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## BEHAVIORAL TRIGGERS AS A TOOL FOR ASSESSING AND MONITORING CUMULATIVE STRESS AMONG FORCIBLY DISPLACED PERSONS

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This article introduces an innovative methodological approach to assessing the mental health of forcibly displaced persons (FDPs) by observing behavioral triggers. The empirical data were derived from 13 cycles of intervention training programs ( $N > 350$ ), including individuals displaced from Artsakh. We sought to substantiate the necessity for real-time monitoring of cumulative stress, noting that standardized questionnaires often trigger participants' psychological defense mechanisms, leading to resistance. The findings reveal significant age and gender-based disparities: women predominantly exhibit expressive-verbal reactions, while men manifest repressive-non-verbal responses. As a practical framework for clinical and socio-psychological support, the "Behavioral Indicators Map" (BIM) is proposed.

**Keywords:** *cumulative stress, behavioral triggers, forcibly displaced persons, psychological resilience, gender psychology, window of tolerance, psychological monitoring.*

### Introduction

Forced displacement is not only a physical relocation but also a collapse of an individual's psychological structure and social identity. The psychological consequences of modern conflicts extend beyond classical PTSD. We are dealing with a situation in which trauma becomes continuous (Continuous Traumatic Stress). In the case of Armenia, this is particularly acute because displaced populations bear the cumulative impact of both warfare and loss of homeland.

Working with forcibly displaced persons and assessing their psychological condition is not a new phenomenon in psychology, since wars have been a recurrent feature throughout human history, and overcoming the psychological consequences of war has consistently been a central concern of this science. However, the forms and methods of warfare have changed, acquiring new scales and degrees of impact. Moreover, the target priorities of conflicting parties have shifted dramatically from physical destruction to deliberate influence on thoughts, emotions, and especially behavior. Efforts increasingly aim not only at physically defeating the opponent but at breaking their will and making their thinking processes controllable in a desired direction. Such a new reality requires new approaches that consider the effects of long-term stress [4, 11].

Early studies on cumulative stress among war-affected populations relied primarily on subjective questionnaires, which fail to capture actual behavioral manifestations and do not account for the layered nature of cumulative stress.

This article proposes considering behavioral triggers as indicators of cumulative stress and analyzing these data as a basis for developing new assessment methods.

### **Methodology**

The design of the study was based on modern approaches to the analysis of human behavioral reactions, which are based on the behavioral methodology of A. Bandura and B. Skinner. This framework was applied to identify specific behavioral triggers that activate and sustain cumulative stress among displaced persons from Artsakh. By analyzing these triggers, the research evaluates the intensity and prevalence of stress responses, considering both conditioned emotional reactions (Skinner) and the impact of environmental social factors on the individual's psychological resilience (Bandura).

By forming small, mobile field teams, the research group aimed to conduct periodic visits to different regions and communities of Armenia. Under the pretext of delivering psychoeducational training sessions, they created a collaborative environment that attracted displaced persons who typically refuse psychological assistance. The team then intensively observed and analyzed participants' behavioral manifestations in various situations, drawing conclusions based on the frequency and repeatability of observed patterns.

### **Participants**

A total of 370 individuals participated across 13 training events, including more than 100 displaced persons. The calculated average age was  $46 \pm 12$  years, indicating predominantly mature adults. Participants' educational levels ranged from secondary to postgraduate, with higher education prevailing.

Notably, the majority of attendees—sometimes up to 100%—were women. Even when men attended, they often apologized and left shortly after the session

began, preferring subsequent individual interactions. This behavior is interpreted as unconscious spontaneous avoidance of trauma activation and the public reliving of associated emotions. Such a strategy among male participants was observed in almost all training sessions.

**Structure of the Training.** Each session lasted between 2 and 4 hours. To maintain a controlled yet relaxed atmosphere, the topic of war-related stress management was combined with themes more accessible and engaging for women, such as modern supportive parenting, psychological work with adolescents, bullying in children's environments, and group work. The practical exercises included thematic art-therapy (drawing 'safe spaces'), group cognitive restructuring to reframe trauma, and role-playing focused on supportive parenting. These sessions were conducted in local community centers and schools to minimize clinical resistance and maintain a naturalistic environment for observation.

**The Concept of Cumulative Stress.** Cumulative stress is defined as the combined impact of traumatic events and chronic stressors. According to Miller and Rasmussen [8, 112–128] refugees' mental health depends not only on past trauma but also on the accumulation of "daily stressors." Each new failure during adaptation acts as a trigger that reactivates earlier trauma.

#### **Theoretical analysis and international comparisons**

**Nature of Behavioral Triggers and the Window of Tolerance.** A behavioral trigger is an external stimulus that activates subconscious traumatic experience. According to Daniel J. Siegel's [10] concept of the window of tolerance, a person under stress may fall into two extreme states: **hyperarousal** — characterized by anxiety, aggression, or intense emotionality. Or **hypoarousal** — characterized by emotional numbing and dissociation.

International research consistently demonstrates that cumulative daily stressors significantly influence refugee mental health outcomes [4], while trauma-related symptom formation is deeply embedded in neuropsychological and somatic regulatory processes [5]. Studies among Syrian and Ukrainian displaced populations shows that men frequently avoid formal psychological assistance, expressing distress indirectly through behavioral or somaticized patterns [6].

At the same time, Armenian scholars examining identity, collective trauma, and socio-psychological adaptation emphasize culturally mediated coping strategies in the Armenian context. Research by S. Hovhannisyan and V. Yaramishyan highlights the role of ethnic identity and mentality in shaping stress responses [2], while A. Berberyan's work underscores the connection between identity structures and psychological well-being [3]. Empirical findings from H. Avanesyan, S. Sukiasyan, and colleagues confirm that among forcibly displaced persons from Artsakh, cumulative stress manifests in culturally specific behavioral indicators, including restrained emotional expression among men [1].

Integrating these international and Armenian perspectives allows the present study to situate Armenian displaced populations within the broader trauma research framework while identifying culturally specific manifestations of cumulative stress [7].

### Research methods and design

**Study Structure and sample.** A mixed-methods approach was employed.

The sample consisted of 370 participants (73% women, 27% men) aged between 36 and 58 years. The core group included 80 forcibly displaced persons.

**Intervention:** 13 professional training-based intervention sessions conducted in different regions of Armenia

**Instrument:** Participant observation. The observation criteria were strictly pre-determined before the start of the intervention cycles. Based on the behavioral frameworks of Bandura and Skinner, the 'Behavioral Indicators Map' (BIM) was utilized as a structured tool where observers recorded pre-defined triggers in real-time using standardized observation diaries. These diaries were developed to record behavioral reactions during discussions of indirectly related topics, ensuring that the indicators were consistent across all 13 training sessions.

**Observational Indicators.** Participants' behavior was assessed across three levels:

1. Verbal: voice tone, abrupt topic shifts
2. Nonverbal: facial expressions, avoidance of eye contact, closed posture
3. Physical: desire to leave the room, emotional withdrawal/silence

### Results and analysis

**Gender Differences.** Statistical analysis revealed pronounced differences in reactions to triggers.

**Table 1.** Frequency of Behavioral Triggers by Gender

Behavioral Indicator	Women (N = 270)	Men (N = 100)	p-value
Emotional response (crying)	68%	12%	< 0.001
Spontaneous avoidance (leaving the area)	5%	42%	< 0.001
Nonverbal repression (silence, withdrawal)	22%	76%	< 0.001

The data indicate significant gender differences in behavioral manifestations of cumulative stress. Women more frequently displayed emotional expressiveness, while men showed avoidance and nonverbal repression. The  $p < 0.001$  values confirm that these differences are highly statistically significant.

**Age-related characteristics.** Young adults (18–35): psychological lability and future orientation, cumulative stress manifests as high emotional reactivity, anxiety, and focus on uncertain future prospects rather than past losses. Older adults

(50+): reflection and self-blame elder participants demonstrated deep reflection, silence, self-blame, and conservative coping strategies, viewing displacement as the loss of an entire life narrative.

Older men showed a combination of self-blame and repressive silence, often leading to somatization (cardiovascular issues, headaches). Younger women demonstrated greater adaptability when supported by social networks.

**Extended case studies**

**Case 1.** Participant G. (Male, 52)

Baseline: Sat near the door, avoided eye contact; left when loss of home was discussed.

Second session: Waited outside until the session ended; resistance decreased through rational therapy.

Analysis: Supports the thesis that trauma mitigation in men may occur through rationalization.

**Case 2.** Participant S. (Female, 38)

Baseline: High anxiety, repetitive speech focused on displacement details.

Outcome: Cognitive restructuring occurred; she began discussing recovery resources.

**Discussion**

Our findings support Bessel van der Kolks [11] thesis that trauma is “stored in the body.” Standard questionnaires often fail because displaced persons unconsciously protect themselves from re-traumatization. Observation of behavioral triggers allows professionals to detect what remains otherwise invisible.

Based on the analysis, a structured matrix of behavioral indicators was developed for monitoring cumulative stress.

**Table 2.** Behavioral Indicators Map (BIM) — Structural Matrix for Monitoring Cumulative Stress

Observation Stage	Behavioral Trigger / Indicator	Interpretation
Entry stage	Voice fluctuation, hand tremor, sitting near exit	Loss of safety, high anxiety
Thematic activation	Topic shift, frozen gaze, closed posture	Trauma activation, cognitive resistance
Group interaction	Silence or sarcastic remarks	Identity defense, emotional dissociation
Reflective stage	Self-blame, repetitive recollection	Depressive layer of cumulative stress
Emotional release	Tears or accelerated speech	Hyperarousal, signs of processing
Physical	Leaving the area, rapid	Acute stress response

reaction	breathing	(fight-or-flight trigger)
Closing stage	Difficulty discussing future	Existential crisis, cumulative exhaustion

## Conclusions

### Summary of Findings

1. **Priority of behavioral triggers:** Behavioral observation provides a more reliable diagnostic tool than questionnaires.
2. **Gender models of coping:**
  - Women — expressive-verbal discharge
  - Men — repressive nonverbal responses
3. **Age-related existential patterns:**
  - Youth — anxiety about uncertain future
  - Older adults — loss-oriented reflection and self-blame

## Practical Recommendations

The analysis of the research findings enabled the development of the following practical recommendations:

### Differentiated interventions:

- Men: application of indirect therapeutic approaches (e.g., occupational therapy, activity-based engagement), where verbal disclosure is not obligatory.
- Women: use of group discussions and art-therapy techniques that facilitate emotional expression and social support.

**Intergenerational dialogue:** Programs should integrate the future-oriented adaptability of younger participants with the reflective life experience of older adults, thereby promoting mutual support and reducing maladaptive coping patterns.

**Implementation of the Behavioral Indicators Map (BIM):** Behavioral-indicator-based assessment systems should be introduced into governmental and non-governmental psychosocial programs to enable early detection of cumulative stress and prevention of severe mental health disorders.

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**ՎԱՐՔԱՅԻՆ ԽԹԱՆԻՉՆԵՐԸ ՈՐՊԵՍ ԿՈՒՏԱԿԱՅԻՆ ՍԹՐԵՍԻ  
ԳՆԱՀԱՏՄԱՆ ԵՎ ՄՇՏԱԴԻՏԱՐԿՄԱՆ ԳՈՐԾԻՔ ԲՈՆԻ ՏԵՂԱՀԱՆՎԱԾ  
ԱՆՁԱՆՑ ՇՐՋԱՆՈՒՄ**

Հետազոտությունն իրականացվել է «Գիտական արդյունավետության խթանման»  
25RG-5A146 դրամաշնորհային ծրագրի շրջանակներում:

*Վիդյա Յարամիշյան (Երևանի պետական համալսարան, Երևան, Հայաստան)*

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Հոդվածում ներկայացված է բռնի տեղահանված անձանց հոգեկան առողջության գնահատման նորարարական մեթոդաբանական մոտեցում, որը հիմնված է վարքային խթանիչների (տրիգերների) դիտարկման վրա: Հետազոտական տվյալները ստացվել են միջամտային դասընթացների 13 փուլերի ընթացքում ( $N > 350$  մասնակից), որոնցում ներգրավված են եղել նաև Լեռնային Ղարաբաղից բռնի տեղահանված անձինք: Մենք փորձել ենք հիմնավորել «իրական ժամանակում» կունուլյատիվ սթրեսի մոնիթորինգի անհրաժեշտությունը, քանի որ ստանդարտ հարցարանները հաճախ բախվում են մասնակիցների պաշտպանական մեխանիզմների դիմադրությանը: Հետազոտության արդյունքում վեր են հանվել զգալի տարիքային և գենդերային տարբերություններ՝ կանանց մոտ գերակշռում են էքսպրեսիվ-վերբալ, իսկ տղամարդկանց մոտ՝ ռեպրեսիվ-ոչ վերբալ ռեակցիաները: Որպես կլինիկական և սոցիալ-հոգեբանական աջակցության գործիք՝ առաջարկվում է «Վարքային ինդիկատորների քարտեզը» (ՎԻՔ):

**Հանգուցային բաներ՝** կուճույլատիվ սթրես, վարքային տրիգերներ, բռնի տեղահանված անձինք, հոգեբանական դիմադրություն, գենդերային հոգեբանություն, հանդուրժողականության պատրուհան, հոգեբանական մոնիթորինգ:

## ПОВЕДЕНЧЕСКИЕ ТРИГГЕРЫ КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ ОЦЕНКИ И МОНИТОРИНГА КУМУЛЯТИВНОГО СТРЕССА СРЕДИ НАСИЛЬСТВЕННО ПЕРЕМЕЩЕННЫХ ЛИЦ

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В данной статье представлен инновационный методологический подход к оценке психического здоровья вынужденных переселенцев, основанный на анализе поведенческих триггеров. Эмпирическую базу исследования составили данные 13 циклов интервенционных курсов ( $N > 350$  участников), включая лиц, перемещенных из Нагорного Карабаха. Нами предпринята попытка обосновать необходимость мониторинга кумулятивного стресса в режиме реального времени, указывая на то, что стандартные опросники зачастую малоэффективны из-за работы защитных механизмов психики респондентов. В ходе исследования выявлены значимые гендерные и возрастные различия: преобладание экспрессивно-вербальных реакций у женщин и репрессивно-невербальных-у мужчин. В качестве практического инструмента клинической и социально-психологической поддержки предлагается «Карта поведенческих индикаторов» (КПИ).

**Ключевые слова:** кумулятивный стресс, поведенческие триггеры, вынужденные переселенцы, психологическое сопротивление, возрастные и гендерные различия, окно толерантности, психологический мониторинг.

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