Coping Together

Dr. Michael Weinberg of the Faculty of Social Welfare & Health Sciences is taking a fresh look at how partners cope with trauma.

How people cope with one-time or ongoing trauma has been widely discussed by psychologists, therapists and academics. But Dr. Michael Weinberg, Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Haifa's School of Social Work, is approaching the field from new angles, spotlighting the effects of a traumatic event not only on the survivor, but also on their partner or spouse; and how their individual coping strategies affect one another.

A traumatic experience could be a road accident or tragedy; it could also be exposure to violence, war or terrorism. "By studying personality traits and responses to a traumatic event in survivors and their partners in what is called a dyadic approach, we can identify which personality factors may aggravate or alleviate reactions to an event over the course of time."

While studying for a degree in law, Weinberg wanted to contribute his skills to helping others. He began working as a legal consultant with OneFamily, a non-profit organization providing assistance to terror victims. He began giving legal advice to victims of terror, counselling them about their rights and navigating bureaucratic and legal systems. "I had realized from the start of my studies that my place was not in the halls of law but with people. The work with OneFamily made me realize that the field of trauma is where I want to contribute most of all," he says.

To make the career shift, Weinberg chose the MA program in Social Work at the University of Haifa, which was then the only one offering a special MA program for students who have academic degrees in other subjects. "I was able to form a very strong basis for research in my chosen field thanks to the supportive Research Authority and first-class experts that I worked with during my graduate and doctoral studies at the University of Haifa, including the late Professor Ora Gilbar, who was head of the School of Social Work, and Dr. Sharon Gil, who was then director of Social Work graduate studies."

Here he embarked on his new perspective of research, at first examining interventions for trauma victims along with their spouses. "These studies provided an understanding of the bidirectional relationship and mechanisms by which trauma survivors and spouses affect each other's psychological state following traumatic events," he says.

Empowered to expand on his approach for post-doctorate research at Columbia University, New York, he examined predisposing variables such as capacity for forgiveness and self-esteem, humor, hope, optimism, social support and dissociation among terror victims and their spouses. "We examined how these traits are associated with a person's and their spouse's post-trauma coping strategies and psychological functioning, as well as the effect that they have on one another. These characteristics can serve as protective or risk factors while coping with exposure to terrorism and psychological outcomes such as PTSD, anxiety and depression."

Weinberg also reaches beyond couple dynamics. A recent study surveyed communities that were in the line of fire during Israel's Operation Protective Edge in 2014. It examined how personality, social and emotional factors influenced wellbeing during and after the war. The study found that while receiving social support was associated with increased wellbeing during the war, those who received more social support during the war expressed a lower level of wellbeing after the war. "This was possibly due to the drop in interest and support once Operation Protective Edge ended, which could not be adequately replaced by formal support systems," he explains.

He is currently in the early stages of traumatic bereavement research, examining personal, partner and social factors that affect how a parent copes with a child's violent death.

"When we understand the impact of personal, family and social traits on individuals and couples experiencing trauma, more effective therapy and support can be shaped to help them cope better and enhance wellbeing."

Wall painting based on a work by Yosl Bergner (University of Haifa Honorary Doctorate 2013), reproduced by Harry Weiss at the University of Haifa, 1974.