Trauma and Resilience in Disaster’s Wake: A Scientific Perspective

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Image above: The wreckage of a collapsed building, Diyarbakır, Turkey, 2023. VOA, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

About this series

Science for Society is an APS webinar series focused on educating the public and bringing psychological science to decision-makers working to solve real world problems. In addition to psychological scientists, participants include public policy decision-makers, news reporters, advocates, and scholars from adjacent fields.

With a long history of traumatic events, Ukraine was already rife with psychological distress when Russia invaded it in February 2022. The World Bank in 2019 reported the country’s suicide rate as
double that of the European Union. A sizeable number of Ukrainians displaced by internal fighting and
the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and
anxiety (Shevlin et al., 2018; Roberts et al. 2019).

The war with Russia has dramatically deepened that anguish, and social psychologist Robin Goodwin
(University of Warwick) is among the scientists examining the conflict’s impact on Ukrainians’ mental
health.

Goodwin shared the findings on Ukrainians’ resilience in a presentation for “Aftermath of a Disaster:
Psychological Well-being After Traumatic Events,” part of APS’ Science for Society webinar series.
Six weeks after Russia’s invasion, Goodwin and colleagues examined survey data from a representative
sample of 2,000 Ukrainians. Using data collected by colleagues in Israel, the researchers examined
individuals’ perceptions of their own trauma and resilience. They controlled for demographic factors.

A recording of the webinar is available below for registrants and APS members.

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The researchers linked high levels of resilience to factors such as trust in others, youth, being a Ukrainian
speaker, and a perceived ability to bounce back after hardship (Goodwin et al., 2023). Further analysis
showed PTSD symptoms to be highest among Ukrainians who were displaced, either within or outside
of the country. Goodwin and colleagues also found PTSD to be prevalent among people with
disabilities, particularly those with impaired social functioning (Ben-Ezra et al., 2022; Kang et al.,
2023).

In another study not yet published, Goodwin teamed with other scientists to examine data collected from
10,000 displaced Ukrainians and found the vast majority scored high on anxiety measures.

Goodwin and other speakers in the webinar described evidence-based steps that mental health
professionals and communities can take to help people traumatized by natural and human-made
disasters.

Public health expert Nikunj Makwana (Jawaharlal Nehru University) described a holistic ‘preventive
medicine’ approach to disaster relief that includes preparing for immediate response to victims’ mental
health needs and sustained measures to help them recover. He cited research showing cognitive-
behavioral therapy (CBT) as an effective early intervention against PTSD and other psychological
problems (Litz & Maguen 2007; Roberts et al., 2009).
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Research on war, conflict, and authoritarianism published in various APS journals between 2008 and 2020.
Trauma and Ukraine: The World Health Organization Leveraged Psychological Science to Help Prepare Us for This Moment

Addressing a crisis like this means looking directly at the problem-solving needs that arise in times of war, danger, or difficulty and empowering ourselves to meet these needs.

Yanki Yazgan, a child and adolescent psychiatrist in Turkey, described research involving victims of massive earthquakes that beset regions of that country in 1999 and 2023. After the most recent earthquake, findings from the 1999 disaster helped researchers identify critical factors that affect mental health (e.g., hunger, lack of sleep) and quickly create interventions that prioritized victims’ access to shelter, food, and other basic needs, Yazgan said.

In a longitudinal study after the 1999 quake, Yazgan and his colleagues trained teachers in psychoeducational and CBT techniques to help school children affected by the disaster. Over 3 years, children who received the intervention showed fewer symptoms of trauma, grief, and dissociation, as well as better academic performance and behavior, than those in a control group. (Wolmer et al., 2003, 2005).

In the wake of the 2023 earthquake, many schools remained closed for extended periods. So Yazgan and his colleagues provided teachers, parents, and mental health care professionals with a digital form of the intervention.
References


