

The Impact of War-Induced Trauma on Young Israelis: *A Qualitative Examination of the David's Circle Project at Koh Phangan*

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the psychological impact of war-induced trauma on young Israelis who sought refuge and healing in Koh Phangan, Thailand, through participation in the David's Circle Project. The project provides a supportive, non-clinical space for the October 7th trauma Nova survivors and young reserve soldiers. In-depth, semi-structured interviews and group storytelling revealed common themes of emotional dislocation, mistrust, and existential uncertainty. The findings underscore the importance of alternative, culturally sensitive healing environments for trauma recovery and point to the therapeutic value of grouping in a safe physical and emotional space. Implications for trauma-informed care and post-conflict rehabilitation for young adults are discussed.

Keywords: War-induced Trauma, David's Circle Project, October 7th Hamas Massacre, Israeli Survivors of the Nova Music Festival, Reservists

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Introduction

The October 7, 2023, Hamas-led massacre and the ensuing war left deep psychological scars on survivors of the Nova Festival and Israeli reserve soldiers who served in combat (Schechtman et al., 2025). Beyond the immediate trauma of witnessing death and destruction, many survivors have experienced post-traumatic stress symptoms, emotional distress, and a profound loss of trust in Israel's military and governmental institutions (Weltman, 2020). This erosion of trust, combined with the absence of adequate therapeutic support, has led to an increasing number of young Israelis relocating abroad, either as an intentional decision to leave the country or as part of a temporary search for relief (Israel population growth 2025). However, without proper coping mechanisms, many are likely to engage in substance use, ranging from recreational to severe drug consumption, which further exacerbates their emotional turmoil (Volkow & Blanco, 2023).

In response to the growing distress among young Israeli war survivors who arrived in Koh Phangan, Thailand, the LDS Foundation, established in memory of David Ne'eman, a Nova Festival victim, created David's Circle in Koh Phangan. Koh Phangan, a tropical island of approximately 125 square kilometers with a population of around 14,000 residents, is located in the Gulf of Thailand, southeast of Bangkok. Known for its natural beauty and spiritual culture, the island hosts over 20 mental health and well-being centers, including trauma rehabilitation, somatic therapy, mindfulness-based recovery, and psychedelic-assisted integration programs. This ecosystem makes Koh Phangan a distinctive refuge for trauma survivors seeking culturally diverse, non-clinical forms of healing (Wonderland Healing Center 2023; Holina Center 2024; Thailand Wellbeing Report 2024).

This initiative offers an open, non-clinical space, bi-weekly group meetings, creative arts workshops, and a judgment-free environment where Nova survivors and veterans can process their trauma, share stories, and find communal support. The project aims to provide a non-judgmental environment where individuals can share their experiences at their own pace, without external pressure or commitment as expected in a therapeutic relationship. Preliminary observations suggest that David's Circle has become a vital anchor for young Israelis, offering them emotional expression and social support. The Circle's team is comprised primarily of Israeli volunteers who are not professionals but undergo training and guidance. This creates a therapeutic environment that is highly egalitarian, non-hierarchical, and rooted in a sense of shared destiny. Since its launch (May 2024), The Circle has recorded over 1000 visits (June 2024), many of whom became frequent and active Open Space members. The extent to which such initiatives contribute to long-term psychological resilience and reintegration remains unclear. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how war survivors perceive and experience David's Circle and its role in shaping their future outlook.

Background

On October 7, 2023, Hamas-led militants executed a brutal attack on Israeli communities near the Gaza border, including the Nova music festival, where over 360 young people were murdered, and many others were abducted or severely injured (Israel Ministry of Health 2023). Survivors of the Nova massacre endured prolonged exposure to life-threatening conditions, hiding for hours in fields and shelters, witnessing deaths of friends, and in many cases, narrowly escaping captivity or death. Initial findings from clinicians and trauma centers report high incidences of acute stress disorder, complex PTSD, dissociative symptoms, and grief reactions among this population (Halperin et al., 2025). Many survivors also

display symptoms of survivors' guilt, hypervigilance, and mistrust toward previously relied-upon social and governmental institutions, particularly after a perceived failure of protection and rescue operations (Nacasch et al., 2024).

Research on trauma from mass violence consistently shows that young adults exposed to massacres or terror attacks are particularly vulnerable to long-term psychological harm due to developmental factors, identity formation, and often-limited coping strategies (Gil-Rivas et al., 2004). The combination of direct physical danger, loss of peers, and national trauma has led to what some Israeli clinicians describe as "collective post-traumatic rupture" (Friedman-Peleg & Bilu, 2011; Vitman Schorr et al., 2025).

At the same time, Israel initiated a large-scale military campaign that has required unprecedented mobilization of reserve forces. More than 300,000 reservists were called up, many of whom have remained on duty for extended periods, up to 300 consecutive days, under intense operational stress. Research on the psychological toll of prolonged combat deployment indicates significant mental health challenges among reserve soldiers, especially when deployments are sudden, extended, and emotionally charged (Kibris et al., 2024). Israeli studies following the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge found PTSD prevalence among reserve combatants ranging from 13% to 20% several months post-deployment (Levi & Lubin, 2018). Contributing factors include exposure to violence, ambiguous combat goals, lack of decompression time, and re-entry into civilian life without sufficient support (Markowitz et al., 2023).

In the current war, qualitative reports and preliminary mental health surveys indicate elevated levels of emotional exhaustion, anxiety, moral injury, and detachment from both military and civil institutions among many reservists (Levy & Gross, 2024). Feelings of abandonment by the state and loss of trust in leadership have become prominent themes in post-service narratives (Popescou-Sarry, 2023). Together, these events, the Nova massacre and the prolonged deployment of Israeli reservists, have resulted in an unprecedented mental health crisis among young Israelis. Both groups face not only clinical symptoms of trauma but also existential disruptions in identity, belonging, and trust in core societal structures. Amidst this psychological rupture, informal, non-clinical spaces such as David's Circle in Koh Phangan have emerged as potential alternatives to conventional therapy, offering culturally and emotionally attuned support. However, the long-term psychological efficacy and social impact of such spaces remain empirically unexamined. The present study seeks to explore how participants who experienced the Nova massacre and/or prolonged military service perceive and engage with David's Circle. Specifically, it aims to understand: (1) how they experience this communal healing space; (2) what meanings they attribute to it in the context of their trauma and recovery; and (3) how their participation shapes their sense of future, belonging, and psychological integration.

Methodology

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and perceptions of the participants in David's Circle. The methodology includes:

1. Semi-structured interviews – Conducted with ten Nova Festival survivors and former soldiers who regularly attend David's Circle activities in Koh-Pangan.
2. Free storytelling in the circle with participants, using the Group Stories Fabric Technique (GSFT) described by Lev-Wiesel (2015).
3. Thematic analysis – Identifying common themes of trauma, sense of place, and community support that emerged within the stories and the semi-structured interviews.

Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 32 young Israeli adults between the ages of 21 and 26, all of whom were either survivors of the Nova Music Festival massacre or Israel Defense Forces reservists who participated in the ensuing "Iron Swords" war. Participants who frequently attended David's Circle and expressed interest in being interviewed, either individually ($n = 10$) or as part of a group session held within the David Circle framework ($n = 22$) during February 2025. The mean age was 24 (range: 21-26). Most participants had completed high school education and were single.

Following approval from both the David Circle program director and ethical clearance from the Tel Hai Academic College Ethics Committee, participants were recruited and informed about the purpose and nature of the study. Informed consent was obtained before data collection.

Two qualitative data collection methods were employed. First, ten individual in-depth interviews were conducted by trained researchers using a semi-structured interview guide. These interviews, which lasted approximately one hour each, focused on participants' personal experiences during and after the traumatic events of October 7th, their coping strategies, and the significance they attributed to participating in the David Circle. The following questions were asked: Can you describe your experience on October 7th and during the subsequent war? What happened to you, and how did you come to join the David Circle? What does the David Circle mean to you personally?

The second method involved a storytelling-based group session with 22 participants. To foster an open and communal atmosphere, each participant was invited to share a personal story of their choice, such as an event, experience, or situation, without any imposed thematic direction. Group members were instructed not to interrupt or comment during others' storytelling. Participants chose freely when and in what order to share. All narratives were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. The storytelling was analyzed according to the following principles: Holistic Reading: Each member group's narrative was first read in its entirety to grasp the overall tone, structure, and emotional trajectory. The second stage was Thematic Structuring: Stories were then segmented into meaning units based on content, emotion, and narrative shifts. The third stage was Recurrent themes (e.g., trauma, belonging, disillusionment, healing) that were identified across groups. The fourth stage was the Dialogical Interpretation: Emphasis was placed on how meaning was shaped collectively – how one participant's account was echoed, expanded, or reframed by others. Patterns of resonance, silencing, or tension were noted. The final stage was the Narrative Form and Function: In addition to content, the structure and purpose of stories were examined (e.g., testimony, justification, metaphor, resistance). The social function of storytelling within the group, such as fostering solidarity or re-authoring traumatic experience, was central to interpretation. Combining individual interviews and collective storytelling enabled a rich, multidimensional understanding of the participants' psychological responses, sense-making processes, and recovery trajectories within the Open Space communal context.

Key Principles and Operation of David's Circle

The social and communal dimension of *The Circle* is expressed through twice-weekly gatherings around a bonfire, accompanied by spontaneous live music jam sessions initiated by the participants and supported by volunteers. At the end of each day, a closing circle is held around the fire, during which participants are invited to share personal reflections guided by rotating thematic prompts selected by the staff (e.g., "What gives me inner

peace?,” “What have I recently discovered about myself?,” “What do I bring to the world?,” “What does music mean to me?” “What have I learned from my difficult experiences?”). Individual therapeutic support is also available. Participants requiring additional care are referred by the social worker managing the space to professional mental health services in Israel. These referrals are arranged during the participants’ stay abroad and include access to online therapy. Another key element of *The Circle*’s approach is the mentorship model. Mentors are themselves survivors of the October 7th events (primarily from the Nova music festival) and have undergone professional training. They serve as peer guides within space, offering a unique therapeutic contribution rooted in shared experience and mutual identification. Participation in maintaining the space is intentionally collaborative. When interested, participants are encouraged to participate in various aspects of day-to-day operations, including tasks such as organizing refreshments, lighting the fire, maintaining order, and even leading peer-led workshops (e.g., clay sculpting, sports as a lifestyle, candle-making, or charcoal painting). In acute psychological situations, The Circle has taken on a crisis intervention role. A dedicated emergency team was established in partnership with Chabad House, the Wonderland Healing Center, and the Holina Treatment Center to manage urgent mental health situations among Israeli youth on the island. Access to The Circle is gained through several informal channels: word of mouth from past participants, outreach by trained mentors engaging with other young Israelis on the island, social media platforms (notably The Circle’s Instagram account), a dedicated WhatsApp group that currently includes over 350 rotating members and referrals from therapists and treatment centers in Israel.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews enabled participants to articulate their emotions and experiences freely. At the same time, the storytelling component offered valuable access to the deeper, often unconscious layers of their experiences within the group context. This study employed a phenomenological approach, which posits that individuals interpret and narrate their experiences through the lens of their social environments and subjective realities. Phenomenology centers on how individuals make meaning from their “lived experience,” both personally and within broader socio-political and cultural frameworks. This form of analysis attends to the implicit, taken-for-granted structures that guide interaction, such as unspoken norms, shared common sense, and the perception of time and space in a specific context (Giorgi, 2012; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Through the process of phenomenological reduction, core experiential themes were identified and interpreted in relation to one another using a “hermeneutic circle” approach (Smith, 2004). In this framework, each theme highlights a specific element of the experience (the part), while simultaneously deriving meaning from its connection to the broader narrative (the whole).

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structure and purpose of stories were examined (e.g., testimony, justification, metaphor, resistance). The social function of storytelling within the group, such as fostering solidarity or re-authoring traumatic experience, was central to interpretation.

Findings

The themes emerged from both research tools: the semi-structured interviews and the storytelling method were combined. The qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews and the storytelling revealed five themes that characterize the participants' psychological and emotional experiences following the traumatic events of October 7 and the subsequent war.

Loss of Faith and Trust in the State of Israel

A prominent theme expressed by participants was a profound erosion of trust in the State of Israel and its institutions. Many conveyed a deep sense of betrayal, rooted in the perceived failure of the state to protect its citizens during the Nova Festival massacre and to support them adequately in the aftermath. Survivors described feelings of abandonment, disillusionment with the military and government, and a re-evaluation of their national identity. This loss of trust not only affected their relationship with the state but also destabilized their foundational beliefs about safety, belonging, and civic duty. A, age 28, said, "I lost trust in the world, in reality... what's good, what's bad? Where am I even?" G said, "The state? I had an intense complex about it – like, how? How is it even possible to do something like that? How can they allow a gate to be opened and not deploy forces, not protect our citizens?"

Psychological Consequences of Trauma

The second theme involved the enduring psychological and emotional consequences of the trauma. Participants frequently reported symptoms aligned with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including recurring nightmares, hypervigilance, emotional numbness, and intrusive memories. In addition to classic trauma-related symptoms, many expressed overwhelming feelings of loneliness, isolation, and emotional disconnection from their environment. For example, A 24-year-old described "I could not sleep, have nightmares... jump whenever I hear a siren..." B said, "A month after Nova, I had a breakdown..." Some reported difficulties engaging in daily routines or forming close interpersonal relationships, for example, C said, "I felt no one could understand what I experienced, the horror, the body freeze...not even my closest friends and family..." The absence of structured mental health support exacerbated their distress, pushing some toward maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance use or emotional withdrawal.

Blurred Future and Uncertainty About Life Direction

The third theme revolved around a disrupted sense of the future. Some participants described confusion regarding their life goals, ambitions, and plans. The trauma had shaken their worldview so profoundly that previously held dreams or career paths no longer seemed relevant or attainable. For some, the uncertainty was existential: a questioning of purpose, place, and identity. This sense of "suspended life" left many in a liminal space – no longer connected to their pre-trauma lives, yet unable to envision a clear path forward. For example, A 25-year-old described, "before the war I had plans and knew what I wanted to do...I am not sure anymore...should I graduate or quit?"

In addition to the individual interviews, analysis of the storytelling group session conducted in David's Circle yielded two additional themes that reflected the communal and symbolic dimensions of the participants' experience:

Loss of Belonging and Rootedness

Across many of the personal stories shared in the group, a recurring motif of alienation from Israel, not just from the state but from the broader sense of "home." The participants' narratives conveyed a disconnection from the physical and emotional landscape of Israel (several included their family as well), with many articulating that they no longer felt a sense of rootedness or cultural belonging. This estrangement was described not only as a reaction to the events themselves but also as a reflection of how they perceived societal and institutional responses, or lack thereof, after the trauma. The following story was told by a 22-year-old female, is an example: "I felt a calling before it all began – on Rosh Hashanah – to move to Kiryat Shmona. I'm from Be'er Sheva – what's the connection? But I listened to it. I chose an apartment, signed a lease. It was September. I was waiting to move. Then the chaos began, and they told me to wait. A week later, Kiryat Shmona was evacuated. I didn't know where I belonged anymore. I moved back in with my mom. We fought. I stayed with friends. I couldn't find a place to live. I tried helping another girl, and somehow, I ended up with housing thanks to that lease. But I felt like the energy in Israel was closing in on me – suffocating. And then I touched a feeling I was most afraid of: darkness. Suddenly, I allowed myself to feel it. I was at the sea and I dove into the pain. I discovered that every part is just a part – and that there's this one deep part. As I moved through the darkness, I returned to something else: the beach, the sun, life. But then the tension increased, this clenching feeling... I saw someone wearing something that triggered me – I posted it on Instagram, even though it was unrelated. I kept moving forward, but everyone around me had stiff faces, and yet I felt like I could breathe. with time, I started feeling it again... that the energy in the air was choking. Something inside me said: Start moving. I wanted to go to the U.S., but I didn't get a visa. Then I started getting signs, crystal clear, that I should fly to London. I booked a ticket, flew there, and stayed for nine months. I was living my dream, but still, part of me was in Israel, and part of me was there. I felt selfish, but kept going on the path that felt right. I realized I'm both light and darkness. I'm both. I heard someone from "the other side" speak, and it made me zoom out – made me see that we all have light and dark sides. I felt guilty for the way I think, the way I feel. But I can't run from myself. I'm both. And this whole world is both. I wrote down five destinations and dove into the one that felt most right for me – Thailand. I ask myself, should I return to Israel or perhaps Australia? That mere thought scares me."

This paragraph captures a psychological and emotional struggle that many trauma survivors, particularly those displaced by conflict or crisis, experience. Here's an expanded interpretation and elaboration of the themes embedded in it: The movement between fear, estrangement, and the urge to escape, and the subsequent emergence of guilt and shame, reflects an emotional pendulum swinging between conflicting needs: the need for safety and distance from a painful reality, and the need for belonging and identity – even if it is tied to a place that no longer feels safe.

David's Circle as a Replacement for Family

Despite the pervasive loss, a somewhat positive theme emerged through the storytelling: the creation of a new form of belonging through David's Circle with other Israelis who experienced similar experiences. Y, for example, told the following story: "So many stories run through your mind, and you try to figure out what's the 'right' story – and what does a 'right story' even mean. I feel like sharing a cosmic seal I received. Before I came to Thailand, I was at a retreat in India. I had been in therapy over the past year, and went through one of the most significant treatments – art therapy. I'm an artist, and this is my field. It was a long journey, and after a particularly meaningful session, I realized I was ready for the next step. That's when the next movement called me to come to Thailand, to Koh Phangan. A friend told me about the magical island, its uniqueness... David's Circle...he said it might help me. At that time in Israel, I felt like I was taking two steps back for every step forward. I understood that the universe itself made every effort to get me here...It was challenging, but eventually, we formed a cosy family...a nest. During one of the workshops, we had a kind of paired therapy with breathing and touch. I felt a release, a clearing of a blockage... I felt the warmth, could cry, hug... we understood each other's pain and suffering, we had gone through similar experiences. I was talking with a guy who told me he had lost a close friend in the war, who keeps visiting him in dreams... The moment we hugged, he felt he had finally let go of his friend goodbye. I felt it, too... I had also lost a close friend at the Nova...sharing it in the circle was kind of a closure... I know why I'm here."

Participants consistently referred to the Circle as a "safe space" or "surrogate family" where they can share, provide, and be provided with understanding and emotional support without judgment or expectation. This symbolic family, formed in a foreign land, provides empathy and a sense of connection that contrasts with their feelings of abandonment. Through creative art expression, shared meals, yoga, and storytelling, many found meaning, purpose, and solidarity with others who had endured similar trauma. The above narrative illustrates how shared trauma and healing practices can foster the emergence of a surrogate, family-like structure among strangers in an unfamiliar environment. The non-stigmatizing, voluntary attendance in the Open Space provided by the David Circle project is akin to a spiritual retreat that allows these survivors an intuitive solution to re-belonging and emotional integration after the rupture of personal and collective trauma.

Discussion

This study explored the role of the David Circle project, operating in Koh Phangan, as a refuge for Israeli survivors of the Nova Festival and reservists who left Israel in the wake of the October 7th trauma. Findings reveal that David Circle functioned as a transformative resonant space, supporting the co-creation of a communal, emotionally safe "nest" with others who had experienced similar trauma.

Participants described profound emotional connections that transcended verbal communication through practices such as paired breathing, storytelling, and shared physical presence. These encounters, marked by mutual recognition, physical closeness, tears, and gratitude, were seen as moments of healing through relational witnessing. In this context,

the concept of an “intimate closed circle” emerged, suggesting a symbolic completion or reconciliation of trauma. Despite the physical openness of the setting (no walls or fixed boundaries), participants experienced emotional containment and safety.

What unfolded was not merely emotional catharsis but a sense of spiritual alignment and renewed clarity regarding one’s place in the world. Participation in the David Circle allowed individuals to see and be seen, fulfilling emotional needs typically met by family or long-standing community ties. In the absence of physical home or familial anchors, this newly formed collective of shared experience served as a chosen family, offering emotional support, mirroring, and a reconstitution of fractured identities.

This resonates with broader themes in trauma recovery among displaced or disillusioned young adults (Schultz et al., 2016): the significance of intentional community spaces, where shared language, emotional resonance, and symbolic rituals (such as storytelling or therapeutic touch) facilitate the rebuilding of trust, coherence, and meaning. In this sense, Koh Phangan becomes more than a geographic location; it evolves into a psychological refuge, described by participants as a “safe place” that supports healing and reconnection.

From a theoretical perspective, the experience of estrangement in one’s homeland, particularly in the aftermath of war, political disillusionment, or personal loss, can evoke a profound sense of alienation (Palmer et al., 2022). This is not simply about geographic displacement, but about emotional detachment from the state, the society, and even one’s previous identity (Wilde, 2022). The urge to escape often arises as a psychological survival mechanism, a way to seek clarity and space when the familiar becomes emotionally suffocating. Such patterns have also been observed in post-conflict societies, such as Syria (Bunn et al., 2023).

Yet, the act of leaving is rarely a psychologically clean process. Once a sense of safety is restored, individuals often face feelings of guilt for leaving others behind, for not fulfilling expected roles, or for experiencing moments of relief while others still suffer. Shame can follow, shaped by internalized cultural or familial narratives that equate departure with betrayal (Hollis et al., 2022) or weakness (Theisen-Womersley, 2021).

The meanings attributed by Nova Festival survivors and reservists to their experiences within The Circle could also be viewed in the broader context of trauma and recovery. Participant narratives revealed a profound existential tension rooted in the fractured sense of belonging following collective trauma. This tension manifested as an internal conflict between staying in one’s homeland, now perceived by many as unsafe, and the idea of relocating abroad, which often evokes feelings of disconnection and loss of identity. This existential dilemma, whether to remain in a familiar yet traumatized environment or to seek refuge elsewhere at the cost of cultural and emotional displacement, reflects a deep rupture in the participants’ psychological landscape. Is it more painful to remain in a place that feels unsafe, or to live in a foreign land where one may feel rootless and alone? Staying offers familiarity and a sense of identity but may also trigger trauma and mistrust. Leaving may bring relief, but often at the cost of isolation and emotional dislocation. The self becomes suspended between two conflicting realities, neither of which offers full psychological resolution.

This inner conflict is well-documented among trauma survivors, refugees, and individuals confronting post-traumatic disillusionment with their society or nation (Wilde, 2022). It complicates the processes of recovery, identity reconstruction, and the ability to form new attachments. The oscillation between escape and return, between shame and relief, becomes part of the broader narrative of trauma integration. Importantly, the Circle appeared to function as a symbolic counter-space in which the tension between leaving and staying could be held, reflected upon, and shared. It did not resolve the dilemma but allowed it to be acknowledged in a communal, compassionate setting. This act of collective holding may be seen as a first step in re-establishing a fractured sense of coherence and belonging in the aftermath of trauma.

Findings indicate that the communal experience created a symbolic and emotional “land platform,” a temporary space of rootedness and safety abroad, that for many became a substitute for the perceived insecurity of Israel. Situated in nature, surrounded by silence and held within a compassionate, non-judgmental atmosphere, the space allowed participants to confront trauma without fear. In this carefully held container, pain could be acknowledged, processed, and witnessed collectively. The environment itself, marked by natural landscapes, calmness, and physical distance from the site of trauma, played a vital therapeutic role. Consistent with eco-psychological theories and trauma-informed approaches, physical immersion in nature can foster regulation of the nervous system and promote psychological resilience (Berger & McLeod, 2006; Jordan & Hinds, 2016). In this sense, David’s Circle offered not only physical respite but also a symbolic landscape that enabled emotional anchoring, even in exile. Crucially, the shared cultural and linguistic fabric of the group amplified the healing effect. Participants described the importance of being surrounded by others who spoke “the same language,” not merely Hebrew, but the language of trauma, cultural meaning, and shared experience. This cultural mirroring created a sense of recognition and belonging that is fundamental to post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The participants’ collective identity as survivors, Israelis, and citizens in crisis allowed for deep emotional resonance and relational witnessing, which are essential conditions for psychological integration (Herman, 1992). Importantly, many participants emphasized the need to distance themselves from Israel to engage in healing and self-renewal fully. However, this departure was not framed as a rejection of the homeland, but as a strategic pause. It reflected a desire to reconstruct the self away from the immediate triggers of trauma, with the long-term vision of returning to contribute meaningfully to society. This finding aligns with the literature on trauma and resilience, which suggests that temporary separation from the context of trauma can facilitate perspective-taking, future planning, and restoration of agency (Bonanno, 2004; Neimeyer, 2001).

Through participation in The David’s Circle, individuals began to reimagine a future in which healing and activism were intertwined. Several described an emergent sense of purpose to return to Israel not simply as citizens, but as agents of change. This dynamic of healing abroad and returning with renewed strength can be seen as a narrative of empowered exile, a transformative arc that fosters psychological integration, future orientation, and a renewed sense of social responsibility (Frankl, 2006).

Concluding Comments

This study offers a nuanced exploration of the psychological, existential, and communal dimensions experienced by young Israeli adult survivors of the Nova Festival and IDF reservists who engaged in the David's Circle as part of their post-trauma recovery. Situated in a peaceful natural environment abroad, this informal healing space provided participants with an opportunity to collectively process their trauma, reconnect with their cultural and emotional identities, and reimagine a sense of future and belonging.

Rather than being solely a space of collective mourning, the David's Circle functioned as a seedbed for resilience and meaning-making. Participants were able to express vulnerability without fear, share trauma narratives in culturally resonant ways, and foster a sense of solidarity rooted in shared experience. These processes contributed to psychological integration and a renewed, though often ambivalent, engagement with the idea of returning to Israeli society as agents of change.

The findings raise critical societal questions. The events of October 7th deeply ruptured the foundational belief in Israel as a haven for Jews, a core pillar of national identity since the Holocaust. For these young adults, this rupture has led to a profound crisis of trust in the state, military institutions, and the very notion of national belonging. The study foregrounds the urgent need to address these existential wounds, not only at the individual level but as a collective social project.

Importantly, the research highlights the efficacy of non-clinical, culturally grounded healing spaces in facilitating post-trauma recovery. David's Circle stands as an example of how intentional communal environments can offer emotional containment, belonging, and symbolic restoration, especially for populations that may be disillusioned with institutional support systems. As such, the study contributes to global discourses on trauma recovery, identity reconstruction, and culturally sensitive therapeutic alternatives in post-conflict contexts.

From a Geographical-psychological perspective, the findings of this study suggest that the transformation of Koh Phangan into a global mental health sanctuary may catalyze significant changes in the island's urban culture. While the island has long been known for its party scenes and spiritual retreats, the increasing presence of trauma-informed centers signals a shift toward an integrative well-being infrastructure. This evolution is also rooted in the island's unique resources for recreation and cultural diversity: diving schools, traditional fishing farms, and blended folk traditions shaped by Thai, Burmese, Indian, and Western residents working collaboratively. These elements may help foster a new type of urban culture defined not by high-density construction but by inclusive, healing-centered communities.

Koh Phangan's physical environment – lush jungles, beaches, and slow rhythms – combines with mindful spaces and a long-standing belief in the island's "positive energy" to support emotional regulation and community-based recovery. If this trajectory continues, the island may emerge as a model for trauma-informed urbanism, where infrastructure is built around emotional resilience, cultural coexistence, and ecological sustainability. In this way,

the influx of global trauma survivors may benefit from the island's resources and contribute to reshaping its urban identity into one grounded in care, creativity, and multicultural synergy.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers some insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research was based on a relatively small and self-selecting sample of individuals who chose to participate in David's Circle and were available during the data collection period. As such, the findings may not be representative of Israeli trauma survivors or of those who either remained in Israel post-crisis or relocated. The participants' inclination to engage in communal healing abroad may reflect unique psychological, cultural, or socio-political perspectives not shared by the broader population.

In terms of future research, several promising directions emerge. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore how participation in communal healing spaces, such as The David's Circle, shapes identity, resilience, and civic re-engagement over time. Additionally, research could examine how cultural, spiritual, and environmental elements interact to foster recovery in displaced populations. Comparative analyses between those who remained in Israel and those who sought healing abroad may also offer valuable insights into the diverse trajectories of trauma adaptation.

Finally, future inquiry should continue to explore the deeper questions raised by participants themselves: How can broken trust be restored? What constitutes belonging in a fractured homeland? And how can young people rebuild a sense of "home within the self" when external systems of meaning and safety have collapsed? Addressing these questions is essential not only for therapeutic intervention but also for shaping inclusive, compassionate post-crisis societies.

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