

How is COVID-19 affecting Holocaust survivors?

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Holocaust survivors have exhibited a wide range of emotional reactions

to, and ways of dealing with, the COVID-19 pandemic. Some are dealing well with the current crisis while some experience considerable difficulties. The way they cope with the current crisis is largely derived from how they deal with their traumatic memories of the Holocaust.

For many Holocaust survivors COVID-19 pandemic health policy guidelines are reminiscent of various adverse conditions that existed during the Holocaust, among them prolonged isolation and separation from [family members](#), but particularly the omnipresent risk of contracting infectious disease.

Previous studies have shown that survivors are more sensitive to various post-Holocaust stressful events, especially those that echo a past primary trauma. In a new study, Bar-Ilan University researchers examined whether exposure to specific Holocaust adversities would be related to amplified psychological reactions to COVID-19.

The study, recently published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, focused on 127 Holocaust survivors and Jews of European descent who did not experience the Holocaust. All of them were born before 1945. Respondents were interviewed during the period of the gradual exit from Israel's first lockdown (April to June 2020).

PTSD and loneliness were more prevalent among survivors who contracted infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and dysentery during the Holocaust relative to [older adults](#) who did not experience the Holocaust (38.5% vs. 0% for PTSD; 53.8% vs. 22.6% for loneliness). Moreover, and surprisingly, worries related to COVID-19 were more frequent among survivors who contracted [infectious diseases](#) during the Holocaust (46.2%) relative to other survivors (22.1%) or those who were not exposed to the Holocaust (6.5%).

"We believed that most Holocaust survivors would manifest increased

[psychological distress](#) during the pandemic because many of them still cope with PTSD symptoms and other impairments. However, heightened distress was evident mainly in a sub-group of survivors whose lives were endangered by infectious disease during the Holocaust," says Prof. Amit Shrira, of the MA Program in Gerontology and the Interdisciplinary Department of Social Sciences at Bar-Ilan University, who led the study in collaboration with Maya Frenkel-Yosef from the Nini Czopp Association, which provides [social services](#) to Dutch-Israeli Holocaust survivors and their families, and Bar-Ilan University Ph.D. student Ruth Maytles. "Most other survivors manifested impressive resilience and were similar in some markers of psychological distress to older adults who were not directly exposed to the Holocaust."

Shrira, who also studies intergenerational transmission of trauma, and colleagues are currently analyzing data from a new study focusing on how descendants of Holocaust survivors are coping with the current pandemic.

More information: Amit Shrira et al, Suffering from infectious diseases during the Holocaust relates to amplified psychological reactions during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of Psychiatric Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jpsychires.2020.08.024](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2020.08.024)

Provided by Bar-Ilan University

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