



Letter to the Editor

On Intergenerational Conflict and Solidarity at Times of Terror and War in Israel: The Case of Late-Life Physical Vulnerabilities and Emotional Resilience

In their letter of response to Ayalon et al.,¹ Maytles and Shrira² rightly stress the resilience of older Israelis who were internally displaced due to the October 7 massacre and the war that followed. The letter also highlights the (intergenerational) support available to internally displaced older Israelis including the provision of formal professional therapy and counseling services, leisure time social activities, assistance in food preparation and clothing, and temporary shelter. In this response letter, we wish to highlight the distinction between late-life physical vulnerabilities and older persons' relative emotional resilience. We also wish to discuss the ways vulnerabilities and resilience relate to intergenerational solidarity and conflict in the current horrific

situation faced by internally displaced communities in Israel.

There is no doubt that older persons are more physically vulnerable to natural as well as human-made disasters. This has been true during the COVID-19 pandemic, where age was found to be an independent risk factor for severe illness and mortality³, and in varied climate events, when older persons are the ones most likely to experience cardiovascular and pulmonary conditions and are at a higher risk for mortality.⁴ This also has been true following the release of more than 100 hostages kidnapped by Hamas on October 7. Although the medical records of the released hostages are confidential, the only two publicly reported incidents of continued medical hospitalization due to exacerbated health conditions following the abduction by Hamas were of women in their 70s and 80s.

In contrast to their notable physical vulnerabilities, there is some reason to believe that older persons are relatively resilient emotionally. This has been shown in response to the pandemic, when younger persons, rather than older persons were more likely to report depression and anxiety.⁵ Likewise, it is younger persons who are more likely to report anxiety about the changing

climate,⁶ and to experience post-traumatic stress disorder following severe climate events.⁷ In the case of exposure to terrorism, research has shown that older age may serve as a protector. For instance, a longitudinal study, which followed a US national sample of adults over the age of 18 over 3 years and 6 waves of data collection has found that older persons reported lower levels of general distress and a lower fear of future terror attacks. Older persons also had a steeper decline in post-traumatic symptoms following the attack compared with younger persons.⁸

Systematic findings concerning the emotional impact of the October 7 massacre and its aftermath are not yet available, but anecdotal information points to the emotional strength and resilience of older persons. Specifically, it is mainly older persons who have chosen to go back to their homes in the area surrounding the Gaza strip despite the horrendous distraction and terror that they had experienced and even though the official recommendations are to stay away from the area during the ongoing war.⁹ Although commendable, the intention of older persons to return to their homes has instigated some intergenerational tension and resentment. Going back to an area where

younger persons are too scared to return to for fear of their own lives and the lives of their children results in the destruction of the community that will no longer be able to physically exist in a single location. This also brings to the forefront older persons' fears that the area surrounding the Gaza Strip will become a de facto nursing home, with no children or younger persons around. Given the horrendous massacre on October 7 that came "out of the blue" with no prior notice, it is possible that younger persons, who refuse to live in that area, will completely refrain from visiting their older parents, thus, leaving them isolated. This represents a strong contrast to the Israeli tradition of very frequent intergenerational contacts, characterized by regular visits between the generations. The decision of older persons to move back to their homes, while the younger generations seek out alternative housing also can deter governmental officials from compensating internally displaced people who decide not to return to their home when the war is over. Moreover, the decision to live in a war zone somewhat ignores the real dangers that (older) persons may face. As the time between the sound of the siren and the need to seek shelter in the area surrounding the Gaza Strip is only 10 seconds, it is highly possible that many older persons may not be able to reach a safe room or a bomb shelter on time. Thus, supposedly emotional resilience in the face of real dangers, results in physically compromising their safety.

The choice of older persons to return to their homes can also highlight the different emotional needs of those displaced during later life compared to younger persons. Older persons might be more connected to their physical home and environment and find it more difficult to build a new life in a new area,¹⁰ also due to their potentially narrower future horizons. Younger persons, especially those with young children, might find it easier to move to a new home if it is deemed safer. Rehabilitation efforts should take these differences into account and strive to tailor solutions that fit the needs of different age groups.

One possible lesson from current horrific events that are unfolding in Israel is that even though emotional resilience among older persons is notable and could possibly serve as a model and a basis for intergenerational solidarity, it may also instigate tension between the generations because of its incongruence with the experiences of many of the younger internally displaced persons who have experienced horrendous terror on October 7 and are afraid for their lives and the lives of their children. Younger and older persons have different life experiences, different value systems, and different coping mechanisms. Whereas current efforts to support internally displaced older persons in their temporary location are notable, it is important to address major challenges concerning their near future decisions

and the implications such decisions have on all generations involved.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ayalon- writing and revising Okun, Cohn-Schwartz, Sagi- critical revisions.

DATA STATEMENT

No primary data were collected for this study.

DISCLOSURES

The authors do not have any conflicts to declare.

*Liat Ayalon, Ph.D.
Sarit Okun, Ph.D.
Ella Cohn-Schwartz, Ph.D.
Doron Sagi, Ph.D.
Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of
Social Work (LA, SO), Bar Ilan
University, Israel
Gerontology Department,
Department of Epidemiology,
Biostatistics, and Community Health
Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences
(EC-S, DS), Ben-Gurion University,
Beer-Sheva, Israel
Applied Gerontology internship,
College of Law and Business (DS),
Ramat Gan, Israel
AMCHA National Israeli Center for
Psychosocial Support of Survivors of
the Holocaust and the Second
Generation (DS), Beer-Sheva, Israel*

References

1. Ayalon L, Cohn-Schwartz E, Sagi D: Global conflict and the plight of older persons: lessons from Israel. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry* 2024; 32(4):509–511. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2023.11.012>
2. Maytles R, Shrira A: Caring for internally displaced older adult Israelis during the 2023 Israel-Hamas War. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry* 2024; 32(5): 642–643. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2024.01.224>
3. Shahid Z, Kalayanamitra R, McClafferty B, et al: COVID-19 and older adults: what we know. *J Am Geriatr Soc* 2020; 68:926–929
4. Anu A, Sonia GL, Ismail K: Effect of climate change on health in older persons. *Wits J Clin Med* 2023; 5:79–84
5. Collier Villaume S, Chen S, Adam EK: Age disparities in prevalence of anxiety and depression among US adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA Network Open* 2023; 6, e2345073-e2345073
6. Ágoston C, Balázs B, Mónus F, et al: Age differences and profiles in pro-environmental behavior and eco-emotions. *Int J Behav Dev* 2024; 48(2): 132–144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01650254231222436>
7. Kongshøj ILL, Berntsen D: Is young age a risk factor for PTSD? Age differences in PTSD-symptoms after Hurricane Florence. *Traumatology* 2023; 29:211–223
8. Scott SB, Poulin MJ, Silver RC: A life-span perspective on terrorism: age differences in trajectories of response to 9/11. *Dev Psychol* 2013; 49:986–998
9. Koren Karib M: Here I feel secure. It makes me feel closer to the people I have lost. (Hebrew), 2023 <https://www.mako.co.il/health-magazine/articles/Article-d82bbdb3582db81026.htm>. Accessed February 10, 2024.
10. Aliakbarzadeh Arani Z, Zanjari N, Delbari A, et al: Place attachment and aging: a scoping review. *J Hum Behav Soc Environ* 2022; 32:91–108