



The Connection Between Parental Guilt, Trauma, and Self-Compassion

Amit Amdorsky, Bar Rozenshin, Inbar Ilovitch, Shahar Salomon, Yaara Nir and Prof. Naama Atzaba-poria
Duet Center, Psychology Department, Ben Gurion University of the Negev

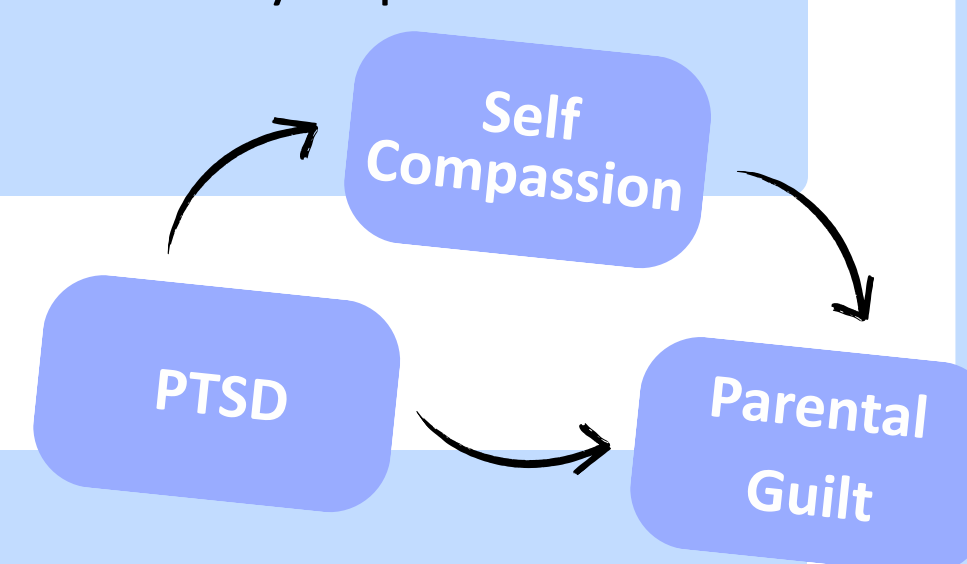


Introduction

- On October 7, 2023, Israel experienced an unprecedented terrorist attack, significantly affecting citizens' mental health. These events were associated with elevated PTSD symptoms (Mayer et al., 2024).
- Feelings of guilt are a very common aspect of parenthood, often resulting from the immense responsibility and vulnerability it entails, as well as from the social expectations placed on parents (Shalev et al., 2023). Although guilt can serve a natural and moral function, excessive guilt may become a psychological burden for many parents (Baumeister et al., 1994).
- Studies have shown a significant positive association between post traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) and guilt (Shi et al., 2021), including among parents and primary caregivers of children exposed to trauma, where PTSS were linked to heightened guilt and shame (Hawkins et al., 2019).
- Self-compassion involves kindness toward oneself, recognition that struggles are part of the human experience, and mindful, balanced awareness of negative emotions (Neff, 2003). Higher levels of self-compassion have been associated with lower maternal guilt (Miller & Strachan, 2020), as well as with reduced symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Maheux & Price, 2016).

The Current Study

- Due to these findings, we examined the correlation between PTSS and parental guilt among parents following the October 7, 2023 terror attack, as well as the potential mediating role of self-compassion in this relationship.
- Hypothesis 1:** There will be a positive correlation between PTSS and the intensity of parental guilt.
- Hypothesis 2:** self-compassion will partially mediate the relationship between PTSS and guilt.



Methodology

Participants:

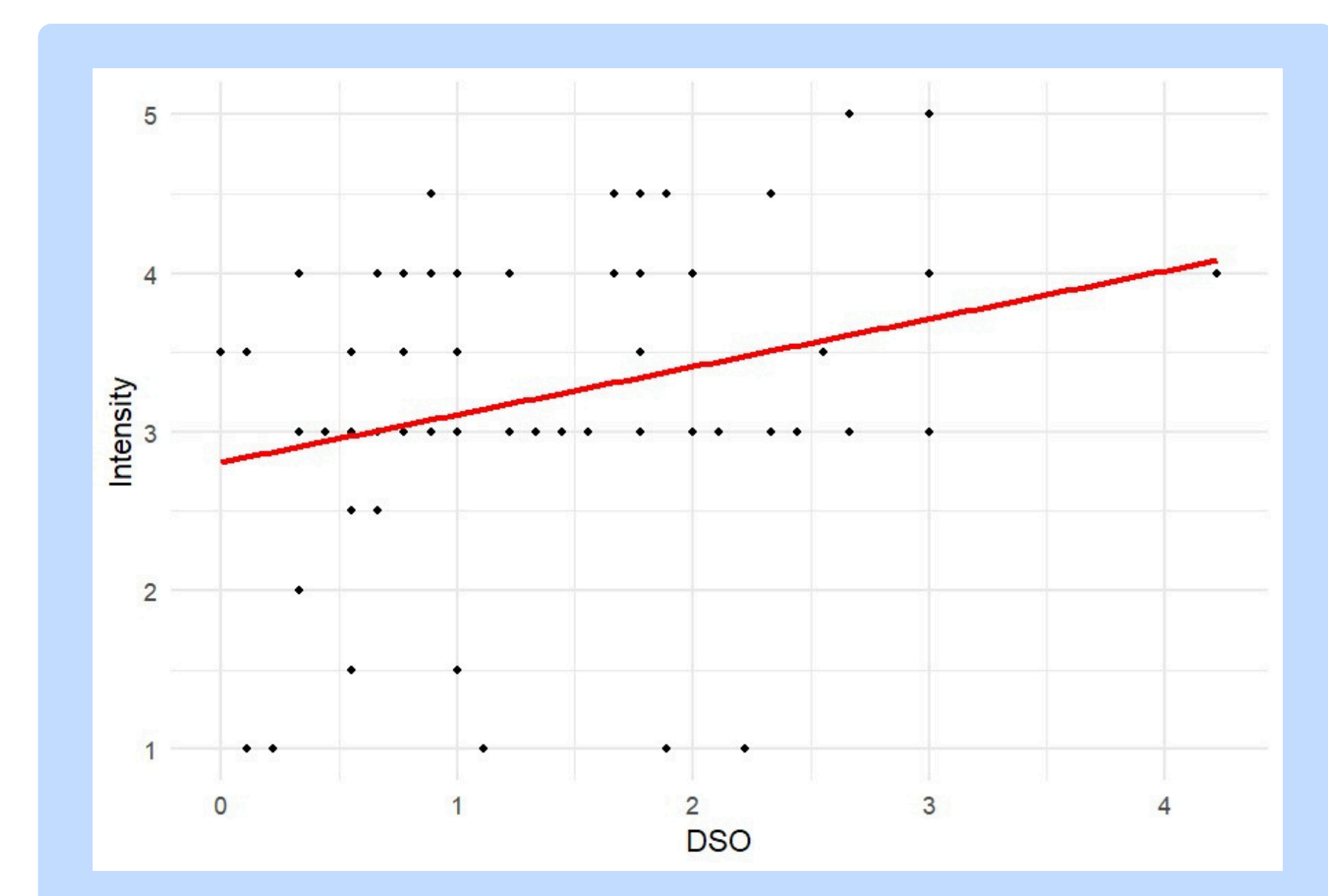
- 78 Israeli parents of preschool-aged children participated in "Duet" groups, a program aimed at enhancing parental reflective functioning (PRF; Menashe-Grinberg et al., 2022). the program was Adjusted to parents exposed to the traumatic events of October 7th.

Measures:

- PTSS were assessed using the International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ), which includes two symptom clusters: PTSD (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$) and Disturbances in Self-Organization (DSO; Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("Not at all") to 4 ("Extremely") (Hyland et al., 2017).
- Self-Compassion was measured by the 12 item Self-Compassion Scale–Short Form (SCS–SF), which includes Self-Kindness, Self-Judgment, Common Humanity, Isolation, Mindfulness, and Over-Identification (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$). The scale ranges from 1 to 5 (Raes et al., 2011).
- Parental guilt intensity was measured using "intensity" subscale from a three-item parental guilt coding system (Shalev et al., 2023; Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$). Coding was based on the specific guilt-related section from the Parent Development Interview (PDI-R; Slade et al., 2004). Intensity was rated on a scale from 1 (no guilt) to 5 (very high levels of guilt). Coding was performed independently by trained coders. All data were collected prior to the intervention.

Results

- The correlation between parental guilt intensity and total PTSD symptoms, as measured by the ITQ, was not statistically significant ($r = .18, p = .122$).
- However, a significant positive correlation emerged when focusing on the link between parental guilt and DSO ($r = .25, p = .028$).
- The hypothesized partial mediation via self-compassion was statistically significant for DSO symptoms (ACME = 0.10, $p = .056$; ADE = 0.21, $p = .152$), and more specifically, higher parental guilt was related to less compassion which, in turn, was related to higher DSO.



Discussion

- We examined the association between PTSS and parental guilt intensity. Although the correlation between parental guilt intensity and total PTSD symptoms was not significant, a significant positive correlation was found with the DSO cluster.
- Complex PTSD (CPTSD), a sibling diagnosis to PTSD, includes the six PTSD symptoms alongside DSO, which captures psychological disturbances following repeated and inescapable interpersonal trauma. DSO includes, among other components, negative self-concept, which involves feelings of guilt (Hyland et al., 2017). This aligns with previous findings linking DSO to guilt and emotion dysregulation (Ford & Courtois, 2021).
- The partial mediation model via self-compassion was statistically significant, indicating that higher parental guilt was associated with lower self-compassion, which, in turn, was associated with higher DSO symptoms. This suggests that self-compassion may serve as a protective factor that slightly reduces the impact of trauma-related disturbances in self-organization on guilt. However, given the small effect size, its buffering role may be limited in the context of severe trauma.
- The core belief system, including beliefs about the self, can be destabilized by traumatic events (Schuler & Boals, 2015), such as the October 7th terror attack. Self-compassion has been linked to greater stability in self-worth (Neff & Vonk, 2009), suggesting it may help maintain core beliefs during stress. However, when these beliefs are already profoundly disrupted, as in the case of severe trauma, self-compassion alone may not be strong enough to restore them - possibly explaining the small mediation effect found in this study.