

Supportive relationships in children and adolescents facing political violence and mass disasters

In the context of mass trauma events such as political violence and natural disasters, children and adolescents are inherently more vulnerable to maladjustment and psychopathology than adults. Despite this, many adolescents tend to survive, even thrive, suggesting the presence of resilience. Understanding the factors that contribute to resilience under differing circumstances is crucial to designing programs to protect children and adolescents from succumbing to the stress of large-scale traumas.

One of the building blocks of resilience is social support, the material and psychological resources provided by a community to benefit an individual's ability to cope with stress. The role of social support in the psychopathology of youths exposed to large-scale traumas has been studied, but there is still a lack in the understanding of the mechanisms at work within it. Social support can be broken down into two categories: received support and perceived support. Received support is the support that is actually provided to an individual and perceived support is the individual's belief that support will be offered when needed. While perceived support is considered more effective than received support and is the dimension of social support that most studies are concerned with, increased received support can bring about increased perceived support.

There are also different models for understanding how social support affects the outcomes of stress on individuals. The main effects model suggests that social support has a direct effect, regardless of an individual's stress level. The stress-buffering model suggests that the relationship between social support and outcomes depends on the individual's stress level. This means that under certain conditions, social support can be less beneficial and could even increase distress. The sources of social support may be understood according to Urie Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological model, in which individuals at all points of development are affected by factors that range from family life at home, to school and work conditions, mass media and government politics, and even overarching cultural norms, ideologies, and historical events.

In an analysis of studies examining the role of perceived social support in the link between adolescents' exposure to political violence and psychopathological outcomes, evidence is consistent with the stress-buffering effect model. Specifically, perceived support from parents or family in particular was shown to have the most protective effect whereas support from friends, peers or school was more variable. In contrast to exposure to political violence, the analysis of studies focusing on the role of perceived social support in the link between adolescents' exposure to natural disasters and psychopathological outcomes was less supportive of the stress-buffering effect model. Most studies found that support from parents and peers has the most protective effect. In cases of natural disasters, when stressors become chronic rather than episodic, the ongoing perception of support begins to deteriorate, as the sources of support are not able to contain the magnitude of the ongoing need. This phenomenon, covered by the "deterioration

deterrence model," may explain why younger children, who are more dependent on their environment, tend to suffer more from deterioration of social support.

Based on the analysis of a number of different studies regarding social support in these two types of traumatic events, it is evident that there is a need for more longitudinal studies, qualitative and mixed-method studies, and studies which differentiate between different sources of support. These factors may help in understanding the many dimensions at play in complex phenomena like social support. It is essential that the protective factors and mechanisms behind social support be further studied, so that researchers and practitioners can develop and implement appropriate interventions to foster resilience among children and adolescents exposed to large-scale traumas.

Clark N, Shahar G

Department of Psychology, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 84105, Beersheba, Israel

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