

Policy Brief: PTSD among caregivers of orphaned and vulnerable children

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PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that can occur to individuals exposed to traumatic events. Individuals with PTSD experience emotional and psychological reactions triggered by trauma-related stimuli that significantly impact their functioning in daily life. Our knowledge of PTSD among HIV affected populations is limited, especially among caregivers of orphaned and vulnerable children. These caregivers may be at high risk for PTSD since they are often grappling with potentially traumatic experiences of familial illness and death whilst also supporting orphaned children. This study aimed to establish rates of PTSD among caregivers of AIDS-orphaned and other vulnerable children and identify protective factors for PTSD.

The Questions:

- What are the types of traumatic events linked to PTSD among caregivers of children in HIV-endemic communities?
- What is the prevalence of PTSD among caregivers of AIDS-orphaned and other vulnerable children?
- What are the protective factors for PTSD?

The Research:

- Cross-sectional survey of 1599 adult caregivers in KwaZulu Natal Province
- Life Events Checklist was used to identify traumatic events
- Harvard Trauma Questionnaire was to assess PTSD symptoms

Finding 1: Many caregivers experienced traumatic events

- 60% of caregivers reported experiencing, witnessing, or hearing of a traumatic of life threatening event happening to someone they know.
- The unexpected death of someone close (30%), life threatening injuries or illnesses (19%), and sudden or violent deaths (13%) were some of the most frequently reported traumatic events.
- Not everyone develops PTSD after a trauma. Among the caregivers who reported that the traumatic event was still bothering them (n=116), 22% reported PTSD.

Finding 2: Caregivers of orphaned children at higher risk for PTSD compared to caregivers of non-orphaned children

- Caregivers of AIDS-orphaned and other orphaned children (e.g., children orphaned through violence, etc.) were significantly more likely to report PTSD (28%) than caregivers of non-orphaned children (10%).

Finding 3: Grants protect against PTSD

- The old age pension is a potential protective factor for PTSD among caregivers.

Conclusions:

- Many caregivers of children in HIV-endemic communities experience traumatic events. Many of these events are related to death or illness.
- Rates of PTSD among caregivers are slightly lower than national averages, but still significant. Notable is that PTSD is much more likely to occur among caregivers of AIDS-orphaned and other-orphaned children.
- The old age pension may serve as a protective factor for PTSD among caregivers of orphaned children.

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