**Mental First Aid Support for Health Care Providers during Time of Conflict**

The surprise terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023, resulted in a significant loss of life, with at least 1,400 killed and over 4,600 injured.1 Additionally, over 230 civilians, including nurses, physicians, and one nurse who was kidnapped, were among the victims. The Israeli healthcare system faced an unprecedented crisis,2 addressing both physical injuries and the mental burden on healthcare providers, including those exposed to distressing scenes while identifying the deceased. Integration between hospitals, community care, public health, and mental health was crucial to comprehensively respond to the needs of affected healthcare providers.

Providing emotional and mental support to medical staff is crucial for their functioning, known as reducing secondary traumatization and burnout.3 however, Non-compliance of some of the Israeli healthcare providers concerns have arisen from mental health stakeholders, possibly due to the hesitation of workers to seek help from professionals within their organization. Concerns about maintaining privacy and anonymity,4 as well as the stigma associated with seeking support, may prevent them from utilizing available resources for their mental well-being.5

For that reason, The Israeli Mental Health Nursing Association launched a support project for healthcare providers to legitimize debriefing and, by product, mitigate the risks of Acute Stress Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Secondary Trauma.

To address the challenges, a project recruited 30 nurses trained in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT). These nurses received trauma training as part of their CBT studies. A preparatory meeting was held to establish working procedures and address concerns, using listening, emotional validation, normalization, and connection to resources' therapeutic techniques. The project managers provided the CBT nurses with a protocol to follow. A digital call for participation was shared on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, offering online psychological assistance while ensuring anonymity. Interested healthcare providers registered through a digital link, and the project manager connected them with the CBT therapists. The supported session lasts up to 30-minute sessions.

Until now, Over 100 requests have been received from across the country. 50% of the applicants were married or in a relationship, with 72% employed in hospitals and the rest in community healthcare or other sectors. 70% of the applicants declared support from family or friends, while 30% lacked external support.

The main reasons for seeking assistance among healthcare providers were fear, worry, anxiety, exposure to traumatic sights, and the unavailability of a spouse due to military recruitment. Other factors, such as the absence of an educational framework for children and emotional burden, were also mentioned. Around 35% of applicants reported taking sedative medicines during the war. Daily functioning was impaired for 70% of healthcare providers, affecting areas such as sleep, appetite, employment, and caregiving. In sum, 90% participated in one session, while 10% opted for advanced session therapy.

This project highlights the increasing need for mental first aid among healthcare professionals, emphasizing the importance of emotional support. Our findings indicate that healthcare providers prefer seeking anonymous telephonic support rather than in-person sessions with colleagues within their organization. This preference suggests a potential broader demand for similar services within the healthcare community, calling for a wider range of options to be considered.

The project was developed to tackle the hesitancy of healthcare providers in seeking assistance, despite the availability of mental first aid services. It provides a convenient and immediate service without requiring long-term commitment or obligation. Its user-friendly design enables easy adaptation and implementation among healthcare providers and colleagues worldwide, particularly during conflict or disaster times-helping them save others.

References

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