Parental physical abuse remains a disturbingly pervasive issue with deep-seated repercussions on mental health. Internationally, one in five adolescents experiences physical family violence. Despite experiencing such adversity, some adolescents do not exhibit observable behaviors or display internalizing symptoms such as depression or dissociation, which traditionally would classify them as “resilient.” Prof. Dr. Wassilis Kassis is the principal proponent of the project “Understanding the Resilience Pathways of Adolescent Students with Experience of Physical Family Violence.” This study examines how exposure to physical abuse affects adolescents’ resiliency, focusing on the interplay of individual, family, and school factors.

Dr. Kassis highlights that family violence is a widespread issue affecting all levels of society, not just marginalized or less affluent groups. He argues that societal perceptions of family violence are often incorrectly attributed to family violence. He further explains that family violence involves a dual aspect of feeling good and doing well, which includes both hedonic (emotional well-being) and eudemonic (functional well-being) aspects. The hedonic element is characterized by high self-esteem and low levels of depression and anxiety, whereas the eudemonic aspect involves the ability to maintain positive emotions.

Externalizing symptoms, on the other hand, are outward-directed behaviors that are usually more observable. These include aggressive behaviors, acting out, and difficulties in controlling impulses. In this study, aggression toward peers is specifically considered an externalizing symptom. Externalizing behaviors are typically disruptive and can be a call for help as the adolescent struggles to cope with emotional pain through outward expression.

Exploring Family Violence Resilience Through the Dual-Factor Model of Mental Health

Understanding the resilience of adolescents who have faced physical family abuse is a challenging task. Resilience isn’t just about bouncing back from adversity; it’s about thriving despite it. This complexity in defining and measuring resilience is partly because it involves a variety of factors at individual, family, and school levels, requiring a comprehensive approach. Given these constraints, innovative ways researchers are tackling this issue is by using what’s known as the dual-factor model of mental health. Traditionally, mental health was often defined merely by the absence of mental illnesses like depression or anxiety. However, the dual-factor model expands this definition by considering not just the absence of negative mental health symptoms but also the presence of positive well-being indicators.

This model helps in understanding resilience by showing that being resilient isn’t just about not feeling bad—it’s also about feeling good and functioning well in daily life. For adolescents, this means not only dealing with the scars of abuse but also developing a sense of well-being that includes happiness, a purpose in life, and effective functioning in their environments, such as school. As Dr. Kassis explains, resilience involves a dual aspect of feeling good and doing well, which includes both hedonic (emotional well-being) and eudemonic (functional well-being). Hedonic resilience is characterized by high self-esteem and low levels of depression and anxiety, reflecting the adolescent’s ability to maintain positive emotions. This emotional resilience is crucial as it supports the adolescent’s overall sense of well-being and helps buffer against the psychological impact of abuse. On the eudemonic side, resilience involves positive functioning in social and academic settings. This includes strong self-efficacy, fulfilling relationships, and effective academic performance.

In his research, Dr. Kassis identifies three main characteristics that are essential for adolescents to feel competent and autonomous. The ability to navigate school demands and build positive relationships are key indicators of an adolescent’s capacity to adapt and thrive despite their challenging experiences. “We believe that just as the absence of war isn’t peace, the absence of negative symptoms doesn’t mean well-being. It’s about more than just surviving; it’s about thriving,” says Dr. Kassis.

The researchers conducted a longitudinal study in two waves that involved seventh-grade students. This study sought to determine whether the resilience observed among adolescents who experienced parental abuse remains stable over time or changes. The researchers used an innovative approach, including latent class and latent transition analysis, to identify different patterns of resilience and how these patterns might evolve. They analyzed how factors such as socioeconomic status, migration background, and gender might influence these resilience patterns.

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Understanding Resilience in Adolescents Facing Family Violence

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