AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Addressing the Psychological Effects of War on Children
The American Psychological Association at the United Nations

As an organization that stands for human rights and the psychological and physical health and well-being of all people, the American Psychological Association (APA) recently adopted a policy statement voicing its solidarity with the National Psychological Association of Ukraine, the Ukrainian people, and colleagues in the Eastern European region. The statement expresses grave concern about the "immediate and long-term trauma and psychological impacts on people of all ages, families, communities and the environment." In the midst of this crisis, it is vital that the international community applies psychological science and practice to ameliorate some of the worst harms of this conflict, particularly for children. War and its aftermath have devastating consequences in terms of physical wounds and death, material and economic hardship, deep psychological distress, loss of dignity and freedom, and other violations of human rights.

Psychological research tells us that experiencing violent conflict may cause stress and trauma, which can have lifelong or even generational consequences. Trauma is a severe emotional response to a serious negative event, such as war. Symptoms can include: unpredictable emotions; intrusive thoughts and flashbacks; strained relationships; nightmares and difficulty sleeping; and physical symptoms, like headaches or nausea. Trauma is typically characterized as an individual-level condition, but a growing body of research has demonstrated that communities that live through traumatic events, like prolonged violent conflict, suffer deleterious impacts that can transcend generations. It is therefore imperative to provide culturally-competent, trauma-informed psychological services to ensure that individuals and societies can endure crises, retain dignity and rights, and recover once the violence has ceased.

Psychological science also provides tools for peacebuilding and conflict prevention, including nonviolent communication strategies and interventions for facilitating productive interactions between conflicting groups. Prevention of violent conflict is imperative for promoting mental health and wellbeing and achieving peaceful, sustainable societies.

Children and youth

Armed conflict disproportionately harms children (people under 18 years of age), who comprise approximately half of the population of most countries affected by war, as well as half of the world's refugee population. Factors such as the mental health of caregivers, separation from caregivers, and poverty or other resource constraints can be especially impactful for children. It is vital to organize evacuations and relocations that keep families together - or reunite them as soon as possible if they must be temporarily separated - to ensure that their wellbeing and rights are protected as specified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The safety and stability of communities in which children live are especially vital for children's wellbeing and recovery. It is important to provide them with routines and activities that help them adjust to the

situation and return to a "normal" life as soon as possible. Opportunities for play and learning are important to this process, including the restoration of functional schools and other community organizations that serve children and their families. Such opportunities may nurture hope, meaning, and a sense of agency. When planning interventions, it is critical to engage youth in program development and implementation as a source of change and as key partners in resilience-building activities. In so doing, it is critical to consider gender, disability status, ethnicity, race, religion, and other intersecting identities relevant to the local context.

Resilience and recovery

Psychology has much to contribute to resilience building during wartime and after. For example, psychologists can:

- Provide in-depth, culturally appropriate, evidence-based clinical services to treat serious mental health conditions, such as trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Help implement child-focused mental health and psychosocial interventions, such as: community-based child protection mechanisms; community-based psychosocial supports; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration supports; family support; and school-based support.
- Train laypeople to provide certain forms of developmentally appropriate psychosocial support to affected populations, including Psychological First Aid.
- Collaborate with communities and underserved populations to ensure inclusion of their values and needs; support initiatives to strengthen trust and safety.

Resources

APA offers many resources to those working with children and others affected by war to cope with uncertainty and stress, build resilience, and help recovery. For example:

- Children and trauma: https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/task-force/child-trauma
- Resilience & Recovery After War: Refugee children and families in the United States: https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/refugees-full-report.pdf
- Resilience in a time of war: Tips for parents and teachers of teens. https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/teen-war
- Building your resilience: https://www.apaservices.org/practice/good-practice/building-resilience.pdf
- The road to resilience: https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience
- How to cope with traumatic stress: https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/stress

Additionally, many UN bodies offer invaluable psychological and psychosocial resources, coordinated by the Inter-agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-on-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-in-emergency-settings

Please contact Gabriel Twose, PhD (gtwose@apa.org), with the APA Office of International Affairs for further resources on trauma and resilience, or topics such as conflict prevention and resolution.