June 2023

This time I draw your attention to the latest publications by Simon Forstmeier (University of Siegen, Germany) and his research team from Germany, Israel and Switzerland. Until recently, there have been no randomized studies of trauma-focused exposure therapy in Holocaust survivors. Seventy-eight years after the end of the Second World War, evidence-based knowledge is now available addressing the effect of trauma-focused exposure on this target group, consisting of elderly people of an advanced age. Given the high age of the participants, it was high time for this study.

The elderly in this target group are more likely than young people to deal with depression and anxiety disorders. In addition, they more often suffer from adjustment problems and experience less social support, which is so important later in life. The traumatic background often consists of multiple or repeated events experienced at a young age.

Two interventions were compared: Life Review Therapy for Holocaust Survivors (LRT-HS; a structured life story intervention, combined with narrative exposure) and a group social support program: the ‘social club’. The findings show that safe and effective treatment of PTSD in the aftermath of multiple traumatic childhood experiences is possible, even for septuagenarians or octogenarians. Immediately after treatment (T2), outcomes for PTSD showed little difference between the LRT group and the social support group. Six months later (T3), LRT outperformed social support. For depression, the mutual differences were minimal. LRT showed a continued symptom reduction during (T1–T2) and after (T1–T3) treatment, resulting in a large effect for PTSD (d = 1.20) and a moderate effect for depression (d = 0.60). These results are not only clinically relevant, but also individually, socially and historically significant. This is illustrated as well in the case study reporting on the same research project (Zimmermann et al., 2022). Reminiscence can be used in adaptive ways, even after long-past traumatic experiences.


Would you like to give feedback, share local developments in the field of trauma treatment in later life or participate in the SIG Aging & Life Cycle? If so, you may contact the ESTSS secretariat (secretariat@estss.org) or Jeannette Lely, j.lely@centrum45.nl.