



World Trade Center disaster and sensitization to subsequent life stress: A longitudinal study of disaster responders



Michael J. Zvolensky^{a,b,*}, Samantha G. Farris^a, Roman Kotov^c, Clyde B. Schechter^d, Evelyn Bromet^c, Adam Gonzalez^c, Anka Vujanovic^e, Robert H. Pietrzak^{f,g}, Michael Crane^h, Julia Kaplan^h, Jacqueline Molineⁱ, Steven M. Southwick^{f,g}, Adriana Feder^j, Iris Udasin^k, Dori B. Reissman^l, Benjamin J. Luft^m

^a University of Houston, Department of Psychology, Houston, TX, USA

^b The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Department of Behavioral Science, Houston, TX, USA

^c Stony Brook University, Department of Psychiatry, Stony Brook, NY, USA

^d Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Department of Family & Social Medicine, Bronx, NY, USA

^e University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Houston, TX, USA

^f United States Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, VA Connecticut Healthcare System, West Haven, CT, USA

^g Department of Psychiatry, Yale School of Medicine, New Haven, CT, USA

^h Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai, Department of Preventive Medicine, New York, NY, USA

ⁱ North Shore-LIJ Health System, Department of Population Health, Great Neck, NY, USA

^j Department of Psychiatry, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY, USA

^k Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute, Piscataway, NJ, USA

^l World Trade Center Health Program, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health & U.S. Public Health Service, Washington, D.C., USA

^m Stony Brook University, Department of Medicine, Stony Brook, NY, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 31 March 2015

Keywords:

Stress exposure
Disaster
Trauma
Responder
Posttraumatic stress
Functioning

ABSTRACT

Purpose. : The current study examined the role of World Trade Center (WTC) disaster exposure (hours spent working on the site, dust cloud exposure, and losing friend/loved one) in exacerbating the effects of post-disaster life stress on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and overall functioning among WTC responders.

Method. : Participants were 18,896 responders (8466 police officers and 10,430 non-traditional responders) participating in the WTC Health Program who completed an initial examination between July, 2002 and April, 2010 and were reassessed an average of two years later.

Results. : Among police responders, there was a significant interaction, such that the effect of post-disaster life stress on later PTSD symptoms and overall functioning was stronger among police responders who had greater WTC disaster exposure (β 's = .029 and .054, respectively, for PTSD symptoms and overall functioning). This moderating effect was absent in non-traditional responders. Across both groups, post-disaster life stress also consistently was related to the dependent variables in a more robust manner than WTC exposure.

Discussion. : The present findings suggest that WTC exposure may compound post-disaster life stress, thereby resulting in a more chronic course of PTSD symptoms and reduced functioning among police responders.

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Introduction

The World Trade Center (WTC) disaster, resulting from the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11), has been associated with numerous negative mental health problems for disaster response, rescue and recovery workers (Aldrich et al., 2010; Levin et al., 2002; Luft et al., 2012; Niles et al., 2011; Pietrzak et al., 2014). For example, responders have been found to have elevated rates of probable posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), (Berninger, Webber, Cohen, et al., 2010; Berninger, Webber, Niles, et al., 2010; Farfel et al., 2008; Stellman et

al., 2008) depression (Chiu et al., 2011), anxiety disorders (Cukor, Wyka, Jayasinghe, et al., 2011; Cukor, Wyka, Mello, et al., 2011; Farach, Mennin, Smith, & Mandelbaum, 2008), and decreased overall functioning (Farfel et al., 2008). Interestingly, the mental health effects from the 9/11 attack and other disasters often vary by occupational type (e.g., Norris et al., 2002; Perrin et al., 2007; Wisnivesky et al., 2011). Specifically, police have reported fewer mental health problems and stressful life events in the face of more WTC exposure compared to non-traditional responders (e.g., construction workers), which may be attributable to such factors as financial resources (e.g., pensions, health insurance), professional training in disaster response among police officers, as well as occupational and social stigma for reporting psychiatric problems (Luft et al., 2012; Perrin et al., 2007).

* Corresponding author at: The University of Houston, 126 Heyne Building, Suite 104, Houston, TX 77204-5502, USA. Fax: +1 713 743 8588.

E-mail address: mjzvolen@central.uh.edu (M.J. Zvolensky).

Irrespective of occupational status, empirical evidence suggests that the extent to which one was exposed to the WTC disaster, which includes such factors as spending long hours at the disaster site, being exposed to the dust cloud, or losing friend/loved one in the disaster, is associated with the onset, and to a lesser extent persistence, of mental health symptoms (Brackbill et al., 2009; Chiu et al., 2011; Luft et al., 2012; Perlman et al., 2011; Perrin et al., 2007; Pietrzak et al., 2014). Yet, it remains unclear what post-disaster factors may further compound the effects of WTC exposures in terms of the continuing PTSD symptoms and overall functioning. A wide variety of variables, including coping skills, personality traits, degree of social support, cognitive styles, and sociodemographic factors, have been linked to persistence of post-disaster mental health symptoms in general, as well as from the WTC disaster, more specifically (Berninger, Webber, Cohen, et al., 2010; Berninger, Webber, Niles, et al., 2010; Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000; Farfel et al., 2008; Norris, Murphy, Baker, & Perilla, 2004; Stelman et al., 2008). For example, stressful life events, such as job loss and relationship problems in the period following a disaster have consistently been found to be related to more severe and chronic course of psychological distress, including PTSD (Brewin et al., 2000; Kessler, McLaughlin, Koenen, Petukhova, & Hill, 2012; Luszczynska, Benight, & Cieslak, 2009; Pietrzak, Van Ness, Fried, Galea, & Norris, 2013; Appleyard, Egeland, Dulmen, & Alan Sroufe, 2005; Galea et al., 2002; Green, Grace, Lindy, Gleser, & Leonard, 1990).

According to stress sensitization theories of psychopathology, prior exposure to extreme stressors may lead to increased responsiveness to subsequent stressors (Hammen, Henry, & Daley, 2000; Post & Weiss, 1998). This perspective is thought to be driven by sensitization, a non-associative learning process, in which repeated administrations of an aversive stimulus produce progressive amplification of a response (Hammen et al., 2000; Post & Weiss, 1998). Drawing from such theory and empirical work, it is possible that people most exposed to disaster may become particularly vulnerable to effects of post-disaster life events on mental health. That is, post-disaster stressful life events may be more strongly related to posttraumatic stress symptoms and overall functioning among WTC responders most exposed to the disaster. To date, however, this type of interplay between WTC disaster exposure and post-disaster stressful life events has yet to be directly empirically explored among police and non-traditional WTC responders.

To address this gap in the literature, the current study examined the role of WTC disaster exposure (hours spent working on the site, dust cloud exposure, and losing friend/loved one) in exacerbating the effects of post-disaster life stress on mental health. Specifically, we examined changes in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and overall functioning among WTC responders over two years. We hypothesized that WTC disaster exposure would moderate the effect of post-disaster life stress, such that WTC responders with more post-disaster stressful life events and higher WTC exposure would experience greater decrements in mental health over time compared to WTC responders with many post-disaster stressful life events but lower WTC exposure. Moreover, consistent with stress sensitization theories (Hammen et al., 2000), we expected that this moderating effect would be evident most strongly for police responders because they had greater initial WTC disaster exposure (Zvolensky et al., 2015) and this prior exposure should theoretically be associated with increased responsiveness to subsequent stress.

Method

Participants

Participants ($n = 18,896$, 85.8% male; 86.4% Caucasian; M age = 39.5, $SD = 8.8$) were law enforcement (mostly police; $n = 8,466$; 44.8%) and non-professional (construction, maintenance, and transportation workers, electricians, clergy, etc.; $n = 10,430$; 55.2%) WTC disaster responders. Data were obtained from the WTC Health Program (WTC-HP), a consortium of five

Centers for Disease Control (CDC) NIOSH-funded clinical programs in New York and New Jersey that provide annual monitoring and treatment service to WTC responders (Herbert et al., 2006; Luft et al., 2012). The WTC-HP provides yearly health monitoring and treats WTC-related conditions of responders with documented involvement in the WTC clean-up and recovery efforts, except for New York City firefighters as they are enrolled in a parallel program (Prezant, 2008). Written informed consent is obtained. The study receives annual approval by the Institutional Review Boards at all participating sites. Although participation in research is optional as part of WTC-HP, more than 90% of responders consent for their de-identified monitoring data to be used for research purposes.

The WTC-HP began in July 2002 and enrollment remains open. The ascertainment period for the current study was 7/2002–7/2010, and therefore, participants retrospectively reported on their experiences in relation to 9/11. During that period, 26,965 responders enrolled in the program and completed monitoring visit 1 (V1), and 18,896 (70.1%) completed a second monitoring visit (V2); this group who completed both V1 and V2 assessments is the focus of the current study. The participants without V2 data were similar to the analysis cohort on posttraumatic stress, functioning, demographics, and WTC exposures. The only difference between the cohorts was that the excluded group enrolled about a year later; consequently, V2 was not completed.

Assessments

WTC exposure was assessed at the initial visit via clinical interview, including (a) hours spent working at the disaster site, (b) whether one worked in the dust cloud on 9/11, and (c) whether one lost a co-worker, friend, or a relative in the disaster. These three exposures were specifically examined as they previously were found to have the most reliable links to health problems in responders (Webber et al., 2011; Wheeler et al., 2007). A dichotomous variable was coded based on WTC hours worked into high exposure (≥ 75 th percentile = 1) and low exposure (< 75 th percentile = 0) as in previous papers (Luft et al., 2012). Similarly, a dichotomous variable was used to indicate whether a responder worked in the dust cloud on 9/11 and whether a responder lost friends/loved ones from the disaster – (coded 1 = yes or coded 0 = no). The three WTC exposure variables were summed to form a composite ‘exposure’ variable, wherein higher scores (possible range 0–3) indicate greater WTC disaster exposure.

A checklist of 12 stressful life events from the Disaster Supplement of the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (Robins & Smith, 1983) was used to assess life stress at V2. Illustrative examples of such stressful life events include job loss, layoff, or substantial loss of income, serious illness, and changing residences. Participants indicated whether an event occurred since the first visit (i.e., between V1 and V2). The responses were summed to create a post-disaster life stress composite score (range: 0–12).

The Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Checklist (PCL) is a 17-item self-report measure used to assess WTC-related posttraumatic stress symptom severity, per the diagnostic criteria defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)* (Blanchard, Jones-Alexander, Buckley, & Forneris, 1996). Symptoms are assessed in the past month “in relation to 9/11”, and severity is rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*); possible scores range from 17–85. The PCL has good convergent validity and internal consistency in previous work (Wilkins, Lang, & Norman, 2011); in the present sample, the internal consistency of the total score was excellent ($\alpha = 0.95$).

The Sheehan Disability Scale (SDS) is a brief self-report measure that assesses overall functioning (Sheehan, 1983). The measure has been used in many contexts and extensively validated in past work (Sheehan & Sheehan, 2008). Participants rated on an 11-point Likert-type scale (0 = *not at all* to 10 = *extremely*) how much their emotional symptoms disrupted their lives in the past month with regard to work/school, social life, and family/home life. Consistent with established practice (Sheehan & Sheehan, 2008), the responses were averaged to form a single composite (overall functioning); internal consistency of SDS items in the present sample was excellent ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Data analysis

Comparisons of police and non-traditional responders were performed using chi-square tests. Police and non-traditional responders differ in pre-disaster training and on study variables (Kotov et al., 2015; Luft et al., 2012; Pietrzak et al., 2014); therefore, analyses were stratified by occupational group (police versus non-traditional responders). Four hierarchical multiple

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