

# THE EFFECT OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FAMILY HISTORY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF GENERATIONS

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**Rezumat:** În articolul de față eu voi încerca să demonstrez de ce este importantă cunoașterea istoricului familiei pe mai multe generații, cum aceasta poate ajuta generația tânără, ce poate însemna pentru generația mijlocie și cu ce poate contribui pentru generația bunicilor. Pentru orice individ poate fi important să afle despre locul de naștere al strămoșilor, povestea vieții acestora, obiceiurile lor și capacitatea lor de a face față dificultăților vieții, despre eșecurile, bolile și circumstanțele în care ei au murit. Mai toate datele pot fi aflate de la generațiile anterioare, ceea ce poate întări identitățile și strategiile de viață ale copiilor și nepoților lor, dacă ei vor intra în posesia acestor cunoștințe. Cunoștințele despre părinți și bunici pot la ajuta generația tânără la a se auto-cunoaște, la formarea identității personale, la îndrumarea carierei, ba chiar și la alegerea viitoarelor relații. Deși în zilele noastre e cam dată uitării, datorită de a forma o punte între bunici și nepoți era în sarcina bunicilor. Ei sunt capabili să transmită toate cunoștințele pe care le posedă, deoarece ei dețin cele mai multe informații despre istoria familiei. Atunci când ei împărtășesc aceste povești cu nepoții, bunicii adaugă din experiența lor de viață și din cunoștințele despre istoria trăită, îmbogățind și personalizând trecutul. Acest tip de activitate poate deveni o sarcină re-descoperită pentru bunici, ceea ce ar putea aduce membrii familiilor atomizate din zilele noastre, mai aproape unul de altul, iar asta i-ar face pe bunici persoane importante, de referință pentru generația tânără.

**Cuvinte cheie:** familia împărțită pe generații, auto-cunoașterea, identitatea, interacțiunea în cadrul familiei, comunicarea.

**Abstract:** In my article I will demonstrate why knowledge of family history is important for the different generations of a family, how it can help younger members, what it could mean to the middle generation, and what it could provide for the grandparental generation. It may be very important for an individual to learn about the birthplace, life story, habits,

*coping strategies, life difficulties, failures, illnesses and circumstances of death of their ascendants. Almost all information could be in possession of the older generations, which can strengthen the identity and life strategies of their children and grandchildren if they transfer this knowledge to them. Knowledge about their ascendants could help younger generations in self-knowledge, forming their identities, career and relationship choices as well. Although nowadays it is quite overshadowed, the task of forming a bridge between the great-grandparents and their grandchildren used to be a task for the grandparents. They have the opportunity to pass over all the knowledge only they possess, since they are the ones who have the most information on their family history. While telling these stories, they can add their own life experiences and historical knowledge making the past and the life of ancestors richer and more personal for the grandchildren. This activity could become a re-discovered task for the grandparents, which could bring the "atomised" families of nowadays, family members closer together, while grandparents could become important - referential - persons for the younger generations.*

**Keywords:** *family's generations, self-knowledge, identity, intra-family interaction, communication.*

### **SELF -DETERMINATION, ADULTHOOD**

*„Who am I?“* – Life's big question in becoming an adult. Lot of people search for the answer their whole lives, but everyone faces it at least through adolescence. To grow up we need to develop our *gender, - family, -communal, -national, -worldview and professional - identities*. This is a long progress which begins at the moment of birth and continues for at least until 25 years. In modern societies, this usually takes at least 30 years because of lengthened learning and welfare services. To really consider someone an adult, we need the following things: *selfknowledge, decisiveness, commitment and the ability to give*. Self-knowledge is an ability formed through others (family, friends, classmates, sport team members etc.), they hold a mirror to the individual, where they can see themselves from several different aspects. Through these relationships, a child can communicate his or her notions, views, wishes, ideas, which then can be changed or polished by the reflections of others. These relationships are the ground for making or postponing decisions, taking or denying responsibility for actions. The ability or lack of commitment also rises from these early relationships. Putting others' needs in front of ours is also an adult behavior, which can be influenced by the impulses one receives as a child, especially from the family. This ability is highly affected by the number of siblings, because this behavioral pattern is especially important between equal partners, which can be transferred to later (romantic) relationships as well.

### **FEATURES OF FAMILY HISTORY**

*A family is a one fold and unrepeatable configuration.*

Everyone knows this, but we rarely think about it. However, knowing this itself can strengthen our identity. The feeling of togetherness in family members *carrying genetics of several generations and history of several centuries in the unconscious* can be reinforced by similar habits, shared memories of ascendants, or time spent together in childhood. There are always some *secrets, positive and negative stories or persons* in a family, of which legends are about. Hearing about these is important and interesting for the youngest generations, *especially for family members.*

### **HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE BENEFIT FROM IT?**

Knowing about family history might help young people *to better understand their own feelings and behavior, most importantly during adolescence when emotions can be the most extreme.* It can also help them *to understand the motivations and actions of parents or grandparents, for example why their grandparents who went through a great trauma (II . World War) might be worried about them traveling to highrisk countries.*

Better knowledge of family stories can provide them with character descriptions, which *can become examples or counterexamples* on how to behave. In each situation, the different behaviors of family members can provide them with *several options to solve the same problem.* E.g. what the great-grandmother did to survive the famine after the war, or how the great-grandfather fought for survival.

Knowledge of family history can also play a role in living a full life, it can help us in career or relationship choices. That is, if young people learn about the lives of close and distant relatives, it might help understand why they feel drawn to certain lifestyles or career options while others do not interest them. E.g. an adolescent boy only feels comfortable in nature, he would rather spend his days roaming the forest than do anything else. He learns that among his ascendants there were foresters and hunters for several generations. His parents would guide him towards popular professions (finance, economy, IT ), but he still chooses the forest. Family-knowledge helps us *understand and handle conflicts of the family,* since from the stories the personalities of relatives can unfold. Which family member was a “*wildling*”, who had a quiet, retractive personality, were there any suicides in the family? etc. Reminiscing of old times and persons, time spent talking about *these can deepen family relationships, and provide support throughout out our whole lives.*

### **GRAND PARENTS IN KEY-POSITIONS**

Grandparents (or great-grandparents, if still alive) are the ones who have *knowledge of a longer interval of time in family and national history, they have more precise information about relatives who are not with us anymore.* Older people

can add their own life experiences to the family stories, filtered through their own lenses, drawing consequences from each life-story, with each story providing a new chapter for the family legends. *Since they are already in the second half of their lives, they can conclude their own and the ascendants' life-stories, adding the "moral of the story" as well.* These can contain several negative experiences as well, but young people, driven by their healthy instincts and curiosity can still handle these stories well. Through grandparents, *at least 2 other generations can be brought closer to their grandchildren,* which can lead back to the past at least 200 years.

#### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE GRAND PARENTS?**

The grandparent, who carries these stories, can *talk about a lot of things only he or she knows about.* While telling these stories, the fates, life-experiences and conclusions are collected, through which the *grandparent can pass on knowledge and experience.* The interest of their grandchildren gives the *feeling of importance* for the grandparents, since they provide a *bridge between past and present.* Spending time with grandchildren gives them the *opportunity of a more balanced, safer aging* by reducing the risk of isolation and depressive mood.

#### **WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR THE PARENTS?**

Parental generations are *"in the middle"*, carrying a doubled weight: they have to raise their children and take care of their aging parents. All the while they have to prove themselves at their jobs as well, therefore they do not have much time or energy left for story-telling and reminiscing. The time spent with family stories by grandparents and children can *provide an opportunity for the parents as well to review and re-live the stories of generations.* The *opportunity to develop their real personalities* is provided by the family for the middle-generation as well, the knowledge of what they had inherited from their ascendants is important for them as well. The time these three generations spend together this way enables them *to experience the feeling of acceptance.* Therefore, *the identities of every generation get stronger and the feeling of stability can grow.*

#### **ENHANCING COOPERATION BETWEEN GENERATIONS – A SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE**

*In times of nowadays' atomized families, connections between grandparents and grandchildren have to be strengthened artificially, through organized programs as well.* Our initiative served this purpose: *grandparents and grandchildren creating a family tree together, organized by the Alliance for Mental Health of Families.* A tender provided us the opportunity to develop this program, in which – on a given Saturday, in the school or community center of the given town – the grandparents and grandchildren attended a short introductory lecture, then with the help of a computer

program began to build their family trees. While filling all required data, a new type of communication develops between grandparents and their grandchildren, where everyone is competent in some way; grandparents have the knowledge and information about ascendants, while children handle the computers better. At each of the 6 locations we experienced a unanimous enthusiasm from the participants, they are going to recommend it to their relatives and friends as well.

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