

WG 3 (Psychological Health)

Prolonged Disaster Response and the Emotional Toll on First Responders – Insights from Surfside and Beyond

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Background and Rationale:

Prolonged disaster response scenarios present significant challenges to first responders yet remain under-examined with respect to resilience training and mental health interventions. The Champlain Towers collapse in Surfside, Florida, required extensive search and rescue efforts involving international collaboration between U.S. domestic and local teams and Israeli first responders, representing the first time there was international collaboration on U.S. soil. As such, this context offers a unique window into understanding the emotional and psychological impact of such operations for first responders. Our research is aimed at understanding how to best support first responders emotionally in prolonged disaster scenarios, with a focus on cross-cultural nuances in emotional support mechanisms.

Research Methodology:

This work employs a phenomenological qualitative approach to examine the lived experiences of first responders deployed to Surfside. We will conduct semi-structured interviews with members from both U.S. domestic teams and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Search & Rescue unit (Target N = Approx. 35) to explore first responders' subjective experiences of emotional debriefing protocols, stress management strategies, and coping mechanisms during this prolonged response effort.

Findings:

Expected findings include information pertaining to the value of semi-structured emotional debriefing sessions, as used by the IDF team, to buffer against long-term psychological distress. We expect that, to some degree, less formalized psychological support potentially leads to greater emotional strain. The researchers will employ thematic analysis to identify potential cultural nuances in trauma processing, the potential role and value of peer support, and the need for some form of structured pre-, during, and post-mission support protocols.

Conclusions:

This research highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how to best support first responders emotionally in the context of a prolonged call, with an emphasis on making recommendations that can help optimize first responder effectiveness and well-being. Findings will support a better understanding of how military-style resilience training and emotional support strategies, like those used by the IDF, may benefit civilian responders. The goal of the study is to enhance psychological support systems to improve operational efficiency while mitigating long-term mental health consequences, contributing to better disaster response frameworks.

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How to Survive? Civilian Women's Coping Strategies in Wartime Captivity

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Background and Rationale:

The few existing studies on civilian abductees revolved around captivity hardships and their lifelong consequences, while how civilians cope with captivity has received limited attention. The current study aims to fill these gaps by analyzing the strategies employed by civilian women of different ages to deal with the hardships of captivity.

Methods:

Our data consists of 17 oral interviews broadcast on Israeli media with nineteen civilian Israeli women aged 18 to 85 abducted by Hamas terrorists on October 7th, 2023, and released after 50-54 days in captivity. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using inductive content analysis.

Findings:

The participants described various coping strategies, which were divided into three types: emotional – hope and psychological disengagement; cognitive – externally-oriented: time orientation and obtaining information about the world outside; internally-oriented: self-talk, thinking about loved ones at home, imagining the release and life afterward, and identifying advantages in captivity; and behavioral – writing, survival-oriented actions, socializing with other hostages, and caregiving. The participants described the various strategies as deliberately applied and requiring constant effort.

Conclusions:

To cope with the extreme adversities of captivity, the participants simultaneously applied emotion-focused, problem-focused, and avoidance strategies featuring emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. Some strategies, particularly caregiving, seem gender-characteristic, and others were used differently by younger and older abductees. Given the long-term psychological consequences of captivity, our findings can inform the rehabilitation process of released captives, especially civilian women.