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*Miri SHACHAM*

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# Suddenly – War. Intervention Program for Enhancing Teachers and Children’s Resilience Following War

Miri SHACHAM<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The Israeli population has been coping with terror acts and war, where residents - adults and children, are under missile attacks and terror which endanger their lives. In order to enhance coping resources in this harsh reality, the “Mashabim” Community Stress Prevention Center in Israel devised special programs for teachers and children at schools. The programs are based upon the “Basic Ph” Model of Coping and Resiliency developed in Israel (Lahad, 1997; Lahad, Shacham and Ayalon, 2013). This article describes a case study of one elementary school whose teachers and pupils were under massive fire during the Second Lebanon War. Immediately upon cease-fire, an intervention program was implemented within the school. The program included special workshops for teachers for enhancing resilience following war. The program also offered verbal and non-verbal activities for pupils, to enable them to express their experiences, emotions and thoughts through painting, sculpting, movement, physical activity, talking and storytelling. The article discusses the program’s theoretical basis and its implementation in school. Furthermore, the findings emerging from in-depth interviews with the teachers are presented, indicating the contribution of the intervention program to teachers with reference to four aspects: enhancing the teachers’ coping resources, effective preparation for activities with the pupils in class, development of the team as a significant support group and the need for in-depth trauma and resilience related training.

*Keywords:* the “Basic Ph” model, coping, resilience, intervention, teachers, children’s resilience.

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<sup>1</sup> Ort Braude College, Karmiel, ISRAEL. E-mail: mshacham2@gmail.com

## Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, which lasted 33 days and ended two weeks before the beginning of the school year, the Community Stress Prevention Center (hereinafter CSPC) team devised special programs for enhancing coping resources and resilience of teachers and children (Shacham & Cohen, 2007). These programs were based on previous programs developed by the CSPC following past events of bombardments, evacuation, terrorism, traffic accidents and interpersonal violence. The programs suggest activities based upon the “Basic Ph” Model of Coping and Resiliency (Ayalon, 2013).

### *The “Basic Ph” Model of Coping and Resiliency*

The Integrative Model of Coping and Resiliency, known as the “BASIC Ph” Model was developed in Israel by Lahad (1997). The “BASIC PH” model is based on the Applied Psychology Approach, developed over 25 years of studies, observations and interviews with different populations worldwide who have lived under the shadow of constant threat to their lives. This approach maintains that each person possesses internal strengths – coping resources – to be engaged in times of stress. Each person develops his/her unique coping pattern in a lifelong process which begins in infancy.

This comprehensive model relates to six major coping modalities at the core of an individual’s coping style, mobilized mainly in times of stress, uncertainty and crisis: *Beliefs and Values, Affect, Social, Imagination, Cognition and Physiology*.

*Beliefs and values resource* - rooted mainly in beliefs, attitudes, values, hope, clarification and meaning.

*Affect resource* - utilizes personal and interpersonal, verbal and non-verbal emotional resources. Verbal and vocal expressions can include crying, laughter or talking to someone, whilst non-verbal methods include drawing, writing and reading.

*Social resource* – based on coping through social support, assuming a role, sense of belonging to community and society, seeking support and communicating with family, friends and peers.

*Imagination and creativity resource* – based on coping through use of imagination, daydreaming, creativity (painting, music, sculpting and writing), humor, relaxation and guided imagery.

*Cognition resource* – involves coping through information gathering and processing, thinking up alternatives and priorities, problem solving, cognitive organization of reality, rational thought, seeking logical information and data collecting.

*Physiology resource* – pertains to coping by physical means and sensory reactions, physical activity, games, meditation, eating, sleeping and also medication.

This model formed a basis for psychosocial interventions and research following disasters and catastrophes around the world (Ayalon, 2013; Lahad, Shacham & Niv, 2000; Shacham and Lahad, 2004; Shacham, 2013).

### ***Programs for Developing Resiliency and Coping Resources in Children***

Proper intervention enhancing resiliency in children following crisis or continuous threat, are imperative to an apt psychological development and adaptability (Hobfoll et al, 2007). Many researches have dealt with the effect of intervention programs on reducing children trauma symptoms. Berger, Pat-Horenzky & Gelkopf (2007) reviewed several intervention programs designed for children exposed to war and terrorism. These interventions are usually carried out inside the classrooms by members of the school staff with whom the children are familiar. These programs sometimes address parents as an additional coping resource. They presented an intervention program applied in a Haifa school following a series of five terror attacks during a period of two years. The program's goal was to enhance pupils' personal resiliency in the face of continuous terrorism. The program was guided by the school teachers and included lectures on typical stress-related symptoms (psycho-education), self-relaxation exercises, narrative techniques and art therapy to process children's traumatic experiences. The research found that at the end of the program the children exhibited a reduction in trauma symptoms, somatic complaints, functioning deficiencies and anxiety related to their exposure to the harsh events.

Wolmer, Hamiel, Barchas, Slone and Laor (2011), used a teacher-delivered protocol focusing on enhancing resilience. The participants, ages 8-12, were exposed to daily rocket attacks in the north of Israel, during the Second Lebanon war. This program was implemented 5 months after the war. The protocol, which was delivered weekly, tackled topics such as stress management, awareness of bodily tensions, attention regulations, identification and correction of negative thoughts. The findings indicated that participating children showed significantly less trauma symptoms, stress, fear and negative mood reactions over 3 months' time than the control group.

Teachers were at the center of a national intervention program in Jerusalem following a series of terrorist attacks. This was due to the teachers' daily contact with children, their ability to provide children with direct, unremitting support and their knowledge of child development (Baum, 2005). Teachers were given

skills and knowledge in the subjects of resiliency, stressful situations and trauma exposure to form a better dialogue with children on the complex issues of fear, loss and coping with trauma. Cohen, Ankor & Lahad (2002) focused on training teachers and school counselors to intervene and instruct teenagers to become sources of support in times of crisis. The interventions included use of art-related expressive and creative techniques, simulation games and problem solving. The program's goals were strengthening resilience, presenting tools for coping with stress, disputing rumors and coping with "the day after" the traumatic event.

Following the end of the 2008 conflict in Northern Uganda, the education system sought to enhance the children's resilience. A psychosocial structured activities (PSSA) program was implemented in 21 schools in northern Uganda (Ager et al., 2011). The PSSA intervention is a school-based, multi-phased method, which focuses on children's natural resiliency to help them recover from trauma. It consists of 15 sessions that incorporate themes of safety and control, awareness and self-esteem, coping skills and future planning. Findings showed that over a 12 month period the well-being of children in the PSSA intervention increased significantly more than for children in the comparison group.

Baum et al., (2013) underlined the importance of training teachers to help build resilience in children in the aftermath of war. In their study, they utilized a brief (12 h) teacher training to provide them with resilience-building tools for the pupils. The workshop also gave them an opportunity to process their feelings and thoughts in reaction to their exposure to trauma. Findings showed that training teachers helped build resilience in children; this was reflected by lower post-traumatic stress and anxiety symptoms in their pupils. Most researches in this field address the issue of children's resilience and reduction in trauma symptoms. There is a gap in knowledge with regard to the contribution of such an intervention program to enhancing resilience among teaching staff at school.

## **Methodology**

The research approach chosen for this research was case study (Yin, 2012). The desired research design's main considerations stemmed from the need to conduct a special intervention program adapted to school needs in the end of the war and the opportunity to obtain data in real time with regard to the contribution of this program to school teachers. The research tools were focus group of 6 teachers following the workshops for the teachers and an individual structured interview with open-ended questions to 14 teachers in the end of the intervention program delivered to the pupils. The objective was to encourage the teachers to raise associative reactions, feelings, thoughts and perceptions.

### ***Case study: “Suddenly – War”. A Program for Enhancing Teachers and Children Resilience Following War***

The following case study pertains to the application of a special program for enhancing teachers and children’s resiliency after the Second Lebanon War in an Israeli elementary school. The war lasted 33 days during which pupils and teachers experienced rocket attacks on their homes. Some of the residents chose to evacuate and moved to live in safer places. Nevertheless, they still had worries about their beloved ones who had remained in the shelled area. Upon cease fire, an intervention program was implemented in the school, with the following goals: (1) Enhancing the resilience of teachers who had to absorb the pupils in their classes after the war; (2) Provide teachers with tools for working with pupils to enhance their coping resources; (3) Strengthen the pupils’ sense of confidence, belonging and availability to learning. An additional goal was to identify pupils who needed personal support from the interdisciplinary team – school counselor, psychologist, nurse and social worker.

#### ***Enhancing the Teachers’ Coping Resources***

In the first stage, workshops for teachers were provided before the children’s return to school. The workshops were conducted by the researcher and a team of CSPC experts. The goals were to allow teachers to express feelings, personal stories and experiences during the war, reflect on what had helped them cope and receive support from their colleagues at school. The workshops included experiencing the “Basic Ph” Model – identifying personal profile and expanding repertoire of coping resources, understanding “trauma” and “post-trauma” symptoms. Through their experiences in the workshops, teachers became acquainted with creative verbal and non-verbal tools to use with their pupils. Homeroom teachers, together with the school counselor and the physical education, music and art teachers developed activities for the children for the first month after returning to school. Teachers were guided by the school counselor and the CSPC team throughout the time of implementing the program in the classes.

#### ***Enhancing the Pupils’ Coping Resources***

Pupils’ activities in the program included writing personal stories, painting, sculpting, relaxation and guided imagery, movement activities, music and discussions with their homeroom teacher. The pupils used the various activities to express feelings of anxiety, pain and concern in the familiar class environment, in a safe, enabling atmosphere. Even when harsh and painful things were expressed, the teachers made sure that the pupils were creating a link to their coping resources, “*What helped me cope...what else can help me cope?*”

### ***Parental Involvement in the Program***

Parents' involvement was greatly emphasized in the program. Parents and pupils stayed in telephonic contact with homeroom teachers during the war and continued to do so following the war and before the opening of the school year. The parents were offered a special workshop by CSPC team focused on coping with trauma, children's "normal" reactions to an "a-normal" situations and the need to address the school therapeutic team for individual support when they noticed signs of distress with their children.

### ***The Intervention Program's Contribution to the Teachers***

In the current research, a focus group and in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 teachers in one of the schools that participated in the intervention program, so as to examine their perceptions of the intervention program contribution to their well-being, coping resources and resilience. Four main themes had emerged from content analysis of the interviews: (1) The contribution of the intervention program to enhancing teachers' coping resources; (2) Effective preparation for activities with the pupils in class; (3) Development of the teaching staff as a significant support group; (4) Need for in-depth trauma and resilience related training.

Most teachers believed the program had contributed to them by allowing them to express what they experienced during the war, and examine what helped them cope with the difficulties and what else could help them. Teachers noted that following the workshops, they were more emotionally available to contain pupils' experiences: "*Now, after the workshops I feel more open and willing to listen to the children experiences and feelings*".

In the workshop, the teachers experienced the activities based upon the "Basic Ph" model, which enabled in-classroom processing of the war's events as depicted by the pupils – bombings, evacuation, parents being injured, and homes destroyed. According to the teachers, these daily activities have allowed teachers and the therapeutic staff to identify and assist pupils who struggled with adjusting to the school year's routine, after the war. The teachers reported that most of the pupils in their classes attributed great importance to these activities and were eager to share experiences, emotions and thoughts with classmates in verbal and non verbal activities. The pupils could choose their course of expression, and the variety of ways of coping enriched their personal repertoire and allowed them to take part in activities that suited them.

A significant finding that emerged from the interviews regarding the contribution of the program to the teachers was that the school staff, whose members had been through similar experiences during the war, has become a significant support group for them during the program:

*“I can get help from my colleagues when I need it, and I had learned a lot from their experiences and ways of coping.”*

*“I feel that I am not alone. It was hard for me with a baby and a husband fighting in the army. I had to evacuate to a safer place. I was away from home and from my friends. I received a lot of support from the staff at school, and this support helped me get myself together and return to teaching.”*

Another issue raised by teachers was lack of knowledge in the domain of trauma and resilience. Half of the interviewees claimed they had not acquired knowledge and insights pertaining to trauma and resilience in their teacher training program. The intervention program made them realize the need for in-depth learning in this field. *“I meet students in other stressful situations such as accidents, illness or death in the family, and the tools I have acquired in the workshop are vital to my role as a teacher and an educator. I would like to learn more about this highly significant field.”*

## **Discussion**

Congruent with Baum’s research (2005, 2013), the research findings reinforce the need for the first stage of the intervention program which included workshops for teachers who implement the program in their classes. Teachers living in the shelled area, had also been through the harsh experiences of war and evacuation and needed the workshops in order to be available to the students who returned to school, listen to them and support them. The research findings reveal that the workshops enabled teachers to share their experiences and feelings with their colleagues and constitute a support group which had a significant contribution to their ability to open the school year and facilitate the intervention program for the students. The research revealed the teacher’s intensive need for additional comprehensive training with regard to trauma and resilience, which would equip them with the necessary tools for helping their students in times of stress and crisis. Although the research was conducted in one school only, it can shed light on the theoretical basis of the intervention program, on its implementation and on the needs of teachers who are the ones chosen to guide the intervention program, as they are significant figures who are familiar with the pupils and know how to support them.

## **Conclusions**

As an educational counselor and a psycho-trauma researcher, I believe that creative resiliency programs are important as models for enhancing teachers’ and pupils’ resilience in the face of stressful and uncertain situations which sadly



characterize Israeli reality. Coping resources can be developed and enriched by early on preparation for stressful situations, increasing the ability to cope and developing personal and community resilience over time. These programs for enhancing children resilience based upon The Basic Ph Model suit, by the nature of activities they offer, every child in the world, regardless of location, language or culture, and can enhance resilience following natural disasters, accidents and traumatic family events. It is recommended that schools acquaint teachers with, produce and apply programs in times of peace and routine to enhance pupils' resilience for times of stress and crisis. These conclusions ought to have an impact, in my opinion, on the teacher training process. I believe that teachers should study the subject of trauma, stress reactions and resiliency and practice developing their personal coping resources as well as their pupils'.

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