

# Bringing the War Home?

## Family relations of military veterans



**Prof. Zahava Solomon**

Head of the I-Core Research Center for Mass Trauma  
Tel-Aviv University



**Soldiers following deployment:  
epidemiology, prevention, and  
treatment of mental health problems**

**Odense – Denmark, January 2014**

# The Never Ending Story

*He keeps waking up from nightmares and screams at night. I can't take it any more. When I wake him up there are always body parts that he's trying to attach – 'this head doesn't fit, this hand and this leg do not match each other.' The whole time he's screaming, and there are his depressions, and his desire to die and commit suicide...*

# The Never Ending Story

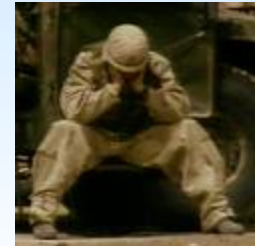
*I tried to close circle, by that I mean that we put on some iodine and a bandage and it was okay... And today, it still bleeds... Every two or three days... we have reminders...*

- The consequences of traumatic events are not limited to the direct victims, but often affect significant others
- Wives and families of traumatized war veterans are also affected negatively



# PTSD Symptoms Implicated in Interpersonal Relationships

- Psychic numbing
- Alienation, estrangement
- Sexual difficulties
- Increased anger and irritability(violence )
- reduced involvement



# Secondary traumatization

"'Secondary traumatization' refers to the traumatization of persons in close proximity to victims of traumatic events, who suffer from a range of emotional symptoms"

(Figley, 1983).

DSM5-changed A criterion



# Research of two Israeli cohorts of veterans' spouses

1. CSR and comparison veterans of the 1982 - First Lebanon War
2. ex Prisoners of war and a matched comparison group of veterans who were not held captive



# Study 1

Secondary Traumatization in wives  
of CSR veterans –  
1982 Lebanon War



# Who Recovers From CSR?

- More single men recover than married men:
  1. Heavy responsibility of family life.
  2. Being married make it easier for the casualty to fall into the comfort role of being “sick”.
  3. Sexuality difficulties

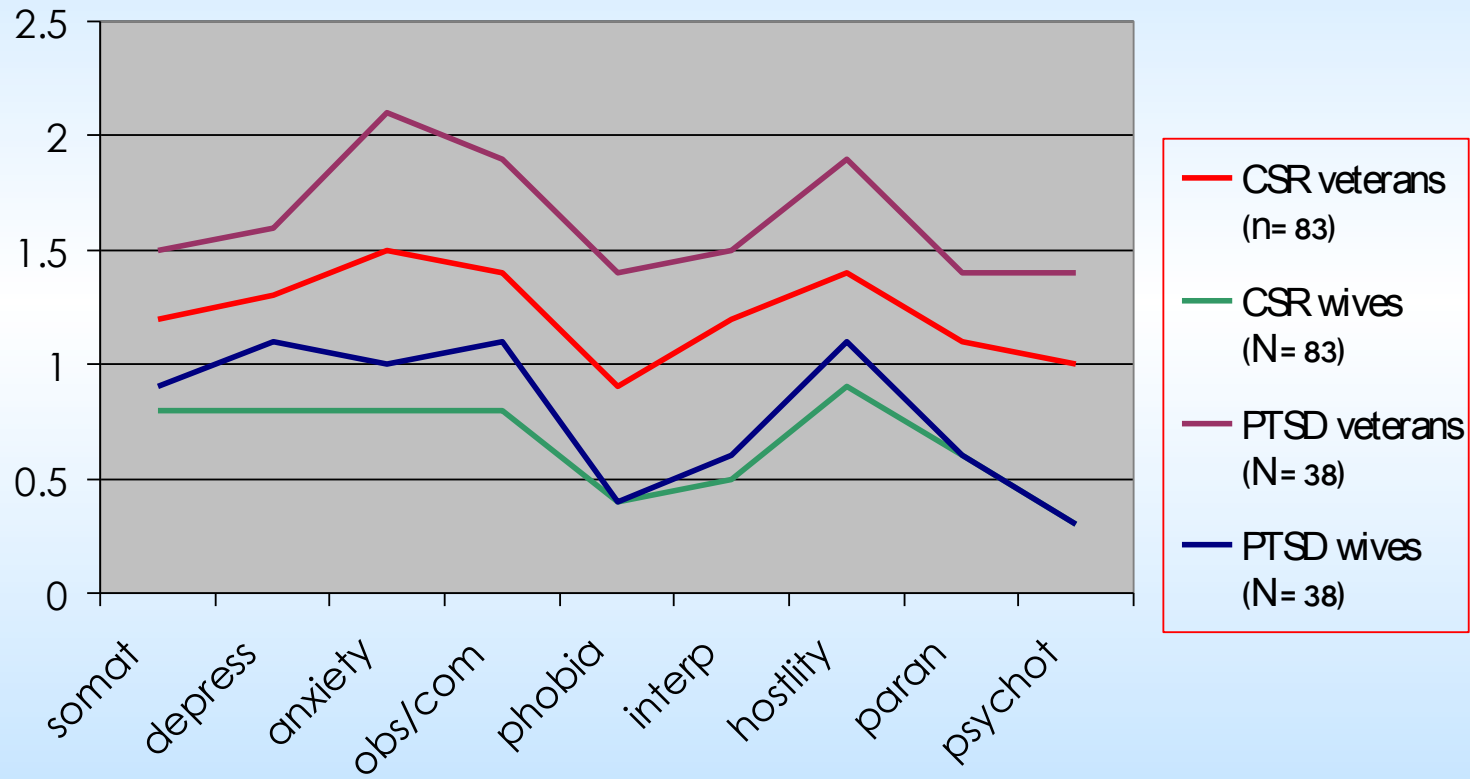


# Secondary traumatization in spouses

- Wives of both CSR casualties and CSRs with PTSD reported more distress and PTSD-like symptoms compared to wives of CSR without PTSD and wives of controls.



# Psychiatric symptoms of wives of CSR/ PTSD



# Wives of traumatized veterans report

1. More somatic complaints
2. More loneliness



# Marital perspective

- Wives of traumatized veterans reported **lower** marital intimacy, cohesion and satisfaction
- **Less** satisfaction in marital and family relations



# Marital perspective

- Wives of traumatized veterans also reported less satisfaction in relationships with **other** family members and with social network than controls.



**The compensatory effect among  
wives of traumatized veterans was  
minimal**



- Despite considerable distress marriages of Israeli traumatized war veterans are relatively stable. (late '80s)
- In fact, rate of divorce was lower than the national average in Israel



# Possibly cohort affect



# Study 2: Secondary Traumatization among Wives of ex-POWs



# The effects of captivity on families

- The waiting period
- Fear and worries about the POW and his destiny and sanity
- Home coming – A changed person  
A changed family system and role reversal

# Spouses of ex Prisoners of War

- Wives of ex-POWs reported more **Secondary traumatization** than control wives
- Wives of traumatized exPOWs (with PTSD) endorsed more secondary traumatization than wives of exPOWs without PTSD

# Other finding in exPOWs spouses

- More general distress
- More physiological symptoms
- Lower self rated health
- More diseases
- Lower cognitive assumptions (WAS)

# Why are spouses of the traumatized at increased risk?

- Assertive mating
- Physical and Psychological burden
- Sense of loss
- Secondary traumatization

# Explanation: Caregiver Burden

The extent to which caregivers perceive their emotional or physical health, social life, or financial status to be affected by their caring for an impaired relative (Zarit, Todd, & Zarit, 1986).

This construct emerged in the literature on caregivers of chronically physically and mentally ill individuals (Chakrabarti & Kulhara, 1999; Cuijpers & Stam, 2000; Loukissa, 1995) and has been applied to spouses of traumatized veterans.

# Spouse's Burden: Findings

The higher the veterans' PTSD, the higher their spouses perceived caregiving burden (Beckham, Lytle, & Feldman, 1996; Dekel, Solomon, & Bleich, 2005).

Spouses' perceived caregiving burden was positively associated with their level of distress (Ben Arzi, et al., 2000; Calhoun, et al., Beckham, & Bosworth, 2002; Manguno-Mire et al., 2007).

Spouse's perceived barriers to treatment of her partner was positively associated with her level of burden (Manguno-Mire et al., 2007)



# Spouse's Burden: Discussion

- It is not clear whether burden is a mechanism or an additional manifestation of distress.
- It does not take into account the unique features of PTSD.

# Explanation: Ambiguous Loss

- When the husband has PTSD, he is physically part of the family but no longer functions as a family member and is not involved with the family as he used to be.
- Continuous ambiguity, may lead to increased depression, anxiety, guilt, and distress.

# Ambiguous Loss: Findings

- Wives of veterans with PTSD were concerned with questions about whether the spouse is a husband or another child (Dekel and Solomon., 2005).

- Secondary traumatization results from **identification** with the victim

# Study 3: Posttraumatic growth (PTG) among wives of ex-POWs



# Getting strength

*“I draw a lot of strength from him. He learns and participates, he fights and gives me encouragement. If he doesn’t break down, who am I to break down“*

*”I admire him for all of his positive characteristics, which I married him for. I don’t think that they’ve disappeared because he’s ill or because of his problems. He’s the same person, but he has gone through some changes and faces some difficulties”.*

# Secondary Growth?

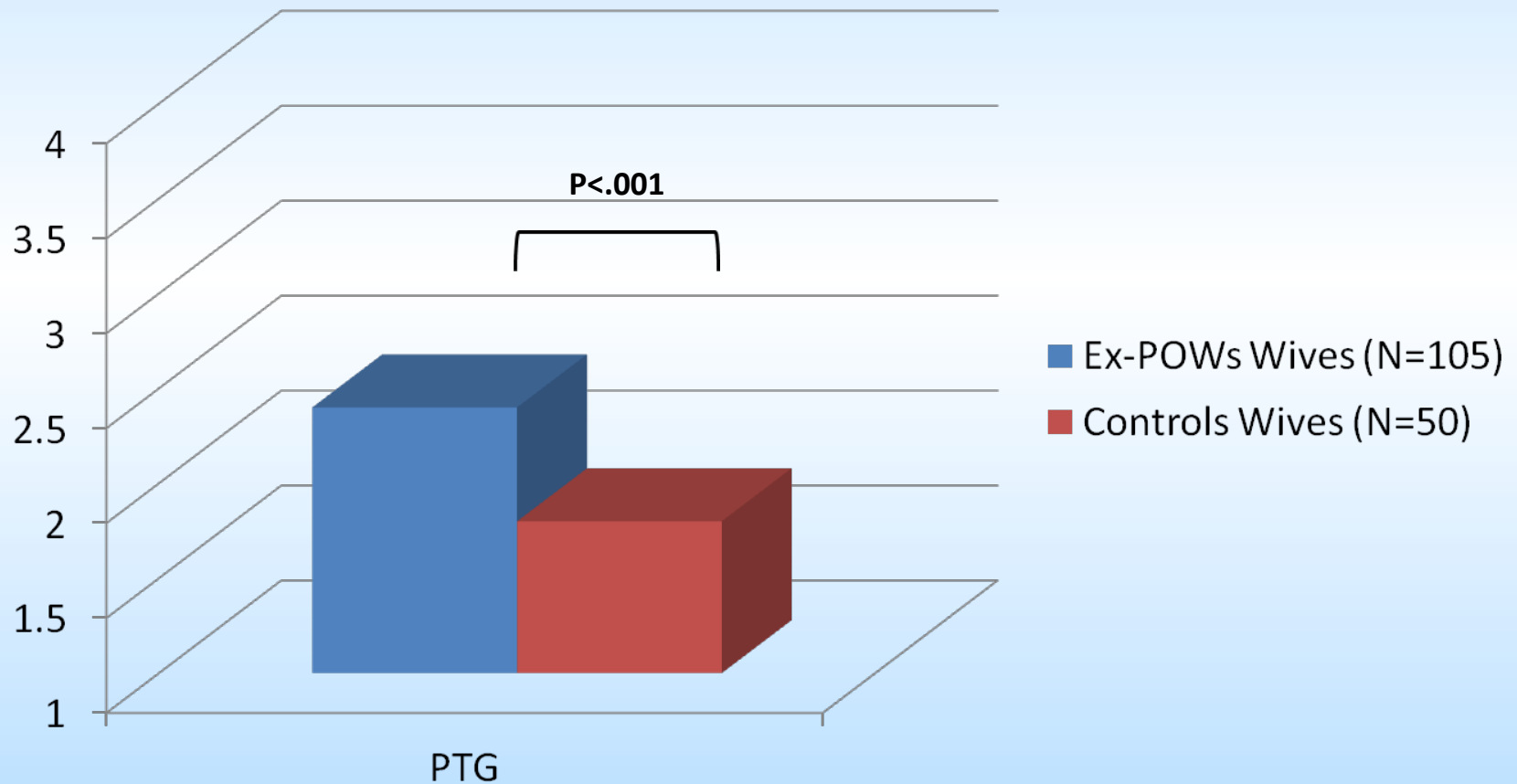
- Does the indirect effects of traumatic experiences have positive relations with PTG?

# Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)

- Salutogenic perspective.
- Positive outlook following trauma, manifested by one's relation to others, perception of new possibilities, enhanced personal strength, a spiritual change, and a higher appreciation for life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).
- PTG observed after exposure to a variety of traumas, even highly stressful experiences, such as war and captivity (Solomon, & Dekel, 2007)



# Group differences between ex-POWs wives and control wives in Posttraumatic Growth



# Post Traumatic Growth

- Vicarious posttraumatic growth have been shown in a variety of populations who were **indirectly exposed**, including disaster workers, spouses and parents of people with cancer, and psychotherapists of trauma survivors (e.g., Arnold, et al., 2005; Linley, Joseph, & Loumidis, 2005)

# Sources of Post Traumatic Growth

- The challenges of living and raising a family with a distressed husband might give her meaning.
- The wives' success in meeting the challenges over many years of marriage might have enhanced their sense of competence.
- Watching their husbands struggle increased their own determination.

# Conclusions

- The consequences of combat and captivity-related trauma are not limited to the direct victims, but often affect significant others.
- Those living with the traumatized suffer from PTSS.
- However, beside the pathogenic ramifications there are also indications of posttraumatic growth.

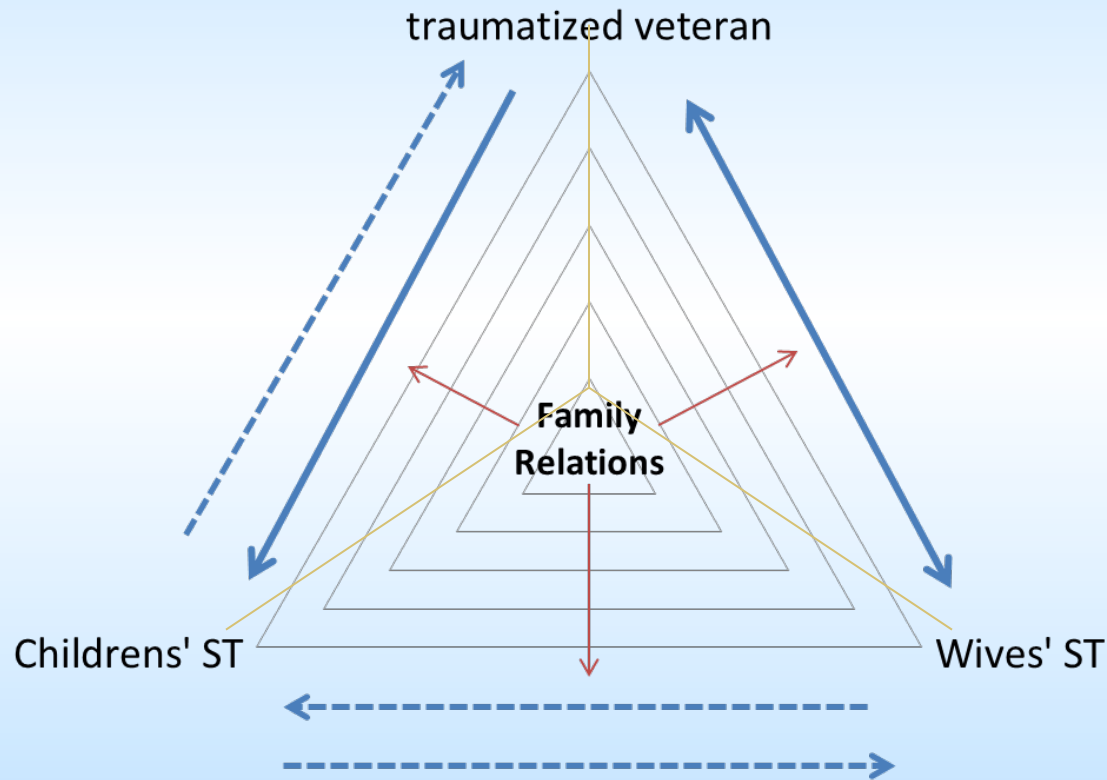
# Implications

- The effects of PTSD on the marital relationships are broad and long-lasting. This should be taken into account when planning and designing services for the couples and families.
- It is important to take into account the couple's developmental stage.

# What should be the next steps?

- Studying **couples as a system**: looking at the bi-directional effects.
- Looking at several of **pathways**: emotional, behavioral, and cognitive.
- Looking at **positive interactions** that may enhance recovery
- Differential effect of gender

# What happened to children who grow up in veterans' family



# Thanks For Listening

