

Study: Many older adult Israelis exhibited impressive resilience during the initial period of the Israel-Hamas war

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Exposure to traumatic events can result in acute stress symptoms that can last for a few weeks and can also lead to post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD) symptoms that persist even longer.

Following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, Bar-Ilan University Prof. Amit Shrira led a study measuring acute stress and [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) symptoms among Israelis between November-December 2023, shedding light on the impact of the conflict on mental health across generations.

The study utilized the Qualtrics online platform, [social media](#), and additional approaches to reach diverse groups of participants, and 428 responses were received. The results, just published in the *[Journal of Psychiatric Research](#)*, revealed striking differences between young adults aged 20-59 and [older adults](#) aged 60-87.

During the initial week of the conflict, [young adults](#) reported significantly higher levels of acute stress symptoms, with 24.8% experiencing distress. In the subsequent weeks, the prevalence of probable PTSD among this group soared to 42.8%. In contrast, older adults exhibited lower rates of acute stress (3.7%) during the first week, with 13.7% reporting probable PTSD in the following weeks.

"This study provides valuable insights into how different age groups respond to [traumatic events](#)," remarked Prof. Shrira, from the Gerontology Program at the Department of Social and Health Sciences at Bar-Ilan University. "Despite the challenges posed by the Israel-Hamas war, older adults demonstrated remarkable resilience compared to their younger counterparts."

The research delved into two hypotheses to explain these variations: the vulnerability hypothesis, suggesting older adults' susceptibility to trauma-induced psychopathology due to physical frailty and reduced [social support](#), and the inoculation hypothesis, proposing older adults' resilience owing to life experience and effective coping mechanisms.

The findings largely support the inoculation hypothesis, notes Shrira. "Older adults exhibited impressive resilience during the tumultuous period of the Israel-Hamas conflict. This means that despite experiencing declining physical, cognitive, and social resources, older adults may still have other resources that help them cope with traumatic events."

"Some of these resources include life experience, wisdom, emotional regulation capabilities, and the use of strategies to compensate for lost abilities while optimizing preserved ones. Additionally, older adults may have adapted to the current war by drawing on their past experiences with warfare, including significant events like the Yom Kippur War," says Shrira.

The study, conducted in collaboration with Prof. Yuval Palgi from the Department of Gerontology at the University of Haifa, underscores the importance of recognizing and harnessing the strengths of older adults in times of crisis.

"It's important to recognize the strength and resilience of older adults, especially those who have experienced trauma. We should encourage and empower them to cope with present challenges by focusing on their capabilities and resources," says Shrira.

"Adopting a strength-based perspective can help care providers impart belief in older adults' ability to overcome crisis, but it's also important to bear in mind that older adults may have different reactions to stress, so an individual approach is crucial."

Moving forward, Prof. Shrira is analyzing data from additional surveys focusing on specific groups of older adults, including Holocaust survivors, veterans of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and internally displaced individuals.

More information: Amit Shrira et al, Age differences in acute stress and PTSD symptoms during the 2023 Israel-Hamas war: Preliminary findings, *Journal of Psychiatric Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jpsychires.2024.03.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2024.03.003)

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