



Beyond The Battlefield: Understanding The Mental Health Impact of War

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INTRODUCTION

As we step into the future of technological advancements and artificial intelligence, the horrors of war continue to haunt us in the modern-day scenario of worldwide conflicts. From wars raging between nations (Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Gaza, China and Taiwan, India and Pakistan) to civil wars within the nations consuming Sudan, Syria, Sub-Saharan Africa to Myanmar, conflict has gained precedence across the globe with major nations like USA, Russia, China also at each other's throat at all times. This has left the world in a state of constant turmoil, with millions being affected by war trauma. While war nevertheless endangers lives, it has a grave impact on the current and long-term mental health of all the people affected by it, especially the minority communities, as well as women.¹

Direct consequences of war like immediate proximity to traumatic events, loss of close family members and financial burdens due to loss of important assets and jobs have been known to have the greatest impact on the mental health with higher rates of anxiety, depression, and post traumatic stress disorder symptoms compared to those without such experiences.² Extreme poverty, lack of resources for health provisioning, a breakdown of the school system, as well as increased rates of family and community violence are the long-term consequences that the war brings upon people.³

Several communities that are not in immediate contact of danger also face the indirect consequences of the war. The future uncertainties of the educational sector and jobs. For both local and international students enrolled in courses, along with the disruption of travel opportunities that the war brings to the countries, adds to the mental pressure and stress of the youth, as well as their supporting families. High levels of depression and anxiety are seen in children displaced from their educational institutes due to war, with worse symptoms seen in the student populations left behind.⁴ Tourism also takes a massive hit, affecting the livelihood of local people. The terror attacks on unprecedented tourist destinations add psychological fear of resuming the natural course of travel and exploration, subjugating anxiety among the tourists as well.⁵

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The regular man, across the globe, who reads the news daily, is also not spared and is afflicted with sadness, anxiety and psychological storm regarding the current war scenario, where he is a distant spectator with no control over the turmoil across the world. Social empathy is also impacted by the media's regular coverage of war news, which shapes society's capacity to help one another during emergencies.⁶

War-affected zones also face major obstacles in receiving mental health assistance due to the destruction of the health care infrastructure, widespread mistrust of medical institutions, a lack of qualified experts, and economic challenges.⁷ Fighting war with mental resilience requires on-ground efforts by trying to reestablish health care facilities while aiming to maintain a person's sense of self and community, encouraging calm as well as fostering social connectivity and safety. New age technology also comes to our aid in these tough situations where direct in-person interventions are not feasible. In a recent intervention done in the war-hit zone of Ukraine, Chatbot interventions have been designed, using the principles of psychological first aid, to meet the needs of the people inflicted with the adversities of war that use interactive measures to tailor advice to users in threatening situations and help them cope with stress. More than 80% people found the intervention to be useful as it boosted personal health awareness and restored social connectedness. Another intervention developed by the World Health Organisation is the transdiagnostic, evidence-based digital mental health intervention known as Doing What Matters in Times of Stress (DWM). It focusses on teaching people how to live in a way that aligns with their values by teaching them new methods to deal with challenging thoughts and feelings, mostly through mindfulness techniques and self-help practices such as grounding, unhook-

ing, or acting on one's values which can be practiced for a few minutes each day using their digital guide and audio exercises. It has aided in reducing psychological distress among both refugees as well as the health care workers assisting in the war-hit zones.⁸ While these measures are difficult to implement, one must continue to do as much as possible and work towards a better world with optimism and uplift our brothers and sisters across the globe in this process.

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