‘Genetic pain’: Prince Harry’s comments stir controversial debate over whether we can inherit our parents’ traumas

The Duke of Sussex said he had left the UK because he wanted to “break that cycle” of “genetic pain” he had experienced through his life. “If I’ve experienced some form of pain or suffering because of the pain or suffering that perhaps my father or my parents had suffered, I’m going to make sure I break that cycle so that I don’t pass it on, basically,” he said.

The notion of “genetic pain” or trauma – that actions in one person’s life can so mark their genes that their bodies literally adapt to the issue, and that is passed on to the next generation through their genetic code – is one that is a trendy topic in science.

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One paper, published in 2018, suggested the trauma of their forefathers resulted in the children and grandchildren of American Civil War prisoners of war having an 11 per cent higher rate of mortality than the general population.

The underpinning science behind that, said the researchers, wasn’t a mutation in genes but something more nuanced: an epigenetic change, where the readability of genes was modified due to trauma.

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“It comes down to the classic nature or nurture debate,” says psychologist Dr Sandra Wheatley. “Parents can pass on caution to children. It can help with self-preservation.”

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