Experiencing Processes of Growth: Coping and PTG Amongst mothers Who Were Exposed to Rocket Attacks

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The Moto

“See how sorrow and pain turns into beauty and growth”

Limor, mother from Sderot.
Introduction

- The ability of civilians to cope with terror and war is an area that has been widely researched over the last decades.
- Such studies usually focus on the negative outcomes of exposure to terror and war (Maguen, Papa & Litz, 2008).
- **Women** were found to suffer more than men from Psychological distress following war and terror (Adams & Boscarino, 2006).
Positive outcomes

- However, recently, an increasing amount of attention has being directed to the potential positive outcomes of such exposure, particularly amongst researchers looking at Post Traumatic Growth (Calhoun, Cann & Tedeschi, 2010; Hobfoll, Hall, Canetti-Nisim, Galea, Johnson & Palmieri, 2007; Weiss & Berger, 2010).
Coping

- Lazarus and Folkman (1991), identified two sets of coping resources:
  
  - **Problem focused coping** - *is mainly in use* when people believe that something constructive can be done about the situation.
  
  - **Emotion focused coping** - when people believe that the stress must be endured, attempt to control distressing emotions and alter the meaning of the situation.
Women-In time of war

- Women, more than men, plan and engage in general problem-focused coping, use active coping and seek social support for instrumental reasons.
- For emotion-focused coping, they seek social support for emotional reasons, engage in positive reappraisal and wishful thinking, ruminate, employ positive self-talk, and use avoidance (Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002).
PTG- definition

- Post Traumatic Growth is defined as: "positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances that represent significant challenges to the adaptive resources of the individual" (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, p. 1).
five potential domains for PTG –

- A greater appreciation of life and a changed sense of priorities.
- A warmer and intimate relationship with others.
- A sense of increased personal strength
- Recognition of new possibilities
- Spiritual and existential development

Women and PTG

- Research suggests that there is a high correlation between symptoms of PTS (stress) and PTG (Growth).
- A recent meta-analysis on gender differences in self reported posttraumatic growth revealed a small to moderate gender difference, with women reporting more posttraumatic growth than men (Vishnevsky, Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Demakis, 2010).
Aim of current research

- Israel is a country that is continually exposed to ongoing terror and wars. It was the ongoing rocket attacks experienced over the last 8 years by the inhabitants of the western Negev that led to the current inquiry, focusing on the coping mechanisms and PTG among mothers of small children, using their personal narratives as the source of information.
Participants

- Fifty two mothers, aged 27 to 50 years, who had children under the age of 18 living at home, and who during the research period had resided in the western Negev for at least eight years.
- 22 mother from Sderot area- long exposure to terror
- 30 women, lived in Kibbutzim and Moshavim, about 20-30 kilometers south of the Gaza strip- Short exposure ,second half of 2008 until January 2009, that is, before and during operation "Cast Iron".
Method and data collection

- The study included two phases: open-ended questionnaire which included a question dealing with their ways of coping with the terror attacks.
- At the second phase, sixteen of the mothers were interviewed and were asked to describe their experiences, thoughts and feelings before, during and after the war, their ways of coping during the war, and their thoughts and insights following the war.
### Table 1: Coping strategies of the mothers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Entire sample (n=52)</th>
<th>Mothers experiencing ongoing exposure (n=22)</th>
<th>Mothers experiencing short exposure (n=30)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optimism and humor</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology: &quot;No other country, every place is dangerous&quot;</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of threat and maintaining routine</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Optimism and Humor - Example from interview

- Ilana, a resident of Sderot, related her tendency to try and keep optimistic in difficult times as an important component of her coping process: "It was important for me to keep optimistic. Even in times of chaos here, I continued to tell myself to be optimistic, and most of the time it worked for me, but not always".
Ideology

- Tamara, who lives in a Moshav and experienced short exposure to rockets attacks, said: *This war made me feel more Zionistic than before, and my love of the country and the understanding that we have no other country but Israel helped me cope*. 
Denial of threat

- Sharona who lives in a Kibbutz near Sderot, recalled: "I was not afraid most of the time. I thought that the chance of a direct hit from a Qassam is so low that I am not going to change my routine of life. I continued with my life, my work in the Kibbutz and shopping in Sderot, which is the nearest town to us".
Maintaining a routine

- Lihi, who lives in a Moshav about 30 kilometers from Sderot, recalled: "I continued with my life. I took my children aged 4 and 2 for walks to the playground in the afternoons. I felt that maintaining a routine is best for us, and when I heard the "CodeRed" alarm, I simply looked for the nearest Shelter".
PTG Processes and Negative outcomes amongst Mothers Exposed to Long-Term Terror

- The mothers' discourses revealed that the exposure to the ongoing threat led to various growth processes including becoming stronger, less vulnerable, more able to take responsibility and more prepared to manage future adversarial situations. These mothers also reported changes in their philosophy of life, as well as developing warmer and intimate relationships with meaningful others.
Examples- Feeling stronger

- Dana from Sderot, recalled: "I feel that I became much stronger as a result of the situation here in the last few years. I am more sure of myself, I know how to cope with difficult times and it makes me feel good."
Changes in philosophy of life

- "I learned to enjoy the little things, a picnic with my family, a quite evening at home, after you go through such a period of fear and stress you learn to appreciate more your life and your relationship with your dear ones." (Tamar)
Spiritual growth

"The ongoing exposure to the Qassam attacks raised new insights and enriched my soul. There are two sides to this coin: one is the fear and the anxiety that I experienced, but simultaneously my soul was strengthened. I saw beyond the here and now, the immediate fear”... (Limor)
empathy and unity with others who suffer

- “This encounter created a new growth in me, also the awareness of other’s suffering and pain. I recognized that beyond my own sense of victimization, we have a common destiny, and this awareness made me stronger in a spiritual and emotional way”. (Limor)
Negative outcomes: Guilt and worries in relation to children's future psychological outcomes

- Together with these positive PTG processes, the mothers also pointed to the considerable psychological costs incurred as a result of living in an area constantly under the threat of attack.
• While some of them claimed that their children coped well with the threatening situation, others described their children’s current **PTS symptoms** and almost all expressed **concerns about future psychological outcomes**.

• This concern about the children elicited **guilt feelings** amongst the mothers because of their own decision to live in a dangerous place which exposed their children for many years to constant threat.
Pnina said: "I know that my children were psychologically hurt by the situation, both received professional help, but I am afraid that it will affect their future, and I feel responsible for it".
Limor: "It is not easy to live with the awareness that you chose to live in a place that is harmful to your children. I feel guilty about my choice, but I have learned to live with this feeling, knowing that there is no insurance for life, and there could be problems and dangers in other places too".
Conclusion and recommendations for professionals

- The overall findings indicate that despite the harsh conditions experienced, especially among mothers exposed to **long term terror**, processes of coping and PTG are apparent.

- To professionals working with such populations, these findings may suggest the value of probing clientele perceptions of coping and growth, in order to assist them in their daily lives during and after the threatening situation.
Thank you!