

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

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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, T.Y. (2024) Changes in Individual and Dyadic Sexual Behavior Frequencies During Wartime in Israel: How Much, Who, and Why? *International Journal of Sexual Health*, DOI: [10.1080/19317611.2024.2389999](https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2024.2389999)

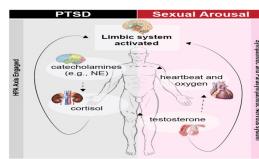
Lazar, A., Gewirtz-Meydan, A., Rosenbaum, T.Y. (2024) War-Time Stress and Sexual Well-Being in Israel *International Journal of Sexual Health*, DOI: [10.1080/19317611.2024.2317169](https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2024.2317169)

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PTSD and Sex: What we already know

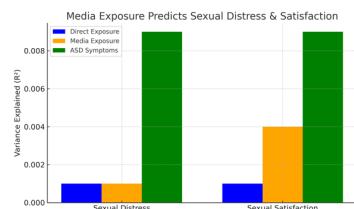
- PTSD disrupts emotional regulation and attachment, key elements for intimacy.
- Sexual arousal mimics the stress response (HPA axis involvement).
- Challenges: Hypervigilance, emotional distance, and sexual dysfunction.
- PTSD is an independent risk factor for sexual dysfunction

Yehuda et al., 2015



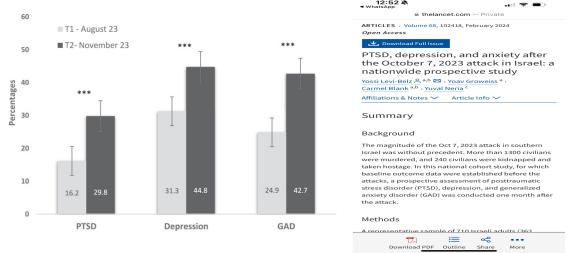
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ASD and trauma exposure and sex



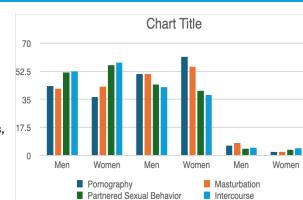
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Direct exposure predictive for PTSD



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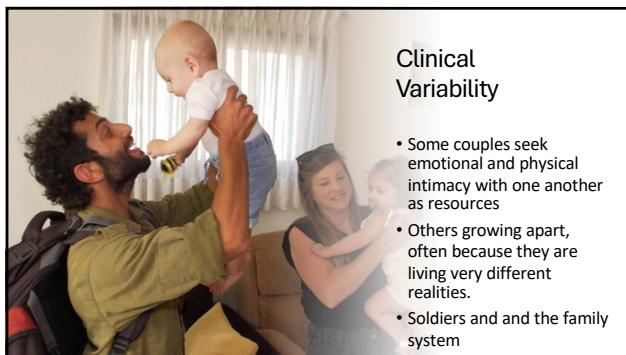
Changes in Sexual Behaviors



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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 hyparousal
- 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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