

# **ARTICLE REVIEW #1: DEPRESSION, PTSD, AND SUICIDAL IDEATION AMONG EX-ULTRA-ORTHODOX INDIVIDUALS IN ISRAEL**

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## **INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE**

- Disaffiliation from/exiting ultra-Orthodox communities is a deeply challenging process, often marked by traumatic experiences, culture shock, loss of worldview, and social disconnection.
- This study aimed to understand the psychological distress, specifically depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal thoughts, experienced by ex-ultra-Orthodox individuals.

## **METHODS**

- A sample of 755 participants (aged 19-54) who left ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel completed self-report questionnaires as well as widely used scales to measure depression, PTSD, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.
- Recruitment was conducted through Hillel, a support organization for ex-ultra-Orthodox individuals in Israel.

## **RESULTS**

- Nearly half (45.9%) of participants showed symptoms consistent with major depressive disorder, 46.7% met PTSD criteria, 34.5% experienced suicidal ideation within the past year, and 27.1% had high levels of anxiety.
- Factors contributing to increased distress included negative past life events, reason(s) for disaffiliation, and the length of the disaffiliation process.

## **DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS**

- Ex-ultra-Orthodox individuals experience high levels of psychological pain, exacerbated by traumatic disaffiliation experiences and lack of social support.
- The longer and more traumatic the disaffiliation experience, the more severe the mental health struggles, highlighting the need for ongoing psychological support.
- This is one of the first published research studies that used quantitative data to suggest that disaffiliation from a fundamentalist religious community was associated with PTSD symptoms, providing support for religious trauma theory. However, this study did not measure if the PTSD symptoms were related to the process of disaffiliation, traumatic religious experiences prior to disaffiliation, or unrelated traumatic experiences (e.g. a car accident).
- The findings suggest that social interventions, such as increased interpersonal support, may alleviate distress among these disaffiliates. Also, mental health interventions that are typically used to treat PTSD, such as cognitive processing therapy, can be useful to reduce PTSD symptoms.

## **Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR: DR. YOSSEI LEVI-BELZ**

### **Q: What motivated you to pursue this research?**

A: I've long been interested in the psychological impact of extreme life transitions, and the disaffiliation from ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel represents one such profound shift. The unique cultural, social, and emotional struggles faced by individuals leaving these communities are often understudied, despite the significant mental health risks involved. I wanted to shed light on this population's mental health challenges, especially in relation to depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation.

### **Q: Were there any findings you would highlight?**

A: One of the key findings was the extremely high prevalence of both PTSD and depression among the ex-ultra-Orthodox individuals, with almost half the sample meeting the criteria for major depressive disorder and PTSD. Additionally, over a third of the participants reported suicidal ideation within the past year, which is quite alarming.

### **Q: Were there any findings that surprised you?**

A: What surprised me most was the significant role that traumatic life events prior to and during the disaffiliation process played in exacerbating distress levels. We knew that leaving the community was challenging, but the depth of mental pain, particularly tied to past trauma, was more intense than anticipated.

### **Q: What were the main challenges/limitations you encountered when conducting your research?**

A: One of the main challenges was the retrospective nature of the data collection, which relied on self-reporting. This approach can introduce biases such as mood-dependent recall. Additionally, since we conducted the study among members of the Israel Hillel organization, it's possible that the findings may not fully represent all ex-ultra-Orthodox individuals.

### **Q: How might future research build on or challenge your findings?**

A: Future research should aim to include longitudinal studies that can track mental health trajectories over time, rather than relying on cross-sectional data. There's also an opportunity to explore how different types of disaffiliation experiences—such as spontaneous versus strategic—affect long-term mental health outcomes. Further research should also consider developing tailored interventions to support this vulnerable population.