

Institutional betrayal in the face of a collective national trauma in Israel

Yael Lahav^{a,*} and Menachem Ben-Ezra^b

^aDepartment of Occupational Therapy, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

^bSchool of Social Work, Ariel University, Ariel, Israel

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants infiltrated Israel, raping, abducting, and slaughtering individuals at a music festival, and in towns, Kibbutzim, and cities across the border. Over 1400 Israelis and foreign citizens were murdered, 247 were abducted, and over 5500 were wounded. Since then, more than 12,000 rockets and mortars have been fired into Israel, causing death and injury, and leading to the displacement of approximately 200,000 Israelis.¹

The scope of this trauma has put many thousands at risk for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other mental difficulties.² Nonetheless, this crisis does not appear to be limited to the exposure to harsh national trauma but is also rooted in the rupture of civilians' trust in their government, which for many Israelis resembles that experienced during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This break in trust refers to various aspects of the government's dysfunction, among them the failure to provide mental health support.

In recent years, Israel's mental health infrastructure has been depleted, despite criticism from professionals. Furthermore, although traumatic events like war are relatively frequent in Israel, no contingency plan was made for trauma-focused treatment on a large scale. Thus, the outbreak of war highlighted the Ministry of Health's failure to provide necessary aid, deepening civilians' distrust in the government.

The consequences of such a break in the civilians' trust in their own government while facing massive trauma, which has been documented regarding various traumatic events worldwide, are not only political, but also psychological. According to the betrayal trauma theory,³ individuals exhibit trust upon large institutions just as they do in close relationships. Therefore, when these institutions fail to fulfill their obligations it poses an institutional betrayal that takes another toll on

trauma victims' wellbeing, beyond the detriments of the trauma itself.³ Research, which has been mainly focused on sexual assault victims, has supported this view, and revealed associations between institutional betrayal and various negative health⁴ and mental health outcomes.^{3,5}

These findings underscore the detriments of governmental dysfunction in providing mental health aid to civilians exposed to trauma, and the need for governments around the world to allocate resources, train specialist trauma therapists, and construct long-term plans for rapid and effective mental aid in the face of national trauma. Forming such a plan will not only enable treatment of trauma survivors soon after exposure, but may also preclude institutional betrayal, which in itself increases the risk of psychopathology.

Contributors

Yael Lahav—conceptualization, writing; Menachem Ben-Ezra—conceptualization, writing.

Declaration of interests

None.

References

- 1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hamas-Israel conflict 2023: key legal aspects (updated to November 2, 2023). 2023.
- 2 Charlson F, van Ommeren M, Flaxman A, Cornett J, Whiteford H, Saxena S. New WHO prevalence estimates of mental disorders in conflict settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet*. 2019;394(10194):240–248.
- 3 Smith CP, Freyd JJ. Dangerous safe havens: institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma: institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma. *J Trauma Stress*. 2013;26(1):119–124.
- 4 Smith CP, Freyd JJ. Insult, then injury: interpersonal and institutional betrayal linked to health and dissociation. *J Aggress Maltreat Trauma*. 2017;26(10):1117–1131.
- 5 Monteith LL, Bahraini NH, Matarazzo BB, Soberay KA, Smith CP. Perceptions of institutional betrayal predict suicidal self-directed violence among veterans exposed to military sexual trauma: MST and perceptions of institutional betrayal. *J Clin Psychol*. 2016;72(7):743–755.



The Lancet Regional Health - Europe 2024;42: 100942

Published Online xxx
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2024.100942>

*Corresponding author. Department of Occupational Therapy, The Stanley Steyer School of Health Professions, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, Tel Aviv University, P.O.B. 39040, Ramat Aviv, Tel-Aviv, 69978, Israel.

E-mail address: yaellah1@tauex.tau.ac.il (Y. Lahav).

© 2024 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).