



Living in Suspension: Dissociation as an Adaptive and Disruptive Response Among Neurodivergent Children and Families in Wartime Ukraine



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Background

The full-scale war in Ukraine has exposed millions of children and families to prolonged uncertainty, displacement, and repeated safety threats.

For neurodivergent children, including those on the autism spectrum or with ADHD, chronic stress environments may intensify dissociative coping responses.

Dissociation can function as a psychological mechanism allowing temporary distancing from overwhelming experiences. At the same time, persistent dissociative patterns may interfere with emotional processing, attention regulation, and relational engagement.

Clinicians working with war-affected families have increasingly reported states of emotional numbing, withdrawal, and attentional fragmentation during periods of acute stress.

Clinical Context

These observations emerge from ongoing psychological support provided to Ukrainian families affected by war through Telehelp Ukraine, an international volunteer network offering remote psychological services.

The clinical work includes sessions with neurodivergent children, adolescents, and caregivers experiencing displacement, chronic threat exposure, and prolonged uncertainty.

Sessions are conducted online and focus on trauma-informed support, caregiver guidance, and emotional stabilization.

Clinical observations presented here reflect aggregated patterns emerging across multiple cases.

Clinical Observations

Observed Patterns

Several recurring patterns were noted during clinical work:

- emotional withdrawal during discussions of uncertainty or safety threats
- reduced affect expression and emotional numbing
- attentional fragmentation under stress
- sensory overload followed by shutdown responses
- increased reliance on internal fantasy or imagined environments

These responses often appeared during moments when children attempted to process war-related experiences or disruptions in daily routines.

Adaptive Function

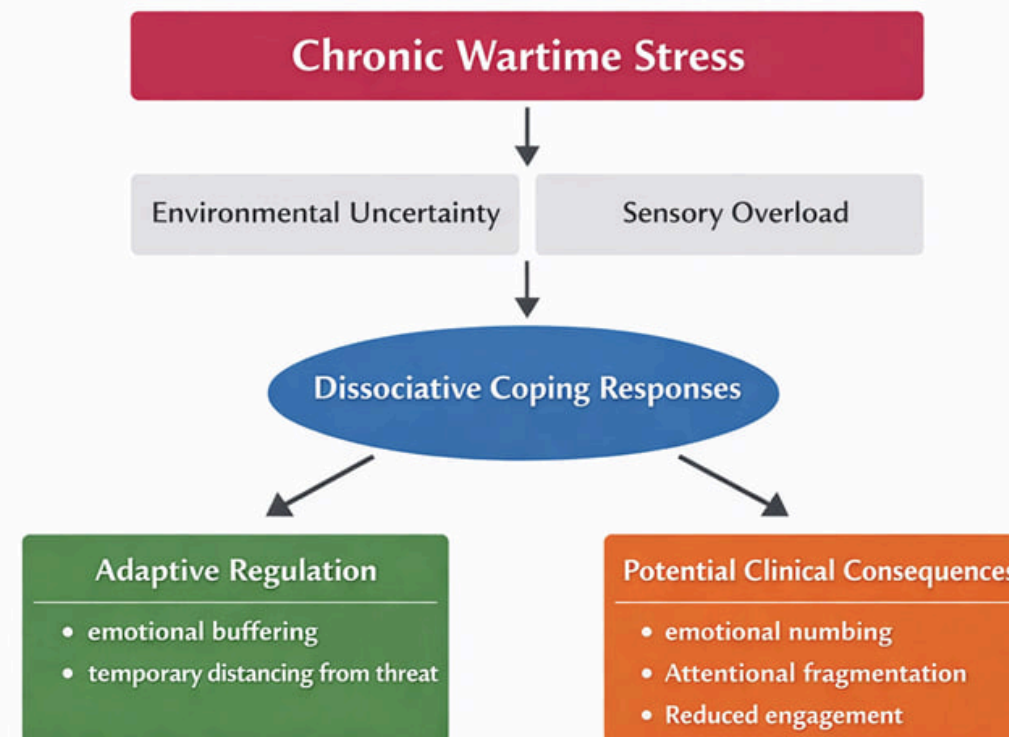
Dissociation as Adaptive Response

In many situations dissociation appeared to serve a protective role.

Observed adaptive functions included:

- temporary emotional buffering during overwhelming situations
- distancing from traumatic imagery or memories
- reduction of sensory overload in highly stressful environments

Within acute stress contexts such responses may help children maintain basic functioning and psychological stability.



Clinical Vignettes

Vignette 1 : Sensory Overload and Shutdown

A neurodivergent school-aged child displaced due to war reported episodes of “disappearing inside” during air-raid alarms and sudden loud sounds.

During sessions the child described losing awareness of surroundings and entering an internal imagined space where external stimuli became distant.

Gradual grounding techniques and sensory regulation strategies helped restore present-moment awareness.

Vignette 2 : Emotional Numbing During Uncertainty

An adolescent living under prolonged wartime uncertainty demonstrated periods of emotional numbing when discussing disrupted routines and safety concerns.

Caregivers initially interpreted these reactions as indifference or avoidance.

Clinical work focused on helping the family recognize dissociative withdrawal as a stress response rather than oppositional behavior.

Vignette 3 : Dissociation as a Functional Coping Strategy

An autistic adolescent who temporarily returned to Ukraine to obtain identification documents reported using partial dissociation to remain regulated while navigating crowded offices and bureaucratic procedures.

She described “switching off emotions” to prevent a meltdown. After returning to a safer environment, she experienced heightened sensory sensitivity and emotional flooding. Clinical work focused on grounding and sensory regulation strategies, including familiar scents, to support reconnection with the present environment.

Clinical vignettes are anonymized and presented in aggregated form to protect confidentiality.

Conclusion

Dissociative responses appear to play a meaningful role in how neurodivergent children adapt to prolonged wartime stress.

Understanding dissociation as both an adaptive survival response and a potential barrier to emotional integration may help clinicians develop more responsive trauma-informed interventions for neurodivergent populations living in conditions of chronic threat.

Clinical Implications

Supporting neurodivergent children in war environments requires trauma-informed and neurodiversity-sensitive approaches, including stabilization strategies, sensory regulation supports, and caregiver psychoeducation about dissociation as a stress response..

Key Takeaway

- Dissociation may function both as a protective survival strategy and as a potential barrier to emotional integration in neurodivergent children exposed to chronic wartime stress.
- Persistent dissociative patterns may also complicate emotional processing and therapeutic engagement.
- Trauma-informed and neurodiversity-sensitive clinical approaches are essential when supporting children and families living in conditions of prolonged threat.

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Conflict of Interest:

None declared.

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Ethical Note

Clinical examples are presented in aggregated and anonymized form.

Details have been modified to protect confidentiality and prevent identification of individuals.