

The role of cognitive flexibility as a moderating factor against war-related stress and anxiety symptoms following direct and indirect exposure to trauma during continuous trauma in a war zone

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Statement of the Problem: Exposure to trauma, both direct and indirect, can precipitate clinical symptoms such as anxiety and stress-related disorders. The relationship between exposure to trauma and the manifestation of these symptoms may be influenced by cognitive flexibility - the ability to change thoughts and actions in response to changing environmental conditions. People with low cognitive flexibility often experience a more pronounced worsening of symptoms following traumatic events. This study seeks to investigate the role of cognitive flexibility in moderating the severity of anxiety and stress symptoms during the initial phase of war, with a specific focus on the acute stress disorder (ASD) phase within ongoing collective and personal trauma.

Methodology and Theoretical Orientation: During the first month of the war, 67 civilians (Mean age=27.40, SD=9.466) were assessed for trauma exposure and symptoms of stress and anxiety. Cognitive flexibility was measured using a computer-based performance-based learning paradigm task. Pearson correlations and regression analyses were used to explore the relationship between trauma exposure, cognitive flexibility, and symptom severity.

Findings: The findings confirmed the hypothesis that cognitive flexibility moderates the effects of trauma exposure on anxiety and stress-related symptoms. Specifically, individuals with low cognitive flexibility demonstrated increased symptom severity with greater trauma exposure. Conversely, those with high cognitive flexibility maintained lower symptom levels, regardless of exposure. This suggests cognitive flexibility may act as a protective factor against worsening symptoms in traumatic situations.

Conclusion and Significance: The study highlights the crucial role of cognitive flexibility in buffering the negative effects of trauma exposure on psychological well-being. These results are a step toward developing tailored interventions that enhance cognitive flexibility to moderate the impact of ongoing trauma, especially during war. Strategies incorporating cognitive flexibility training may help reduce the burden of anxiety and stress-related disorders in affected populations.

Figure 1. The interactive effect of cognitive flexibility and indirect exposure on stress.

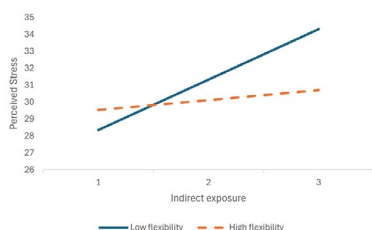


Figure 2. The interactive effect of cognitive flexibility and direct exposure on stress.

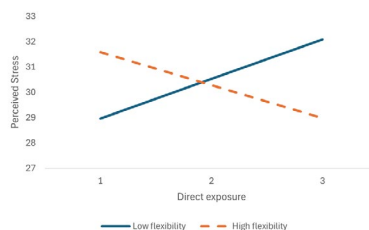


Figure 3. The interactive effect of cognitive flexibility and indirect exposure on anxiety.

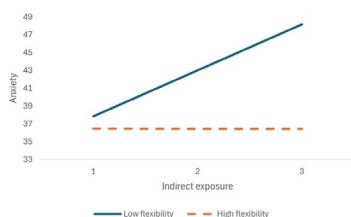
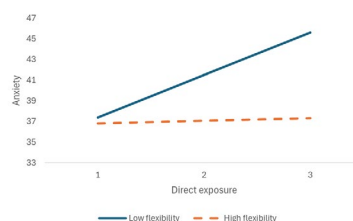


Figure 4. The interactive effect of cognitive flexibility and direct exposure on anxiety.



Biography

Shir Porat-Butman is an outstanding master's degree student on an integrated path to a doctorate and lab manager of the Trauma, Coping, and Growth Laboratory directed by Prof. Einat Levy-Gigi. She conducted this research as part of her thesis at the beginning of the war in Israel during a period of ongoing trauma. With over twenty years of expertise in trauma studies, Prof. Levy-Gigi's work focuses on how cognitive flexibility helps in the management of ongoing trauma situations. This setting provided Shir with a unique opportunity to explore the critical role of cognitive flexibility in moderating the effects of wartime trauma exposure on mental health outcomes. Her work contributes significantly to the understanding of psychological disorders caused by ongoing trauma. It highlights potential pathways for the development of targeted interventions that leverage cognitive flexibility to mitigate the negative effects of ongoing trauma.