

How Does War Affect Mental Health?

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War is known to have a significant impact on civilians. The World Health Organization (WHO) has found that “Around 10 percent of the people who have experienced traumatic events will have serious mental health problems, and another 10 percent will develop behavior that will hinder their ability to function effectively.” People experiencing war not only struggle with the deaths, violence, and destruction, but also have to live with the fear that their lives are in danger. This can lead to anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

The evolution of mental health care has stemmed from wars. Both World War I and World War II resulted in new psychological advancements for citizens and veterans. The National Institute of Mental Health in the USA was created to help the people affected by WWI before sending people to fight in WWII. As The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes, “emergencies can be catalysts for building quality mental health services.” Before the Syrian Civil War, there were few mental health resources available. Now, due to the increasing awareness of the need for support for people who have been affected by the war, there are mental health resources that are available in health facilities, communities, and schools. In Lebanon, the government built new resources for both Syrian and Lebanese people as a response to the influx of Syrian refugees needing mental health support. Mental health developments have always been closely intertwined with times of conflict.

Currently, Ukraine’s mental health situation has led to the development of several new resources. WHO has assisted in creating a roadmap that will build on previous efforts and distribute equitable support to Ukraine. The roadmap uses the Minimum Service Package, which provides information such as childhood development activities and support for community mental health efforts. Additionally, WHO and the Ministry of Health have been growing Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP) activities in Ukraine, which provide mental health resources. More than 700 primary healthcare workers have been trained by WHO to treat mental health conditions, and around 120 workers have been taught how to train even more primary care workers. The World Health Organization and the Ukraine government have been working to provide fast and effective mental health care.

Psychiatrist Steve Sugden has been researching the effects of war on the mental health of three separate groups: soldiers, civilians, and people watching from afar. With new social media

such as TikTok, war footage is much more accessible. Additionally, there is often less censorship on TikTok than there is on the news, so the media is more gruesome. Sugden found that veterans are most affected by conflict. The US veteran homeless population and suicide rate has increased greatly, which comes with “higher overall medical complications, dysfunction within families, unemployment, substance use, and more” (Sugden). In Sugden’s findings, civilians were least affected by the trauma of war, most likely due to resilience and their ability to talk with people experiencing the same things around them. He also found that viewers experienced trauma from absorbing media. Regardless of which group they fell into, all people exposed to conflict developed “mistrust, suspicion, and a sense of hopelessness” (Sugden), reinforcing that war has an extremely significant impact on the mental health of all people.

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