First-ever study of the psychological impact of war on autistic children

July 9 2024

Correlation matrix of study variables. **p Stress and Health (2024). DOI: 10.1002/smi.3442
A new study reveals alarming findings on the psychological impact of terrorism on autistic children and their parents, following Hamas' October 7th, 2023 attack on Israel. The study is published in the journal *Stress and Health*.

Within 30 days of the attack, both autistic and non-autistic children exhibited significant post-traumatic stress symptoms, with autistic children showing a more pronounced response, and their parents experiencing higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, underscoring the urgent need for specialized mental health services for these families. These preliminary findings highlight the urgent necessity for both immediate and ongoing mental health support for all children and parents impacted by the conflict.

In the first ever study of autistic children and their parents in the context of war, Dr. Judah Koller from the Seymour Fox School of Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem and his team, led by doctoral student Shir Rozenblat, found alarming preliminary findings on the impact of terrorism and war on this population. The study, which focuses on the psychological aftermath of Hamas' October 7th, 2023 attack on Israel, underscores the urgent need for tailored support services for autistic children and their families during times of conflict.

Within 30 days of the attack, both autistic and non-autistic Israeli children exhibited clinically significant post-traumatic stress symptoms, with autistic children showing a more pronounced manifestation of these symptoms, highlighting their heightened vulnerability.

Additionally, parents of autistic children reported significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress compared to parents of non-autistic children. These levels were found to be 2-4 times higher than what was reported by an independent cohort of parents of autistic children assessed prior to the war in a study conducted by the Azrieli
National Centre for Autism and Neurodevelopment Research at Ben Gurion University.

Autistic children's reliance on routine and predictability, which are severely disrupted during terrorist attacks and warfare, appears to exacerbate their stress responses.

"Parenting a child during wartime is a universal challenge, but our findings indicate that autistic children and their parents," said Dr. Koller. "These children and families need targeted mental health support that takes into account their unique characteristics."

The study employed caregiver-report online questionnaires to gather data quickly and efficiently from a wide population. While acknowledging the limitations in generalizability due to sample size and characteristics, the researchers emphasize the importance of their preliminary findings as a crucial first step in a year-long longitudinal investigation.

The research team has completed data collection on a more extensive mixed-methods, cross-sectional study, reaching a broader population of both autistic and non-autistic children and their parents. This effort, in collaboration with Dr. Yonat Rum, also of the School of Education, includes in-depth analyses of parental post-traumatic stress and resilience along with qualitative data on families' experiences.

"Our goal is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ongoing effects of war on these vulnerable populations and to advocate for the necessary support services," Dr. Koller added.

These findings highlight the critical need for immediate and sustained mental health support for all children and parents affected by the conflict. The study calls on policymakers and health care providers to prioritize the specific needs of autistic children and their families, not
only in Israel but in similar conflict-affected regions worldwide. This project is a collaboration with ALUT, the Israeli Society for Autistic Children and Adults, Bar-Ilan University, and Ben-Gurion University.


Provided by Hebrew University of Jerusalem


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