

PRESS RELEASE

Croatian Medical Journal
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Refugees suffer from psychosomatic and depressive symptoms more often than soldiers

ZAGREB – Which population group in last 11 war and postwar years has suffered the most from psychosomatic and depressive symptoms: refugees, soldiers, or civilians who were exposed to the threat of war destruction? The study published in the April issue of the *Croatian Medical Journal* shows that depression and psychosomatic disturbances were most common among refugees.

Scientists from Croatia and Germany conducted a longitudinal study of three groups of people who were exposed to the war stress in different ways. During 11 years, they followed-up a total of 128 civilians from Split, 88 refugees from the occupied regions of Croatia, and 70 Croatian soldiers with at least six months front line combat experience. All participants were of male gender. The questionnaires on depressive symptoms and psychosomatic complaints were administered to three groups of participants first in 1993 (the war year), then in 1995 (immediately after the war), and again in 2000 and 2004.

The highest numbers of depressive symptoms and psychosomatic complaints were observed in the group of refugees. There were relatively high levels of psychosomatic problems in the group of soldiers, but the level of depressive symptoms among soldiers was not higher than in civilians. As could be expected, civilians showed the lowest level of psychosomatic complaints.

The study found that the reported symptoms change with time. The soldiers increasingly complained on psychosomatic problems, while the complaints of refugees decreased with time. On the other hand, relatively low rate of psychosomatic disturbances among civilians did not significantly change through the years.

Generally, there was a significant decrease in depressive symptoms in refugees over the follow up. However, specific changes occurred in 1995, when the level of depression increased in refugees and soldiers. Although one could assume that the end of war would have positive influence on the mental status of people involved in it, the study showed just the opposite. The refugees returned to their destroyed homes, and faced further financial hardships and job problems. Soldiers were demobilized and had to undergo transition from military to civilian life, which could be a „trigger“ for depressive symptoms.

When compared with soldiers, civilians reported an unexpectedly high level of depressive symptoms during the war (1993). Although the number and degree of traumatic events may be lower among civilians the presence of significant depressive symptoms could be the result of passivity, helplessness, and loss of control during the war period.

The study was conducted by Ana Proroković and Vera Čubela Adorić from the Department of Psychology, University of Zadar, Croatia; and Majda Čavka from the Clinic for Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, Heinrich-Heine University, Düsseldorf, Germany.

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