

## Beyond PTSD: Exploring the Effects of Chronic Wartime Stress on Sexuality and Relationships

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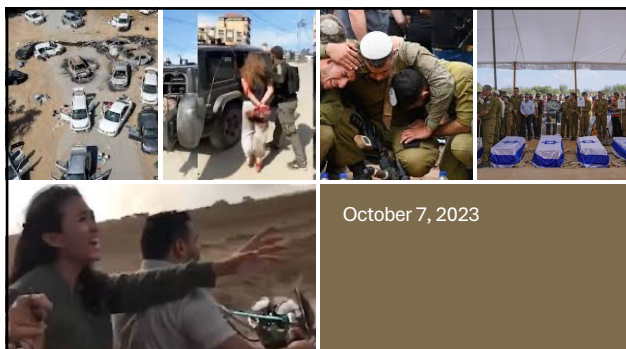


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## Objectives

- Highlight key findings on PTSD and sexuality from existing research
- Explore the impact of acute and chronic wartime stress on intimacy and relationships in general population
- Present clinical insights based on soldier and couple experiences
- Acknowledge need to study effect of prolonged captivity on intimacy and sexuality

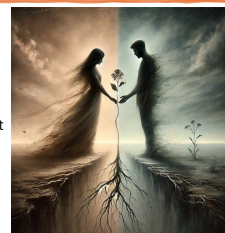
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## With all this going on, why are we even talking about sex?

- In the midst of death, loss, and grief, we instinctively seek life.
- Sex is about vitality, connection and repair
- Repopulation
- Sex is about pleasure and resilience and PTG
- Security and intimacy and connection, not just about function



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## The clinic: early experiences

- Acute stress responses
- Couples conflicts: different coping mechanisms
- Parental stress: sirens, safety
- Funerals, shivas
- Sexual difficulties
- Images of violence sexual violence during sex
- Hierarchy of trauma: direct exposure, media exposure, relocation, reserve duty
- Guilt
- New identities: Nova survivor, hostage family, war widow



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- Lazar, A., Gewirtz-Meydan, A. Rosenbaum, TY. (2024) [Changes in Individual and Dyadic Sexual Behavior Frequencies During Wartime in Israel: How Much, When, and Why?](#) International Journal of Sexual Health, DOI: 10.1080/19317611.2024.2389999
- Lazar, A., Gewirtz-Meydan, A. Rosenbaum, TY. (2024) [War-Time Stress and Sexual Well-Being in Israel](#) International Journal of Sexual Health, DOI: 10.1080/19317611.2024.2317169

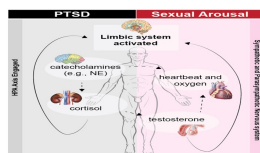


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## PTSD and Sex: What we already know

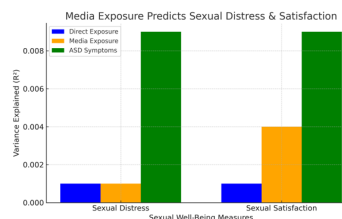
- PTSD disrupts emotional regulation and attachment, key elements for intimacy.
- Sexual arousal mimics the stress response (HPA axis involvement).
- Challenges: Hypervigilance, emotional distance, and sexual dysfunction.
- PTSD is an independent risk factor for sexual dysfunction

Yehuda et al., 2015



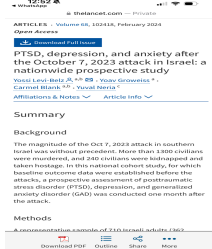
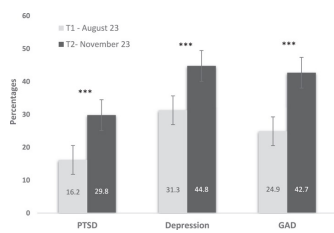
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## ASD and trauma exposure and sex



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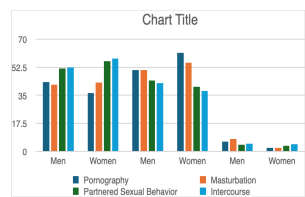
## Direct exposure predictive for PTSD



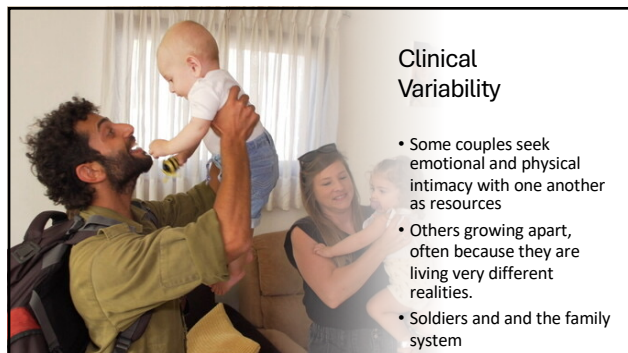
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## Changes in Sexual Behaviors

- Findings:**
  - 50% reported no change in sexual behavior.
  - 40% reported a decrease.
  - 3-5% reported an increase.
  - Emotional factors (e.g., sadness, fear) cited most frequently for decreased desire.



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### Clinical Variability

- Some couples seek emotional and physical intimacy with one another as resources
- Others growing apart, often because they are living very different realities.
- Soldiers and the family system

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### Soldiers

- Psychological Impacts
  - Depression
  - PTSD
  - Anxiety
  - Moral Injury
- Physical
  - Combat injuries
  - Genital injuries
  - Hormonal changes
  - Sleep Disorders

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## Experiencing two separate worlds

### • Soldiers:

- Disconnection between battlefield hypermasculinity and intimacy at home.
- "I feel nothing" syndrome: Emotional numbness and withdrawal.
- Sexual dysfunction due to exhaustion and hyperarousal
- Fear of hyperarousal
- Struggles with vulnerability

### • Partners:

- Caregiving burdens and miscommunication.
- Emotional distance due to differing coping mechanisms.
- He is strange, different and "other"
- Overfunctionality: "don't come back"



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## Implications for Therapy

### • Therapeutic Recommendations:

- Normalize the impact of acute and chronic stress and the war on intimacy and sexuality
- Encourage couples to communicate openly about their experiences.
- Incorporate trauma-informed care and somatic therapies.

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## Will returned hostages be able to love and make love again?



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"Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation."

"Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a meaningful world."

Judith Herman

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