

WG 3 (Psychological Health)

Beyond Human Lives: Coping with the Loss of Canine Partners in the Oketz Unit During the Iron Swords War

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The Oketz Unit lost 24 service dogs during the first few months of Iron Swords War, creating a unique grief response among handlers not addressed by standard combat stress protocols. Based on requests from the soldiers, this intervention was developed to facilitate healthy grief processing for soldiers who lost their canine partners, recognize the legitimacy of their emotional response, and support their psychological readiness to return to operational duties. Based on attachment theory, the intervention acknowledges that losing a service dog triggers significant bereavement processes and also Traumatic grief, requiring specialized therapeutic approaches for military personnel.

The program targeted soldiers who lost canine partners in combat. Implemented as a one-time intervention for 11 soldiers, the intervention utilized the "Photo Album Protocol," adapted specifically for the military context. The structured session provided a safe environment for emotional expression, memory sharing, and collective meaning-making around the unique bond formed in combat settings. The intervention addressed the dual identity of service dogs as both operational tools and emotional companions, a complexity that complicates the grieving process in military environments.

The intervention's effectiveness was assessed through facilitator observations, participant feedback, and thematic analysis of session content. Key outcomes included normalization of grief responses, reduced emotional isolation, enhanced unit cohesion, and increased psychological readiness to form new operational partnerships. Following the initial session, additional groups were requested, indicating the intervention addressed a previously unmet need within the unit. Preliminary feedback suggested the intervention helped soldiers integrate their loss experience into their professional identity without compromising combat readiness.

This intervention provides a framework for structured emotional support following service animal loss. Recommendations include incorporating canine loss protocols into standard mental health procedures and implementing follow-up assessments. Further development should focus on creating sustainable support mechanisms that acknowledge the human-canine bond while ensuring operational continuity and soldier wellbeing.

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Cross-Border Mental Health Group Interventions During the 'Swords of Iron' War

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Background:

During the 'Swords of Iron' war, under the guidance of the IDF mental Health Center, hundreds of cross-border interventions (within combat zones) were carried out by mental health officers (MHO) on a regular and ongoing basis throughout the war. These interventions were not part of the official emergency response protocol of the IDF mental Health Center and are unique. The commanders in the field expressed their need and we had to adjust during war and find a solution. We needed to provide interventions that help soldiers reduce combat reactions and rapidly return to mental and emotional readiness for combat.

Rational:

The aim of the research is to identify the key themes emerging from these interventions and to provide qualitative insights for determining in which situations cross-border interventions are beneficial and whether there are situations in which it would be preferable to refrain from such interventions and choose alternative options. We seek to integrate findings from the interviews and use them for developing a professional protocol with guidelines for such interventions.

Methods:

The study is based on a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews. The sample includes: 15 MHOs and 10 commanders. Data collection method is based on a narrative approach using Thematic Analysis, aimed at identifying key themes and examining their interconnections.

Preliminary Conclusions:

The initial conclusions, based on partial data analysis, point to trends requiring further examination.