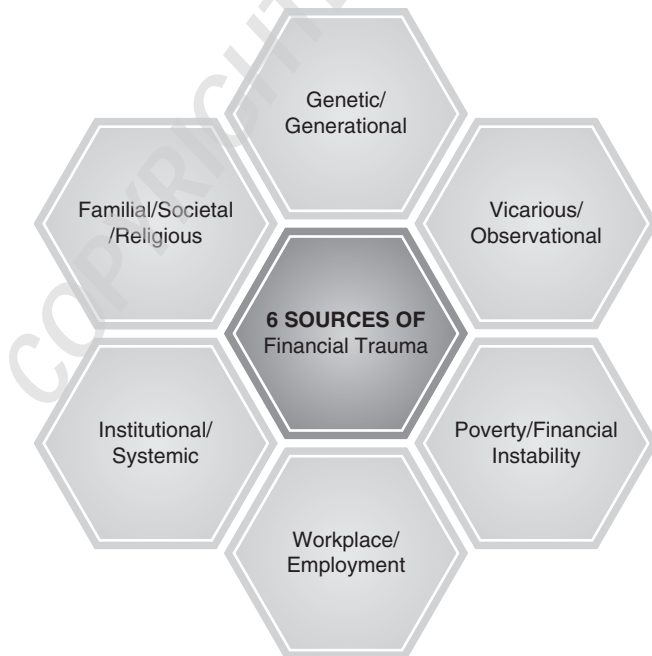


Chapter 1

Unpacking Generational and Genetic Financial Trauma



When I was in high school, I remember coming home one day to see an eviction notice taped to our front door. For context, the building I lived in had two sides, each with several floors—no elevator—and we lived on the first floor. You had to walk past our front door to get to the mailboxes and go to the next floor. I remember seeing that notice and experiencing a flood of emotions in less than 30 seconds. Fear, confusion, and embarrassment are among the most notable to me. “How many people saw this?” I thought to myself. I snatched the letter off the door so quickly because I didn’t want anyone to know. I remember asking my mom if we were being put out, and her response was not to worry about it. I was the oldest of three at the time, and I don’t ever remember sharing the news with my siblings. It felt not only like a personal secret but also a personal failure. It was the first time I remember feeling powerless financially. Not poor, just powerless.

In a 2019 TEDx talk I briefly described this experience to the audience. It was my first time sharing so publicly what happened and how I felt, but I was telling the story as a new homeowner. One could infer that I metabolized that feeling of powerlessness into a triumph that put me in a position of power, and on some level really zoomed out, you might be right. But that journey from feeling powerless to feeling empowered was anything but linear. You see, after that experience I just learned to navigate the financial systems of my family at the time—and by my family, I mean my mother’s household. When revisiting this experience in a conversation with my brother, he reminded me that he only lived with us part-time and that his experience at my father’s house was nearly the exact opposite. I fought through the memories of that time period, trying to make sense of this information. So much of my money story rested not only in the scarcity I experienced in the moment but also in rising to the occasion as a good son and big brother in helping steward the household finances for all of us.

In the process of that learning, despite never being told to, I began to make plans based on what I observed and experienced:

- Rent was too expensive to afford, so we needed Section 8.
- Groceries were too expensive to buy, so we needed food stamps.
- Food stamps were reloaded at the beginning of each new month, so I had to figure out how to help budget them so they would last.
- I'd buy store brand over name brand because it was cheaper.
- If the power goes out, then there's no hot water or lights. So we could use our gas stove to boil pots of water to bathe and use candles for light.
- If we didn't have enough money to wash clothes, we could wash our underwear in hot soapy water and hang it on the shower rod to dry before school the next day.

I had a solution to every problem as long as we had a place to stay. I felt like a savvy and responsible custodian of the household finances, and I was still just a teenager. I believed that when I was ready to live on my own, I would be prepared to do the same for my own finances. At this stage of acceptance and necessary navigation of my family's financial system, I began to shape my money story.

The thing about our money stories is that they are subjective and based on our individual observations and experiences. While much of what I've shared was true to me at the moment, it didn't occur to me until recently that these experiences were not objectively true of my family as a whole. As I shared, my immediate younger brother, for example, lived part-time with my father and was aware of the circumstances I helped to navigate, but not impacted in the same way because although he was part of this household, he was part of that one too. My younger sister, also present in the household, was too young to really understand the gravity of these experiences and thus never picked up the modeling around having Section 8 or food stamps. To her, we were just

living life. Sharing this perspective on money stories is important because you can have multiple perspectives on money in the same household between spouses, between siblings, or parent to child.

Based on my experiences and the formation of my money story at the time, it didn't occur to me that it would be possible or likely that I could do anything but what I was witnessing and was a part of. That I could have a mortgage or even buy groceries without food stamps was such a far-off concept to me in my mid-to-late teens. I thought that by the time I lived on my own, I'd be so poor and struggling at first that if homeownership was possible, it would occur in my 40s and 50s and only if I went to a good school and maybe became a doctor or lawyer. The possibility seemed so distant, almost like it was a separate reality. In hindsight, I never thought it wasn't possible. I just thought, like winning the lottery, it wasn't very likely.

Throughout this book I'm going to provide you with various lenses to observe similar issues. You'll observe through psychological and neuroscience lenses. You'll observe through the lens of systems and socio-economics. You'll observe through somatic healing and financial therapy lenses. I want you to understand that my progression and your progression (or lack of progression) is not because we're smart, special, lucky, or hardworking *exclusively* but because of a combination of factors that have worked—or not worked—in our favor.

These perceived personal victories and failures have much deeper roots that we learn to expose or bury based on variables from a time even before we are born.

While you may or may not connect with or relate to the stories I tell, I want you to understand something extremely clear: an awareness of obstacles and stumbling blocks is not permission for you to give up; it's the opposite. As much as this book will seemingly poke and jab at the system, it demands your accountability.

What you do with the information in this book is on you, but my goal for you and anyone else who reads this book is to take you from feeling financially powerless due to past, present, or future

financial trauma, to feeling financially empowered. This book is broken into three parts of my signature framework called **The Three E's Of Overcoming Financial Trauma™**, or simply “The 3E's™.”

They stand for:

- Exposure
- Education
- Execution

If you're reading this book linearly, you will go through this framework up to the execution phase, where I will provide tools and perspective to take action—which I encourage you to do. Moving through this framework is what helped me go from “aspiring to be poor” to doing the work I do today. Ironically, as I'm writing this book I find myself combing through the framework in my own life and processing hidden or unresolved financial traumas that persist to this day. In that way we can say we are going on this journey together.

The first E in the framework is for **exposure**, which involves becoming aware a thing exists or afflicts you. In this part of the book, exposure is going to focus on providing you with terms, concepts, and definitions so that we can ensure we are on the same page, as well as providing a broad overview of some factors that contribute to financial trauma. It's important to point out the underlying systems that influence how people engage with money both broadly and directly: how people connect those external systems to the internal systems of our bodies and brain. Notice my use and focus on the word *system* as we will explore the concept of systems theory in becoming aware of and healing your relationship with money later.

The second E in the framework is for **education**, which involves some in-depth understandings of concepts and how things work. In addition to becoming aware a thing exists, you can understand how to navigate some of those things with tools, strategies,

and resources at your disposal. Many people believe that increased financial literacy will solve issues of poor money management. While financial literacy has its place, you will see that financial literacy alone won't address the root of behavior or the impact of the systems you navigate. In the education section, we will examine financial literacy through a trauma-informed lens while also discussing successful navigation through systems.

The last E in the framework is for **execution**. This is arguably the most difficult phase of the framework and the context in which this book is being written. If nothing else, I want this book to empower you, the reader, to be mindful of obstacles that inflict financial trauma and to give you the tools to address financial trauma head on. During the execution phase of this book I will introduce you to methods for financial healing, exercises, and strategies you can execute on independently, in partnership with practitioners, and in community.

Author Note: I've created additional resources to accompany this book including videos, micro courses, and more. Scan the following QR code or visit RahkimSabree.com/resources to access them.



What Is Financial Trauma?

Financial trauma is any instance observed or experienced that has a negative impact on the way you view, interact with, or believe about money. When I came up with this definition, I was operating with the idea that I was the originator of the term.

As I began to socialize it and came up against clinical and academic definitions of financial (or money) trauma, I decided to double down on this definition as it encompasses so much more than the direct experiences one might have with money. This definition includes forms of vicarious trauma experienced by growing up in a poor environment—which may have a different effect than growing up poor—observing stressful, harmful, or abusive behaviors with money; being educated about how to use money through a lens of some financially traumatized person and thus inheriting or transferring their trauma onto you; and experiencing workplace or employment trauma, institutional trauma, religious trauma, or any other indirect (sometimes referred to as little “t” trauma) experience that influences your attitudes and beliefs about money.

Not only do these direct and indirect experiences shape our money stories but so do those of our parents, their parents, and their parents. Trauma—including financial trauma—can exist in our genetic memories and be passed down from generation to generation. The intergenerational transfer of trauma effects studied by Vivian Rakoff may have laid the foundation for what we now recognize as epigenetic studies credited to research by Rachel Yehuda. Yehuda and Lehrner cite Rakoff as the originator of the study of intergenerational trauma effects by quoting a paper that Rakoff wrote where he states that the children of Holocaust survivors displayed severe psychiatric symptomology (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Yehuda’s studies in epigenetics demonstrate that environmental factors, including stress, can affect the expression of genes not only in the individual experiencing the stress or trauma but also in their offspring.

Generational Money Beliefs

Have you ever felt like you needed to work harder than everyone around you? Do you feel pressured to take shortcuts by taking advantage of people? Do you think the acquisition of money is evil? Throughout my life I remember hearing some variation of

all of these. In fact, I had a good friend who told me once that he views people as stepping-stones, and when asked if he viewed me as one, he told me straight up that he did. Did this make him a bad person? No, but it did provide insight into the lens through which he operated. A lens through which many of us secretly operate, for fear that should we be so honest in admitting it, we would be considered a bad person. The lens is one of scarcity, and it's that lens of scarcity that contributes to hoarding money (I need to get it), flaunting money (YOLO, I deserve this), and keeping up with the Joneses (I don't want people to think I'm poor). Extremes in behavior related to money can be due to dysregulation of emotions tied into generational coded messages about what money does or represents. When working with clients, one of the questions I like to ask is "What does money represent to you?"

For some of my clients, money represents security. ("I need money to feel secure.")

Money represents power. ("I need money so I can do/I need money so others can't do to me.")

Money represents status or respect. ("If I have money people will respect me.")

Tied into the concept of white supremacy, Black people may view having money as a leveling of the playing field. ("At least I'll be treated like a human being.") Is having money a prerequisite to being treated as human? We can look back at the historical mistreatment, colonization, exploitation, and abuse of Black bodies in the United States (including slavery) and draw direct ties to capitalism and a lack of security, respect, and power. Subconsciously, values related to working hard(er) can transfer across generations tied not only into survival via compensation but also the avoidance of abuse and the pursuit of freedom. Abstract? Perhaps in concept, but these are historical facts that without doubt have shaped the realities of generations of Black Americans who may in turn pass on these ideas as status quo unspoken rules for safety. In Chapter 4 we'll explore this a bit more. While many of the survival-based narratives we have around money are a reaction to larger systemic designs outside of

our individual control, fortunately we can begin to reframe and heal some of the narratives around what money represents for ourselves through practices like affirmations that we'll explore in the chapters on financial healing in Part III of this book.

When I think about some of the most common financial habits inherited from previous generations that keep people stuck, I land on the concept of not talking about money. It's an odd thing really, when we think about how large a role money plays in our lives. Talking about the nuances of money (how to make it, how we use it, our mistakes with it, etc.) is often shrouded in shame, guilt, or frustration. It's one of the few things we learn about after we start using it. Sure, a lack of financial knowledge gets the brunt of the blame when it comes to bad financial habits, but let's be real; practical financial advice often sits behind someone's paywall. There is profit in financial illiteracy, and more than that, there is a sense of safety derived from one-upping someone who doesn't know the secrets to money, basically saying "If I know and they don't, there's more money for me. I'm better off. I'm more valuable."

This is a myth.

There's nothing wrong with admitting that the feeling you get when you know you make more money than someone is a good one. What about when you realize you make the most in your friend group, your immediate family, or your community? I'm not talking about your sense of obligation or the expectations they may have of you; I'm talking purely about knowing you make more.

It feels good, and there are those of us who will continue to chase that feeling without knowing why. That feeling is rooted in scarcity. This is the same scarcity that encourages you to hoard your money just in case, or to overspend because if you no longer have it, no one can ask you for it. You can talk about money, how you make it, use it, your mistakes with it, and you can establish and maintain financial boundaries.

Overspending might be another financial habit inherited from previous generations but not in the way you might think initially.

Certainly there are instances where overspending is a modeled behavior that gets passed on; however, with the FICO credit scoring model being introduced in 1989, the explosion of credit card debt is a relatively recent occurrence that blends the blatant cultural push for consumerism with the feelings of entitlement that says “I deserve this now.” These feelings of entitlement may be a reaction to not having the means growing up to getting even the most basic of necessities when needed. Gradually, there was a cultural shift from using credit cards for emergencies to them being used for everyday purchases coupled with reward points and airline miles.

How Does Financial Trauma Manifest at a Genetic or Psychological Level?

Genetically, prolonged financial stress (such as poverty) can alter gene expression through epigenetics. If that stress is tied to perceptions of safety, security, and emotional regulation, especially through financial triggers, the expression of genes can be altered in future generations. The ripple effect of this can be devastating as heightened cortisol levels linked to obesity, eating disorders, and stress coping behaviors like gambling, alcohol addition, hypersexuality, and even the kinds of foods you eat for comfort or stress relief can compound not only physical disease but financial behavior as you have to spend money on all of these things to cope and/or remediate disease through expensive medications, procedures, or insurances.

When I was born, my mother was not much older than I was when I began to make the associations about money and survival I mention at the opening of this chapter. Her mother was about the same age as I was at that time when she gave birth to my mother. That’s at least three generations of adult financial decision-making occurring in teenage bodies. That’s three generations of stress hormones and financial struggle shaping the stories I told myself about money.

Psychologically you may demonstrate avoidant behaviors related to your finances such as not checking your bank account or credit score, not asking for fee refunds, and not opening mail.

This could contribute to feelings of shame or guilt as financial failures are often internalized as personal failures. It's important to highlight, however, that these feelings are not your fault. Cultural and systemic factors contribute to these cycles, especially in marginalized communities (we'll discuss this more in Chapter 5).

I think about the food we eat in the Black community called "soul food." I mean the baked macaroni and cheese, greens, candied yams, corn bread, and some kind of meat—usually pork or chicken. I think about the portion sizes we have piling our plates up high and the long-term impact of the high salt, high sugar, and high preservative content in the foods we eat when happy, when mourning or grieving, and when celebrating. I think about how cost-effective cooking these items in bulk are and how they are often paired with alcohol or sugary drinks like Kool-Aid, sweet teas, or lemonade. I think about how we trace diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, and certain cancers through our family lines as well. This ties directly into genetic expression with financial implications because it's not only what we bond over and trigger a dopamine response to, but it also makes us feel safe.

It makes us feel loved. It makes us feel like we're at home; even if we don't know anyone in the room with us, we instantly become cousins.

Realization

Financial trauma is not just a personal issue but an inherited one. We carry the financial wounds of our ancestors.

Declaration

"I will no longer accept the myth that financial trauma is just about bad decisions. It's systemic and generational."

