

A TikTok A Day Keeps the Trauma Away with Macy Dame

In the social climate of a global shutdown, the possibility of nuclear destruction at any moment, and the ordinary struggles that accompany teenage life, our youngest American generation has developed a rather unique manner of coping with traumatic events. Any member of Generation Z, and most Millennials, will affirm that they are sick and tired of living through major historical events. Feelings of anxiety and isolation are to be expected in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic or multiple government threats of nuclear war. But an unexpected effect of such events has begun to creep into popular culture of teenagers and young adults: public expression of trauma. The tabu connotations surrounding therapy and mental health struggles are beginning to crumble, with the acceptance of positive mental health rising. No longer is trauma a closeted, shameful experience. It is now as mainstream as TikToks or Disney movies, and is expressed through items as innocent as Squishmallows.

An unfortunate aspect of trauma lies within the truth of its ability to affect everyone worldwide. History offers the lens into the heart of this matter as we glance into the horrific events which have shaken mankind. The World Wars, Holocaust, the Great Depression, and the terrorist attacks of September 11th demonstrate only a few events which have altered active history. While these events are memorable and more recognizable, there are an equal number of globally traumatizing events which are more subtle. The most recent example being the Covid-19 pandemic. After this worldwide shutdown, modern society has experienced a vast shift and has come to terms with the knowledge that nothing will ever quite be the same. In essence, every person alive is now sharing the traumatic experience of a global pandemic. We are recovering from the shock of being unable to attend school, work, or socialize. The meaning behind this example is the truth that everyone is susceptible to trauma, several people may share traumatic

experiences, and that it is natural to cope with our trauma. The content that follows is based on this truth, and is an exploration of the expression of trauma that younger generations are beginning to create.

Gaining popularity in 2018, the famed TikTok app features short videos which are shared across the globe. While several TikToks display dances or lighthearted stories, some members have begun to follow a “trauma-celebration trend”(Williams). These TikToks involve people sharing their stories of traumatic events, and has become an expression of trauma amongst the younger generations. Such videos might display teenagers or young adults speaking of a memory when they were assaulted, abused, or faced a challenging personal obstacle. More viral TikToks which display trauma sharing often offer groups of friends that have decided to explain their experiences together. Rather than leaving painful memories in the past, or closeting them in shame, trauma is openly expressed in a phone app. Whilst previous generation were silent in regard to mental health struggles, or subtly expressed them through film or graphic novels, the uniqueness of its now open dialogue cannot be dismissed.

And the TikTok community has risen to support these videos, and the more important aspect of these trauma sharing TikToks, are their results. An outpouring of positive reception has followed the people that have spoken out about their traumatic experiences. With talk of mental health disorders out in the open, members of the TikTok community are able to creatively and healthily express themselves. While younger generations may be criticized for their amount of screen time, there is the simple truth that this aspect of social media is working. Several members of TikTok have not only voiced support for trauma TikToks, but they have decided to “join in on the trend to help show others that they aren't alone in their trauma”(Wilson).

Proponents of this new movement hold firm to the belief that we, as people, are stronger together. After experiencing the isolation and division of the Covid-19 pandemic, it should be no surprise that this trend is on the rise. While we were physically isolated, social media apps like TikTok were a means of uniting people. It is natural that people would turn to ways that they are able to feel connected to others, even though that connection may occur through a screen. The global traumatic scar of the pandemic and its shutdown increased the use of apps like TikTok for more serious purposes. Because there was no means of talking about the anger, frustrations, and struggles of isolation, teenagers and young adults began expressing these emotions and traumas in TikToks. People were not only able to connect with others, but were able to take strength, hope, and inspiration from these videos. It should not strike us as unexpected that trauma celebrating TikToks are existing and creating a positive impact. It is simply the expression of trauma from a generation that did not know of any other way to express it.

Not so coincidentally, trauma expression is also becoming more mainstream in the realm of professional film. The Disney film company, for example, has recently opted to feature more films that explore the concept of trauma. Movies such as *Encanto*, *Turning Red*, and *Coco* all present plotlines with “familial generational trauma as the main conflict”(Delbel). Not only has an emphasis on the open discussion of trauma gained popularity in amateur TikTok videos, but in professional film companies that target children as an audience. The film *Coco*, for instance, follows the story of a young boy with a passion for music. Unfortunately, this love of music is suppressed by an ongoing family tradition which dictates that music and singing of any kind is forbidden. *Coco* reveals the impact which generational trauma can create, and affirms that even children are susceptible to secondhand trauma. Luckily, the family of the movie is able to move forward together, and grows to understand one another’s perspectives and traumatic experiences.

While a token of a happy ending, this eventual familial understanding emphasizes the importance of open discussion of trauma. Because the musical suppression began with a traumatic family event, it was necessary for members of the family to recognize and grow to accept this experience. It cannot be overlooked that the child is not simply admonished, but is accepted when his family processes and overcomes this generational trauma together.

Film companies like Disney recognize that these heavy topics are necessary to teach our children. As per the trauma TikToks, the inclusion of generational trauma in films reinforces the theme that no one is alone in their traumatic experiences. This motif is the very reason that films like *Coco* were created: because it happened to the creators. The animators and production team that inspired movies exploring generational trauma specifically chose this realm as a means of expressing their own traumatic experiences. These creators personally understood the effects of trauma that present themselves in parents, children, and the family's entire dynamic. Expressing personal trauma promotes the ideals that trauma has a difficult and lasting impact, and that humans are able to take strength from one another. These rising themes of traumatic expression in children's films illustrates the truth of its growing normalization in society.

Just as TikToks provide open dialogue for trauma discussions in teenagers and young adults, Disney is opening dialogue for traumatic expressions in children. However, this dialogue is meant to be shared amongst the whole family. While primarily children's films, Disney's latest additions have "gained strong followings of teenagers and adults"(Delbel) that take value in the inclusion of themes like trauma. Because *Coco* resolved in the family overcoming familial trauma together, an encouragement for self-reflection as adults is fostered. New Disney films present the truth that adults make mistakes, and that children sometimes live with the consequences of those mistakes. Movies like *Coco* encourages children and adults alike to

discuss generational trauma. They offer the perspective that children do not always wish to be rebellious, but are experiencing second or thirdhand trauma instilled through the parents. Essentially, children's films portraying trauma advocate the overcoming of trauma through communication, self-realization, and open dialogue.

Another expression and strong link to trauma that most anyone can identify with, are items that we possess. Classically, things have been able to provide humans with strong emotional ties and feelings of comfort. Objects that have held a significant and personal meaning are able to "transmit meaning that originates in humans"(Bernstein). While a necklace or book may be insignificant or meaningless on its own, it is us humans that bestow a special power onto objects. For instance, the graphic novel *Maus* offers a Postmodern expression of trauma detailed by a Holocaust survivor and his son. Survivor Vladek Spiegelman describes stowing away precious items in the chimney of a house and returning after his time in Auschwitz to retrieve these things. However, a furthering of this practice is illustrated through acts of hoarding and a refusal to throw out broken items. And, similarly to the themes highlighted in the film *Coco*, the concept of secondhand generational trauma is expressed. While Vladek is the survivor of the Holocaust, his son Art was the witness to the trauma responses of hoarding and emotional distress. Much like *Coco*, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* explores the effects which generational trauma produces. In essence, these works epitomize the role trauma plays on the family, rather than simply the individual, and the necessity for relief and coping.

These instances of Vladek's hoarding and generational trauma may sound familiar to those that have a connection to someone that has survived the American Great Depression. While those who survived the Great Depression experienced very different circumstances than Holocaust survivors, these people have displayed a similar expression of trauma. Thus, there are

the continued motifs that the impacts of trauma are universal, and the evidence that human reactions towards trauma are universal. While TikTok is only one example of an expression of trauma, the importance of things is perhaps an older expression. The link between humans and items is a notion that is not exactly new. Medieval times, of course, created the tie between objects and wealth. This concept still lives on as several people wish to attain material wealth, and view this as a large achievement. However, the sentimental value of things are equally as powerful of a notion. Humans form strong emotional ties with inanimate items through the challenges and memories that are experienced with these things. The things Vladek Spiegelman hid in the chimney held such an important value because they were able to provide him with the memories of what he had lost. Similarly, Great Depression survivors tend to hoard items because these things remind them of what life was like when they had little. In this manner, the items that people value are able to express past traumas that they have endured. In other words, what people hold on to offers a glimpse into what they have experienced.

While the Holocaust and Great Depression are more traditional examples of the value of items, a modern illustration of this concept is the popularity of Squishmallows. These stuffed animals come in a variety of shapes, colors, sizes, and range from fictional animals to Starbucks drinks. Created in 2003, over one thousand of these collectible Squishmallow characters have been released. A unique element of Squishmallows, however, is the popularity these stuffed animals hold with adults. Stuffed toys are generally regarded as childish, and are reserved more for younger children. But Squishmallows are not only popular with children, but are collected and appreciated by people of all ages. They may be regarded as simply another fad or another stuffed toy by some, but many have spoken out in favor of Squishmallows. These Squishmallow lovers claim that they are not merely collectibles, but have anxiety relieving effects as well.

Several people have described the emotional support that Squishmallows have provided them, relaying that “It gives [them] anxiety relief to have them...in stressful situations” (Burkholder). With the rise in mental health acceptance, it is becoming more commonplace to see open strategies and techniques which are benefiting people. Material items were able to benefit Holocaust and Great Depression survivors by providing comfort and memories, and Squishmallows are simply a modern extension of this practice. Because “things...literally shape human behaviors”(Bernstein), it is practical that they would be used with the intention of offering support or comfort in the face of anxiety and trauma. It is human nature to crave physical affection of some sort, and squeezing a Squishmallow is able to provide this level of comfort. In fact, Squishmallows were created with the intention of providing comfort to people. They were made to be held and squeezed, which establishes that emotional connection which humans are able to build with objects.

Squishmallows are undeniably very soft and comfortable, but the physical designs and aspects of these stuffed animals play an important role as well. Generally, Squishmallows are designed with positive connotations in mind. For example, some Squishmallows are created to appear like comforting food, such as s'mores and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. These foods subtly invoke happy and calming images of childhood. Other food designs, like bubble tea and coffee, reminds customers that children are not the only target audience. Including Starbucks coffee themed Squishmallows offers characters that will appeal to a slightly older range of buyers. Younger children will not quite be interested in these designs yet, but they were created with the intention of emphasizing the awareness that there is nothing wrong with an adult owning a Squishmallow. Rather, adults are encouraged to create a positive emotional connection with a Squishmallow, which has the potential to act as a relief of traumatic stressors.

Not only have the notions of trauma TikToks and films, along with anxiety relieving Squishmallows become more prevalent, they have become a valuable and meaningful contribution to society. These pioneering techniques which openly express trauma offer a glimpse into the future that our current young generations will create. Public discussion of traumatic experiences is not only existent, but is now encouraged. While past illustrations of trauma responses were more inferred, such as Vladek Spiegelman's hoarding in *Maus*, current society has made an incredibly large leap. At this point, there is an emergence of films, TikToks, and stuffed animals that broadcast uplifting and comforting one another. However, these examples do not specifically target those that have suffered traumatic experiences. Squishmallows and films like *Coco* are targeted for a much broader audience than those who have dealt with trauma, and can be enjoyed by anyone. But in a not so distant future, when the present young generation are the animators, creators, and entertainers, there will be items and media specifically regarding trauma.

Like a child, society must grow. We cannot begin as adults, but must learn, struggle, and overcome obstacles to improve ourselves. Society began with normalizing the untruth that traumatic experiences must be closeted and hidden. Now, we are beginning to include trauma as plotlines in films and TikToks, and sharing that comforting items assist in comfort and anxiety relief. Coincidentally, the manner in which trauma is coming to light is occurring through items and media that is typically targeted for children and teenagers. Disney movies and TikToks are film and video services that are generally observed by children, teenagers, and younger adults. Squishmallows and other stuffed animals are societally categorized as items that are made for children. How ironic it is, that as society grows like a child, adults are discovering that a child's lens may help overcome trauma. The children and teenagers which are now watching *Coco* will

have grown in a society where traumatic expression is becoming normalized. Thus, the future of traumatic expression will become much more open, normalized, and specific in its aims.

Currently, Disney films and Squishmallows are not created with trauma in mind, but future items and films will be. Because the therapeutic effects of Squishmallows are surfacing and inciting studies, the current young generation will reap the benefits of those studies. An examination of why Squishmallows in particular relieve anxiety will become more scientifically clear, and creators will begin designing future items with this purpose in mind. No longer will there be the lingering notion that Squishmallows are only for children, but rather scientific evidence to support the contrary. With this knowledge, Squishmallows, and other products like them, will be made with a target audience of those that have experienced trauma. And a similar practice will occur in the film industry. Because early films like *Coco* and *Encanto* successfully explore generational trauma, more films exploring trauma will be created specifically for trauma survivors. These new films and Squishmallow type products will simply be seen as another movie genre, or another aisle at the store. The day is coming when items and films will not simply explore or relieve trauma coincidentally, but will be having these effects on purpose through current research and testimony.

In the social climate of a global shutdown and the possibility of nuclear war, we must learn to celebrate the small victories that occur. Though the world is still learning to process and cope with the Covid-19 pandemic, it has inadvertently brought about strides towards a positive conception of mental health. From trauma TikToks to Disney movies, even to Squishmallows, society is gradually taking the steps that are required to normalize discussions of traumatic experiences and personal struggles. While we are still in the pioneering time and experimental phase, humans are striving to reach a point of acceptance and tolerance towards one another.

Lofty as a goal that may be, our society must support and encourage these early steps in the process. We must rely on the message which trauma TikToks relay: no one is alone. We must look to the lessons of the newest Disney films: overcoming begins with acceptance and patience with one another. And we must learn from the Squishmallows that a simple hug can make the biggest difference. Until we reach the world we dream of, we must take strength from each other in the world we live in now.

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