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Trauma and posttraumatic reactions in German developmental aid workers: Prevalences and relationship to social acknowledgment

Abstract

Background: While on duty abroad developmental aid workers (DAWs) are at risk of being traumatized. We investigated the prevalence of traumatic events, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and subsyndromal PTSD as well as associations with duty features and the psychological variable of social acknowledgement as victim or survivor.

Method: A total of 312 developmental aid workers from the governmental German Development Service (DED) were surveyed by use of a trauma list, demographic questionnaire, the Posttraumatic Diagnostic Scale (PDS) and the Social Acknowledgement Questionnaire (SAQ). In addition, participants answered an open question concerning the amelioration of the DED's care provision.

Results: Some 47% of the surveyed DAWs had experienced and 7% of them witnessed traumatic events while on duty abroad. A total of 16% developed either full or partial PTSD with highest conditional PTSD probability after rape (33%) and life-threats (23%). Experience of traumatic events was correlated to duration of duties and number of duties, while PTSD symptomatology was associated with self-perceived general disapproval as a trauma victim.

Conclusions: DAWs on duty in foreign countries experience more traumatic events compared to other German representative population samples. PTSD prevalences are also higher than those of German population samples. The association between rejection as a victim of trauma and PTSD severity indicates a possible starting-point for the development of PTSD prevention specific to this profession. Implications of the study are discussed with regard to participants' suggestions on how to handle traumatic experiences while on duty abroad.