



Youth

in the shadow of
"Swords of Iron"



On October 7, thousands of teens joined the cycle of risk

We cannot lose them

January 2024

At-risk youth in Israel since the outbreak of the war

From Shai Piron, Chairman ELEM – Youth in Distress

Dear Partners,

90 days have passed since Black Saturday. Those devastating events shook the world for thousands of teens across Israel. Some witnessed the atrocities. Others lost loved ones. Some teens have family members in captivity. Thousands – from both southern and northern Israel – were evacuated from their homes and are living in various housing solutions throughout Israel. They struggle to return to routine and to function normally. At this dramatic moment, we have a duty to do everything to make sure these teens don't join the cycle of risk.

At ELEM, we realized we face an emergency and we have increased and expanded our work. We are fighting for the future of these teens. We cannot allow this traumatic experience to become the central pillar of their identity. We are fighting to prevent risk behaviors, build dialogue and provide appropriate care.

I am impressed with ELEM's staff and volunteers who work tirelessly, day and night, to carry out this important mission. I would like to thank the ELEM management – headed by CEO Tali Erez and President Nava Barak – for their inspiring leadership. At this time, I would also like to take a moment to remember Yonatan Richter, Lior Hadad Attias and Sigal Levy, who lost their lives in the massacre at the Re'im festival.

I would also like to thank you, our partners, who understood the magnitude of the mission, the urgent challenges, and expanded your involvement in ELEM's initiatives.

We will not give up: the job is only getting bigger. ELEM will be there for every teenager, no one will be left behind.



Photo: Keren Gafni

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I want someone to wake me up from this nightmare! I walk around here and around the area, and everything seems tense. Like we are waiting for something to happen. Then I come back to the hotel, and I don't have my own room, I don't have my own corner. I get into bed and pull the covers over my head. And then it all comes back. What happened there. What I saw..."

(A teen girl at the ELEM "Breathing Space" in one of the temporary housing sites for evacuees).

On October 7, 2023, the State of Israel experienced the greatest national catastrophe since its establishment, with the invasion of Hamas terrorists in an onslaught of murder and the abduction of citizens, soldiers, women and men, babies and elderly. With the outbreak of the war, approximately **130,000 residents** have been evacuated from their homes in the north and the south, about **30% of them teens and young adults**.

Three months into this war, it is evident in all arenas of ELEM's activities, we are dealing with youth in situations of direct or indirect trauma, whose emotional resilience has been severely harmed.

This report presents the situation of the teenagers we have met.

Areas of distress



Direct trauma - Teens and young adults who survived the terrifying attack on the towns in the Gaza area, who directly witnessed the violence, the death and abduction of their relatives, who lost their homes and are living in evacuation sites, experienced direct trauma.



Indirect trauma - Many teens and young adults in Israel experienced indirect trauma as they dealt with a variety of situations related to the war, missile strikes in central Israel, fear of an October 7-style attack on the northern border, exposure to harsh online content, displacement, financial hardship and uncertainty.



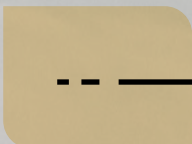
Displacement and lack of appropriate housing - Many teens were evacuated from their homes in both the north and the south. Some lost their homes and property entirely and have nowhere to return to. Others are detached from their circles of identity, living in overcrowded conditions, have lost their privacy, personal security, stability and hope for the future.



Destabilized families - Parental authority and presence were undermined, as parents struggle with their own trauma and find it hard to accept their children's distress, to set boundaries and to model resilience and faith in the future. Some teens lost close family members and beneficial adults who were abducted, wounded or killed in the assault.



Lack of structure - The mass displacement detached teenagers from any existing framework: school, employment or recreational activities. Many refuse to join new frameworks in the evacuation centers either due to loss of their sense of purpose or to feeling incapable. Under these circumstances, they reverse day and night and spend their waking hours loitering and intensifying risk behaviors.



Lives, interrupted - The evacuees' sudden detachment as well as their displacement, apprehension and financial instability, create a crisis that affects the entire population's ability to function normally. This traps the teenagers in ongoing helplessness and loss of control.



Ongoing uncertainty - The indeterminate wartime displacement, the lack of communication with enlisted family members, financial crisis and the feeling of being deserted by the establishment, have all damaged teens' ability to create stability, permanence and a sense of future, which is critical to rehabilitation.



Increased exposure to harmful online content - Teenagers spend long, unsupervised hours watching horrifying content online, which widens the circle of direct trauma.



Clash of identities and cultures - Friction between identities at the evacuee housing sites sharpens socioeconomic and cultural differences and creates fertile ground for violence, hatred and racism.

Direct trauma → Indirect trauma → Displacement and lack of appropriate housing → Destabilized families → Lack of structure → Lives, interrupted → Ongoing uncertainty

Risk behaviors

It should be noted that in times of national emergency and trauma, all the manifestations of distress among adolescents and young adults, especially those who were on the risk spectrum or who suffered from trauma before the emergency situation, increase in severity. Risk behaviors among youth accordingly become more extreme.

Expressions of mental distress

Depression and anxiety 46% **Loneliness 60%**



We expect that if appropriate mental health services are not available to teens, their situation could deteriorate into serious risk phenomena such as seclusion and social isolation, insomnia, dysfunction and suicidality. We are already seeing self-harm and eating disorders in 10% and rising.



Attrition and slipping to the margins 51%

Covert and overt attrition from school and social frameworks.

1 out of every 2 children report they haven't integrated into a school or social group. Until now, this population was accustomed to structure and didn't have trouble with accepting authority or boundaries.



Detachment is a slippery slope. It is a clear risk factor that can lead to regression in all aspects of life – academic, social and emotional – and even lapsing to serious behaviors.



Substance abuse 47%

Alcohol use among younger teens ages 12-15



Experimentation and use of alcohol and drugs among younger teens can lead to physical and emotional dependency and addiction among evacuated teens, as well as increased violence, attrition and criminality.



Violence in the public sphere 20%

**1 out of every 5 children was involved in violence in public spaces
1 out of every 8 children was involved in violence or vandalism in which police were involved.**



Teens not previously considered at-risk involved in violence related to direct or indirect trauma. This impacts broader circles, can worsen emotional distress, leads to involvement with law enforcement and the development of criminal behavior, as well as having adverse, life-changing impact.



ELEM responses in the Swords of Iron war

Already on October 7, ELEM realized the scale of events and understood we must organize immediately to help both vulnerable teens and young adults who face a complex reality in routines times, and also to help the teens and young adults who fell headfirst into the cycle of risk as a result of that traumatic day. In the first 48 hours, we bolstered our existing programs and created a new program at evacuation sites in cooperation with the Social Services Ministry.

"Breathing Spaces"
9 towns, **17** spaces,
700 at-risk teens
 and young adults
27 staff, **55** volunteers

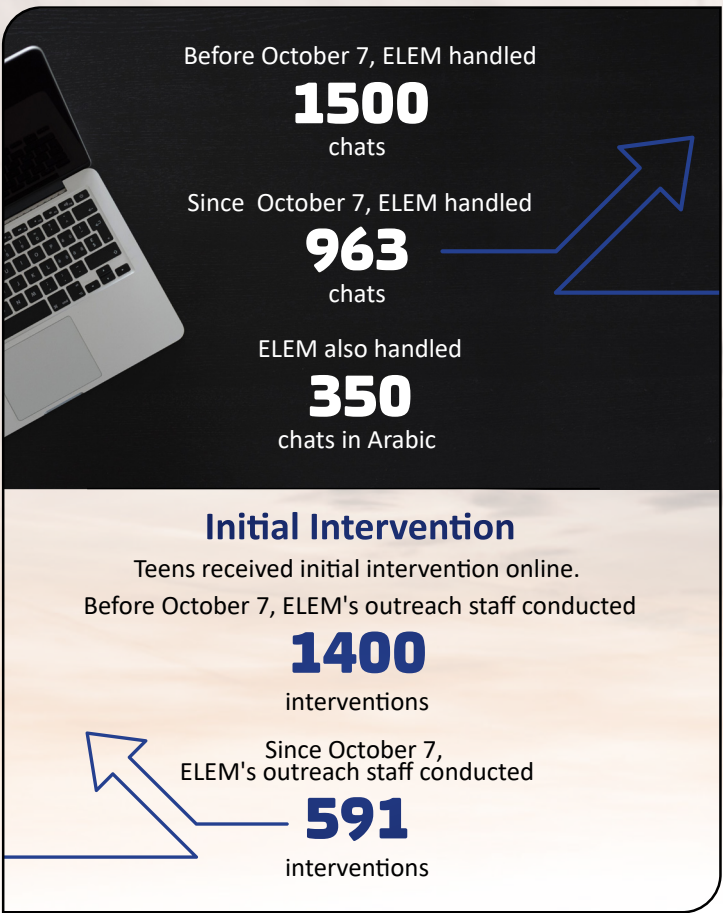
Mental health spaces to support youth at risk and in trauma at the temporary housing sites for the evacuees from the towns in the Gaza area and from the north. As part of these activities, ELEM staff and volunteers work to identify, track down and connect with youth through informal dialogue to decrease isolation, provide an initial response to trauma and crisis, and an opportunity to vent, providing privacy from family members and assistance in seeking further treatment. These interactions with teens are complex and often difficult, but knowing that we can locate them and give them hope for a better future, gives us the strength to always be there for them.



"ELEM Digital"
4800 teens have received services and support through this program.



- ✓ 14:29 My dad never turns the news off and it's always at full volume ... I can't listen to it anymore!
- ✓ 14:29 I'm afraid that if we don't go back to school, I'll go nuts here at home with them
- ✓ 14:30 I keep trying all sorts of things to calm down but nothing works. I haven't slept in three days.
- ✓ 14:30 The pressure in my chest never stops
- ✓ 14:31 I can't breathe and the tears are stuck in my throat
- ✓ 14:31 Thank you for being here with me



On-going activities with at-risk youth

In this harsh emotional, security and financial reality, ELEM continues to work with teens who were at risk before the outbreak of war, detached from frameworks, lacked family support, and must handle the present challenges on their own.

During the year, ELEM met 11,500 teens and young adults at risk.

Often, ELEM staff and volunteers are the only support these youth have. We continue to counsel them in person, on the phone and online, as well as at our drop-in centers, on the streets and at our shelters for young people surviving through prostitution and substance abuse.



Looking forward - Plans for long-term services

ELEM's many years of activity have taught us that building eye-level relationships with teens, meeting them on their own turf, in informal settings, creates meaningful change for those who struggle with more formal, established treatment, and can help the most intense distress.

ELEM, with great effort and in partnership with the Social Services Ministry and National Insurance Institute, aims to go wherever teens are, where young people are in trouble, to seek them out and help them both in usual times and in emergencies. We are at evacuation sites, on the street and online, all in order to identify signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and difficulty returning to routine, and to provide the right service for these issues.

We see working with evacuated teens in informal settings as the most appropriate and significant service at this time.

We are currently working to establish informal social-emotional spaces in schools, in cooperation with school systems and local government. The school spaces will provide guidance and emotional support as well as pedagogical content designed to improve teens' emotional state, reduce risk factors and reduce covert and overt attrition after the war.

The generation of "Swords of Iron" youth will continue to face the ramifications of these dramatic events, and we will continue to help them cope, both as parents and as a society.

The myriad risk factors stemming from "Swords of Iron" that are not treated now, will be amplified and intensified and become endless tragedy. Now is the time to act – before it is too late.

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I write to him: 'Take a deep breath, count to five slowly, let it out. I am here, I am counting with you.' He writes that there is a rocket alert and he can't breathe this way. It's too hard.

'OKay,' I write, 'Look around the room. Tell me what you see. Pick something to focus on and tell me about it.' We go on like this until he calms down.

And - like him - I am sitting in the shelter. I don't know who this boy is, where he comes from or what his name is. That's how it is when you meet teens in a virtual space, in ELEM's emergency chat.

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(An ELEM Digital volunteer)



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ELEM mourns the murder of three staff members of ELEM's "Good People" project at the Re'im music festival. The late Sigal Levy, Lior Attias and Yonatan Richter, as well as Yasmin Bira – a long-time volunteer with our Young Mothers At-Risk Program – are forever in our hearts.



ELEM partners with Israel's Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs

