



## Trajectories of Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms (PTSS) after Major War among Palestinian Children: Trauma, Family- and Child-Related Predictors

Punamäki, R. L., Palosaari, E., Diab, M., Peltonen, K., & Qouta, S. R. (2015). Trajectories of posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) after major war among Palestinian children: Trauma, family-and child-related predictors. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 172*, 133-140. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2014.09.021

**SUMMARY:** 240 Palestinian children and their parents completed assessments of Post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) 3, 5, and 11 months after the war in Gaza. Post-traumatic stress symptoms followed one of three trajectories: recovery (high initial stress followed by a decrease), resistant (low stress across time), and increasing (high initial stress followed by an increase).

### KEY FINDINGS

- Three trajectories of symptoms emerged in the Palestinian children and their parents, including recovery (high post-traumatic stress symptoms that decreased over time), resistant (low levels of stress across time), and increasing (high initial stress that increased over time).
- The majority (76%) of participants recovered over time, with equal portions showing low overall stress (12%), or stress that increased over time (12%).
- The evolution and duration of children's post-traumatic stress symptoms were predicted by children's cognitive appraisals of the world and themselves, along with their emotion regulation.
- Children showing low overall stress reported more parental love and support and more positive cognitive appraisals of the world and themselves than the other two groups.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Programs could:

- Offer classes to Service members returning from combat deployment that promote positive appraisals of the world and themselves
- Help Service members' families identify when a Service member is struggling and empower them with information about available resources
- Provide supportive classes for children whose parents return from deployment with mental or physical injuries

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES

Policies could:

- Recommend the development and infrastructure of mentoring programs for Service members
- Allocate funding for parenting courses, with particular attention to parent-child relationships after parental exposure to trauma
- Suggest screening service members for PTSD at multiple points following deployment to track changes in stress symptoms over time

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## METHODS

- Four government schools were randomly selected from the most war-affected areas.
- Students were randomly selected from the second, fifth, sixth, and eighth grade classes.
- Students were interviewed separately over three time periods (3, 5, and 11 months) following the War on Gaza in 2008-2009 about war trauma and post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- Children were asked about their self-appraisals, emotion regulation, parental acceptance, and war trauma experiences.
- Parents separately reported family war trauma exposure and their willingness to serve as an attachment figure for their children.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Palestinian school children (N=240) and their parents (N=170).
- The average child age was 11.35 (SD=0.57), with a range of 10-12.
- Family monthly income was less than \$260 USD for 60% of families.
- Unemployment was high among fathers (49%), and mothers predominantly worked from home (90%).

## LIMITATIONS

- The duration of the study was only 11 months, and therefore does not capture potential longer-term stress responses to wartime exposure.
- The study did not assess trauma exposure from non-war experiences, including family violence.
- Reports of post-traumatic stress symptoms were self-reported by children, and may contain response bias.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Future research may include multiple reports of children's post-traumatic stress symptoms, including reports from teachers and parents.
- Future research may examine change in mental health functioning over time after Service members return from a combat deployment.
- Future research may distinguish between acute and chronic trauma in conceptualizing responses to combat events.

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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