, it can be highly challenging to achieve a balanced, healthy differentiation of self.

This is why children of survivors often did not learn in their early years what we would like for our children and grandchildren to know: that within the family it is acceptable to sometimes express opinions that are different or to want to do something that one's parent is not crazy about, and that differences of opinion and lifestyle can be accepted or at least tolerated.

We will be exploring this in more depth later, after we discuss the general process of sibling differentiation.

## Development as a Sibling: The Process of Sibling Differentiation

---

As siblings in all families grow up, they develop their own distinct identities. This process is called differentiation, or de-identification between siblings.

*Discussion question for the audience: Where do you think sibling differences come from?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that from the beginning, siblings differ genetically. Each child is born with particular temperament traits and qualities, which then interact with environmental forces, such as the parents' personalities, the circumstances into which each child was born, birth order, and many other influences.

For example, one son of a very controlling survivor father felt he needed to raise his older two children strictly and harshly in accordance with his father's preferences. His younger two children were born after their grandfather had passed away, and both he and his children felt that the younger ones grew up in a very different family setting than the one in which the older set had been raised. In another example, one older sibling was born in a DP (Displaced Persons) camp immediately after the war while the younger sibling was born in 1948,

immediately after the State of Israel became independent. The older sibling would say about her younger sibling, "I'm Kirschenbaum; he's Duvdevani," noting the family's new Hebraicization of their European name as a reflection of the family's changed circumstances and environment. Changed family circumstances in childhood, whether in a negative direction, such as family illness or unemployment, or in a positive direction, such as becoming more established financially and culturally in a new country, might also influence a sibling's desire to stay more connected to the parents or to distance themselves.

Gender also plays a major role in sibling differentiation, with boys and girls being still being subject to different expectations and treatment. Birth order is another important factor since generally, if an older sibling is already filling a particular role, the next child will likely choose to create a different role for themselves. Finally, each sibling might have particular innate talents that distinguish them in different ways.

Sibling differentiation is driven by a tendency for each child to want to carve out their own unique niche in the family. This general developmental tendency might have evolved over the generations as a way to manage limited emotional and practical resources in the family. Each child might want to claim their own share of parental love or appreciation by trying to be recognized in a unique way. Sibling differentiation might also be a reaction to realistic limits on actual resources, e.g., if one child excels at piano playing, a subsequent child might choose to be a runner since the family can't support music lessons for two. Additionally, it was suggested in studies of siblings that de-identification aims at reducing the level of competitiveness and conflict between siblings. However, in contrast with such findings in the general population, as we shall see, the differences among siblings in Holocaust families seem to actually increase the level of strife and mutual resentment among them.

## Sibling Differentiation in Survivor Families

---

Within survivor families, it is very common for one sibling to remain geographically and emotionally close to the parents. This sibling often shares a lot about their life with their parents, including their conflicts and struggles. They might frequently need the parent to "rescue" them or bail them out of a variety of situations, and might also be financially dependent on the parent. In some cases, the sibling who remains more intertwined with the parents is incapable of holding down a job and may need the parents' direct financial support, or they may be indirectly supported by being employed by the parents in the family business, regardless of whether they actually contribute productively to the business or not. Sometimes, this financial dependence might result from their being overburdened with the demands of caring for the parent at the expense of creating an independent career. This child often both gives care to the parents and receives a great deal of support from them. They might be viewed as both the care-taking and care-eliciting child.

It is more common for the child who assumes the care-taking and/or care-eliciting role to be female. Given our society's differing expectations for men and women, it is more socially acceptable for a daughter to fill this role, and the choice to focus on running her own household and on caring for her parents rather than on developing her career is seen as more normative than it is for a son.

At times, though, this child can be the son. In many of these cases, it is typical for the parents, particularly the father, to have been very controlling and overly punitive in the relationship with his son. The son's history usually shows that he has had a difficult relationship with his parents throughout his adolescence and adulthood but has remained intertwined with them both emotionally and financially. Rather than moving away geographically or creating his own career (despite the fact that he is often highly intelligent and talented), the son has remained living close to his parents and is either supported by them or ostensibly working in the family business, often not very successfully.

In one clinical example of this, a patient who was a daughter of survivors had grown up in Canada. She was very dedicated to the care of her parents and after being married she still had the full intention of staying close to her parents to care for them for the rest of their lives. Although this woman's survivor mother was generally a high-functioning woman who owned a successful business which she ran together with her husband, she was also suffered from repeated, undiagnosed depressive episodes which were not appropriately treated, and she developed an undiagnosed and untreated addiction to Valium. As a result, in the daughter's youth the mother was frequently bedridden while her school-aged daughter ran the household.

This same patient's brother was an intelligent young man who befriended rebellious kids and got into repeated trouble at school. The parents were frequently summoned to school to deal with the problems of their son, and their daughter was acutely aware of the toll these problems took on them. The daughter grew up in the role of the "good girl," while her brother's behavior frequently upset their parents. As an adult, the brother's difficulties with authority continued, and he was unable to hold down a job and was eventually taken into the family business, where his erratic behavior was tolerated by the parents.

The dynamic changed unexpectedly when this woman's husband's work required that they relocate to the United States.

Although she continued to receive her parents' phone calls with complaints about her brother, her geographic distance from her parents limited her ability to intervene. Her brother continued to depend on their parents and experienced a series of life crises, including two divorces and a variety of financial and personal struggles. The daughter, in contrast, experienced a bankruptcy and kept it a secret from her parents, even as she worked three jobs to stay afloat. Naturally, she felt bitter resentment toward her brother for all the demands he made on their parents, particularly as they aged and became ill toward the end of their lives.

In contrast to the child who remains very intertwined with the parents, either in care-taking or care-eliciting ways, another child in the family might make a radically different choice. This child might choose to move farther away geographically and make independent decisions. From an early age, this child does not share their challenges with the parents and shields the parents from knowing about any of the child's own difficult experiences. They manage on their own, without parental support or guidance, and they try to share with the parents only good news and accomplishments and to bring them only reason to be proud. Generally, this child tends to be successful professionally and financially as an adult but less involved with the parents, both emotionally and financially. The parents, as well as the sibling who remains more connected with the parents, frequently feel emotionally less important, or even abandoned by this sibling, who has relatively distanced themselves from the family. This type of a role is more often seen among male children of survivors than among females.

Siblings often harbor deep resentments against each other for the pain that they perceive the other to have caused their survivor parents. One therapy patient spoke about her survivor father reacting with uncontrolled bouts of crying when upset. As a child, she found this anxiety-provoking and grew up constantly accommodating her parents, including by attending college close to home. Her brother, on the other hand, engaged in dangerous and risky behaviors despite his awareness that he was causing his parents pain. After graduating from college, the brother enlisted in the USA Military and the patient recounted how upset her father was over it, how he cried and sobbed for three days, and how intensely she resented her brother for having caused their parents such suffering. However, from her brother's perspective, enlisting was the only path that allowed him to get away from the dysfunctional relationships with his parents and achieve some autonomy, which he felt he needed in order to survive.

The two siblings' lives took very different turns. The patient, the daughter, obeyed and complied with her parents' demands. She stayed close by, married the man they approved of, and constricted her personal and professional development in many ways as a result of the continued pattern of compliance and self-diminution. The brother, meanwhile, left for the military, where he learned a profession, married, and established his family far away in another state. He rarely came to visit his parents. For many years, the patient had difficulties recognizing that both she and her brother paid a heavy price for their respective choices, and that her brother had not acted out of sheer cruelty, but rather out of desperation, in making his choice.

These differing paths of connectedness and distance represent two styles of relational adaptation. One child remains more intertwined with the parents and dependent on them, whether in a compliant and obedient way or in a more ambivalent, rebellious, or angry way, while the other becomes pointedly self-sufficient and rejects the parents' involvement. Both of these prototypes exist at all levels of psychological health and at all levels of functionality. The child who remains more emotionally dependent on the parents might be professionally or socioeconomically successful or unsuccessful. The other sibling, who distanced themselves, might similarly be more successful in external measures or less so.

In the next section, we will discuss how these differing adaptation styles impact later adult functioning.

## Long-Term Effects of Sibling Differentiation in the Lives of Adult Children of Survivors

---

*Discussion question for the audience: How do you think adopting these differing roles in childhood impacts a person's emotional functioning as an adult?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that parents who suffer from the after-effects of trauma are easily triggered to feel anxiety and worry and are likely to try to limit their child's actions out of disproportionate concerns about safety.

The children who distance themselves from parental involvement and “hide” their private life from the parents create a safe zone for themselves to explore and experiment and thereby develop all kinds of skills. Keeping information from their parents allows these children to protect themselves from their parents' anxiety and to avoid the parents' attempts to constrict their actions. As such, this type of child of survivors developed more autonomy, self-sufficiency, and confidence in their adolescence.

However, there is a cost to being the child who developed premature autonomy and self-sufficiency. Ideally, children develop their autonomy in the context of parental support and security. In contrast, children of survivors who distanced themselves from their parents to gain some independence often ended up having to raise themselves. In order to protect themselves from their traumatized parents' anxiety, these children were unable to confide in their parents about their challenges, dilemmas, difficult decisions, opportunities, etc. Consequently, these children did not benefit from the scaffolding that parents could provide, and the long-term effects of such premature self-sufficiency might be that they developed the belief that they cannot rely on anyone. Individuals who have grown up developing this type of personal style often have difficulties relying on anyone for help and cannot open up in relationships and ask for what they need. This often has a negative impact on the level of closeness in their relationships, including in marital relationships.

The children who grew up relying only on themselves carry these attitudes into their marriages. While often successful and well-adjusted in their professional achievements, these individuals might feel very alone in their marriages, just as they felt in their families of origin while growing up. When difficulties in their marriages bring them to therapy, they might express feeling misunderstood, unappreciated, overburdened, or uncared for. They do not see the contribution of their own pattern of behavior to the isolation they are feeling or the emotional distance between them and their spouse. Additionally, overly self-sufficient individuals often choose spouses who need them to take care of their needs and are not so good at reciprocating.

Gradually, people who stay confined within this style of relationships come to feel angry and resentful of the fact that they are always in the caregiving role and never feel cared for. On the other hand, the child who remained overly dependent upon and connected with the parents might feel very constricted, constantly focusing on accommodating their parents and others and protecting them from pain, at the cost of their own life and relationships. A patient who was a single child told of the years in which, every day after work, she would stop at her mother's and stay there for a couple of hours. She would arrive home in the late evening, while her children were still in high school. Only in retrospect was she able to see the cost of her devotion to her mother in terms of her role as a mother and a wife.

## Long-Term Effects on the Sibling Relationship

---

*Discussion question for the audience: How might sibling dynamics that emerge in childhood and adolescence affect the sibling relationship in adulthood?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that often, each of the siblings described in the above sections ends up resenting the other sibling.

The child who remains more connected with the parents might feel that their more distant sibling was emancipated by their sacrifices, free to avail themselves of a variety of opportunities that were not available to the sibling who remained closer to care for the parents. They might feel that the more distant sibling abandoned the family emotionally, and might find themselves needing to provide frequent emotional support to their parents, who are hurt by the sibling's distance from them.

In contrast, the more distant sibling might feel that the sibling who remained connected to the parents has overburdened the parents with their difficulties and drained them emotionally and/or financially. They might look down on their "needier" sibling and fail to recognize the sibling's contribution to their parents, who may appreciate feeling needed by their child.

For example, a brother wrote the following in a letter to his sister, which she shared with Dr. Felsen: "I know you had the privilege – you went away. You got the benefit of being away, built your beautiful family, and were able to just focus on your family and your relationship. I'm the one who stayed here with our parents and had to deal with all their stuff. It's on my hide that you got to have your life over there." In contrast, the sister complained to her therapist that her brother had drained their parents financially and emotionally and has been the topic of the daily distressed phone calls which she was getting from their aging parents.

In many families, out of respect for the parents, siblings will try to maintain a peaceful façade despite these resentments. The maintenance of the appearance of a reasonably good

relationship is often the burden of the “good” sibling. Accommodating to the needs of the parents and their wish to see their children as having a good connection, this sibling often tolerates and absorbs unpleasant behaviors by the other sibling.

As parents age and begin to ail, the siblings might be called back into having far more interaction with each other than they had had in many years. In all families, this stage can activate many old dynamics and resentments, and when the resentments are more pervasive or intense, there is danger that once the parents pass away, the siblings might cut off communication with one another entirely.

Unfortunately, these cutoffs between siblings mean that their children, the cousins, will have no chance to develop relationships. The cutoff between the children of survivors thus destroys the fabric of the extended family, and in this way, impacts the culture of family relationships available to the Third Generation. This is particularly tragic in light of the destruction of the extended families of Holocaust survivors by the Nazis, and the fact that not having extended family has been a painful aspect of growing up in survivor families. We can try to prevent this re-enactment of the loss of family ties for the Third Generation by using our knowledge and insights to achieve a fuller and more empathetic understanding of our siblings’ choices.

## Toward a More Nuanced Understanding of Sibling Differences in Survivor Families

---

*Discussion question for the audience: How can we have a more positive, or at least more balanced, understanding of our siblings’ choices?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Note the importance of developing a nuanced perspective on sibling differences. Admittedly, as individuals, some of us do tend to be either more focused on our own needs or more focused on others’. We have different value systems and might emphasize either self-sacrifice or self-determination, with downsides and costs associated with either style.

That being said, the anger and judgment we might feel toward a sibling who chose a different path needs to be placed in the context of trauma and its impact on families. The dynamics of trauma often accentuate the differentiation between siblings. Intense parental pain, anxiety, and post-traumatic reactions are so difficult for children to deal with that it can be impossible to remain neutral when the other sibling appears to cause the parents, who have already suffered so much, additional pain. Instead, reactions tend to be extreme and often polarized. In such an environment growing up, it was difficult for many Second Generation members to find a comfortable balance between being “good” (i.e., making sacrifices in order to protect their parents from pain and anxiety) and doing what might be in their own best interests, even if it caused their parents worry. It was far more common to go to one extreme or the other.

Two siblings who were therapy patients of Dr. Felsen's illustrate these extremes. The brother, a man who was successful professionally but less so in his personal life, remained very close to their parents, helping his mother care for their father as he suffered with Parkinson's and continuing to speak with her on a daily basis. The sister, in contrast, was unsuccessful professionally but very successful in her marriage. She was a woman who lived a comfortable life with no obligations outside the home, focused solely on caring for her own nuclear family. Unlike her brother, she visited her parents very infrequently, despite the fact that she did not live very far from their home. While this behavior was perceived as selfish by her brother, this woman was not a characteristically selfish person; in fact, she was generous in her behavior with her husband and children. Her distance from her parents, rather than manifesting selfishness as a general character trait, reflected the need she felt to protect herself from the pain their presence caused her. Although improving this behavior was an important therapy goal, the behavior itself could be understood on the backdrop of this woman's experiences of growing up in the family and the way she has dealt with it from childhood onward, for example by removing herself and shutting the door to her room, or spending as much time as she could in the homes of her friends.

Henry Miller's play, *The Prince*, describes a similar pattern in a non-Jewish family. In the play, one brother remains with his dysfunctional, alcoholic father in their small town, while the other moves away to create a better life for himself in the city. In a confrontation between the brothers after the father's death, the brother who remained tells the brother who moved away, "You don't understand; we took the same journey on two different paths."

While we might disagree with our sibling's chosen path, our attitude needs to be one of compassionate understanding. Recognizing the price that each sibling paid for the path they chose can improve insight and mutual tolerance and allow us to feel more compassion and understanding. Even if we dislike our siblings, this attitude can at least help us maintain family ties so that our children can feel connected to each other. Otherwise, we may find ourselves and our children bereft of extended family. As one patient sadly commented, she felt that she was more alone in the world, despite having a brother, than were her survivor parents, who had no extended family but managed to create a family among their network of fellow survivors and distant relatives.

## Importance of Understanding Sibling Dynamics in Survivor Families

---

*Discussion question for the audience: How can we use the insights we gained tonight to improve the quality of our own relationships with our siblings and with extended family members?*



Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that Second Generation meetings provide an opportunity to explore the family dynamics outside of the context of the family. Through this exploration and peer support, one can feel empowered to make the courageous decision to act differently and change established patterns in the family. It actually takes an enormous amount of courage to behave differently with people you've known since you were born and to change long-established patterns in your relationships with them.

Through discussing the dynamics of survivor families, we come to understand that the more dysregulated the parent, the more the siblings resented the pain that they felt the other sibling inflicted on the parent, either by distancing themselves from the parent or by burdening the parent with their difficulties and dependence. This speaks to the importance of the parent's capacity for self-regulation in facilitating healthy sibling relationships. The insights about these issues gained from Holocaust families apply also to other parents whom we might know today who were exposed to traumatic events or stress. Helping parents seek and get appropriate care for themselves improves the well-being of their children and has long-term implications for the children's family lives and relationships.

*Discussion question for the audience: How can we use the insights we gained tonight to help members of the Third Generation?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that in order to minimize these effects for the Third Generation, we can work on our own self-regulation so that our children do not respond in the same way and become similarly polarized and estranged from each other. Additionally, we can intentionally seek to maintain our sibling relationships so that members of the family's next generation might remain connected as a result.

After the catastrophic losses survivors suffered in the Holocaust, it was very important for them to re-build their lives, establish families, and provide for them. They focused their efforts on these goals and pushed onwards despite their internal anguish. This style of coping with extreme trauma might have meant that they neglected to attend to their inner lives, which was also surely related to the fact that psychotherapy was less accepted in the survivors' generation. At the same time, there are also indications that the repressive coping employed by survivors of the Holocaust (and by the Second Generation) had an adaptive value for many years, allowing both generations to manifest tremendous resilience.

However, for the Second Generation today, who are in middle or late adulthood, there is a new opportunity for growth. At this age, many pressures of the earlier phases in life have leveled off. Our children are grown, our career has probably reached its maximal potential, and we have already managed to prove some important things to ourselves and reach some meaningful achievements and accomplishments that contribute to our sense of a relatively solid self. Studies of adult development also show that middle age and the later years are accompanied by a more nuanced ability to see the various shades of grey, as opposed to having the "black and white" thinking that characterizes younger individuals. Age and life experience allow us to see "multiple truths" at the same time, an important capacity in reflecting about our parents, our

siblings, and ourselves from multiple perspectives. These new strengths that come with age facilitate a new internal awareness. Many people at this stage of life are capable of making very good use of therapy and truly blossom, making changes that significantly improve their feelings about themselves and the quality of their relationships. It is not too late for new insights to make a difference.

In middle age, we can reorganize issues we have struggled with for many years, finding new ways of doing things, new possibilities of expressing ourselves, and new courage. We still are very likely to have 35 years left to lead a different and improved life with stronger and more meaningful connections. This is a goal worth pursuing.

## Wrap-up

---

The facilitator can wrap up the session by reviewing the session's objectives and what was discussed—the importance of the sibling relationship in general; aspects of emotional development within the family of origin, both as an individual and as a sibling; common sibling differentiation patterns in survivor families; the various reactions children might have to parental trauma and dysregulation, and the effects of these styles of adaptation, both on the individual and on the sibling relationship; and the importance of placing sibling patterns in their proper context and working toward mutual acceptance.

The facilitator can then ask the audience to name particular insights that stood out for them. If time allows, the facilitator can ask the audience if they have any further questions or if anything was unclear.

Finally, the facilitator can announce the date and topic of the next meeting.

# Handout 1: Session Outline

---

- The importance of the sibling relationship
- Aspects of emotional development within the family of origin, both as an individual and as a sibling
- Common sibling differentiation patterns in survivor families
- The various reactions of different children to parental trauma and dysregulation
- The long-term effects of the different reactions of children in the family, both on the individual and on the sibling relationship
- The importance of placing sibling patterns in their proper context and working toward acceptance

\*Participants are encouraged to review the following blog post by Dr. Felsen as a supplement to this discussion:

Felsen, I. (2016, July 31). Adult siblings in Holocaust survivors' families [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/07/31/adult-siblings-in-holocaust-survivors-families/>.

# Session 6

---

## Improving Present Day Relationships

### The Session in Perspective

The session is intended to improve Second Generation members' understanding of particular biases and beliefs about relationships that affect Second Generation members and of how awareness of these biases can be used to improve current relationships. In addition to educating and validating Second Generation members with regard to facets of their relationships, this session will provide a forum where participants feel comfortable enough to share thoughts, feelings, and insights and ask sensitive questions.

### Session Objectives

After completing the session, participants will understand:

- Research findings indicating an elevated vulnerability to stress among the Second Generation
- Separation and individuation as a particular challenge for Second Generation members
- Why Second Generation members wish for both more autonomy from, and more closeness with, their survivor parents
- Second Generation members' experiences of loneliness and the impact of these experiences on current relationships
- The concept of "failed intersubjectivity" in the experiences of the Second Generation
- Ways to address experiences of failed intersubjectivity
- A model for increasing awareness of one's relationship beliefs and their impact on reactions, and how raising awareness can improve relationships

### Session Preparation

#### *Materials:*

Photocopied handouts (see end) – outline; resources for further learning.

#### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the following resources:

#### Articles:

- Solomon, Z., Kotler, M., & Mikulincer, M. (1988). Combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder among Second-Generation Holocaust survivors: Preliminary findings. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 145(7), 865-868.

- Wiseman, H. (2008). On failed intersubjectivity: Recollections of loneliness experiences in offspring of Holocaust survivors. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 78, 350–358.

#### Films:

- *Hedy and Yumi: Crossing the Bridge* (2008). A documentary described here: <http://www.hedyandyumi.com/>. The film is available for rent or purchase on Amazon Video.

#### Online Resources:

- Dougherty, K. (2016, June 23). Mother-infant communication: The research of Dr. Beatrice Beebe promo [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEMge2FeREw>.
- Felsen, I. (2017, March 20). Summary of the eighth meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2017/03/20/summary-of-the-eighth-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park/>.
- Waldinger, R. (2015, November). What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness [Video file]. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/robert\\_waldinger\\_what\\_makes\\_a\\_good\\_life\\_lessons\\_from\\_the\\_longest\\_study\\_on\\_happiness](https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness).
- Reivich, K., Seligman, M., Master Resilience Training in the US Army. *American Psychologist*, January 2011; <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/49740667> Master Resilience Training in the US Army

## Session at a Glance

Segment	Description
Introduction: Raising Awareness of Triggers to Improve Relationships	The facilitator will introduce the topic of common biases and triggers for Second Generation members and the need to increase awareness of these biases in order to improve relationships.
Post-Traumatic Reactions and Stress Management	The facilitator will note research findings indicating a particular vulnerability to stress among the Second Generation.
Separation/Individuation	The facilitator will discuss Second Generation members' particular difficulties with separation and individuation.
Wishing for Both Greater Autonomy and More Support	The facilitator will discuss Second Generation members' wish for more emotionally attuned closeness with their parents.
Lack of Emotional Support and Experiences of Loneliness	The facilitator will discuss the Second Generation's commonly reported experience of loneliness while growing up and the impact of this experience on current relationships.
Failed Intersubjectivity	The facilitator will explain the concept of failed intersubjectivity in the experiences of the Second Generation and how individuals who have experienced failed intersubjectivity can improve their present-day relationships.
Reexamining Relationship Beliefs and Improving Responses	The facilitator will describe a model for increasing awareness of one's relationship beliefs and their impact on reactions, and discuss how raising this awareness can improve relationships.

# Introduction: Raising Awareness of Triggers to Improve Relationships

---

Distribute session outline and briefly review with participants.

In earlier sessions, we discussed childhood adaptations and their effects on present-day relationships. We have spoken about how parents who suffered horrific trauma experience might suffer from intense posttraumatic reactions that affected the quality of their relationships with their children. Children often internalized their parents' emotionality, believing it to be a response to their behavior and not understanding that their parents are reacting to their own experiences.

We've spoken about the scene from the movie "Fugitive Pieces," where the positive and warm interaction between the survivor father and his son is destroyed when the father overreacts to the boy leaving a half-eaten apple. When negative interactions like this one become a recurring phenomenon, they profoundly influence the way the children feel about themselves, their parents, and relationships in general.

For example, the son in the movie might have come to believe that relationships are unpredictable and not to be trusted. He might have internalized the idea that moments of closeness are transient and unreliable and can quickly turn into negative interactions. These beliefs can then form a relational pattern that the individual carries into their adult life.

Even if the son in the movie were to marry a warm, reliable, consistent, and even-tempered woman, he might still struggle with an internal vulnerability to be easily triggered by perceived reminders of the frightening unpredictability in his relationship with his father. It might be challenging for him to recognize that his wife does not have the same tendencies as his father, that his life is different now, and that he can relate to his wife from a more open and less self-protective place. Rather than reacting intensely to minor triggers attributed to his wife, this man would benefit from changing his perspective and recognizing that he now lives in a new and different reality in which his childhood adaptations are no longer relevant. But how can such a shift in mindset be accomplished?

This session will discuss how Second Generation members can increase their awareness of common "hot points," or biases, resulting from experiences in their family of origin. The ability to recognize these sensitivities allows individuals to examine their reactions rather than simply allowing them to unfold automatically.

We will begin by discussing some research findings about common triggers for Second Generation and then move into delineating some ways to increase our awareness and address these triggers in present-day relationships.

# Post-Traumatic Reactions and Stress Management

---

As a group, Second Generation members are particularly vulnerable to stress and they show a higher incidence of post-traumatic symptoms despite the fact that they don't experience a higher frequency of traumatic events. It has been suggested that this is because when they are confronted with adverse events, Second Generation members respond with stress reactions that are more catastrophic than those of other people.

Several studies attest to this. Zahava Solomon, an Israeli researcher, examined individuals who had experienced PTSD due to combat trauma. When comparing children of these survivors with their peers, Solomon found that PTSD symptoms were more robust and treatment-resistant for children of survivors than for the other soldiers.

Another study conducted at Hadassah Hospital, which was already mentioned, compared groups of women who had been diagnosed with cancer. The study found that daughters of survivors reacted more catastrophically to their diagnosis than did their peers with the same diagnosis.

Children of trauma survivor parents could have become more sensitive to stress by the cumulative relational impact of growing up with parents who were chronically anxious and easily stressed.

Significant differences in stress hormones were observed between the adult children of Holocaust survivor parents with PTSD and control groups. These biochemical changes in the offspring are influenced by the relational impact of growing up with parents who were particularly anxious and easily stressed.

## Separation/Individuation

---

Studies that compared children of Holocaust survivors with their peers at various periods in their lives showed that the children of survivors have frequently reported difficulties differentiating themselves from their parents and forming their own identities. In young adulthood, they had a harder time moving away from their parents geographically, e.g., attending college far from home or accepting a job that took them to another part of the country. They also find it difficult to choose a life partner or lifestyle of which their parents might disapprove. In marriage, daughters of survivors often feel caught between their obligations to their parents and their obligations to their spouses and children, which places a significant stress on them that manifests in less satisfaction from the marriage and less positive self-perceptions as parents.



*Discussion question for the audience: Why might Second Generation members struggle more than others with issues of separation and individuation?*

Elicit responses from the audience. Then note that while growing up, children of Holocaust survivors felt a constant need to monitor their parents' well-being and to refrain from hurting them, after all their parents had suffered. They felt coerced to fulfill parental needs and expectations, often at the expense of their own desires. As a result, children of survivors find it difficult in adulthood to connect with their own feelings and to successfully navigate the tension between others' desires and their own.

When their needs or preferences conflict with those of their significant others, some survivors' children display an automatic, unthinking tendency to fully accommodate the other person's wishes. Other children of survivors feel resentful of the accommodations that were demanded of them in childhood and of the expectations that they conform to the other's wishes. Rather than picking their battles, the latter individuals might be overly sensitive to feeling pushed around in the present. Their reactions to perceived slights and disrespect are disproportionately "short-fused" and aggressive.

*Discussion question for the audience: What changes of midlife might pose particular challenges for Second Generation members?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that, in midlife, Second Generation members' children are maturing into young adulthood. This poses challenges, since Second Generation members need to accept that their loved ones, spouses as well as children, are separate from them. Loved ones have their own minds, opinions, and feelings, and when these do not coincide with one's own, the differences can feel like a lack of respect or love. This reality, which becomes more pronounced as our children come into their own, is particularly poignant for Second Generation parents who struggled with the expectation to completely suppress their own desires in order to accommodate their own parents.

As Second Generation members' children choose their own lifestyles and life partners, new ways of doing things are introduced into the family. These changes can be experienced as tremendous crises or losses for children of survivors. When a child of a Second Generation member adopts a radically different lifestyle, moves far away, or puts their spouse's wishes above those of their parents, this can feel like a profound loss, even a death of the relationship. Perceiving such normative developmental changes as tragic losses makes it more difficult for the children of survivors to accept and adjust to them, and puts the Second Generation at risk for depressive reactions, to which they are prone.

# Wishing for Both Greater Autonomy and More Support

---

While many Second Generation members felt restricted growing up and wished for more freedom and autonomy, they also desired more closeness with their parents. This seems paradoxical at first glance, but will be explained in the following section.

*Discussion question for the audience: Do you have any recollections of a wish for both more autonomy from, and more closeness with, a survivor parent?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that children of survivors did want more connection with their parents, but wished for a particular kind of connection. Many children of survivors felt restricted by their parents, bound by their parents' anxieties and by the perception of the parents' wish that they remain close and lead their lives a certain way. Children of survivors often express that they wished for a closeness with their parents that was more emotionally attuned to their own needs.

Emotionally attuned closeness means a connection with the parent that is not intrusive or enmeshed, but rather, that is appropriate for the child's individual needs and preferences. Children of survivors often wished that their parents would show more curiosity about them as people, more interaction about their daily activities, interests, and what was going on in their lives. They express that they wished for a closeness that would respect their individuality and needs rather than focusing on the needs of their parents. Many also report that although their parents were very attentive and generous when it came to caring for them and providing for their physical well-being and material needs, the parents' ability to talk about emotional topics and provide emotionally attuned closeness and support was limited.

## Lack of Emotional Support and Experiences of Loneliness

---

Many children of survivors received very little direction or support from their parents when it came to figuring things out or making life decisions. Parents who suffer from chronic anxiety and post-traumatic reactions such as hypervigilance, mistrustfulness, and fear of loss tended to be overreactive, a tendency that made it difficult for children of survivors to ask them for help for fear of the impact of the parents' reaction both on the parents and on themselves. Growing up without a sense of this kind of support, children of survivors often grew accustomed to not sharing emotionally and to making life decisions without the expectation of support or participation from a caring party.

Many Second Generation members, even those who had good, loving parents, also experienced the sense of loneliness that was mentioned earlier. Many were left to fend for themselves at far too early an age, even caring for their younger siblings. Survivor parents were busy and preoccupied, often working long hours and multiple jobs. Additionally, although many survivor parents tended to be overprotective, the experience of having lived through unbelievable horrors sometimes affected their ability to make appropriate judgments about safety, which sometimes meant that children were entrusted with either too little autonomy or too much responsibility.

*Discussion question for the audience: What ramification might these experiences have for Second Generation members in their adult relationships?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that children of survivors often enter relationships expecting self-sufficiency and loneliness to be part of life, even in the context of their relationships with their partners. Despite their partners' efforts to engage them and to provide love and affection, they might continue to feel lonely and closed-off to the partner, unable to share their challenges or ask for help.

## Failed Intersubjectivity

---

Within relationships, each of us has our own perceived experience or subjectivity. This includes our own thoughts, feelings, perceptions of reality and of ourselves, and all of our inner experience. Intersubjectivity refers to the idea that what takes place between two people is created by those two people, that there is no single "truth" and one who is "right" while the other is "wrong," but that the shared experience between two people has to take into account each person's subjective view. Each partner ought to be curious and try to consider how they might contribute to the way they are experienced by the other.

In order to respect the intersubjectivity within a relationship, both parties need to be open to integrating the other's point of view into their reality. Each individual needs to be able to transcend their own experience and accept the fact that the other has their own, even if the other's view of reality conflicts with theirs. Genuine curiosity about the other's point of view, and the ability to listen openly in order to understand, facilitates a dialogue about the other's perspective and is much more constructive than arguing or trying to convince the other that their way of looking at things is wrong. Listening with a focus on one's own rebuttal to the speaker's words, rather than on what the speaker is expressing, limits our capacity to truly understand the speaker's experience.

Having the ability to allow someone else to have a different subjective experience and to respect that difference allows the two parties to communicate effectively and to arrive at an agreed-upon sense of meaning. Naturally, this sort of communication is easier for some than for others, and most of us must make an intentional effort in order to listen to the other's perspective, especially when there is a conflict and negative emotionality involved.

People who struggle with the basic idea of intersubjectivity find differences of opinion upsetting. They might see the other person's expressing a different point of view as oppositional, disrespectful, rebellious, aggressive, or simply stupid. In this kind of a relational context, when feelings and needs clash, there are only two options. Either one party completely surrenders to the other's subjective view of reality, or there is a break in the relationship.

Many Second Generation members do experience cutoffs within their family of origin, either between parents and children or between siblings. This is a sad yet not surprising observation, since Second Generation members often have difficulty experiencing, accepting, and working with the intersubjective nature of relationships.

*Discussion question for the audience: Why might growing up with a survivor parent potentially decrease a child's capacity for intersubjectivity?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that although many survivor parents had difficulty managing their emotional experience, they also had a strong desire to protect their children from knowing what they had been through. This effort to shield their children sometimes resulted in a barrier between the parent and the child. Children who grew up with survivor parents often felt that they could never fully know and understand their parents or be understood by them. This divide could be exacerbated at times by unpredictable and frightening outbursts by the parent, the occurrence of which created a need for the child to protect themselves from becoming too close to the parent.

This feeling of distance from a parent who could not allow themselves to be known by the child, as well as the unpredictable nature of the parents' emotional presence, limited the child's ability to safely reveal all aspects of themselves. This, in turn, contributed to failed intersubjectivity between many survivor parents and their children. For many children of survivors, the experience of a lack of parental emotional availability contributed to an adaptational style dominated by independence and self-protection, at the expense of vulnerability and intimacy in relationships.

## Addressing Failed Intersubjectivity

---

Understanding that children of survivors struggle with experiences of failed intersubjectivity can be a first step toward making improvements in the here and now. Through examining these issues, we can consider ways to develop a different kind of intersubjectivity in our current relationships.

One way to do this would be by connecting with others not only through providing physical care, but through genuinely trying to understand their emotional experience. Working toward this goal can improve our relationships with our partners, our grown children, and even our

grandchildren. All of our relationships can be improved by efforts toward increasing intersubjectivity, whether with a preschooler or an adult.

For example, Beatrice Beebe created a documentary (excerpted on YouTube; see resource list) focusing on mother-infant interactions. In this documentary, Beebe focuses her camera on mother-infant pairs and then shows the mothers the videos of their interactions with their infants. In one scene, a mother is trying to interest her small infant in a doll. The baby is uninterested in the doll; instead, she is highly focused on playing with a button on her chair. While watching the video, the mother observes that it had not occurred to her that she could follow the baby's object of focus—the button—rather than her own. (You can also view the “Mother Infant Interaction Picture Book” by Beebe, Cohen, and Lachman, 2016, which includes the pictures of the pairs and their interactions).

Ideally, in intersubjectively attuned interactions, parents follow their children's interests rather than imposing their own agendas. Doing so communicates the message that the child is important, that their focus of attention is important, that the mother is following the child, and that it is the mother, rather than the child, who is responsible for creating an environment of attunement in the relationship.

In contrast, when parents are depressed or suffer from PTSD, this process is often reversed. In these cases, it has been observed in empirical studies of pairs of mothers and their children that from an early age (even in the cases of infants who are just a few months old), children respond to the parent's lack of attunement and, as a result, assume responsibility for the synchronicity and good feeling between mother and child. These children quickly learn to follow their mother's focus, to notice when their mother is emotionally unavailable, and to refrain from intruding when the mother is uninterested in them. This adaptation can be pathological for the child's development of a sense of self. However, it can be corrected if the mother is taught to make a conscious effort to follow her child's lead and focus on what interests her child.

*Discussion question for the audience: How might we correct our responses of failed intersubjectivity in our present-day relationships?*

Elicit responses from the audience. Then note that our responses of failed intersubjectivity can be corrected in our present-day relationships if we make ourselves aware of this profound aspect of relationships and make a conscious effort to repair our automatic tendencies to be defensive and focused on our own views and feelings. Although this process takes time, effort, and commitment, when we are interacting with others, we can remember the image of the baby playing with the button. Instead of automatically following our own interests and focusing on our own needs, we can think about the other person. What are they interested in right now? What are they focused on at this moment? What would they like to talk about, think about, or do with us?

Of course, it might not always be appropriate to consistently follow the other person's interests, and we have already mentioned the negative consequences of one person's accommodating

too much for the other's wants and needs. As adults rather than infants, our relationships are more reciprocal and should be more balanced. In fact, even in the mother-infant relationship, focusing exclusively on the infant's interest is unrealistic and can be counterproductive; children who are overly protected from realistic frustrations can become very narcissistic. Although a parent's failing to be emotionally attuned can have a negative impact on the child, going to the other extreme and making the child the consistent focus to the exclusion of all else is also unhealthy.

## Reexamining Relationship Beliefs and Improving Responses

---

As children of survivors, experiences of failed intersubjectivity can influence our conscious and non-conscious beliefs about relationships. Many Second Generation members grew up with the perception that their parents lacked the emotional resources to deal with them effectively.

This legacy can be carried over to adult relationships. Many Second Generation members hold the belief, even if they are not fully aware of it, that the other person will not be there for them. They believe the other person will lack the resources, patience, strength, or desire to remain available for them in challenging times. Everyday relationship interactions are often filtered through this lens, leading Second Generation members to act or react accordingly.

Instead of allowing these beliefs, formed in the past, to influence our relationships in the present, we can train ourselves to openly evaluate the current context and respond differently in ways that are more appropriate to the here-and-now.

One model for examining and changing our reactions can be referred to as "ABC." A refers to the Activating event, the occurrence that triggers your thoughts and feelings. Identifying this event is the first step.

B refers to your Beliefs about the event. At this stage, the task is to slow down and recognize what emotions and reactions are surfacing. As a child of survivors, your fundamental belief about your place in relationships might be that you are alone, that there is no hope of sharing your burdens, that no one is really there for you, including your spouse, and that this behavior is proof of your spouse's lack of concern for your thoughts and feelings or even lack of care for you.

C refers to the Consequences. Having made yourself more aware of your underlying relationship beliefs, you can consider the consequences of thinking this way. When you become aware of the thoughts and beliefs that are triggered in response to the activating event, you can ask yourself, How do they make you react? What impact does that reaction have?

As a child of survivors who maintains the belief that your relationship partner is not there for you, you might react in an un-nuanced fashion. Never having learned to assert yourself and to express your feelings in a modulated way, you might withdraw, sulk, get depressed, or cut off the relationship, or else you might react in a disproportionately aggressive way. Neither is likely to lead to the best possible results.

*Discussion question for the audience: What do you see as the benefit in applying the ABC model?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that the ABC model facilitates the goal of identifying automatic thinking patterns, or the paths your mind tends to take when you get upset. Instead of automatically following the usual path, the ABC model encourages you to slow down and think about your thoughts.

Asking yourself questions about your thoughts and reactions, how these thoughts and reactions are related to what just happened, how they might be influenced by the past rather than by the present, and how your beliefs and your behavior might impact your partner and your actual relationship goals, can lead you down a different path. Hopefully this is a path that allows you to choose more consciously and intentionally the way you wish to respond. A more thoughtful, less automatic response is more likely to lead to constructive resolution of the problem and to strengthening of the relationship.

We can intentionally train our attention to focus on the positive rather than on the negative. Consider the famous "embedded figure" drawing, which looks from different perspectives like a beautiful young woman or like an ugly hag. Some can see both images simultaneously, but most viewers see one immediately and then have to make an effort to see the other image.

This is a good example of what our brain does in every respect. Reality is complex, and we cannot attend to all of the details around us at once. Our brain continuously selects what to attend to from within the multitude of stimuli in our external environment and internal responses. We choose, often on the basis of our past experiences, whether to focus on the part of the glass that is half-empty or the part that is half-full. Like in the embedded figure illustration, both options are there to choose from. Even if your mind spontaneously focuses on one, you can train it to notice the other.

This is also true when regarding your partner's behavior. While it is natural to immediately notice and focus on the things we dislike, the things that hurt us, we can also train ourselves to examine whether our response is the only possible way to interpret what just happened. Perhaps there might be another way to look at your partner's behavior or to understand their perspective. Perhaps there is even a positive way to look at what initially appears negative. This understanding can create a more balanced view, shifting away from our "negativity bias" to a healthier and more positive outlook.

# Conclusion

---

As mentioned earlier, midlife is a particularly good time to do the work of re-examining our underlying relational beliefs in view of our past experiences as children of survivors. Midlife is potentially a crisis point, but also a time that offers opportunity for change and re-organization in our concepts of ourselves, in our priorities, and in our relationships.

Many changes take place in midlife. We reach a point where we know what ambitions will no longer be achieved, but on the other hand, we can relax a little because we have raised our families and accomplished the major tasks we were responsible for. We experience changes in our family roles as parents age or pass away, and as children grow up and make choices independent of our control or approval. For those of us who struggle with issues around separation and individuation, these experiences can be particularly poignant and can trigger negative emotional reactions.

Studies on well-being, such as the longest study on adult development conducted at Harvard University (<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/>), have found that positive relationships with others are associated with living longer and better. The quantity of these relationships is irrelevant; even one relationship characterized by a deep, authentic connection with the other person can be significant. As such, countering negative relationship patterns we might have learned in childhood and strengthening our current relationships with spouses and family members can serve as a tremendous resource. Understanding the impact of our childhood experiences allows us to make changes that will enhance our relationships in the present and in the future.

# Wrap-up

---

The facilitator can wrap up the session by reviewing the session's objectives and what was discussed -- research findings attesting to Second Generation members' particular vulnerability to stress; separation and individuation as a particular challenge for Second Generation members; why Second Generation members wish for both more autonomy from, and more closeness with, their survivor parents; Second Generation members' experiences of loneliness and the impact of these experiences on current relationships; the concept of failed intersubjectivity and its relevance for Second Generation members; ways to address the current residues of past experiences of failed intersubjectivity; and a model for increasing awareness of one's relationship beliefs and their impact on reactions, and how raising this awareness can improve relationships.



The facilitator can then ask the audience to name particular insights that stood out for them. If time allows, the facilitator can ask the audience if they have any further questions or if anything was unclear.

Finally, the facilitator can announce the date and topic of the next meeting.

# Handout 1: Session Outline

---

- Research findings attesting to Second Generation members' particular vulnerability to stress
- Separation and individuation as a particular challenge for Second Generation members
- Why Second Generation members wish for both more autonomy from, and more closeness with, their survivor parents
- Second Generation members' experiences of loneliness and the impact of these experiences on current relationships
- The concept of failed intersubjectivity and its relevance for Second Generation members
- Ways to address experiences of failed intersubjectivity
- A model for increasing awareness of one's relationship beliefs and their impact on reactions, and how raising this awareness can improve relationships

# Handout 2: Resources for Further Learning

---

## Articles:

- Solomon, Z., Kotler, M., & Mikulincer, M. (1988). Combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder among Second-Generation Holocaust survivors: Preliminary findings. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 145(7), 865-868.
- Wiseman, H. (2008). On failed intersubjectivity: Recollections of loneliness experiences in offspring of Holocaust survivors. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 78, 350–358.

## Films:

- *Hedy and Yumi: Crossing the Bridge* (2008). A documentary described here: <http://www.hedyandyumi.com/>. The film is available for rent or purchase on Amazon Video.

## Online Resources:

- Dougherty, K. (2016, June 23). *Mother-Infant Communication: The Research of Dr. Beatrice Beebe Promo* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEMge2FeREw>.
- Felsen, I. (2017, March 20). Summary of the eighth meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2017/03/20/summary-of-the-eighth-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park/>.
- Waldinger, R. (2015, November). What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness [Video file]. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/robert\\_waldinger\\_what\\_makes\\_a\\_good\\_life\\_lessons\\_from\\_the\\_longest\\_study\\_on\\_happiness](https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness).

# Session 7

---

## Childhood Needs and Current Relationships

### The Session in Perspective

The session is intended to improve Second Generation members' understanding of unmet childhood needs and their effects on adult relationships, as well as to enhance awareness of these gaps in order to improve relationships. In addition to educating and validating Second Generation members with regard to facets of their relationships, this session will provide a forum where participants may feel comfortable enough to share thoughts, feelings, and insights and to ask questions.

### Session Objectives

After completing the session, participants will understand:

- Some common emotional needs that went addressed, or unaddressed, in childhood
- The impact that unmet emotional needs can have on choosing a romantic partner
- Reasons stemming from childhood relationships that cause adults to respond rigidly and inappropriately in their current relationships
- How adults can adopt a more flexible and effective response style in their current relationships
- The importance of achieving emotional intimacy
- A structure for empathic listening that can improve emotional intimacy

### Session Preparation

#### *Materials:*

Photocopied handouts (see end) – outline, image of *Burning Man Sculpture "Love" by Alexandr Milov, Odessa, Ukraine.*

#### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the following online resource:

- Felsen, I. (2016, December 25). "Conscious relationships": Summary of the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors, Boro Park Y [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/12/25/conscious-relationships-summary-of-the-6th-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-boro-park-y/>.

## Session at a Glance

Segment	Description
Introduction: Unmet childhood needs and current relationships	The facilitator will introduce the topic of improving relationships in the present through increased awareness of the impact of unmet childhood needs.
The need for attachment	The facilitator will discuss the childhood need for healthy attachment and factors impacting the fulfillment of this need.
The need to explore the world and develop mastery	The facilitator will discuss the childhood needs for exploration and mastery and factors impacting the fulfillment of this need.
The need to develop a sense of identity	The facilitator will discuss the childhood need to develop a sense of identity and ways that parents may respond to this need.
The need to develop competence	The facilitator will discuss the need to develop competence through being challenged, and factors affecting the fulfillment of this need.
Unmet childhood needs and the “Imago”	The facilitator will discuss the role that unmet childhood needs might play in one’s choice of romantic partner.
Unmet childhood needs and attraction/repulsion	The facilitator will discuss the influence of unmet childhood needs on attraction to particular qualities, sometimes followed by a sense of aversion to these same qualities.
Underdeveloped skills: Selective responding learned in childhood	The facilitator will discuss the tendency to respond rigidly and automatically in current relationships based on adaptations learned in childhood.
Finding new responses as an adult	The facilitator will discuss ways that, as adults, we can make more flexible and appropriate choices in our relationships.
Achieving emotional intimacy	The facilitator will discuss achieving emotional intimacy and enhancing one’s adult relationship.
Listening empathically	The facilitator will discuss a structure for empathic listening that helps teach the skills that promote emotional intimacy.

# Introduction: Unmet Childhood Needs and Current Relationships

---

Introduce the idea that while Second Generation members benefit from understanding the effects of the past, they must learn how to address these effects in the present. As such, this session will focus on the impact of unmet childhood needs and using awareness of these needs to improve current relationships.

Distribute session outline and briefly review with participants.

## The Need for Attachment

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What are some universal emotional needs experienced by all children?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Listen for and highlight attachment (relationships/bonding), exploration/mastery, a sense of identity, and a sense of competence. Then, begin by focusing on attachment.

Humans, like all mammals, are connected with their caregivers even before birth. Studies show that in the womb, fetuses' heart rates increase when they hear their mother's voice, as opposed to the voice of another woman singing. We are biologically predisposed to bond with the person who will be a constant presence for us because we depend on them for protection and nurturance.

*Discussion question for the audience: How does a child benefit from a secure parental bond?*

Elicit responses from the audience. Then note that when this bond, or attachment, is healthy, it creates a context for growth. In this situation, the child internalizes the message that their needs will be predictably met and that the world is a safe place. This creates a sense of emotional security for the child.

Healthy attachment also creates a sense of emotional coherence, where a person can develop the ability to be in touch with their own feelings and needs so they can direct themselves towards their own goals. Someone who has achieved emotional coherence can choose a direction that fully fits their preferences and talents. In contrast, someone who experiences incoherence might not be able to use their strengths and competence to serve their own goals. Children of survivors might be overly focused on fulfilling the needs of their parents or others. Parents who were survivors might have not been consistently emotionally available for their children, either because of post-traumatic symptoms or because they were busy rebuilding and

providing for their families. Thus, children of survivors might have experienced a childhood dominated by awareness of their parents' pain and emotional needs instead of feeling like their own emotional needs were valid. Taking initiative and pursuing their own goals might have been viewed as causing one's parents pain and worry, and therefore might have been subsequently repressed.

This may be true for any individual who grows up with a parent who has experienced trauma. It is worth noting, however, that when a parent with a very traumatic history has had the opportunity to process their trauma before becoming a parent, transmission of the trauma might have been mitigated. The degree of trauma exposure in the parent is less relevant than the degree to which they had the opportunity to successfully process the traumatic experience before becoming a parent. Unfortunately, many survivors had little opportunity to do so.

## The Need to Explore the World and Develop Mastery

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What do we mean when we say that people are born with a need to explore the world and develop mastery?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that humans are born with a need to learn how to do things, and to believe that they are capable of doing things. This need is apparent when we look at toddlers who have recently become mobile. Toddlers will move away from their parents, exploring their environment and then returning just to touch them or to emotionally “refuel.” When the parent picks up the toddler, the toddler often wiggles away to explore again. This pattern reflects the toddler’s simultaneous desire to explore the world, which is both exciting and scary, and to reassure themselves that their parent remains available as a safe base.

*Discussion question for the audience: How can a healthy parent nurture the need for exploration? What happens when this need is met?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that a healthy parent can nurture this need by encouraging the child’s exploration while setting appropriate limits on dangerous behavior. It is very important that the parent appear calm, confident, and supportive when the child returns for “refueling,” indicating that they are still there for the child.

Ideally, the child will then internalize the message that they are allowed to want to explore the world and to be interested and curious. As a result, the child will have a healthy sense that they can go out and experiment in a safe way without fearing that they will be hurting or abandoning anyone.

Parents who are depressed, anxious, or have suffered terrible losses that have left them highly sensitive to the experience of separation and to the perception of potential danger might have a difficult time responding appropriately to their children's desire to explore. These parents might want to keep their children close to them, minimizing risk-taking, and might have difficulties when their children go off to explore. They may communicate to the child, through body language or even verbally, that the child's efforts to explore independently sadden or frighten the parent. This is particularly relevant during the period of adolescence, when individuals growing up in survivor families felt the need to assert their own independence.

## The Need to Develop a Sense of Identity

---

*Discussion question for the audience: How do children develop a sense of identity?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that the desire to express as many facets of our evolving self is an important part of fully exploring and developing our sense of identity. Children might identify with TV characters, peers, teachers, and others to whom they are exposed. They might try on different identities and roles to see how they feel. Exploring these different facets of the self is a normal process of development.

*Discussion question for the audience: How should a parent respond to this need?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that parents should refrain from shaming the child or from narrowing the child's efforts at self-expression. Ideally, caregivers should nurture this need and accept it. If all goes well, it is communicated to the child that it is okay for them to be themselves.

This process leads to a secure and well-integrated sense of self, where by the end of adolescence or young adulthood, the child has consolidated their sense of self through these trial identifications.

## The Need to Develop Competence

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What do we mean when we say, "a need for competence?"*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that children have a need to feel competent and effective and to believe that they can do things in a masterful way. When parents set appropriate tasks for children and provide clear instructions, children are given opportunities to develop this sense.



*Discussion question for the audience: Do you think that children in our culture at this time have a similar experience of developing competence compared with children of earlier generations? (see Wall Street Journal's "The Overprotected American Child.")*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that currently, our culture is going through a transformation. Where once the parent-child relationship was more hierarchical, with parents having clear authority, today children are more empowered. Some studies claim that children today feel a greater sense of entitlement and a decreased sense of filial obligation, and that current parenting practices might be contributing to the increase in narcissistic personality disorders.

When parents fail to give children age-appropriate challenges, such as tasks, responsibilities, and obligations, with proper guidance and instruction, the child does not get sufficient opportunities to challenge themselves and earn a sense of authentic competence and mastery.

Parents today often over-nurture their children and don't give them enough activating opportunities. This results in a paradox: in wanting to make their children feel good about themselves, parents deprive their children of the chance to stretch themselves, to develop grit and to gain the self-respect and confidence that accompany overcoming challenges.

When we nurture children's competencies, we send them a message that expresses faith in their abilities and allows for the development of a sense of personal effectiveness, power, and competence.

## Unmet Childhood Needs and the Imago

---

*Discussion question for the audience: When childhood needs are not met, how might that affect us in adulthood?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that when childhood needs are left unfulfilled, we are driven to try to complete their development in ways that can be productive or unproductive. Our unconscious needs and wishes are particularly influential when choosing romantic partners.

Our relationships with parents, who are our first love objects, serve as prototypes for future relationships. We develop a mental image of our love object, called an *Imago*, based on what our parents were like and how it felt to be with them. This image might include both positive and negative qualities.

We carry our Imago with us throughout our lives, and often end up choosing a spouse because they remind us of our Imago. Part of this may be an unconscious wish for this person, who reminds us of our Imago, to fix the things that did not go right the first time.

Unfortunately, spouses cannot fix each other's childhood wounds or fill each other's unmet childhood needs; nor should that be an expectation in marriage. It is our own responsibility to work to become aware of our own unmet childhood needs and to learn adaptive ways of relating to our partners that lead to the fulfillment of current needs.

## Unmet Childhood Needs and Attraction/Aversion

---

Expecting our spouse to fulfill our unmet childhood needs can have a variety of manifestations. For example, our unmet needs from childhood may result in seeing ourselves as deficient in various ways. As a result, we might choose a partner who has capacities that we believe we lack. We admire and perhaps idealize the capacities that we feel we are missing.

For example, one patient who was in the process of a very hostile divorce was an accommodating, unassertive personality, while her husband was dominating and controlling. These differences had actually attracted her to him during their first encounter. They had met in a crowded bar where the woman was having difficulty reaching the counter to buy a drink. Her future husband was a large, assertive man who managed to get through the crowd to buy her a drink. The woman was initially impressed with his power and assertiveness, which, unfortunately, he later turned against her.

In some cases, the attraction of opposites can be healthy, creating a situation where the couple works well together as a team. In these cases, each partner has areas of strength and weakness where they can provide assistance to the other and encourage the other to stretch and grow their underdeveloped aspects of self.

Sometimes, though, the quality that initially seemed attractive during courtship becomes upsetting once the couple is in a committed relationship.

For example, in some families, emotionality, sensuality, or asserting oneself might be viewed as unacceptable for girls. What many families would consider normal childhood exhibitionism, the desire to be looked at and admired, could earn a cutting response from one's parents if the parents are particularly sensitive to anything that suggests that the child is arrogant, narcissistic, or immodest. Growing up in this environment, the child may eventually have difficulty asserting themselves, speaking in front of a group, or feeling confident in general. While this person may initially feel attracted to someone who is competent in these areas, they may later come to resent these very qualities in the context of a long-term relationship.

*Discussion question for the audience: Why do you think a spouse might come to resent a quality that initially attracted them, especially if it was a quality that they felt they were missing?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that qualities that seem to compensate for our own deficits might seem highly attractive at first glance, but that living with them often proves unexpectedly difficult. We must cultivate ways of fulfilling our needs both within ourselves and in the context of our mature adult relationships, remembering that spouses should not be expected to repair childhood wounds, but rather to be good partners in the present.

## Underdeveloped Skills: Selective Responding Learned in Childhood

---

Many individuals did not learn some important relationship skills in our relationships with our parents.

*Discussion question for the audience: Why might children miss out on learning positive relationship skills in their childhood homes?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that skills might have remained underdeveloped because they were not modeled properly. Certain responses might not have been part of the emotional communication within the family, so that children are unaware of these possibilities even in adulthood.

Children might have also grown up learning that certain responses were effective in their relationships with their parents, while others were ineffective. Like the pruning of a tree, certain responses were reinforced while others fell away.

In some homes, asserting oneself might have been a skill that was useless or, worse, that got negative feedback from parents. As a result, these skills remained undeveloped. Instead, children found other ways of responding that were more positively received in the context of their childhood homes.

Similarly, if children had parents whose own pain made it impossible for them to be emotionally available, or who were less empathetic to their children's pain as a result of their own suffering and hardening, these experiences can lead to a self-protective pose rather than one that is open and allows for intimacy.

Such patterns can become entrenched. Children might develop rigid ways of protecting themselves, which can then characterize later relationships in ways that are unnecessary, misplaced, or detrimental.

[The facilitator can show the audience a piece of art from "Burning Man in Nevada" (see resources at end).]

This piece of art serves as a metaphor for what we're discussing. Here are two adults in rigid poses, positions that are defensive and self-protective. These poses represent the result of childhood adaptations that were needed in order to deal with conflict and frustration. These adaptations protected us from pain.

Inside this rigid, fossilized pose is the genuine person seeking emotional connection and intimacy.

In adult relationships, spouses might trigger feelings that are reminiscent of experiences their partners had as children with their parents. In the adult relationship, though, rather than responding automatically and rigidly according to childhood adaptations, individuals have the option of choosing other responses that can be more productive.

## Finding New Responses as an Adult

---

When one's partner resembles one's Imago in ways that are frustrating and reminiscent of one's parents, one can choose to see this as an opportunity for growth. Frustrations and conflicts in relationships can be used as opportunities to become aware of aspects of oneself that might have remained underdeveloped. Rather than expecting one's partner to provide them with something they never received, one can look at oneself and ask how one might handle the situation differently and more effectively now.

*Discussion question for the audience: When your spouse is irritating or frustrating you, what might be some alternatives to the way you usually respond?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that when your spouse frustrates you and you feel yourself getting angry, you might try to refrain from attacking until you've had the opportunity to be more thoughtful. Conversely, if your tendency is to withdraw and shut down, you might make an intentional effort to communicate more openly.

In either case, you should ask yourself, Does the situation at hand remind you of something that frustrated you in your childhood relationship with your parents? How did you handle that similar experience? Would that response, which was the only one you had as a child, be appropriate for your current relationship and for your current abilities as the adult that you are today?

Our childhood ways of responding to parents become automatic, and these automatic responses might trigger corresponding automatic responses in our spouses. We probably don't notice this process. But if, instead, we become aware of other options for responding, we can improve this dynamic rather than being trapped in it.

Through working to get to know your spouse better, on a deeper level, you can respond genuinely to your spouse as an individual rather than automatically playing out a script that was

created with your parent. When spouses truly see and understand each other, they can create a relationship that is far more intimate and mutually satisfying.

## Achieving Emotional Intimacy

---

Happiness and closeness in a relationship, as well as relationship satisfaction, are connected with a profound universal need to be deeply known and truly seen by one's partner. We seek to be liked, valued, and appreciated by our partner; achieving this is what makes a relationship sustainable.

During the early phase of a relationship, there is often a feeling of mutual infatuation which has been shown to be associated with a dopamine increase that eventually fades. In the long term, a couple's happiness depends greatly on their capacity to get to know each other deeply, to establish that level of emotional intimacy and to fulfill each other's needs as well as possible. Through understanding each other better, partners can better appreciate each other's strengths and needs. Rather than wanting our partner to become more like us or vice versa, we can become more aware of the unique strengths and vulnerabilities that characterize each of us, and be willing to work as a team with these differences.

For example, when a wife wishes that her husband would provide her with more emotional closeness, perhaps in addition to examining the couple's communication she might consider her longstanding sense that her emotions were not given enough space in her relationship with her parents. She might have been compelled to always focus on her parents' needs and to refrain from demanding and expressing her own needs and emotions so as to avoid overwhelming her parents.

This wife may be accustomed to feeling frustrated and to seeing her needs for communication and closeness go unmet. A balanced response would include the wife's self-awareness of these pre-existing frustrations, as well as the need to develop more realistic expectations of her husband's and her communication.

The husband, meanwhile, is presented by his wife's frustration with an opportunity to develop a greater ability to relate to and convey his own feelings and inner world, as well as those of his wife. While he ought not to be asked to become exactly like her, this is an invitation for him to stretch and expand an underdeveloped part of himself, namely that of better communication and intimacy.

Mutual growth can be achieved when partners make a conscious decision to truly hear their s and understand them and their needs. Empathic listening is a valuable tool for facilitating this.

# Listening Empathically

---

*Discussion question for the audience: Is empathic listening easy or difficult? Why?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that we often fail to listen empathically.

Surprisingly, this can be the case even for very intelligent, sophisticated people. When we listen to someone, we have a tendency to be focused on our view of what they are saying and are preoccupied with considering our own response. In order to listen empathically, we need to clear our minds of our own agendas and to stay focused exclusively on what the other person is saying, from their perspective, in their own words.

Responding to one's partner with, "So what I hear you saying is...", then repeating the partner's exact words, followed by the question, "Did I get you?" forces us to truly listen to the other person's perspective, told in their own words. Changing even one word of the person's original statement can significantly change the statement's meaning and create a gap in communication or lead the conversation away from the main point.

Failing to listen empathically can trigger much negative emotion in a couple. In contrast, disciplining oneself to adhere to the structure of empathic listening facilitates intimacy, self-awareness, and both personal and relational growth. Partners who use this skill regularly benefit in a variety of ways, both on the individual level and as a couple.

## Wrap-up

---

The facilitator can wrap up the session by reviewing the session's objectives and what was discussed -- some common emotional needs that are addressed, or unaddressed, in childhood; the impact that unmet emotional needs can have on choosing a romantic partner; childhood adaptations that might lead adults to respond rigidly and inappropriately in their current relationships; ways that adults can adopt a more flexible response style and respond more effectively in their current relationships; the importance of achieving emotional intimacy; and the role that adhering to a structure for empathic listening can play in improving emotional intimacy.

The facilitator can then ask the audience to name particular insights that stood out for them. If time allows, the facilitator can ask the audience if they have any further questions or if anything was unclear.

Finally, the facilitator can announce the date and topic of the next meeting.

# Handout 1: Session Outline

---

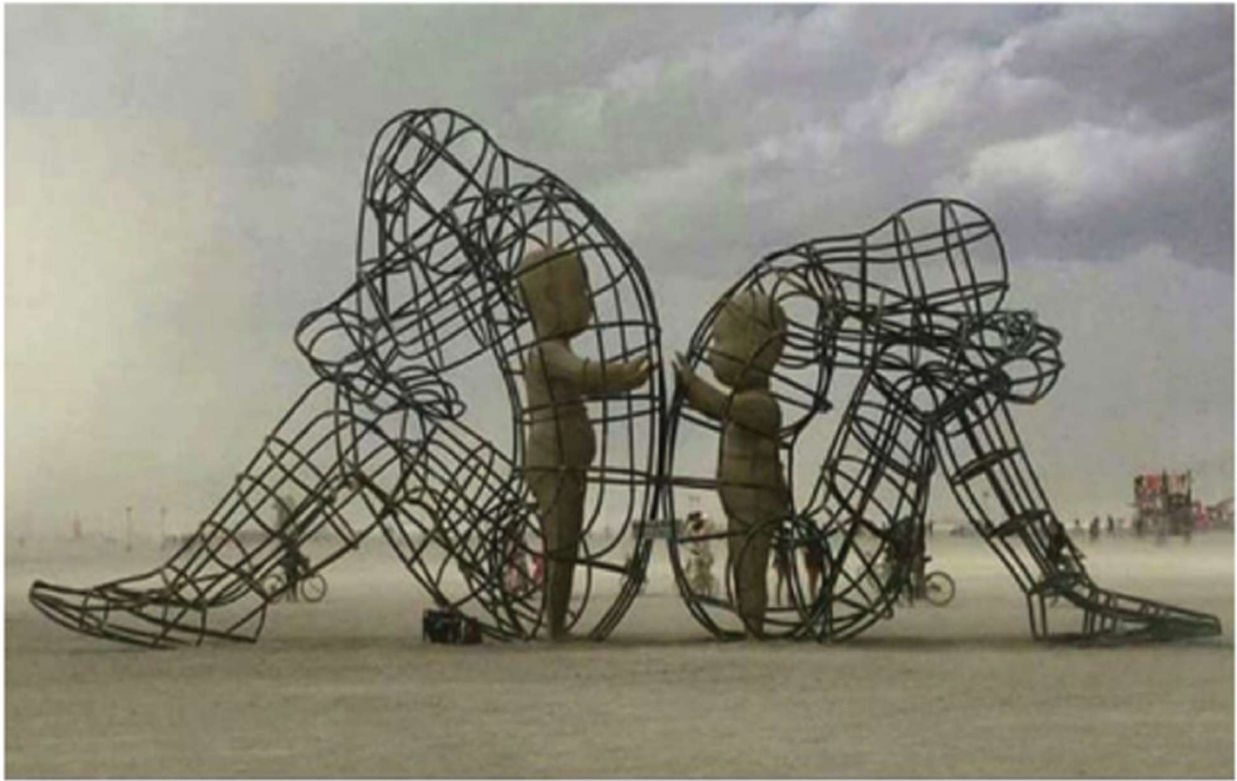
- Some common emotional needs addressed, or unaddressed, in childhood
- The impact that unmet emotional needs can have on choosing a romantic partner
- Reasons sourced in childhood that adults often respond rigidly and inappropriately in their current relationships
- Ways that adults can adopt a more flexible response style and respond more effectively in their current relationships
- The importance of achieving emotional intimacy
- The role that adhering to a structure for empathic listening can play in improving emotional intimacy

\*Participants are encouraged to review the following blog post by Dr. Felsen as a supplement to this discussion:

Felsen, I. (2016, December 25). "Conscious relationships": Summary of the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors, Boro Park Y [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2016/12/25/conscious-relationships-summary-of-the-6th-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-boro-park-y/>.

*Wall Street Journal's "The Overprotected American Child" by Andrea Petersen.*  
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-overprotected-american-child-1527865038>

***Burning Man Sculpture “Love”, by Alexandr Milov, Odessa, Ukraine***





# Session 8

---

## Constructive Empathic Communication

### The Session in Perspective

The session is intended to expand on issues addressed in the previous session about the effects of childhood adaptations on adult relationships, and will focus on teaching a structure for constructive empathic communication to enhance insight and empathy in the couple relationship. In addition to educating and validating Second Generation members with regard to facets of their relationships, this session will provide a forum where participants feel comfortable enough to share thoughts, feelings, and insights and ask sensitive questions.

### Session Objectives

After completing the session, participants will understand:

- Adaptations made in childhood relationships and their impact on current adult relationships
- How recurring conflicts between couples can serve as a window into unmet needs influenced by childhood adaptations
- How constructive communication can facilitate awareness of these needs and new alternatives for responding
- How the Dialogue taught in this session serves as a structured model for active listening and constructive communication
- How participants can incorporate lessons from the Dialogue into their own interactions

### Session Preparation

#### *Materials:*

Photocopied handouts (see end) – outline

Blank paper and pens for writing

#### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the following online resource:

- Felsen, I. (2017, February 11). "Constructive empathic communication: Summary of the seventh meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park" [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2017/02/11/constructive-empathic-communication-summary-of-the-seventh-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park/>.

## Session at a Glance

Segment	Description
Introduction: Childhood Adaptations and Current Relationships	The facilitator will re-introduce last session's topic of adaptations made in childhood relationships and their impact on current adult relationships.
Recurring Conflict as an Opportunity for Constructive Communication	The facilitator will discuss how recurring conflicts between couples can serve as a window into unmet needs influenced by childhood adaptations, and how active listening can facilitate awareness of these needs and new alternatives for responding.
Preparing for Constructive Communication: The Speaker	The facilitator will discuss ways that the speaker can prepare for constructive communication and increase their likelihood of being heard.
Preparing for Constructive Communication: The Listener	The facilitator will discuss ways that the listener can prepare to participate in constructive dialogue and reduce the likelihood of the conversation's being derailed.
Beginning the Dialogue	The facilitator will introduce the Dialogue as a structured model for constructive communication and describe how to initiate the process.
Crossing the Bridge	The facilitator will discuss "crossing the bridge" to the other person's world as a metaphor for the frame of mind of the Dialogue.
Summarizing	The facilitator will discuss the importance of having the repeat and later summarize what they have heard from the speaker.
Beginning or Ending with Gratitude	The facilitator will discuss the importance of expressing gratitude to one's partner for their participation in the Dialogue.
Bringing the Dialogue into Your Own Life	The facilitator will discuss ways that participants can incorporate lessons from the Dialogue into their own interactions.
Reflection Exercise: Childhood Adaptations and Current Relationships	The facilitator will lead an exercise where participants examine how childhood adaptations might be impacting their adult relationships.
Common Childhood Adaptations for Second Generation Members	The facilitator will discuss common childhood adaptations made by Second Generation members that can impact their current relationships.

# Introduction: Childhood Adaptations and Current Relationships

---

Distribute session outline and briefly review with participants.

Introduce the idea that each child and each parent create an understanding of their relationship as each child's unique features interact with the parent's unique features. This mutual contribution to the interaction is termed co-construction of reality, i.e., creating shared meaning.

Even within the same family, each child will have a particular relationship with their parent. For example, a child who needs a lot of relatedness will respond in a particular way to a parent who seeks a lot of connection with them. In contrast, a child with a strong need for autonomy and less desire for relatedness may experience that same parent as highly intrusive rather than supportive. The co-constructed experience for each pair of child and parent is not an objective depiction of "reality."

As their relationships with their parents develop, children and parents learn to respond to various qualities in each other and adapt accordingly, learning which patterns work well and which of their features are perceived as likeable or unlikeable. Children might learn that their parents find some aspects of their personalities intolerable or overwhelming and will subsequently suppress certain patterns of behavior, needs, and aspects of themselves.

These lessons become the template for adult relationships as well. The ways in which the child adapts their behavior to accommodate the parent can become rigid patterns, restricting the individual's repertoire of responses in any interaction. Even in a current relationship, with a person who is different than their parent, the person's responses may be unwittingly dictated by habits learned earlier in the parent-child relationship.

The couple relationship offers a second chance in life to revise and improve relational capacities and communication skills. Individuals can work to make their current relationship a conscious relationship, one which is not dictated by automatic, habitual, outdated adaptations learned in childhood. They can become aware of these adaptations, noticing what their part in the interaction is and how their partner responds to it. They can recognize the needs being expressed, and once those needs are made conscious, they can choose more appropriate, creative ways to respond to those needs in the present rather than resorting to old, unproductive habits.

# Recurring Conflict as an Opportunity for Constructive Communication

---

*Discussion question for the audience: Why, do you think, do many of us keep having the same arguments with our spouses over and over?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that conflicts, especially those that repeat themselves, can shine a spotlight on entrenched particular stumbling blocks. Conflicts that recur with some regularity often provide windows into parts of the self that are underdeveloped, and into childhood needs that have remained unfulfilled.

For example, one patient tearfully described an action of her husband's which had hurt her. The patient acknowledged that although the misdeed itself was objectively trivial, she had been triggered to feel that no one ever listens to her feelings. This patient had grown up as a parentified child who was over-responsible in her family. As a result, interactions taking place in the present which could be viewed from a number of perspectives tended to automatically trigger her feelings of being unheard and uncared for.

In committed, long-term relationships there will be conversations that recur around conflicts that do not ever seem to be resolved. As mentioned in the last session, sometimes it is because the very qualities that initially attracted us have now become ongoing sources of tension and conflict. When this happens, it is often because these qualities are reminders of significant aspects of childhood relationships which are emotionally loaded.

Consider the expression "the tip of the iceberg."

This can serve as a metaphor for surface behaviors and tendencies which have very deep roots that escape our consciousness. As an exercise, think back on the most annoying or upsetting interaction you had with your spouse over the past week, especially if it was about a repeated irritant. Chances are that you could examine this interaction carefully and find something underneath the surface of this irritation that goes all the way back to an adaptation made in childhood.

In order to experience a conscious relationship, we need to identify our own "icebergs." We can do this through examining recurring conflicts and the themes that emerge, e.g., "You never listen to me"; "I always have to take care of everyone else and no one ever takes care of me." We can notice how quickly those feelings come up in the context of recurring arguments. However, it is also important to honestly evaluate the extent to which a recurring theme from the past remains relevant and accurate in the present, because we might have found ourselves in a situation that has recreated particular dynamics.

*Discussion question for the audience: Is there an alternative to having the same fights with your spouse over and over?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that when a fraught conversation occurs repeatedly in a relationship, it may feel as if nothing will ever change and that there is no point exploring it further. However, it is exactly in these instances that it can be most helpful to recognize that if the same conflict keeps recurring, there may be a very deep issue that is not being resolved, an important need that is not being fulfilled. In that case, it is more productive to address this issue in a different and more constructive way. A conflict with deep roots is worth the effort involved in repairing it.

In order to resolve conflicts, particularly longstanding ones, we need to communicate constructively. Whenever there is a conflict of need, opinions, or feelings about important issues, it is important to be able to discuss these things with our spouses in a productive way.

## Preparing for Constructive Communication: The Speaker

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What can the speaker do to try to prevent a difficult conversation from getting derailed?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that unfortunately, when trying to discuss emotionally loaded topics, we often have difficulties saying what we need to say in a way that allows us to be heard. Our words might come out critical or our voice might sound aggressive, all of which reduce the likelihood that the message will penetrate. A message that “hurts as it comes into the ear” will not be heard. Instead, our partner will shut down defensively or become aggressive.

Communicating in such a way might offer some temporary relief from pent-up frustrations but it does not provide the constructive communication that benefits the relationship in the long term. When we need to discuss an upsetting topic, it's our responsibility, if we want to be heard, to formulate our message in a way that goes easily into the other person's ear and allows them to hear us. A speaker who needs to share something difficult with their spouse needs to be prepared to share it in a way that maximizes their likelihood of being heard.

# Preparing for Constructive Communication: The Listener

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What can the listener do to try to prevent difficult conversations from getting derailed?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that in a constructive dialogue, the listener's responsibility is to open their mind and to be fully present with the speaker. In today's fast-paced world, it is more difficult than ever to stay fully present with and attentive to another person. An interaction need not be long, as long as the listener is fully present with the speaker for the brief duration of the conversation.

Being fully present when someone is speaking means refraining from thinking about your to-do list, overcoming your wish for the conversation to be over, ignoring your phone and other distractions. The listener must provide the speaker with the feeling that the listener is fully available.

Given this responsibility, it is important for the listener to be realistic about whether this is in fact a good time and whether they can provide or maintain the necessary level of focus at this particular moment. If the listener knows that they are too tired or preoccupied, they should inform the speaker of that and it is their responsibility to suggest an alternate time reasonably soon.

*Discussion question for the audience: What are some things a listener can do to keep themselves fully present, even if what they're hearing is difficult to absorb?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that once the conversation has started, the listener must make every effort to quiet the chatter in their head and be fully present. Deep breathing can be used to quiet the parasympathetic nervous system. Other helpful physical gestures include putting one's feet on the ground, maintaining an open posture, and being mindful of one's body language and facial expression. An angry look or a rolling of the eyes, even unaccompanied by words, can end the conversation before it starts.

Eye contact is particularly important here; the eyes can communicate soft receptivity or sharp judgment, messages that the brain processes even before verbal content.

## Beginning the Dialogue

---

The Dialogue is a structured method for having a meaningful conversation with one's spouse that teaches the specific skills of active listening. Although following these guidelines in the

context of an important discussion can be difficult at first without on-the-spot coaching, it is still useful to learn about the technique and to try to implement it to some degree.

The first step of the Dialogue is asking the listener if this is a good time for a discussion of a serious topic. The point is not to pounce on the listener, but rather to invite them to a conversation with the understanding that if the time is not convenient for both parties, the conversation will take place at a more opportune time.

If both parties have agreed that the conversation will take place at this moment, they should sit across from each other on chairs of the same level. The optimal distance between their eyes should be about 18 inches, which is considered ideal for empathic resonance between the brains of the two people.

## Crossing the Bridge

---

*Discussion question for the audience: In what ways is having a difficult conversation with your spouse like crossing a bridge from one country to another?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that we use the metaphor of “crossing the bridge” because each of us may be viewed as a unique country with its own language and culture. For example, although we may use the same words, our associations to these words differ. Words like “tree” or “mountain” likely recall one image for one partner, and a different image for the other partner. This is not only true for words connoting objects, but also for emotions and memories.

When two people agree to discuss a conflict, the speaker is inviting the listener to visit their inner world. They are asking the listener to try to learn the language and culture of the speaker’s country. As the host, the speaker is responsible for behaving as a gracious and respectful “tourist” in the other person’s inner landscape and culture.

Like a courteous visitor, the listener respects what the speaker is showing them. They refrain from judging and criticizing what they’re seeing simply because it doesn’t conform to their own preconceived notions.

Crossing the bridge begins with the speaker introducing the topic they want to discuss. While doing so, the speaker must avoid certain pitfalls. For example, when discussing a loaded topic, anxiety and a sense of urgency can drive the speaker to go into long monologues. In many cases, the main point of what needs to be said can be summed up quite succinctly. One or two simple sentences usually suffice, and if needed the listener can ask for further clarification. The speaker might say something like: “I want to talk to you about our plan to move to the city. I want to ask you to postpone it for a year.” This is a topic which may be highly loaded and important. Yet, those two sentences are sufficient for explaining what the speaker wants to discuss.

*Discussion question for the audience: Why might staying succinct and focused be particularly challenging for Second Generation members in an emotional conversation?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that this pitfall is particularly relevant for Second Generation members, many of whom might have grown up feeling that their emotions were not given a lot of space in their relationships with their parents. Others might have difficulties expressing their emotions when they expect that they might conflict with the needs and wishes of their partner. As a result of their childhood adaptations where communication about emotional issues was not commonplace in the family, it is common for Second Generation members to feel that they have never really been heard. Thus, during loaded conversations they might have difficulties expressing themselves or, conversely, might overtalk.

It is important for the dialogue to focus on one particular topic and not migrate to include others. In order for the dialogue to be effective, it must be concise and highly focused.

Another serious pitfall for the speaker can be the tendency to blame or shame. One way for the speaker to avoid this can be to use “I messages” – “I feel,” “I want.” Sentences that start with “You,” especially those that include absolute terms like “never” or “always,” can make the listener feel judged and blamed, and they will become unreceptive as a result.

On the listener’s end, one of the reasons that emotional conversations with spouses often get derailed is that listeners fail to listen with complete openness and curiosity. Instead, the listener might be busy formulating their responses and defenses. Preoccupied with their own thoughts and reactions to the speaker’s message, they fail to remain fully present in the conversation. This tendency is self-defeating. We are already familiar with our own thoughts; the only way for the conversation to be constructive and lead to novel outcomes is to suspend our own thoughts and responses while listening to the other person. The listener needs to cultivate an attitude of genuine curiosity about why the other person has a different position. Like a visitor to another country, the listener needs to try to understand the language and cultural expectations from within the speaker’s perspective.

Both the speaker and the listener need to remain mindful of the difference between feelings and reality. We can be intensely triggered in the moment, but upon reflection afterward when we are calmer, we can recognize that the objective situation did not necessarily warrant the intense reaction. Phrases like “I feel hurt when *it feels like* you’re not listening to me” reflect the fact that the perception of not being listened to is a subjective feeling, and not necessarily indicative of the objective reality.

Another unique feature of the Dialogue is that once the speaker is finished speaking, the listener will repeat what they said, adhering as closely as possible to the speaker’s original words. Rather than parroting the speaker’s words mechanically, though, the listener should first take a few minutes to allow the speaker’s message to sink in. The listener then begins with, “I hear you say...” and repeats what they’ve heard.



*Discussion question for the audience: Why do you think the listener should use the speaker's language when reflecting what they've said, rather than paraphrasing in their own words?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that this repetition is mindful rather than automatic, and it is important for the listener to make every effort to use the speaker's original language and refrain from paraphrasing. Paraphrasing the speaker's words can introduce other nuances, and the speaker might feel that they were not understood correctly. If this happens, both parties might get caught in a cycle of trying to clarify precise meanings rather than staying focused on the original message and on moving forward.

After the listener repeats what they heard the speaker say, they check in to see if they understood the speaker correctly. Asking the question "Did I get you?" or "Am I with you?" after the repetition provides the speaker with the opportunity to make corrections as needed. That being said, if the speaker feels that the listener missed something, their response to "Did I get you?" still needs to be phrased in a positive way in order to minimize defensiveness on the part of the listener. Rather than saying, "No, that isn't what I said," the speaker's response should be, "Almost, let me add..." or "Almost, let me repeat..." The listener then repeats back the new information, followed again by "Did I get you?"

Once it has been established that the listener correctly understood the speaker's concerns, the repeated question "Did I get you?" is answered with "Yes." At that point, the listener tells the speaker, "Tell me more."

Crossing the bridge can continue for 10-15 minutes, until the speaker feels that they've had their full say about the topic. The listener makes every effort to fully listen and establish that they understand correctly. The listener's encouraging the speaker to "Tell me more" is one of the things that makes the Dialogue different and more productive than a typical argument between spouses.

## Summarizing

---

Once the speaker has had the opportunity to express themselves fully and the listener has confirmed their understanding by repeating what they heard, the next step is for the listener to summarize the main message that they've heard in their own words. An example of a summary might be: "So what I've heard you say is that it's very hurtful to you when I don't listen to you, and when that happens, it makes you feel like I don't care about your feelings and your feelings don't matter to me."

The summary can also include additional feelings that were expressed. The speaker might have additionally said, "When that happens, what scares me is feeling like I'm all alone, like you don't care about me and how I feel," or possibly, "It reminds me of my childhood because my parents didn't have time to think about how I felt and that's the way it always was... and I don't want to

feel this way in my relationship with you for the rest of my life. I want it to be different.” In this case, the listener can add this to the summary: “So what I also heard is that you felt this way with your parents, and that you really want it to be different with the two of us.”

*Discussion question for the audience: Other than communicating to the speaker that they have been heard, what might be another benefit of the listener’s mirroring and reflecting back the speaker’s words? Additionally, what might be the benefit of paraphrasing and summarizing a speaker’s main message?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that the listener’s mirroring and reflecting what the speaker has said develops the listener’s ability to empathize with the speaker even if the listener disagrees. Paraphrasing and checking if the listener got it right develops the capacity to slow down our interpretations and improve our comprehension. Although this is a difficult skill, it is an important one. The ability to empathize with the hurt party is what allows past injuries to stop infecting the present. Recognizing and empathizing with the other party’s pain and how you might have contributed to it, even if unintentionally, is what heals injuries in a relationship.

## Beginning or Ending with Gratitude

---

It is important to either start the Dialogue, end the Dialogue, or even do both, by recognizing what we are grateful for in our relationships and appreciation of the partner for participating in this Dialogue.

It is important to say something along the lines of, “I want you to know that I appreciate \_\_\_\_\_ about the way you are.” If you are just beginning the Dialogue, you can add, “I want to start by saying that. And then, I have something that is important/hurtful to me that I want to clarify with you.” When you end the Dialogue, you can say, “I know this was a difficult conversation and I appreciate [the way you listened to me, the sensitivity with which you responded, etc.]”

## Bringing the Dialogue into Your Own Life

---

*Discussion question for the audience: Even if you don’t follow the Dialogue’s formal structure when speaking with your partner at home, what are some principles that you can try to incorporate into your interactions?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that although implementing the structure for the Dialogue the way it is laid out can be challenging and feel artificial, it might be worthwhile to try it anyway, at least in the beginning, because it teaches the skills needed for active listening and better communication. Later, you can experiment with incorporating the underlying principles of the Dialogue in a less formally structured way.

For example, the next time you need to have a loaded conversation with your spouse, you can focus on opening your mind and listening in a constructive, empathic way rather than allowing yourself to be distracted by your own thoughts and responses.

You can also focus on responding in a way that is empathically resonant, e.g., being fully present, summarizing what you have heard, checking in to make sure you understood, and asking for more information. Doing any or all of these things will contribute to a more empathic, constructive style of communicating.

## Reflection Exercise: Childhood Adaptations and Current Relationships

---

Understanding our own past, and that of our spouse, is an important part of responding empathically rather than dismissively or defensively. We need to consider the stories our spouse has shared with us about their past, and the impact that these stories could be having in the here and now. It is helpful to reflect on the themes of these stories by asking oneself the following questions: In these stories, what happened to my spouse? What did they learn at home? What did they learn in their relationship with his parents that they are bringing to our relationship? You should also ask the same questions about yourself.

[The facilitator should distribute pen and paper to participants and explain that they will be asked several questions. Participants can take a few minutes to write down the answers to these questions and use these answers as a framework for a conversation at home with their spouses. Participants who do not have a spouse can consider how their experiences impact their adult relationships in general. The answers to these questions will provide an opportunity to become more aware of how each individual feels about the deeper parts of themselves and what they bring from childhood into the present.]

*Instruct the audience: Write down whatever comes to mind in answer to the following questions, in a few sentences.*

- 1. What I learned about relationships in my childhood was:*
- 2. The ways that I adapted in order to survive in my family were:*
- 3. These adaptations affect my adult relationship in the following ways:*
- 4. What do I appreciate about my spouse right now?*

These answers do not necessarily need to focus on traumatic experiences. All of us adapt in various ways in order to create space for ourselves within our families. This process in and of itself is not pathological and does not have to necessarily be associated with threatening parental responses. Children naturally adapt to their environments and attempt to elicit positive regard from the adults who care for them.

For example, in many families where daughters are expected to be well-related, altruistic, and demure, girls may learn to tone down their tendencies to be intellectual or opinionated in order to fit into the family culture. The relational patterns we have consolidated throughout childhood and adolescence might have been more adaptive, yet in every case there is always room for greater relational maturation to take place.

## Common Childhood Adaptations for Second Generation Members

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What childhood adaptations might be particularly common for Second Generation members?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Note that certain adaptations are common to Second Generation members.

For example, research shows that Second Generation members might struggle with over- or under-control of anger and hostile feelings because of adaptations they made in childhood. Growing up, some children of survivors might have felt inhibited from expressing their own negative feelings toward their parents in light of everything their parents had suffered. Although a normative childhood includes feeling triggered at times by family members, e.g., interactions with siblings, Second Generation members often grew up feeling afraid of expressing their anger. On the other hand, others might have observed instances of explosive behavior in the family because of post-traumatic symptoms in the parents.

Therefore, for a Second Generation member, one possible response of, “What I learned about relationships in my childhood was...” might be, “I learned that anger is unacceptable. I learned that anger is very dangerous and hurtful, and that I should not express it.” Conversely, one response might be, “Under situations of stress, it is acceptable to respond explosively.” To the second question, the response might be, “The ways in which I adapted in order to survive in my family were that I didn’t express my anger. I hid it and never spoke about it.”

Of course, different children of survivors adapted in different ways. Some children became very obedient, so afraid of their urges for aggression that they found themselves unable to assert themselves in later relationships. Others became passive aggressive so that they could be aggressive without owning the responsibility for their aggression.

In contrast, other Second Generation members went to the other extreme, becoming very trigger-sensitive. These individuals (more often male than female but not always), rather than being over-controlled, are under-controlled, expressing their anger in extreme ways. The inhibition they experienced as children led to a poorly integrated capacity to regulate their emotions, particularly anger, which therefore remains either entirely unexpressed or vented in

an intense rage. Rather than being able to modulate their anger and recognize a range of acceptable ways for expressing it, these individuals act as if anger is a switch with just two settings, on and off.

## Conclusion

---

Emotional communication is complicated in general, and is particularly complicated in trauma-exposed families. Second Generation members and others who grew up in families exposed to trauma might not have developed effective ways to communicate emotionally, either about their needs or about triggers that hurt or offend them. They may also find it difficult to hear other people's side of things without reacting defensively and emotionally.

One of the advantages of reaching midlife is an improved ability to reflect upon and address unconstructive habits. Midlife is a good point to stop and think about recurring concerns and to experiment with new ways of addressing these concerns. Having reached a point where we are older, stronger, and more mature, we have an improved capacity to try out more effective responses in our relationships. Improving our relationships has been shown in studies of adult development to enhance both physical and mental wellbeing and is particularly important in the later years.

## Wrap-up

---

The facilitator can wrap up the session by reviewing the session's objectives and what was discussed -- adaptations made in childhood relationships and their impact on current adult relationships; how recurring conflicts between couples can serve as a window into unmet needs influenced by childhood adaptations; how constructive communication can facilitate awareness of these needs and new alternatives for responding; ways that both the speaker and listener can prepare for constructive communication to maximize its effectiveness; how the Dialogue serves as a structured model for constructive communication, and the various steps of the process; ways that participants can incorporate lessons from the Dialogue into their own interactions; how participants' own childhood adaptations might be impacting their adult relationships; and some common childhood adaptations made by Second Generation members which can impact their current relationships.

The facilitator can then ask the audience to name particular insights that stood out for them. If time allows, the facilitator can ask the audience if they have any further questions or if anything was unclear.

Finally, the facilitator can announce the date and topic of the next meeting.

# Handout 1: Session Outline

---

- Adaptations made in childhood relationships and their impact on current adult relationships
- How recurring conflicts between couples can serve as a window into unmet needs influenced by childhood adaptations
- How constructive communication can facilitate awareness of these needs and new alternatives for responding
- How the Dialogue serves as a structured model for constructive communication, and the various steps of the process
- How participants can incorporate lessons from the Dialogue into their own interactions
- How participants' own childhood adaptations might be impacting on their adult relationships
- Common childhood adaptations made by Second Generation members which can impact their current relationships

\*Participants are encouraged to review the following blog post by Dr. Felsen as a supplement to this discussion:

Felsen, I. (2017, February 11). "Constructive empathic communication: Summary of the seventh meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors in Boro Park" [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2017/02/11/constructive-empathic-communication-summary-of-the-seventh-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-in-boro-park/>.

# Session 9

---

## Sexuality and Intimacy for Second Generation Members

### The Session in Perspective

The session is intended to improve Second Generation members' understanding of the role played by their experiences in couple intimacy. In addition to educating and validating Second Generation members with regard to facets of their sexual experiences, this session will provide a forum where participants feel comfortable enough to share thoughts, feelings, and insights and ask sensitive questions.

### Session Objectives

After completing the session, participants will understand:

- The function that sexuality serves in the lives of couples
- Some of the midlife changes that can impact couples' sex life
- Sexual challenges and complaints in midlife
- Sexual challenges for children of survivors in particular
- Reasons why addressing sexual challenges can be difficult
- The importance of addressing sexual challenges despite discomfort
- Some positive ways to address sexual challenges
- Unique midlife opportunities for improving relationships

### Session Preparation

#### *Materials:*

Photocopied handouts (see end) – outline; resources for further learning.

#### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the following resources:

#### Books:

- Davis-Weiner, M. (2008). *The sex starved wife: What to do when he's lost desire*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

#### Films:

- *Hope Springs* (2012). A film with Meryl Streep described here: <http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/hopesprings/>. The film is available for rent or purchase on Amazon Video.

Online Resources:

- Waldinger, R. (2016, January 25). What makes a good life? [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KkKuTCFvzl>.
- Perel, E. (2013, February 14). The secret to desire in a long-term relationship [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sa0RUmGTCYY>.
- Katehakis, A. (2017, March 14). Grown-up sex [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.soundstrue.com/store/weeklywisdom?page=single&category=IATE&episode=12033>.
- Felsen, I. (2017, May 6). Summary of the ninth meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors: Intimacy in couples [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2017/05/06/summary-of-the-ninth-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-intimacy-in-couples/>



## Session at a Glance

Segment	Description
Introduction	The facilitator will introduce the topic of sexuality and intimacy and note that trauma can impact intimacy, which has ramifications for the couple's relationship.
The function of sex for couples	The facilitator will discuss the benefits of healthy sex for couples, as well as noting the conflicting needs for security and for adventure and novelty.
Common sexual challenges	The facilitator will discuss some conflicts which affect sex for many couples.
Factors affecting couples during midlife	The facilitator will discuss developmental transitions taking place for midlife couples.
Causes of sexual difficulties during midlife	The facilitator will discuss physical, environmental, and other contributing factors which can negatively impact couples' sex life.
Common sexual complaints during midlife	The facilitator will review common complaints about sex expressed by midlife clients.
Sexual challenges for children of survivors	The facilitator will discuss how unique experiences of children of survivors can influence sexuality and intimacy for this population.
Challenges of discussing sexual difficulties	The facilitator will discuss some of the reasons that people find it difficult to address their sexual complaints.
Importance of discussing sexual difficulties	The facilitator will discuss some of the reasons that sexual difficulties need to be addressed despite the discomfort that frequently characterizes this process.
Ways to address sexual difficulties	The facilitator will discuss some of the ways that couples can address their sexual difficulties, e.g., positive communication, education, and mindfulness.
Unique opportunities for children of survivors at midlife	The facilitator will discuss some positive developments in midlife and the opportunities that they present for children of survivors to improve their relationships.

# Introduction

---

Introduce the idea that trauma can affect sexuality and intimacy even in high-functioning relationships. Note that sexual intimacy is strongly connected with a couple's feelings of closeness.

Distribute session outline and briefly review with participants.

## The Function of Sex for Couples

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What function do you think sex serves in a couple's relationship?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then discuss the negative impact for each individual in the couple if intimacy is lacking or is not satisfactory. Note that these negative feelings in a relationship can also detriment each individual's self-esteem and feelings of femininity/masculinity.

*Discussion question for the audience: What do you see as some of the differences between immature and mature relationships?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then, explain that mature relationships were described by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber as "I-thou," stressing the sanctity of the other person's otherness.

A mature relationship is one in which the two individuals fully recognize and respect each other as two separate beings with their own feelings, opinions, separateness, and otherness. In contrast, in an immature relationship, partners might see each other as extensions of themselves and expect the other to feel, think, and behave in complete accordance with their own wants and needs. A metaphor for this kind of relationship would be the expectations one has toward one's own arm to do exactly what one wishes it to do. Should one's arm all of a sudden behave differently, one would understandably feel frightened, outraged, and distraught. However, another individual should never be expected to feel or behave exactly how we feel or want them to feel.

Explain that a mature relationship fulfills psychological needs for validation and confirmation. The sexual intimacy in such a relationship helps partners feel desirable, lovable, and wanted, and contributes to self-esteem and vitality. Having this special connection with one special person is a big part of feeling vital and relevant. Satisfactory sexuality in a couple functions for many individuals as a way to regulate stress, and feel soothed as well as vitalized. In the context of a healthy, mature relationship, sex can help a couple feel connected and create a

sense of mutual belonging. However, partners might have difficulty understanding each other's experience when there is a discrepancy in the level of sexual desire or differences in wants and likes between the two people.

Satisfaction with one's sex life is important, and dissatisfaction with one's sex life is even more significant! Studies have shown that when satisfaction with their sex life contributes about 15-20% to the couple's overall level of marital satisfaction. But when couples are dissatisfied with their sex life, this contributes about 50-70% to their sense of overall marital dissatisfaction. Introduce the fact that sex has a paradoxical nature. On the one hand, during sex, a partner allows themselves to stop taking care of the other person and surrenders into self-immersion into their own sexual experience. On the other hand, the partner also wants to remain attentive and in tune with what the other person wants and needs. When sex is healthy, a balance is maintained between these two states.

## Common Sexual Challenges for Couples

---

*Discussion question for the audience: Can you name opposing emotional needs which might come into conflict for people in long-term intimate relationships?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then, introduce the fact that, in intimate relationships, people's need for security can conflict with people's need for novelty and excitement. Explain that novelty releases dopamine in the brain, which creates positive excitement. The novelty in a relationship diminishes over time. At the same time, people also want to feel secure in their relationship, comfortable, well-known, and accepted.

Return to the topic of immature vs. mature relationships. Sex tends to be exciting at the beginning of a relationship. Note, for example, that "hot and heavy" sex as portrayed in the movies is most often premarital or extramarital. Sex in long-term relationships becomes qualitatively different as the relationship matures. In order to achieve a satisfying sexual relationship at the more mature stages of a relationship, each individual needs self-awareness and understanding of the emotional "dowry" that they bring with regards to intimacy and sexuality from their own families and previous experiences.

*Discussion question for the audience: Is it possible to maintain a sense of novelty as a relationship matures?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then explain to the audience that novelty does not have to mean initiating a sexual relationship with a new person. One can achieve novelty within a long-term relationship by increasing the level of intimacy and vulnerability between the couple. When a couple lives together for many years, it is easy for partners to stop being curious about each other, which can be both a cause and an effect of a decreasing sense of novelty. One of the ways that a sense of mutual boredom or excessive familiarity can be countered is through enhancing the recognition and respect of separateness between partners. When

partners maintain some separate interests, for example, they can maintain more interest and respect for each other. A real connection can only be fostered between separate individuals. Respect for one's separateness might also entail maintaining some degree of privacy when it comes to certain personal tasks, for example, shaving legs and other aspects of grooming/hygiene. Some partners can be turned off if these tasks are performed in their presence. Partners need to be able to communicate openly and non-defensively about these issues in order to maintain closeness.

*Discussion question for the audience: How might a person's overall sense of self affect their sex life?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then explain that a cohesive sense of self is an important factor in enjoying a fulfilling sex life. All of us play many different roles, each of which may be viewed as an aspect of our self. For example, we might try to be a good child to our parents, a caring spouse or parent, a respected professional in the workplace, a devout Jew, etc. Each of us has some characteristics that feel more authentically "me." Some of the roles we play and traits we exhibit are closer to this core of our sense of self. Others seem farther away, or might even feel completely removed.

For example, one woman who took pride in being truthful, honest, and loyal experienced an unexpected crisis in her relationship. She tolerated this crisis bravely and thought she was managing well. At one point, though, she found herself struggling with an intense infatuation with a coworker. Although she did not act on this infatuation, simply having these feelings felt very foreign to her usual sense of who she was.

This example illustrates how one's sense of sexuality can feel very foreign to their sense of who they are as a complete person. In some cases, this can contribute to sexual difficulties. When one's sense of self does not allow for one's sexuality to be well-integrated into all of the other aspects of self that are highly valued, sex can be highly anxiety-provoking.

In these cases, people choose to do one of two things. They can try to avoid sex in order to escape the insecurities and anxieties it elicits. This can lead to a vicious cycle in which anxiety contributes to a negative sexual experience, which in turn contributes to increased anxiety around sex.

Alternatively, some people might come to overly rely on sex as a way of eliminating their feelings of being unattractive or unloved. If this motivation becomes the main driving force of sex, it can compromise attunement with one's partner and even be a factor in turning to pornography and promiscuity. In other words, one's motivation for wanting sex becomes less about connecting with the other person than about enhancing one's sense of their own desirability.

*Discussion question for the audience: How might ideas that we developed about sex and sexuality in childhood impact on our sexual experiences as adults?*

Our conscious and non-conscious attitudes about sexuality can interfere with sexual intimacy. These attitudes might be called organizing psychological principles. These principles might stem from attitudes and messages that we internalize from family members, friends, or our surrounding culture. For example, some might view sexuality as dirty or dangerous, as something that men enjoy and women tolerate, or as a way for women to manipulate men. Others might view sexuality as a way to express love and to feel close. These attitudes may be helpful or harmful when it comes to enjoying sex and creating intimacy.

In addition to forming our organizing principles about sexuality, we also develop knowledge about touch from the time we are young children. With regard to sexuality, this knowledge might include how close to get, how restrained or unrestrained to be in sexual intimacy, or how to recognize or communicate one's sensual and sexual needs and preferences.

People not only have different ideas about touching, but also about how to talk about it. For example, some might be reluctant to guide their partners about how to touch them. Others might react defensively to feedback about their touch. The idea that touch can be discussed in an open and non-critical way might be new for some.

*Discussion question for the audience: What are some of the challenges that can arise when partners have different levels of desire, or ways of expressing it?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then, discuss the fact that it is normal for sex to sometimes be more satisfying for one partner than for the other. This can be anxiety-provoking for couples if they expect that they should always be equally desirous and satisfied, and are worried that if they're not, something is wrong. Sometimes, especially in middle age, sexuality changes and some sexual encounters will not be "successful." Couples benefit from maintaining a sense of lightness and humor when this happens and remembering that, like everything else in life, sex won't always be perfect. What is important is not to let such incidents create anxiety and prevent couples from continuing to be sexual with each other.

There can also be differences between partners when it comes to levels of sex drive. When that happens, the partner with low desire might feel like they're being chased or pressured. They might also feel like their partner is seeking sex for pure physical gratification rather than out of a desire to connect with them. The partner with the greater desire, for their part, might feel rejected and undesirable.

Unless this pattern is addressed, it can continue and become increasingly frustrating and hurtful for both parties. The path toward a solution is for both partners to try to understand each other's experience. For example, the partner with greater desire can say, "I feel undesirable because you haven't wanted to have sex with me in so long that it feels like you're not attracted to me. I feel lost; I feel lonely..." This way of expressing one's experience and the more vulnerable feelings that it gives rise to is much more constructive for the relationship than expressing anger and criticism, for example, by saying "You never want to have sex with me."

A separate, or possibly related, challenge is when one partner pursues the other in a way that the pursued partner does not find arousing. These hurts often go unspoken or discussed only in anger. It is easier to express anger and frustration than to express more vulnerable feelings that might lie underneath the anger.

Realistically, one, or possibly both, partners might not feel aroused at a time that is opportune for sex. Sometimes the decision to have sex might precede arousal rather than the other way around, at least for one partner, but nevertheless result in “responsive arousal.” One of the contrasts between mature relationships and immature relationships is that in mature relationships, couples might need to plan for sex by discussing it, planning for a time when they will be available and uninterrupted, and creating the conditions for it to happen. The busy schedules of family and work life are not usually conducive to spontaneity.

(If desired, the facilitator can offer the following example: If one partner is a night owl and the other is an early bird, they might never overlap in terms of being available for sex in the bedroom. In such a case, it is important to let go of the expectations that sex will simply happen spontaneously, and to embrace the need to plan for it accordingly.) This pattern is different from the pattern characteristic of early relationships or sexuality in the young years, which typically manifests as a spontaneous mutual surge of desire. This brings us to some of the changes of midlife and how they impact a couple’s sex life.

## Factors Affecting Couples during Midlife

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What are some of the developmental changes that occur during midlife for couples?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Make sure to mention (if the audience does not): loss of parents to illness or death, physical changes, changing relationships with maturing children, improved ability to consider multiple perspectives simultaneously, and the recognition that our busiest childrearing and career years are behind us while the years ahead of us are numbered. Midlife brings with it the challenge of needing to recognize that “This is what’s left,” and needing to figure out what to do with it.

## Causes of Sexual Difficulties in Midlife

---

*Discussion question for the audience: In midlife, what changes might cause or influence sexual difficulties?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Make sure to mention (if the audience does not): physiological factors like aging (especially for males), medications, sleep deprivation, alcohol and drugs, hormonal problems, and illnesses; environmental factors like increased drains on

time and other factors not necessarily specific to midlife, for example, difficulty attending to others' cues because of ADD, differing sleep cycles, a history of previous relationship injuries where one partner felt put down or mistreated, shame with regard to one's body (particularly in light of the physical changes of midlife), shame with regard to one's sexual prowess (particularly for males, which can perpetuate a vicious cycle of anxiety leading to poor performance leading to increased anxiety), or even sharing a bed with the dog.

If desired, the facilitator can share the following anecdote: One couple in marital therapy had not been physically affectionate in about six years. The therapist was working with them to discuss this openly and slowly create conditions to facilitate their reconnecting sexually. When the couple discussed some of the obstacles to their sexual relationship, they reported that there was an actual hill in the middle of their mattress that had been created because they had each slept exclusively on their own sides for so many years. They also reported that their dog slept in the middle. Although this particular couple could afford a new mattress, they had not chosen to buy one. This couple provides us with an example of the fact that the longer a problem continues, the more difficult it is to address it proactively without assistance. With this couple, the therapist's goal was to facilitate an intimate conversation between them that would help bring them closer to regaining their sexual relationship.

## Common Sexual Complaints in Midlife

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What do you suppose are some of the common sexual complaints for couples?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Make sure to mention, if the audience does not:

- "I'm so tired of having to initiate, but if I didn't, we'd never have sex."
- "He/she's so mean to me all day, and then he/she expects me to jump into bed with him/her at night."
- "He/she is too tentative/rough/fast/slow/talkative."

Some couples in midlife suffer from what's called an "asexual marriage." This may be defined rather arbitrarily as a couple having sex fewer than ten times per year. Asexual marriages might develop because of infidelity (virtual or real) or because of inhibited sexual desire.

Statistically, in the United States, one in three women and one in seven men report an asexual marriage. Overall, 20% of U.S. marriages are considered asexual. The longer an asexual marriage is allowed to continue, the more problematic it becomes and the more difficult it is to change it. As noted earlier, dissatisfaction with one's sex life contributes about 50-70% to marital dissatisfaction and can therefore be a real threat to the marriage's viability.

# Sexual Challenges for Children of Survivors

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What unique issues might a child of survivors face that could impact their sexual relationships?*

Elicit responses from the audience. Then, discuss the fact that children of survivors often feel a strong, unexplained sense of guilt when they are enjoying themselves. Being aware of how much their parents have suffered and the pain that their parents felt can make it feel disloyal to be carefree and completely happy.

At the Passover Seder, some say we spill off a little of our wine in order to limit our experience of joy as an acknowledgement of our enemies' suffering. Many children of survivors have difficulty rejoicing fully when they know how their own parents have suffered and may continue to suffer in the present. Feelings of joy tend to be accompanied by feelings of guilt.

These feelings can interfere with the creation of a rewarding sexual relationship. Sexuality is a way of expressing connection and feeling as one with somebody else in a joyful way. This requires the ability to be fully present, available, and intimate.

Then, discuss the fact that we all bring our own templates to marriage. Each of us is a product of how we experienced our environment when we were growing up. As a result, each of us has a different way of relating in intimate relationships. These are automatic patterns.

*Discussion question for the audience: What might be an example of a template that a child of survivors might bring from childhood that could impact their intimate relationships?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Offer the following examples: if we felt lonely in our home, we might bring a template to our relationships whereby we always feel lonely. If being close to people resulted in being hurt, and no one cared to know what we really felt inside, that can be a template that we bring into our relationships that results in closed-off behavior and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Second Generation members often have memories of having experienced, at least to some extent, their parents' lack of attunement and emotional availability due to the parents' post-traumatic residues.

Because many survivor parents tended to either lack attunement with their children, to emotionally overreact to various triggers, and/or to respond with emotional detachment at important moments in their children's lives, some children of survivors as adults feel exquisitely sensitive to feeling misunderstood or not cared about, and hypersensitive to perceived slights.

Some children of survivors might have adapted early on to their parents' lack of attunement by denying their need for it. If we didn't receive something growing up, then we have some very



powerful ways of defending ourselves so as to prevent experiencing the pain of longing for what we're missing. We find a variety of ways to shut down our emotional needs, telling ourselves, "I don't need it; I can do without it."

Conversely, some children of survivors might have become too clingy because they learned that that this behavior could elicit emotional availability from non-parental figures.

Many children of survivors experienced what is called failed intersubjectivity, or a feeling that they could not be understood by their parents and could not share things with their parents. Therefore, children of survivors might carry within them the strong belief that the other person in a relationship will never understand them, that what they themselves feel doesn't matter, and/or that when their intimate partner is upset, the partner will focus on their own needs at the expense of those of the Second Generation member.

Recognizing our templates and what we bring to the here and now helps us change our responses. As we change the way we relate to others, our template changes as well.

*Discussion question for the audience: What are the advantages and disadvantages of trying to create a life that is the opposite of one's childhood?*

Elicit responses from the audience. Share with the audience that some people try to change their templates by deciding to be the opposite of whatever they observed or experienced growing up, and expecting the same of their spouse. This can result in a fantasy or an over-idealized template, which can create difficulties.

## Challenges of Discussing Sexual Difficulties

---

*Discussion question for the audience: Why do you think it is difficult for couples to talk openly and honestly about their sexual problems?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then, explain that many people are not aware that sex needs to or can be discussed, which can make the possibility of initiating a conversation about it anxiety-provoking. Note that many couples have the misconception that sex should be spontaneous and natural in every case. Unlike newer couples, though, long-term couples need to accept the fact that the desire for sex may not conveniently arise for both parties at a conducive time, and that there might be a need to discuss and plan for it.

# Importance of Addressing Sexual Difficulties

---

*Discussion question for the audience: Why is it important to discuss sexual difficulties?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then, note the following:

- Sexual difficulties between partners can be very hurtful and damaging not only to the relationship, but to each individual's sense of self.
- In midlife, with the children grown, one's spouse is one's most important source of support. Intimacy enhances this support, both at the time and in later life.
- Talking about difficult things is important. Only an open conversation can get us to where we want to go, i.e., to a sex life that continues to be satisfying, connecting, affirming, reassuring, and a buffer against some of the less desirable changes of aging.
- A frank conversation might include questions such as, "What do I deeply feel about sex?", "What am I longing for?", "What hurts me?"
- With regard to the latter question, it is important that it not be expressed as an angry criticism but rather as a positive and constructive suggestion for building connection. During the conversation, partners are responsible for expressing themselves in a way that will penetrate and to refrain from hurting the partner or evoking defensiveness.

## Ways to Address Sexual Difficulties

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What can a couple do to try to resolve their sexual difficulties?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that although this requires some effort, positive communication is a key part of addressing sexual difficulties. When we feel upset, there is a tendency to blame and accuse the other person of not caring. This can sometimes happen in the sexual arena. For example, one woman in her mid-thirties returned home after a two-week absence for her father's funeral in Israel. She arrived in the early morning hours and joined her husband in bed, feeling sad and wanting him to comfort her. He immediately became sexual with her, which was not the response for which she had been hoping.

From the husband's perspective, this was an expression of his desire to reconnect with her. But from the wife's perspective, she felt like she was being used to relieve his sexual tension after two weeks of deprivation. She felt angry and responded accordingly. The anger she felt masked the more vulnerable feelings underneath, i.e., a desire to feel cared for, to feel close to him, and to feel that he was interested in her and concerned about her feelings.

When we feel hurt, we tend to express ourselves with angry, blaming comments rather than saying what we really yearn for and want from the other person. However, if we express ourselves in a more honest, vulnerable way, there is a better chance of receiving a more

vulnerable response from the other person which will be more satisfying and result in a positive interaction and outcome. In contrast, if we express ourselves in an angry, blaming way, the other person is more likely to respond in kind.

In our earlier example, the husband might respond to his wife's critique with anger and defensiveness. "What do you mean, I don't care about you? I just watched the kids for two whole weeks!" Alternatively, he might apologize and say, "I missed you so much, and I wanted to show you that I'm here for you. I was trying to connect with you." The latter response would be more likely to elicit empathy and understanding from the wife. In this way, either partner has the potential to contribute more thoughtfully to the interaction.

*Discussion question for the audience: How might education benefit a couple in midlife struggling with sexual difficulties?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that education is also a key component of addressing sexual difficulties. It is never too late to benefit from education, coaching, or specific suggestions about sexual behavior. In midlife in particular, it can be very helpful to get specific education since our sexual behavior changes at around age 50 for physiological and hormonal reasons. Lack of education can lead to unrealistic expectations and disappointment, so addressing gaps in people's sexual knowledge is important.

*Discussion question for the audience: How might increasing your awareness improve your sex life?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that mindfulness about sex can pave the way toward improving your sex life. Paying attention to what you and your partner are both thinking, feeling, and saying to yourself before, during, and after a sexual encounter can be enlightening. If anxiety is present for one or both partners, for example, then becoming aware of it is helpful. Noticing the anxiety allows you to remind yourself that sex isn't about performance, but about enjoying the closeness and the experience.

## Unique Opportunities for Children of Survivors at Midlife

---

*Discussion question for the audience: What midlife changes might help a person improve their relationships?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that research shows that different characteristics become more prominent at different stages of life. Midlife brings with it a greater capacity for seeing multiple truths at the same time, as opposed to the black and white thinking that is often typical of younger people.

Another quality that improves with age, especially when there is intentional focus, is the capacity for self-regulation. As we get older, our ability to examine our own responses improves. We get better at noticing that many of our responses are automatic reactions to external triggers.

Rather than allowing these to be our only responses, we can ask ourselves why we felt so bad, or exploded, in a particular situation. We can recognize the fact that we were triggered and that we responded disproportionately to the realities of the situation.

*Discussion question for the audience: Is it possible to change longstanding habits in midlife?*

Elicit answers from the audience. Then note that one of the exceptional qualities of our brain is its ability to rewire itself. Research has demonstrated that when we make the intentional choice to respond differently in a situation, both structural and functional elements of our brain change demonstrably, even in later life.

As we continue to respond in improved ways, the new connections become stronger and the old connections weaker. Any time we do something differently on a regular basis, we build new connections in our brain that make it easier to move away from problematic patterns. Making this happen, though, requires conscious attention.

Children of survivors are at a stage of life where they can mobilize their maturity, their life experience, their wisdom, and their improved capacities in order to examine some of their typical ways of doing things. In becoming more mindful and making conscious choices, they can grasp the joyful possibilities of connection that may have remained unrealized until now.

In midlife, we are still young enough to change things and improve the rest of our lives. We are strong enough, wise enough, and mature enough to examine things from a different perspective if we choose to do so. We no longer need to be bound by habits created in our youth. Survivor parents and their legacy were a tremendous presence for Second Generation members. In some cases, this reality prevented people from being fully present in their own relationships. For some individuals, the extreme tendency to put others' needs, particularly their parents' needs, ahead of their own, interfered with their ability to focus on their own lives, happiness, and intimacy. As the years go by and children of survivors mature, they can become more focused on their own lives and relationships and on trying to improve them.

## Wrap-up

---

The facilitator can wrap up the session by reviewing the session's objectives and what was discussed -- the function that sexuality serves in the lives of couples; common sexual challenges and complaints; some of the midlife changes that can impact a couple's sex life; sexual challenges and complaints in midlife; sexual challenges for children of survivors; reasons that addressing sexual challenges can be difficult; the importance of addressing sexual

challenges directly despite discomfort; some positive ways to address sexual challenges; and unique midlife opportunities for improving relationships.

The facilitator can then ask the audience to name particular insights that stood out for them. If time allows, the facilitator can ask the audience if they have any further questions or if anything was unclear.

Finally, the facilitator can distribute the handout with resources for further learning and announce the date and topic of the next meeting.

# Handout 1: Session Outline

---

- The function that sexuality serves in the lives of couples
- Common sexual challenges and complaints
- Some of the midlife changes that can impact a couple's sex life
- Sexual challenges and complaints in midlife
- Sexual challenges for children of survivors specifically
- Reasons why addressing sexual challenges can be difficult
- The importance of addressing sexual challenges directly, despite discomfort
- Some positive ways to address sexual challenges
- Unique midlife opportunities for improving relationships

# Handout 2: Resources for Further Learning

---

## Books:

- Davis-Weiner, M. (2008). *The sex starved wife: What to do when he's lost desire*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

## Films:

- *Hope Springs* (2012). A film with Meryl Streep described here: <http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/hopesprings/>. The film is available for rent or purchase on Amazon Video.

## Online Resources:

- Waldinger, R. (2016, January 25). What makes a good life? [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KkKuTCFvzl>.
- Perel, E. (2013, February 14). The secret to desire in a long-term relationship [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sa0RUmGTCYY>.
- Katehakis, A. (2017, March 14). Grown-up sex [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.soundstrue.com/store/weeklywisdom?page=single&category=IATE&episode=12033>.
- Felsen, I. (2017, May 6). Summary of the ninth meeting of the discussion group for children of Holocaust survivors: Intimacy in couples [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2017/05/06/summary-of-the-ninth-meeting-of-the-discussion-group-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-intimacy-in-couples/>

# Session 10

---

## **Second Generation Family Caregivers Group: Termination Session**

### **The Session in Perspective**

The session is intended to serve as the final session of the Second Generation Family Caregivers Group. The facilitator will review participants' goals in attending the group. The facilitator will then elicit personal reactions from group members about their experience participating in the group. The facilitator will encourage participants to discuss their feelings as the group ends, and to share their feedback about the group. Options for follow-up will be reviewed for those who are interested.

### **Session Objectives**

During the session, participants will discuss:

- Their original goals and expectations in attending the group
- How they experienced their participation in the group
- Topics discussed that were particularly meaningful or helpful
- Topics that they would have liked to explore at greater length in the group
- Feelings as the group ends
- Other feedback for the facilitator to inform future groups
- Desire and options for follow-up after the group ends

### **Session Preparation**

#### *Materials:*

The brief resource list at the end of this manual provides information for participants who would like to listen to Dr. Felsen's original lectures on which this manual is based, and/or read summaries of the lectures.

If the facilitator wishes and feels it is appropriate, they can prepare and distribute a contact list for group participants who would like to keep in touch. Additionally, the facilitator may choose to provide refreshments and/or inexpensive mementos to group participants to mark the occasion.

#### *Facilitator Preparation:*

In addition to reading the suggested facilitator guidelines for this session, the facilitator is encouraged to review the goals participants expressed in their first meeting, if they documented them at the time.



# Reflection Questions

---

Greet members and remind them that this is the final session. Since the content for this group will mostly be provided by the participants, a printed outline might not be necessary. Instead, the facilitator can provide an oral synopsis of the topics that will be discussed in the meeting.

*Discussion question for the audience: Do you remember our first session when I asked you what brings you to this group? Let's review some of your reasons for attending the group.*

Go around the room and encourage participants to state, in 1-2 sentences, their original reasons for attending the group. If a participant begins to share too much detail, politely but firmly interrupt them and remind them that in the interest of time, their response needs to be brief and limited to 1-2 sentences about what they wanted to see addressed in the group.

*Discussion question for the audience: What was participating in this group like for you?*

Here, the facilitator is encouraged to take the time to listen to participants' individual responses and reflect their experiences back to them, while remaining mindful of time constraints and the need to allow each group member to respond.

*Discussion question for the audience: Which topics or insights were particularly meaningful for you?*

Here too, the facilitator is encouraged to listen to participants' responses and reflect back to them. The facilitator might also find it useful to take note of topics that were particularly meaningful to larger numbers of participants. This is helpful feedback that can be incorporated into planning future groups.

*Discussion question for the audience: Which topics would you have liked to explore further in the group?*

The facilitator is advised to note topics that are of greater interest to participants and to take this into account when planning future groups. If time allows and if the facilitator feels sufficiently knowledgeable and comfortable, the facilitator may choose to address some of the topics raised by participants.

*Discussion question for the audience: How are you feeling as our group ends?*

Either before or after participants respond, the facilitator can share something positive about their experience facilitating the group, getting to know the participants, or the fact that the facilitator will remember participants after the group ends.

*Discussion question for the audience: Would anyone like to share any additional feedback about the group that could be helpful for future participants?*

The facilitator can inform participants that they can share their feedback privately if they prefer.

## Follow-up after Group

---

It is common for group participants to express a desire to continue the group even after the planned termination session. Participants often appreciate the social support and learning they have received and feel a wish for this experience to continue.

While it is often unrealistic or unnecessary for the facilitators to continue leading the group, the facilitators can help the participants identify ways they can have their needs met in the future. Facilitators can share the resource list below, which provides information for accessing audio recordings of Dr. Felsen's original ten lectures, on which this manual was based, summaries of the lectures, and Dr. Felsen's blog posts about the meetings.

Some group members may wish to exchange telephone numbers or addresses to keep in touch after the group ends. Some may even decide to meet for continued exchange of support and information without a designated facilitator. If the facilitator knows of any helpful or relevant local resources to share with participants, the facilitator is encouraged to do so.

# Handout 1 – Resource List for Continued Education

---

Audio recordings of Dr. Felsen's ten original lectures, which served as the basis for this manual, are available in Dropbox at:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/b5pg2q3owl6hfyb/AAAMbWnzPPXJJQ05sxP51vika?dl=0>

Participants can also read the compilation of Dr. Felsen's blog posts about the original meetings at:

<https://iritfelsen.wordpress.com/2017/10/16/summaries-of-lecture-series-for-children-of-holocaust-survivors-our-parents-ourselves-our-changing-lives/>