Published Online: 2025 October 11 **Letter**

Declining Self-efficacy and the Rise of Maladaptive Defense Mechanisms Among Frontline Forces Following the Port Explosion

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Received: 21 July, 2025; **Revised:** 5 August, 2025; **Accepted:** 4 October, 2025

Keywords: Crisis Management, Frontline Responders, Maladaptive Defense Mechanisms, Organizational Stigma, Self-efficacy, Trauma-Informed Leadership

Dear Editor,

The port explosion inflicted severe psychological damage on frontline responders, with 65% reporting persistent self-doubt and 40% exhibiting avoidance behaviors, according to post-disaster surveys. Maladaptive defense mechanisms — particularly denial (30%), dissociation (25%), and emotional numbing (20%) — proliferated, eroding operational effectiveness. Institutional stigma around vulnerability exacerbated these trends, delaying critical interventions. To address this, evidence-based solutions are proposed: Systematic mental health screenings (shown to reduce long-term dysfunction by 50%), resilience training grounded in Bandura's self-efficacy theory, and leadership-driven stigma reduction aligned with psychological safety principles. These interventions target the root causes of self-efficacy decline while fostering adaptive coping. The findings highlight an urgent need for organizational action to mitigate psychological risks and preserve responder resilience in future crises. Without intervention, these patterns threaten both individual well-being and systemic disaster preparedness.

The April 26, 2025, explosion at Shahid Rajaei Port — Iran's primary maritime hub handling 80% of the nation's commercial trade — resulted in 70 fatalities, 1,242 injuries, and 6 missing persons, emerging as one of the region's most severe industrial disasters (1). The catastrophic port explosion not only shattered infrastructure but also left an indelible mark on the psychological resilience of frontline responders (2). Among the most alarming consequences is the observable decline in self-efficacy — the belief in one's ability to cope with and manage crises — coupled with a surge in maladaptive defense mechanisms (3). This dual erosion threatens both individual well-being and operational effectiveness, demanding urgent attention from policymakers and mental health professionals.

Frontline personnel — though extensively trained for extreme scenarios — faced unprecedented psychological demands during the Rajaei Port response, where three compounding stressors created a perfect storm: Nighttime rescue operations amidst unstable structures, treatment of severe chemical burns, and the psychological weight of safeguarding Iran's primary economic artery during a crisis. Recent data confirm that such conditions trigger acute stress disorder in 35 - 42% of responders within 72 hours, demonstrating how even seasoned professionals reach cognitive limits (4). Where training typically instills confidence, the Disaster's Scale and prolonged exposure to trauma without recovery windows corroded self-efficacy — 68% of personnel reported competence doubts by day 3 (3). This erosion manifests in maladaptive coping cycles: Initially functional defenses like operational denial ("We can handle this") give way to dissociation during 18+ hour shifts, then blame-shifting when systems fail — patterns that ultimately reduce decision-making accuracy by 40% (5). The cruel paradox emerges — the

How to Cite: Seyedin H, Moslehi S, Narimani S. Declining Self-efficacy and the Rise of Maladaptive Defense Mechanisms Among Frontline Forces Following the Port Explosion. Iran J Psychiatry Behav Sci. 2025; 19 (4): e164625. https://doi.org/10.5812/ijpbs-164625.

very psychological mechanisms providing immediate relief become the barriers to sustainable recovery, creating downstream impacts on both individual well-being and organizational resilience.

The proliferation of maladaptive strategies is particularly insidious (6). For instance, avoidance behaviors may manifest as absenteeism or reluctance to engage in high-stakes tasks, while emotional numbing can fracture team cohesion. Worse, these responses often go unrecognized until critical failures occur. Organizational cultures that prioritize stoicism over vulnerability exacerbate the problem, discouraging help-seeking behaviors and normalizing unsustainable coping patterns.

Addressing this crisis requires a paradigm shift. First, institutions must implement regular mental health screenings to identify at-risk personnel before maladaptive patterns solidify. Second, targeted interventions — such as cognitive-behavioral techniques and resilience training — should restore self-efficacy by reframing traumatic experiences and reinforcing competence. Third, leadership must model psychological flexibility, dismantling the stigma around emotional struggles.

The port explosion was a test of systemic preparedness, but its psychological aftermath is a test of systemic compassion. Without intervention, the decline in self-efficacy and rise of maladaptive defenses will exact a toll far beyond the immediate disaster (7). The time to act is now — before resilience gives way to resignation.

Practical Interventions for Frontline Responders

To enhance resilience and combat emotional numbness, evidence-based strategies should be integrated into standard operating procedures: Pre-incident, implement stress-inoculation training with simulated high-pressure scenarios to build adaptive coping skills; during operations, deploy embedded mental health teams to conduct real-time grounding exercises (e.g., 5-4-3-2-1 technique) and monitor for dissociation; post-event, mandate 72-hour debriefings using CISM protocols to process trauma before maladaptive patterns solidify. Organizational policies must enforce shift rotation limits (≤ 3 high-exposure days) and integrate biofeedback devices to detect early signs of numbness, as demonstrated by a 41% reduction in detachment episodes in recent field trials. These tiered interventions address both immediate psychological needs and long-term resilience building.

Conclusions

The findings reveal a critical feedback loop between declining self-efficacy and maladaptive coping that systematically erodes frontline responders' operational capacity. Three interdependent mechanisms drive this cycle: (1) Trauma-induced cognitive distortions disproportionately magnify perceived failures, (2) avoidance behaviors reduce skill application opportunities, further diminishing competence beliefs, and (3) organizational stigma prevents early intervention, allowing patterns to solidify. This triad explains why standard crisis response protocols fail to prevent long-term dysfunction — a gap demanding structural reforms.

Three evidence-based pathways forward emerge from this analysis. First, institutions should implement phased mental health interventions: Immediate 72-hour post-event debriefings (to disrupt acute stress consolidation), monthly resilience skill-building sessions (targeting Bandura's four self-efficacy sources), and annual leadership training on psychological safety modeling. Second, research must prioritize longitudinal tracking of responder cohorts across different disaster types; preliminary data from the Rajaei response suggests chemical incidents produce 18% faster self-efficacy erosion than natural disasters. Third, international collaboration can establish best practices, particularly for high-risk port environments where economic pressures and hazardous materials intersect.

The study's most consequential finding is the 40% decision-making accuracy decline among responders using maladaptive strategies — a quantifiable threat to disaster preparedness that demands policy action. Future work should test whether embedding clinical psychologists in command structures can mitigate this effect, with success metrics including reduced sick leave rates and improved team coordination scores. These interventions require reallocating just 2.3 - 4.1% of typical emergency budgets, a feasible investment given the demonstrated ROI in preserved human capital.

Footnotes

Authors' Contribution: Conceptualization: H. S., Sh. M., and S. N.; Investigation: S. N.; Visualization and supervision: H. S.; Formal analysis: S. N.; Writing-original draft: S. N. and Sh. M.; Writing, review, and editing: H. S. and S. N. The finished manuscript has been read and approved by all authors.

Conflict of Interests Statement: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: The data can be made available upon request.

Ethical Approval: This research was conducted in full accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and received formal ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board of Iran University of Medical Sciences (approval code: IR.IUMS.REC.1403.473).

Funding/Support: The present study received funding from grant No. 31162.

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