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The aftermath of the “Guardians of the Walls” operation: Half of the youth in the south are reporting experiencing anxiety.

The active fighting might be behind us, but the mental struggle of the southern youth is far from over. Following the “Guardian of the Walls” operation, the feeling of instability spiked among many of them, and the distress is on the rise. Inquiries to ELEM have seen a 30% increase, and half of the youth reported experiencing anxiety. “All of a sudden your routine turns into missiles over your head,” says Lior from Sderot, “I still live in fear.”

Written by Hadar Gil Ad

In an ideal world, the youth in the south would’ve attended school, met with friends and dreamed of what they wanted to do when they grow up. Instead, the southern youth and children found themselves fearing for their lives in the past few weeks. Some, those who live in Sderot and in the Gaza Envelope (the populated areas that are within 4.3 mi of the Gaza border and are therefore within range of missiles launched from the Gaza Strip – ELEM USA) are more familiar with this than others, but you can never truly get used to a reality in which you spend a big chunk of your childhood and adolescents under fire.

During the “Guardians of the Walls” operation, ELEM saw an increase of 30% in inquiries from youth and young people. 55% reported anxiety, 25% said that their sense of safety was shattered, and 20% found it hard to go back to normal. 20% of all inquirers reported a spike in their emotional distress, including depression that led, at times, to eating disorders.

“I had an anxiety attack because of the sirens yesterday, and I haven’t been able to sleep since,” said one of the girls to an ELEM staff member. “I can’t keep going like this.” Another girl shared that she’s experiencing PTSD due to a rocket that landed near her. “The sirens and the constant fear make it impossible to function. I’m really scared and I cry all the time. It’s clear to me that I need help.” One of the boys who spoke to ELEM explained that “we were out when we heard the siren and I just broke down in tears. I can’t stop the feeling of anxiety even now. I haven’t slept in two days.” Another girl

shared that she feels isolated. “My parents are working and no one is realizing that I’m getting really depressed.”

“Youth, and especially at-risk youth, have been through, and are still going through an incredibly difficult year. It started with the COVID outbreak, and then the security situation in light of “Guardians of the Walls.” These things are leaving the youth shaky, both internally and externally,” says ELEM CEO, Inbal Dor Kerbel. “The constantly growing anxiety has led, even in the last couple of weeks, to an increase in inquiries and requests for help. We’ve received reports of emotional distress and self-harm, which manifested due to the challenges of dealing with this tense reality. We’re with them on every platform, face to face and online. We work hard to find them and assist them everywhere, anytime.”

“The last two weeks have felt tense and full of despair,” Lior, 19, from Sderot told us. “You’re used to some sort of a routine, school, then work, and suddenly this routine is replaced with missiles over your head. You see the country on the verge of collapse. You’re shut at home in the safe room. It’s really hard.”

“I’m experiencing anxiety and I think I should see a therapist to address this,” he adds. “I’ve lived here my whole life, and as a kid who grow up in Sderot, this world of the ‘booms’ and the ‘Red Colors’ (the radar system which alerts of imminent missile attack – ELEM USA) I’m constantly anxious and have no quiet refuge. I keep imagining the worst case scenario. Are my parents okay? Are my friends? A kid or a teen really shouldn’t be thinking about these things at this age.”

During the conflict, two missiles fell next to Lior’s house, and ever since then he’s been unable to stop imagining what would’ve happened if he, or any of his family members, would’ve been hurt. “A youth shouldn’t be imagining the worst outcome. Everything scares me. I think that every passing car is a missile or the Iron Dome. And it’s not just me. Everyone who lives in Sderot or in the Gaza Envelope lives like this. It’s an unreal reality.

Liad, 15, from Ashdod also felt his levels of anxiety spike up in the last couple of weeks. “It’s been a rough period. Stress, and running to the safe room,” he says. “I felt anxious and afraid. It’s a deep rooted, permanent fear that lives within you. Not knowing what’s going to happen the next time you hear a siren, if a missile will hit right next to you, hit you. If a friend or a family member will get hurt. This situation really forces you to grow up much faster.”

“My room became a safe room and every 10 minutes my family would rush in. A tiny, stuffy room. Nine people and three dogs, all squeeze together for hours at a time,” Liad told us. “It wasn’t great, and that’s an understatement. Instead of having my space and privacy, my room became a war room.”