Beyond conventional PTSD: culturally recognized expressions of suffering among conflict-affected adults in northern Ethiopia

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Abstract

Background: Traumatic events have a well-established impact on mental health, often leading to psychological distress and functional impairment. However, the impact of the Northern Ethiopia conflict (November 2020–November 2022) on the mental wellbeing of conflict-affected communities, particularly in Axum, remains insufficiently studied.

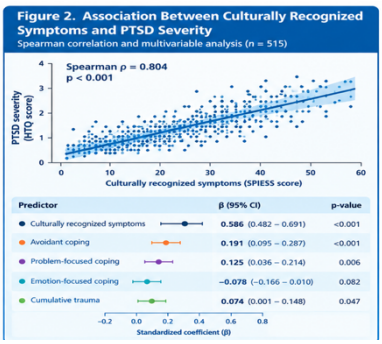
Objectives: To examine trauma exposure and its association with mental health and psychosocial outcomes among permanent residents and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Axum following the Northern Ethiopia conflict.

Methods: A community-based cross-sectional study was conducted in August 2025 among 515 adults (340 permanent residents and 175 IDPs) selected using multistage systematic sampling. Data were collected using validated and culturally adapted instruments, including the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, General Health Questionnaire-12, Humanitarian Emergency Settings Perceived Needs Scale, Brief COPE Inventory, and Oslo Social Support Scale. Multiple linear regression identified factors associated with post-traumatic stress symptom severity.

Findings: Trauma exposure was nearly universal (99.8%), with more than half reporting eight or more traumatic events. Probable post-traumatic stress disorder was identified in 41.9% of participants, while 74.6% reported significant psychological distress and 31.5% experienced functional impairment related to emotional distress. Culturally recognized symptoms of suffering, including hopelessness, perceived inability to help others, and persistent existential questioning, were the strongest correlates of post-traumatic stress symptom severity ($\beta = 0.586$, $p < 0.001$). Avoidant coping was associated with greater symptom severity ($\beta = 0.191$, $p < 0.001$), whereas emotion-focused coping was associated with lower severity ($\beta = -0.078$, $p = 0.014$). IDPs had significantly higher post-traumatic stress symptom scores than permanent residents.

Conclusions: The conflict has resulted in a significant and persistent mental health and psychosocial burden among conflict-affected communities in Axum. Culturally recognized expressions of suffering should be incorporated into assessment and intervention approaches. Community-based mental health and psychosocial support programmes should integrate culturally responsive care with interventions addressing ongoing socioeconomic needs.

Image



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