



## The Mental Health Effects of War on Survivors and the Way Forward

Dear Editor,

War is a conflict between political groups involving hostilities of considerable duration and magnitude.<sup>1</sup> War is an expressed form of violence. Specifically, it is a collective, direct, manifest, personal, intentional, organized, institutionalized, instrumental, sanctioned, and sometimes ritualized and regulated violence.<sup>2</sup>

War typically creates numerous negative social, economic, biological, psychological, and environmental effects which directly or indirectly affect the mental health of the survivors such as loss of jobs, loss of loved ones, social deprivation, social exclusion, and poverty.<sup>3</sup> A war survivor is someone who continues to live despite coming close to death during a time of war. This include the combatants, the refugees, and other forced migrants who may have experienced a wide range of traumatic events, either in their countries of origin, in their journey to finding a place of refuge, or in the event of settling down in another location.<sup>3</sup> It was reported among refugees settling down in Western countries that about 10% met the diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 5% had major depression, and 4% had generalized anxiety disorder.<sup>3</sup>

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Therefore, this article is aimed at exploring the direct and indirect impacts of war on survivors' mental health as a war can serve as both a traumatic experience and a stressful event for the survivors.<sup>4</sup>

People who survive wars are usually exposed to the direct effects of violence and thereby increase their risk for psychological conditions such as major depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, PTSD, substance use disorder, schizophrenia, and other psychosis. Studies have shown that there is a six-fold excess of life events within six months of onset of a depressive disorder. This means that there is an increased risk of developing major depression months after experiencing adverse life events like war.<sup>3</sup>

Indirectly, war can increase the risk for psychological disorders. Because of the stress involved in the experience of war and violence, survivors may sometimes take psychoactive substances to relieve their mood symptoms and may end up misusing or becoming dependent on them.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, because of the vulnerability of the female survivors, they may experience sexual exploitation which may consequently result

in conditions such as PTSD or major depressive disorder. The offspring of the survivors may have intellectual disability from chromosomal abnormalities as a result of genetic mutations from maternal or paternal exposure to the firearms and bombs.<sup>3</sup> In addition, recent studies have linked the toxic substance, dioxin which can be released from firearms as increasing the risk for autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning disability, and other neurodevelopmental disorders among the offspring of war survivors.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, maternal PTSD which can occur from war has been linked with autism spectrum disorder in children of such individuals. This is due to the effects of maternal stress on the fetus, shared genetic risk, and the influence of negative emotions in mothers altering the mood regulation of children with autism spectrum disorders.<sup>7</sup>

One major way to handle events is to be as proactive as possible. Concerned countries and groups should set up frame works for psychological first aid to ameliorate the impacts of war on the survivors. Psychological first aid is an evidence-based approach to manage the immediate effects of the traumatic experiences of war on the survivors. The components of psychological first aid include briskly linking survivors with adequate sources of supports, protection from further threats and distress, facilitating a sense of being in control, helping reunion with loved ones, immediate physical care, provision of comfort, and consolation.<sup>3</sup> Other evidence-based psychological approaches are trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, narrative exposure therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, prolonged exposure therapy, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing.<sup>3</sup> An *ad-hoc* mental health team comprising psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and psychiatric nurses should be set up to handle all the psychological complications of the traumatic events. In addition, job centers should be set up to review the skill sets of the survivors in order to rehabilitate them. Employment has a lot to do with helping survivors improve their psychological well-being as it creates an avenue for new and better experiences defying the humiliation from job loss following war and violence. Adequate support systems, both from family and school should also be devised for the children.<sup>5</sup>

War typically creates numerous negative social, economic, biological, psychological, and environmental effects which directly or indirectly affect the mental health of the survivors. Concerned countries and groups should set up adequate structures to engage international humanitarian communities for the provision of support systems for the survivors.

### Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

### Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Received: August 24, 2023; Revised: October 19, 2023;  
Accepted: October 21, 2023; Published: January 29, 2024

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**How to cite this article:** Adekeye AP. The mental health effects of war on survivors and the way forward. J Med Sci 2024;44:101-2.