

Mental Health Crisis In Gaza Strip: Current Challenges and Urgent Call For Action

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Dear Editor-in-Chief,

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This article was written to draw attention to the emerging mental health crisis in the Gaza Strip due to the current conflict since October 7, 2023. In this article, we aim to identify the different aspects of the mental health crisis in Gaza and to provide recommendations for urgent action to alleviate this catastrophe.

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On the 7th of October 2023, a new war started in the Gaza Strip, manifested as a significant ground Israeli military operation alongside bombardment and airstrikes, which led to the devastating destruction of the Gaza people and their civil infrastructure. Up to this moment, 38,819 people have been killed and 73,934 have been wounded in Gaza since October 2023, according to the Ministry of Health in the Gaza Strip (1).

Israeli airstrikes targeted homes, shelters, and hospitals, which led to a massive impact on healthcare services due to the shortage of healthcare resources and ongoing targeting of healthcare professionals, with at least 337 health workers being killed, in addition to the accumulated weakness due to the Israeli siege since 2007. People suffering from chronic illnesses are unable to access vital medicines, and disease is spreading at an unprecedented rate due to a severe lack of access to clean water, causing a sanitation crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) has described the healthcare situation in Gaza as "indescribable" (2).

Many conditions increased the prevalence of psychiatric illnesses among the people of Gaza before this conflict, such as poverty, unemployment, economic siege, travel restrictions, limited resources associated with substantial population growth, and, most importantly, recurrent violent conflicts with Israel since 2008, making Gaza the largest open prison in the world. This led to many mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorders, and traumatic stress disorder (TSD) (3).

According to a nationwide survey that was conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in collaboration with the World Bank in 2022, more than two-thirds of individuals in the Gaza Strip

were found to suffer from depression (4). The incidence of TSD symptoms tends to increase among younger individuals (between 18 and 29 years old) and to decrease with age (4), with an expected prevalence of 71% of the Gaza population to be affected by TSD (4). However, anxiety was found to be the most prevalent cause of functional difficulties among children aged 5-17 years in the Gaza Strip, affecting approximately 13% of the population (4). Approximately 52,450 children aged 5-17 years are estimated to experience stress in 2023, while approximately 13,000 children will suffer from signs of depression, according to estimates based on the Clustering Multiple Indicators Survey in 2019-2020, before the current aggression on the Gaza Strip since October 7th (5).

Exposure to trauma during wars and violent conflicts is strongly linked to an increased incidence of different mental health disorders, such as TSD, especially among children (6). Repeated wars cause widespread psychological trauma, with long-term effects due to the loss of family members and the destruction of vital infrastructure (6). Persistent violence, destruction, starvation, unclean water, gynecological and obstetric crises, and loss of lives have resulted in a pervasive atmosphere of fear, despair, and trauma (6). Sadly, it is estimated that 91% of children have expressed symptoms of TSD since the onset of the current war (6), with emerging concepts starting to appear, such as "Shake like a leaf," which describes the acute symptoms of TSD in survived children after Israeli bombardment (3). Unfortunately, this stress may have a transgenerational impact, affecting children for generations (6).

In addition to the long-lasting siege for approximately 17 years, the current war made Gaza's healthcare system unable to respond to this mental health crisis due to a lack of professionals and the stigma surrounding seeking-help behavior. In addition, the current conflict led to the massive destruction and dysfunction of the only existing psychiatric hospital in the Gaza Strip (7), leaving the psychiatric health sector with no specialized center of care.

Therefore, we call for urgent action from international organizations, the global community, and the local health sector to alleviate the mental health crisis that resulted from this devastating conflict on the people of Gaza. Here in, we recommend urgent actions to be taken:

1. Immediate and permanent cease-fires in the Gaza Strip.

2. Facilitating the entrance of food and medication supplements and providing sustainable sources of clean and drinkable water.

3. Launching relief missions of psychologists and psychiatrists to Gaza to provide mental health assessment and to determine the needs inside Gaza.

4. Establishing multiple mental health centers to increase access to mental health services.

5. Conducting mental health awareness campaigns

6. Focused research projects should be conducted to evaluate the exact status of mental illnesses and to identify long-term needs.

Finally, this war adversely affected the lives of the people of Gaza in different ways, with expected damage to last for generations. Our short-term aim is to provide relief for the psychological aspects of this war to alleviate the devastating long-term effects.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the conceptualization and manuscript writing of this letter.

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