

Maintaining the mental health of Ukrainians in time of war: searching for a mechanism to provide a comprehensive system of psychosocial support and mental health awareness

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To substantiate the possibilities of developing a comprehensive system of psychosocial support for Ukrainians during and after the war through the development of an integrated model of psychosocial service provision in the community, which promotes cross-sectoral interaction and expands the possibilities of integrating and scaling up multiple levels of mental health interventions.

Materials and Methods: The article is based on the use of bibliosemantic analysis of scientific works on the topic of mental health and mental health during the war.

Conclusions: It is emphasised that in developing a comprehensive system of psychosocial support, it is necessary to: ensure accessibility of services for those in need; integrate services into the general health and social protection system; use a multisectoral approach, involving various organisations, institutions and professionals; train professionals to work in war conditions; develop and implement psychoeducation and psychological support programmes; monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of programmes. Particular attention is paid to psychoeducation as a technology that can be used at different levels of psychological intervention by both mental health professionals and other specialists involved in the provision of social services in communities. The spread of the impact of psychoeducational programmes will contribute to the development of community resilience in the face of social and psychological risks provoked by the war. A mechanism for scaling up the capabilities of the Technical Working Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS TWG), an association of leading international and Ukrainian NGOs specialising in mental health, established in Ukraine with the support of the WHO and the Ministry of Health of Ukraine, is proposed. The idea of creating a network of Resilience Centres in communities with the aim of forming a comprehensive system of psychosocial support at the state and community levels is substantiated.

KEY WORDS: psychosocial support, mental health, psychosocial support system, integrated system of social services, psychosocial services, psychoeducation, war

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INTRODUCTION

The war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine has led to significant social and psychological consequences that affect all aspects of people's lives. The social challenges faced by Ukrainian society include political, economic, demographic, health, disability, displacement and migration risks.

According to WHO global estimates, approximately 22.1% of the population that has experienced military conflict has various mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. These disorders can manifest themselves in the long term up to 10 years after the trauma [1]. This study has updated previous WHO estimates, as current figures indicate an increase in the number of people with mental disorders as a result of the military conflict compared to 2016 data. This figure, in the context of Ukraine, may suggest that around 10 million Ukrainians may have mental disorders.

According to estimates by the Minister of Health V. Lyashko, 14 million Ukrainians are in need of psychological assistance [2]. Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, more than 13 million people have been forced to flee their homes. Both the impact of war and displacement have had a significant impact on mental health, especially among vulnerable groups. The results of a survey on the impact of the war on the mental health of Ukrainians forced to flee their homes, published in the journal PLOS Global Public Health by researchers from the University of Southampton, showed high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and generalised anxiety among both refugees and internally displaced persons. The sample size was 8,000 people. Almost 70% of all survey participants reported increased anxiety, with those who stayed in Ukraine experiencing higher levels of anxiety and more frequent painful memories. The study indicates that internally displaced people face more serious

mental health consequences, likely due to the ongoing impact of the war. The authors of the study emphasise the need to provide mental health support and assistance as a priority for humanitarian assistance [3].

The destructive impact of the war on parents' mental health is confirmed by an online survey conducted with a national sample of parents living in Ukraine (N= 2004) between 15 July and 5 September 2022 [4]. The majority of participants experienced a deterioration in mental health following Russia's attack in February 2022, with the largest increases in anxiety, depression, and loneliness. In particular, increased feelings of loneliness and the risk of unsafe drinking were more relevant for young people, while pensioners were less likely to experience depression. These results indicate that the disruption of normal life caused by the war has a significant impact on young people. Increased anxiety, depression, and loneliness were more common among women, while men experienced an increase in hazardous alcohol use, highlighting potentially important gender differences in reactions to war. It should be noted that the situation in the family and the health of parents directly affects the well-being of children, who are the most vulnerable group of the population. The study of barriers and facilitating factors for interventions aimed at different levels of the MHPSS pyramid (in our article, it is presented in Fig. 1) is informative about the effectiveness of psychological interventions for children affected by war [5]. The authors identified factors that exacerbate trauma-related symptoms in children: lack of support from parents or guardians; lack of political will and financial resources, difficulties in prioritising or insufficient medical staff; conflicts, etc. Among the favourable factors are the consideration of the cultural context and cooperation of different actors in psychological interventions; involvement of caregivers of children affected by war, etc.

Less studied, but no less significant, is the impact of war on mental health workers who provide mental health support services during war. Interesting results were presented by Kang et. al. [6]: lower levels of mental health problems, such as anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms, and higher levels of psychosocial factors, such as higher optimism, gratitude, presence, and meaning-making, were associated with higher well-being of mental health professionals. Professionals with high levels of protective psychosocial factors were more likely to report higher well-being even in the presence of mental health problems.

It is clear that the war has highlighted the urgent need to improve the system of psychosocial support for the population of Ukraine, both at the state and community levels.

AIM

The aim of the paper is to substantiate the possibilities of developing a comprehensive system of psychosocial support and mental health awareness for Ukrainians during and after the war through the development of an integrated model of psychosocial services in the community, which promotes intersectoral cooperation and expands the

possibilities of integrating and scaling up multiple levels of mental health interventions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article is based on the use of bibliosemantic analysis of scientific works on the topic of mental health and mental health during the war.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

Psychosocial support is a comprehensive approach aimed at improving the psychological and social well-being of individuals in the community. It includes both psychological support (assistance in overcoming stress, anxiety, depression and other emotional difficulties) and social support (providing access to resources, social services and support networks). An important element of the system of psychosocial support in communities is the organisation of group meetings, trainings and joint activities to support the health of citizens. Such activities help to raise awareness of mental health problems, reduce stress, improve quality of life, ensure psychological resilience, social integration and support vulnerable groups.

Psychosocial support is an important element of an integrated community-based social service delivery system, which combines different types of social services (e.g., medical, educational, psychological) to provide comprehensive community support. This model takes into account the needs of different categories of the population and promotes the efficient use of resources of both the community and the recipient of the social service - an individual, family or a certain social group. At the same time, the model's effectiveness is ensured by the possibility of interagency/intersectoral cooperation, including in the field of psychosocial support. Different specialists work together to ensure a comprehensive approach to the mental health of the population: psychologists provide individual and group psychotherapy services, counselling, and help to cope with trauma and stress; social workers help with rehabilitation, social adaptation, access to necessary information and resources, and provide social services, etc; psychiatrists assess and treat mental disorders and prescribe medication; medical staff, including family doctors, identify signs of mental disorders and refer patients to specialists; volunteers and NGOs provide psychosocial support, organise trainings and events, etc. These professionals need to work together to provide appropriate support and improve the mental well-being of the population in times of war [7]. It is also important that the organisation of the community-based model of integrated social services involves both the provision of social services by professionals and the active involvement of people in solving problems that affect their lives. It focuses on the relationships between individuals, groups and institutions that shape everyday life. The main actors in the amalgamated territorial communities in the field of social service provision are social work specialists, psychologists, doctors, lawyers, etc., representatives of state authorities, the non-governmental sector (religious organisations, charitable foundations, etc.), experts and

community members. Accordingly, the organisation of a comprehensive system of psychosocial support for citizens can be built on the basis of an integrated system of social services in the community, which involves close intersectoral cooperation between the social protection system and the health care system in the field of mental health of Ukrainians.

It is important to integrate multiple levels of interventions into the emergency response. These levels are aligned with a wide range of mental health and psychosocial support needs and are reflected in the intervention pyramid (Fig. 1), which range from integrating MHPSS aspects into basic services to providing specialised services depending on the needs of communities and individuals and the severity of the mental disorder they may have.

Basic services and safety, as well as community-based support for individuals and families, should be accessible to all segments of the population. Targeted (person-to-person) non-specialised support provided by trained service providers (e.g. general practitioners trained in the management of common mental disorders or other non-specialised workers trained to deliver scalable psychological interventions, such as social workers) who are potentially prepared to support people with mild to moderate mental disorders [9;10]; while specialised services provided by mental health professionals are aimed at targeting the most vulnerable and most affected populations [11].

Coordination between professionals at different levels of the pyramid and a referral system are important here. Also, not all actions fit perfectly into specific levels of the intervention pyramid. For example, a person with a severe mental disorder may need access to specialised services; however, they also need to be provided with basic services and safety, access to community and family support, and may additionally benefit from some interventions at the level of targeted non-specialised support. In order to

provide these services at different levels of the pyramid, ongoing training and supervision is also needed, both in the short term (in-service training) and in the long term (pre-service training).

Scalable psychological interventions are promising because they can provide wider coverage of services. These interventions reduce dependence on specialists and contribute to more efficient use of resources of different professionals. A combination of interventions that require lower or higher resource intensity and are organised at the individual service, community or national level can be offered as a 'stepped care' system, where a person can use guided self-help or other interventions provided by lay people and 'step up' to more specialised support if and when needed [8].

Psychosocial support is aimed at strengthening mental health, developing stress resilience and maintaining the health of citizens in all its dimensions - mental, physical, spiritual and social. The importance of such support lies in ensuring the resilience of society and facilitating rapid recovery from war. To ensure effective psychosocial support, we believe it is necessary to: ensure access to services for all those in need; integrate services into the general health and social protection system; use a multisectoral approach, involving various organisations, institutions and professionals; train professionals to work in war conditions; develop and implement psychoeducation and psychological support programmes; monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of programmes. Such a comprehensive support system will help reduce the negative impact of war on the mental health of the population and facilitate faster social adaptation and integration of victims into society.

It should be noted that the current regulatory framework in the field of social protection and healthcare is contributing to the improvement of the psychosocial support system in Ukraine. In particular, the Law of Ukraine "On Social Services"

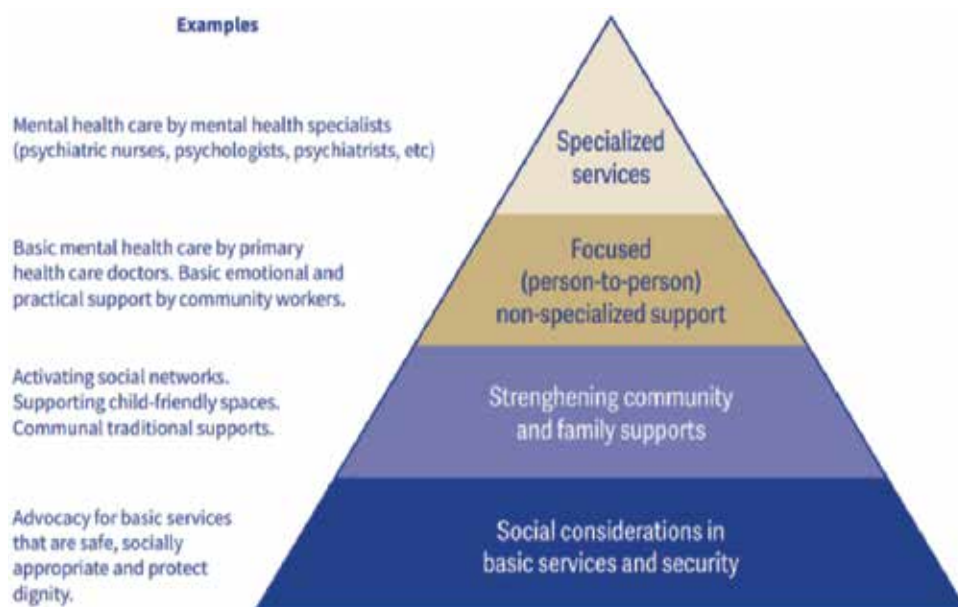


Fig. 1. IASC MHPSS Guidelines intervention pyramid [8].

defines the basic organisational and legal framework for the provision of social services (including the development of a system of integrated social services in the community) aimed at preventing difficult life circumstances, overcoming or minimising their negative consequences, to individuals/families in difficult life circumstances [12], the Order of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine "On Provision of Psychosocial Assistance to the Population" of 13.12.2023, which substantiates the procedure for providing psychosocial assistance and psychosocial services on mental health issues to various categories of the population, primarily vulnerable groups, presents recommended methods of psychological diagnosis and psychotherapy, and provides a list of psychosocial services, including psychoeducation [13].

The order defines psychoeducation as an activity that consists of conducting outreach work to explain and convey to people the necessary information about mental health, psychological problems and trauma and their consequences for the individual in order to prevent and prevent the development of mental and behavioural disorders in the individual and family members, to form a general understanding of mental health and skills to care for it. [13]. Psychoeducation can include information about the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, self-help methods, the importance of social support, and the development of stress-resilience skills. It can also help to destigmatise mental disorders and improve access to psychosocial services.

Psychoeducation is an important component of both the healthcare and social protection systems in Ukraine. In the healthcare system, psychoeducation aims to provide information and skills to patients and their families about mental health. Its main goal is to translate complex medical or scientific facts into simple language that everyone can understand. This helps patients to better understand their diagnoses, treatments and ways to maintain their mental health. The Concept for the Development of Mental Health Care in Ukraine until 2030 also pays attention to the development of a system of social assistance for people with mental disorders, ensuring the availability of this assistance at the level of territorial communities and the implementation of state guarantees for mental health support [14]. Psychoeducation is an important tool for building a culture of mental health and raising awareness of mental disorders and their management. It is important, as we have already noted, that spreading knowledge about mental health contributes to the destigmatisation of mental disorders and improves the social integration of people in need of psychological assistance. This allows for a more inclusive society where people with mental disorders can feel accepted and supported.

Given the scale of the need and the importance of spreading knowledge about mental health in times of war, psychoeducation should be an integral part of a comprehensive support system for the population. The importance of psychoeducation as part of the humanitarian response to war, as well as the need for timely and quality assistance, is underscored by the fact that the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) in Ukraine has expanded its support to psychoeducation initiatives for Ukrainians during the war [2].

Among the numerous civic initiatives and projects designed to form a comprehensive system of psychosocial support for Ukrainians in times of war is the creation of the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Technical Working Group [15], which brought together leading national and international organisations involved in emergency response, which brought together leading national and international organisations working in the field of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and involved in the emergency response in Ukraine. The Technical Working Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) was established to implement the All-Ukrainian Mental Health Programme "Are You OK?"; initiated by First Lady Olha Zelenska with the support of WHO and in cooperation with the Ministry of Health of Ukraine. As part of the programme, a special virtual platform "How are you?" was created, where you can find contacts of specialised institutions, useful links, tips and techniques to help take care of your psychological state. There are also hotlines where you can get help from specialists in the most difficult moments [16, 17]. The main goal of the group is to reorganise the system of mental health services, including work with stigma, development of resilience skills, quality screening of the population's mental health status and creation of accessible psychosocial services for children and youth.

This initiative is an important step in supporting the mental health of Ukrainian citizens and contributes to their well-being. The possibility of using psychoeducational technologies plays an important role in this process.

In our opinion, the urgent task is to scale up the capabilities of the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Technical Coordination by creating a network of Resilience Centres in communities to form a comprehensive system of psychosocial support at the state and community levels.

The issue of continuity and sustainability of essential MHPSS Programs and services received great deal of MHPSS professionals' attention to bridge gaps in care and provide support and guidance on ways to implement the actions needed to strengthen mental health response using most effective methods, share knowledge and cultivate best practices in Ukraine. How to equip MHPSS professionals and Community members in Ukraine with the necessary skills to provide effective psychological and psychosocial support according to local context? To address this demands, it is traditional for MHPSS to launch a Community of Practice (CoP).

Aims: The Community of Practice (CoP) on child-centered MHPSS Programs in Ukraine aims to:

- strengthen technical expertise around sustainability of MHPSS intervention;
- elucidate main facilitators to improve quality of Community based MHPSS services for affected populations;
- foster collaborative working spaces (CoPs), which support a comprehensive and harmonized MHPSS response;

- integrate/adapt MHPSS international approach (as well as values of child-friendly social environment and health-responsive society) into Ukrainian cultural context;
- establish multisectoral cooperation on MHPSS topics between different actors in Community level (based on relevant needs of the Community);
- Mental Health Literacy: dissemination of MHPSS values for wide Ukrainian society;
- sustainability of MHPSS interventions' impact on well-being of beneficiaries.

Design and Administration:

The CoPs on International MHPSS Programs could be designed and administrated in a way to ensure analytic – design – implementation – coordination circle progress.

Analytical stage: This work will include Lessons Learnt sessions, Group discussions, analytical materials (from monitoring/mentoring visits, feedback mechanisms, assessments evaluation etc).

Webinars/seminars/round tables: according to the results of analytical stage, the content and calendar of these activities will be developed and commonly discussed/arranged.

Tutorials/guidelines: (video)tutorials/guidelines will be developed (based on results of analytical and webinars stages) to ensure common approach and common understandings in the MHPSS Program.

Channel for dissemination: The Channel(s) will be established to ensure visibility and accessibility of MHPSS materials/messages/values according to different levels of Ukrainian society (Public, Civil Society, Professional Sectors as well as MHPSS Program facilitators community).

Internship model and Mentoring sessions: These models will allow to share/exchange best practices between experienced and new facilitators, ensure supportive mechanism in professional development/growth of facilitators ...

Intervisions: As part of supportive mentorship, we will use intervision sessions (supportive mentorship sessions between groups of facilitators from different Organizations). This will allow to create collaborative Space/Platform for exchanging of best practices, and ensure sustainability of common approach in MHPSS Program implementation (Fig. 2).

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE CENTERS

Community Resilience Center is a safe and developing environment that supports the personal and social development of all members of the community, including children and caregivers. Community Resilience Centers are aimed at building capacity, supporting the health and well-being of community members, even in difficult conditions.

The aims of Community Resilience Centers functioning are:

- coordination and information hubs to meet urgent needs and build the social potential of the community (basic opportunities, services, resources, etc., which can be available both for certain groups in the community and for specific individuals);
- educational, developmental, and supportive environments that ensure the effective implementation of social innovations in community life, contribute to the successful implementation of social plans and community building activities;
- commuting the efforts of the Public and Civil Society. Organizations to ensure the well-being of both the community as a whole and specific individuals;
- promoting the successful adaptation of community members to new social conditions; assistance in the successful integration of new members into the host community, including internally displaced persons.

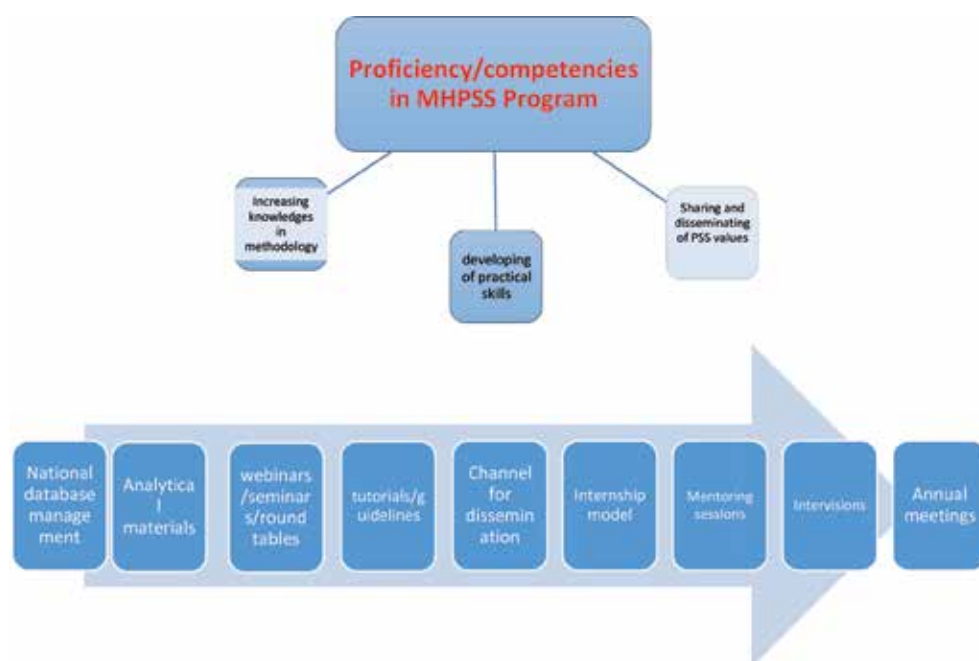


Fig. 2. Semantic structure in MHPSS Program implementation

CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, the organisation of a comprehensive psychosocial support system that integrates medical and social services in Ukraine during the war requires an integrated approach. Here are some key steps to create such a system:

1. Needs analysis: identifying the specific needs of the population, including vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, veterans, internally displaced persons and others.
2. Intersectoral cooperation: cooperation between government agencies, non-profit organisations, international partners and the private sector to ensure a comprehensive approach to service delivery.
3. Training of professionals: training of medical workers, social workers, psychologists and volunteers to work in war conditions, providing them with the knowledge and skills for effective psychoeducation.
4. Information campaigns: development and implementation of information campaigns to raise public awareness of available services, self-help methods and the importance of mental health.
5. Establishment of support centres: Opening of social and psychological support centres that will provide comprehensive services, including psychoeducation, counselling, medical care and social adaptation.
6. Monitoring and evaluation: Regular monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of services provided to improve support programmes and strategies.
7. Community involvement: Increasing community participation in the planning and delivery of services to ensure that they meet local needs and cultural contexts.
8. Funding and resources: securing sustainable funding and resources for the long-term sustainability of the system, including international assistance and grants.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

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