

# **Rescuers of Human Tragedies**

**- A study of Trauma Experience**



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*“We are soldiers, we do not fight in wars...  
we fight different kinds of battles.”*

*Zach*

# The Study

- Rescuers of human tragedies – who are they?
- Do they need ongoing support
- Is psychological support available?
- Before, during, after traumatic incidents?
- How does trauma affect their lives?
- Do they need/want support, counselling?



# The Study

- Qualitative study
- Participants – Armed Forces of Malta 
- Semi-Structured Interviews





# The Findings

# Trauma

*“We had picked up the bodies of dead babies. My sister has kids, and I thought of them ... I could not look at the frame, with my sister’s kids, for some time afterwards” - Adam*

- How does trauma impact a rescuer’s life?
- Changes - physical, psychological, social, & personality spheres



# Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- 5.9-22% of rescuers develop PTSD (Flannery, 2014)
- This study - 28% of participants possible traits of PTSD



# Recurring Dreams



*“I used to dream about her a lot...it completely disrupted my sleep...I believe she was still alive, but her legs got stuck, they got stuck! Who knows how she must have tried to survive? I keep thinking ‘was she still alive?’” - Peter*





# Intrusive Thoughts



*“As I was swimming towards her, I could see her red hair, floating ... her hand floating, it is a horrible scene. What a waste of life! This thought haunted me, for years.”*

*Peter*



## Changes in Self

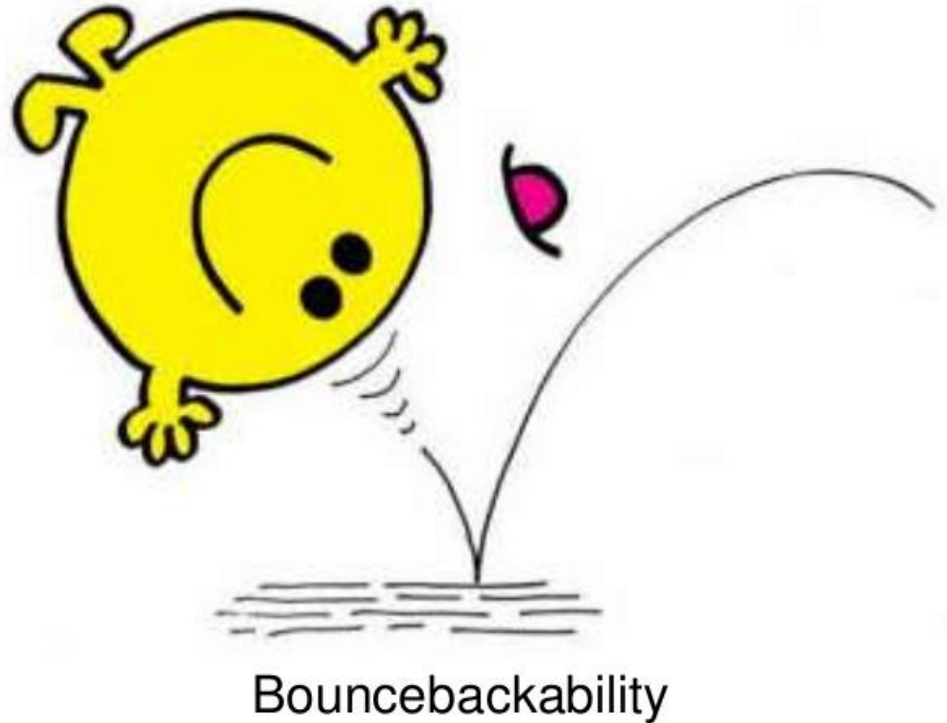
*“I have become  
negative, I have  
become a pessimist  
and this upsets me!”*

*Donald*



# Resilience – What is it?

- Ability to bounce back from stress, adversity, challenges, trauma & tragedy.
- Resilient people - more brave, more curious, more adaptable, more confident.
- Potential for happiness & greatness lies in everyone



# Teamwork

*“We always have each other’s backs ... without a doubt! We work as a team or as buddies. Teamwork is imperative”*

*- Paul*

- Strong sense of group identity (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005).
- Cohesion - core factor in building resilience & warding off PTSD



# Coping Strategies

*"Training...I believe it is our medicine here!" Steve*

- Striking a balance – work & home life
- Socialising - family & friends
- Evaluating missions with peers



# Resilience Traits

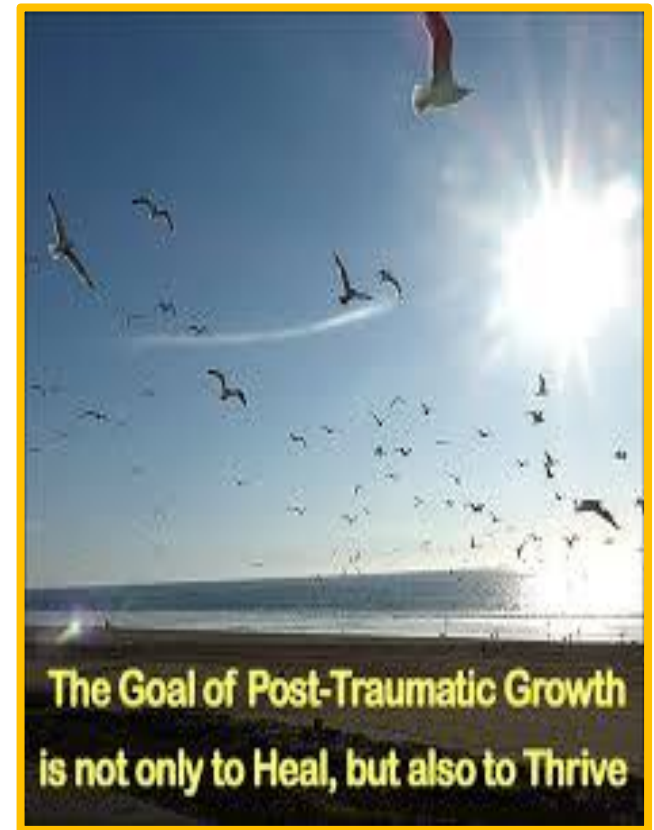
- Personality factors – integrity, kindness, strong internal locus of control.
- Hardiness – commitment, control and challenge (Bonanno, 2004).
- Sense of connectedness & belonging.





# Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)

- Trauma does not always lead to psychopathology!
- PTG – not about the absence of suffering in relation to trauma but the *Wisdom* that grows out of it (Moore, 2014)
- Changes in Self, Changes in Relationships with Others, and Changes in Philosophy of Life





# Positive Outcomes



*“I felt proud, a sense of fulfilment, I was instrumental...I did my job ... self-esteem, happiness, indescribable ... just knowing that a human being has been saved, that is the best possible gift!” – Donald*

*“I am immensely proud of my job! We are the only ones doing this work in Malta ... yes, my work motivates me, it adds meaning to my life.” - Steve*

# Appreciation of Life



*“You become aware of certain things, even when it comes to your family, your wife, and your children!”*

*– Zach*

*“You learn to appreciate more, your family, personally I feel it ... that I was born in Malta, that I have my family, I have my friends. We are lucky, very lucky, compared to others who have nothing.”*

*- Adam*

# Any Psychological Support?

- Dealing with fatalities, injured people, being responsible for lives - can cause *emotional* and *psychological* burdens (EU-OSHA, 2011)
- Research - being psychologically prepared & supported helps rescuers
- Most participants state that *none* was available



*"I believe that being prepared is better."*  
Zach

# What is currently available?

- Army Chaplain – some support
- Peer support
- Richmond Foundation was also mentioned [groups]

# Participants' Thoughts



*“The fact is Malta is small, perhaps there is an element of embarrassment, a fear of being picked on because someone asked for help.”*

*Adam*

*“This is the Army, you must not look weak, you will be labelled ... There is not a lot of help. There is nobody to support you. You end up hiding your thoughts, you will not say anything, or you just do not show your feelings”*

*Steve*

## What Participants Said about Counselling...

*“I don’t believe that opening up between ourselves is the best therapy though! We are not professionals in therapy. So are we doing it right? Are we doing it wrong? Is there someone who needs more help? I do not feel I need more, but who knows? Or perhaps, I need more help, and I am not even aware of it! So what I’m saying is that yes, there is a need for therapy.” – Oscar*

*“They could identify issues, before it becomes a problem, it could be that a person is shy or unaware of an existing problem, or in denial, maybe he can do something about it.” - Steve*

# Some recommendations

- A preparedness component - rescuers' training programme.
- Counselling sessions - part of rescuers' duties.
- Awareness & psycho-social education for those in charge.
- An awareness of counselling promoted through the media = more accepting/less stigma re mental health issues.

# In conclusion

- Effects of trauma
  - lead to stress
  - possibility of developing depression/PTSD
- Rescuers need to be psychologically supported
  - before,
  - during and
  - after trauma
- Resilience & PTG increased
  - good intra and interpersonal communication,
  - internal locus of control etc.



**THANK YOU FOR YOUR  
ATTENTION!**

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