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Posttraumatic Stress and Posttraumatic Growth in New Zealand Surf Lifesavers: An Analysis of Age, Gender, Social Support, & Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

Introduction. New Zealand surf lifeguards are exposed to a range of potentially traumatic events including search and rescue, trauma and medical care, and body retrievals. Although extensive training is required and peer support programmes are in place, little is known about the impact this work may have as there is a lack of published literature focusing on surf lifeguards. Method: A cross-sectional online survey was available to all current, paid and volunteer lifeguards, 17 years and older. Information was gathered on personal and surf lifesaving trauma exposure, posttraumatic stress symptoms, posttraumatic growth (PTG), perceived social support and perceived self-efficacy. Statistical analyses were performed to explore hypothesized relationships between these constructs and demographic variables. Results: A total of 181 lifeguards 17 years and older (M = 26.96, SD = 12.45), were included in the final analysis. Males reported significantly higher trauma exposure, yet females presented with higher posttraumatic stress symptoms. 7.8% of adolescents and 1.8% of adults scored above 40 on the PTSD measure suggesting probable PTSD. Adolescent participants reported both higher posttraumatic stress and PTG. Total trauma exposure, including surf lifesaving events, failed to show a significant relationship with trauma outcomes. However, personal traumatic events alone did show a small but significant relationship with both posttraumatic stress and PTG. The expected relationships between social support and self-efficacy with posttraumatic stress were not verified. Social support and self-efficacy did show a small but significant positive relationship with PTG. No moderation effect was found for either social support or self-efficacy. Exploratory analysis did show that age moderated the relationship between trauma exposure and both posttraumatic stress and PTG. Discussion. Results suggest that being younger may facilitate PTG but it may also make some vulnerable to posttraumatic stress symptoms under high trauma conditions. Traumatic events within Surf lifesaving were not related to trauma outcomes suggesting that personal trauma may have a stronger impact than lifeguard related trauma. The lack of evidence supporting the impact of social support and self-efficacy may be due to limitations in the measures used. Results and limitations are discussed with a focus on how this unique population could benefit from future research.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract................................................................................................................................. i
Acknowledgements................................................................................................................ ii
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. iii
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................ v

1. Introduction......................................................................................................................... 1

2. Relevant Literature............................................................................................................. 3
   Trauma Exposure................................................................................................................ 3
   Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.............................................................................................. 4
       Rescue workers and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder........................................................... 10
       Gender and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder........................................................................ 12
       Resilience and Recovery................................................................................................... 14
       Perceived Social Support and Posttraumatic Stress........................................................... 15
       Perceived Self-Efficacy and Posttraumatic Stress............................................................... 20
   Trauma exposure and Posttraumatic Stress in Adolescence............................................... 23
   Posttraumatic Growth.......................................................................................................... 27
       Gender and Posttraumatic Growth.................................................................................... 31
       Resilience and Recovery................................................................................................... 32
       Perceived Social Support and Posttraumatic Growth......................................................... 33
       Perceived Self-Efficacy and Posttraumatic Growth........................................................... 34
   Trauma Exposure and Posttraumatic Growth in Adolescence............................................ 35

3. Current Study...................................................................................................................... 38
   Surf Lifesaving New Zealand............................................................................................... 38
   The Current Study............................................................................................................... 41
   Study Hypotheses................................................................................................................ 42

4. Method............................................................................................................................... 44
   Research Design................................................................................................................... 44
   Participants............................................................................................................................ 44
   Ethical Considerations......................................................................................................... 46
   Procedure.............................................................................................................................. 47
   Statistical Procedures......................................................................................................... 48
Psychometric Measures .................................................................................................................. 50
  Trauma exposure .......................................................................................................................... 50
  Posttraumatic Stress ................................................................................................................... 53
  Posttraumatic Growth .................................................................................................................. 55
  Perceived Social Support ............................................................................................................. 57
  Perceived Self-Efficacy ............................................................................................................... 58

5. Results ......................................................................................................................................... 60

Data Screening and Correction Methods ....................................................................................... 60
Descriptive Statistics ....................................................................................................................... 64
Group Comparisons ....................................................................................................................... 66
Correlational Analyses .................................................................................................................... 70
Hypothesis Testing .......................................................................................................................... 71

6. Discussion ..................................................................................................................................... 87

Hypothesis Analysis
  Hypothesis One: Trauma Exposure and Trauma Outcomes ................................................... 87
  Hypothesis Two: Gender Differences ......................................................................................... 88
  Hypotheses Three & Five: Age Differences .............................................................................. 92
  Hypotheses One, Four, & Five: Perceived Social Support ..................................................... 95
  Hypotheses One & Four: Perceived Self-Efficacy .................................................................... 98

Study Limitations .......................................................................................................................... 100
Directions for Future Research .................................................................................................... 104
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 107

References ......................................................................................................................................... 109

Appendices ....................................................................................................................................... 119
  A. Survey Facebook Post ............................................................................................................. 119
  B. Information Sheet and Consent Form ...................................................................................... 120
  C. Extended Tables of the Summary of Descriptive Statistics for \( t \)-Test
      and \( F \) Test Analyses, including Subscales ........................................................................ 122
  D. Extended Correlational Analyses, including Subscales ...................................................... 124
  E. Online Survey ......................................................................................................................... 125
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Sample Demographics ................................................................. 65
Table 2. Summary of Descriptive Statistics for t-Tests with Effect Sizes .......... 67
Table 3. Summary of Descriptive Statistics for F tests with Effect Sizes .......... 68
Table 4. Pearson Product Moment Correlations for Primary Measures ............ 71
Table 5. Distribution Transformations ....................................................... 78
Table 6. Pearson Product Moment Correlations for variables in Hierarchal
Multiple Regression Analysis ................................................................. 79
Table 7. Summary of Hierarchal Multiple Regression Analyses with
Posttraumatic Stress as the outcome variable ........................................... 79
Table 8. Summary of Hierarchal Multiple Regression Analyses with
Posttraumatic Growth as the outcome variable ...................................... 81
Table 9. Summary of moderation regression analysis with Posttraumatic
Stress as the outcome variable ................................................................ 84
Table 10. Summary of moderation regression analysis with Posttraumatic
Growth as the outcome variable ............................................................... 86

Figure 1. Moderation of Trauma Exposure and PTSD symptoms by Age .......... 84
Figure 2. Moderation of Trauma Exposure and PTSD symptoms by Age .......... 86