

WG 3 (Psychological Health)

Suicide Among IDF Soldiers in the Last Decade: Peacetime and Wartime

Carmel Kalla, Zivan Aviad-Beer, Jacob Rotschild.

Medical Corps, IDF.

Background and Rationale:

Suicides among military personnel are a significant concern for many armed forces worldwide. However, the impact of warfare on suicide rates is inconsistent, with variations observed across different armies and conflicts. This study aims to present recent data on suicides within the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), with emphasis on changes observed during the past year and a half of wartime.

Materials and Methods:

A descriptive study was conducted using systematically collected data from the IDF Human Resources Division. Suicide data were gathered and suicide rates calculated relative to the size of the military. Demographic and clinical data were also collected, with separate calculations made for regular and reserve soldiers. The suicide rate for regular soldiers was based on the total number of active-duty soldiers, while the rate for reserve soldiers was based on annual reserve duty days.

Results:

In 2024, 21 soldiers in the IDF died by suicide: 7 active-duty soldiers, 2 career soldiers, and 12 reserve soldiers. This represents a high absolute number compared to the past decade. Most had no prior contact with mental health services (18 out of 21), and all were male, with the majority being combat or combat-support soldiers. The suicide rate among regular soldiers in 2024 was lower compared to previous years, while the rate among reserve soldiers showed a slight increase.

Conclusions:

The findings align with other studies indicating a decrease in suicide rates during wartime. Suicides among reserve soldiers may be linked to their abrupt transition into the military environment, where there is limited familiarity with their backgrounds and a lack of clinical information sharing between civilian and military authorities. These results underscore the need for focused preventive efforts for reserve soldiers during times of conflict.

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Development and Use of Virtual Reality Tools for PTSD Treatment in Israel After the October 7th War

Ehud Bodner, Shachar Maidenbaum, Ilan Vol, Albert Rizzo, Mario Mikulincer.

Bar Ilan University.

Background and Rationale:

The October 7th war caused significant psychological trauma among soldiers and civilians, leading to a rise in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Traditional therapy often fails to meet these individuals' complex needs, particularly where access to mental health resources is limited. Virtual Reality (VR) presents a promising solution, offering immersive, personalized therapy. We explore how VR can be utilized for PTSD treatment, focusing on soldiers and civilians affected by the war.

Research Methodology:

A mixed-method approach, combining tool development with qualitative and quantitative evaluation. The target population includes Israeli soldiers and civilians impacted by war trauma. We are adapting the US BraveMind VR Technology to Israeli scenarios, and developing a new VR tool focused on place attachment. A focus group of seven experienced therapists (1 psychiatrist, 2 psychologists, 2 clinical social workers, 1 drama therapist, and 1 medical clown) tested our prototypes and answered a standard Presence questionnaire and customized user experience questionnaires. A 60-minute group discussion provided insights into tools' effectiveness and adaptations needed.

Findings:

We will present the current version of our tools. Initial evaluation results indicated that therapists responded positively to both VR tools. Participants reported a strong sense of presence during sessions and were optimistic about using these tools for PTSD treatment. Therapists suggested cultural and geographical adaptations to reflect local trauma experiences. The group discussions and questionnaires revealed enthusiasm for VR as a viable treatment option and we are adapting our prototypes accordingly.

Conclusions:

The initial phase shows that therapists accept VR for PTSD treatment and recognize its potential for combat PTSD and trauma related to place attachment and bereavement. Given the extensive validation of Bravemind in the US and these early findings, VR is concluded to potentially enhance emotional processing and offer scalable mental health interventions for soldiers and civilians in Israel.