

UDC 159.96+364-7

DOI: 10.61727/ssspj/2.2024.53

The role of mindfulness in coping with the experience of war: An analysis of empirical data

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Abstract. The relevance of this study arises from the search for personal protective factors that mitigate the impact of war and contribute to post-traumatic growth. This article analysed empirical data to determine the role of mindfulness in coping with the experience of war. Empirical data were collected using the “Personal Strength” and “Appreciation of Life” scales from the post-traumatic growth questionnaire, as well as the Healthy Lifestyle of Ukrainians During the War survey. The study sample comprised 6,042 respondents (60% men, 40% women; mean = 37.9 years; range = 16-77 years). Data were collected using Google Forms (between late 2023 and early 2024). The results indicated that the dynamics of positive personal changes during wartime are associated with socio-demographic factors such as gender, age, level of education, place of residence, living situation, and income. Women are more likely than men to demonstrate an increased sense of personal strength and a heightened appreciation of life. Young people aged 16-25 and those aged 50 and older exhibit greater resilience in coping with wartime experiences than other age groups. Individuals with higher education are more likely to demonstrate a high level of positive internal transformation. The lowest levels of post-traumatic growth are observed among residents of frontline zones and occupied territories compared to those living abroad or in western Ukraine. Those residing in extended families, with children, or with a spouse/partner exhibit greater potential for post-traumatic growth than those living alone. Additionally, personal strength scores increase with income level. For most respondents, post-traumatic growth indicators are at an average level, suggesting the potential to develop new habits that enhance their health and well-being in the context of war

Keywords: healthy lifestyle; awareness; mindfulness; post-traumatic growth; coping with war experiences

INTRODUCTION

The scale of losses and suffering associated with war leaves individuals with no possibility of remaining unaffected by the challenges of the present. People are continuously confronted with the task of surviving catastrophic living conditions, maintaining physical and mental health, and sustaining their quality of life. Consequently, examining how Ukrainians manage to maintain a healthy lifestyle during wartime is a pressing issue. In this context, exploring the phenomenon of mindfulness as an intrinsic regenerative resource for personal healing

and resilience in fostering a healthy lifestyle is of particular relevance (Bharti *et al.*, 2023). Mindfulness theory, established by J. Kabat-Zinn (1982), seeks to understand the mechanisms through which individuals recover from chronic pain and excessive stress. The researcher emphasises that stress, as a fundamental aspect of human nature, is an inseparable component of the human experience. He also highlights that individuals can learn to coexist with stress, comprehend its significance, derive meaning from it, make informed decisions, and harness its energy

Article's History: Received: 19.08.2024 Revised: 20.11.2024 Accepted: 26.12.2024

Suggested Citation:

Larina, T. (2024). The role of mindfulness in coping with the experience of war: An analysis of empirical data. *Scientific Studios on Social and Political Psychology*, 30(2), 53-59. doi: 10.61727/ssspj/2.2024.53.



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to cultivate inner strength, wisdom, and self-compassion. Contemporary research on the spiritual dimensions of human psychology underscores the significance of applying spiritual principles and techniques to develop pragmatic and purposeful approaches for self-regulation, transformation, and liberation from suffering, ultimately facilitating self-healing and holistic well-being (Dvornyk *et al.*, 2024). The Buddhist modernist movement, which has rapidly gained traction in Western culture through the widespread practice of simplified meditation, represents a technique for cultivating mindful awareness. Mindfulness, as a personal commitment to practising freedom, self-realisation, and self-transformation, increasingly serves as a tool for self-help in achieving personal aspirations for self-improvement and optimising individual productivity (Lorenzini *et al.*, 2023).

Research on the role of mindfulness in addressing mental health and well-being issues during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights its protective effect in mitigating heightened stress levels during periods of crises and uncertainty. The findings confirm the importance of examining personality traits such as mindfulness and resilience to understand the mechanisms that alleviate problems associated with stress, anxiety, depression, and other psychological challenges (McMahan & Braun, 2017). Researchers emphasise that mindfulness, as a protective factor, positively influences the resolution of psychological distress during the pandemic. Moreover, mindfulness as a trait – defined as the ability to remain aware of one's experiences without judgement in the present moment – determines self-efficacy and coping strategies within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Phong, 2024). Evidence also indicates that mindfulness can mitigate the psychosocial consequences of collective trauma and protect against the negative effects of secondary stressors, such as job loss and income reduction (Schmiedeler *et al.*, 2023).

Therefore, a theoretical analysis of effective mechanisms for managing traumatic experiences and the consequences of collective trauma confirms that mindfulness, as a personal protective factor against pathological psychological reactions during periods of severe crisis or catastrophe, provides a buffering effect and a restorative impulse for post-traumatic growth. Accordingly, the present study aimed to determine the role of mindfulness in coping with the experience of war. Research hypotheses: the levels of post-traumatic growth indicators such as "Personal Strength" and "Appreciation of Life" correlate with socio-demographic characteristics. Furthermore, an awareness of the increasing sense of personal strength and the recognition of life's value during war is associated with how individuals take care of their health.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the study's objectives, the concept of post-traumatic growth was employed (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), along with the "Personal Strength"

($\alpha = 0.88$) and "Appreciation of Life" ($\alpha = 0.89$) scales from the post-traumatic growth questionnaire, developed by R. Tedeschi and L. Calhoun (Ukrainian adaptation by D. Zubovskiy, 2018). Additionally, questions regarding the healthy lifestyle of Ukrainians during the war were incorporated (Dvornyk *et al.*, 2024). The research hypotheses were tested using Pearson's correlation coefficient and the Chi-square (χ^2) test for categorical data. The study sample comprised 6,042 respondents (60% men and 40% women), with a mean age of 37.9 years (min = 16, max = 77 years; SD = 9.3). Data were collected via Google Forms between September 2023 and January 2024. All survey participants were informed about the measures taken to ensure their anonymity, the purpose of the study, the intended use of their data, and any associated risks. The study was conducted following the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (1975).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The majority of respondents exhibited moderate levels of post-traumatic growth, with 58.7% scoring in this range for "Personal Strength" and 42.5% for "Appreciation of Life". A high level of awareness regarding positive internal changes and greater confidence in managing challenges related to the full-scale invasion was observed in 10.7% of participants. Additionally, 28.9% of respondents reported an enhanced understanding of the value of their lives. Statistically significant differences in the levels of awareness of positive internal changes were identified across socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, age, educational level, place of residence, living arrangements, and income level. The Chi-square test was used to examine these hypotheses, serving as a non-parametric statistical method for nominal data. A higher level of confidence in coping with difficulties was more commonly observed among women (14.4%), whereas men were more likely to report a moderate level of positive personal changes (59.1%). Significant shifts in life priorities were more frequently noted by women (38.4%), while a majority of men (43.3%) perceived only moderate changes in their understanding of life's value. Young individuals (aged 16-25 years) were predominantly found to exhibit moderate (62.5%) and high (18.1%) levels of "Personal Strength". Conversely, individuals aged 40-49 years displayed the lowest levels of personal strength, whereas those aged 50 and older were more likely to demonstrate a moderate level (60.4%).

Respondents with low levels of "Personal Strength" were more frequently found among those with incomplete secondary education (36.3%) and full secondary education (33.6%). Individuals with moderate levels of "Personal Strength" were more likely to have completed higher education (59.8%) or to hold some higher or secondary specialised education (58.7%). Those with high levels of "Personal Strength" were more often individuals with an academic degree. Furthermore, respondents with

full higher education (31.8%) were more likely to report a significant re-evaluation of the value of their lives, while a moderate level of "Appreciation of Life" was more common among those with an academic degree (45.5%) and those with incomplete higher or secondary specialised education (44.7%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics and levels of "Personal Strength" and "Appreciation of Life"

Socio-demographic characteristics		Levels of "Personal Strength"			Level of "Appreciation of Life"		
		low	moderate	high	low	moderate	high
Gender	Men	32.5%	59.1%	8.3%	34%	43.3%	22.7%
	Women	27.5%	58.1%	14.4%	20.3%	41.3%	38.4%
<i>Pearson's correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 64.676, p < 0.001			Chi-square (χ^2) = 221.186, p < 0.001		
Age group	16-25 years	19.4%	62.5%	18.1%	Not detected		
	26-39 years	31.8%	57.8%	10.4%			
	40-49 years	32.1%	58.4%	9.5%			
	Aged 50 and older	30.6%	60.4%	9%			
<i>Pearson's correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 64.901, p < 0.001					
Educational level	Incomplete secondary education	36.3%	56.1%	7.6%	37.6%	37.6%	24.8%
	Full secondary education	33.6%	56.5%	9.9%	32.2%	42.5%	25.3%
	Some higher or secondary specialised education	31.5%	58.7%	9.8%	28.4%	44.7%	26.9%
	Full higher education	28.6%	59.8%	11.6%	26.6%	41.6%	31.8%
	Academic degree	26%	57.1%	16.9%	29.9%	45.5%	24.7%
<i>Pearson's correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 20.151, p = 0.010			Chi-square (χ^2) = 30.077, p < 0.001		

Source: compiled by the author

Among those with low levels of "Personal Strength", residents of frontline or occupied areas were overrepresented (30.9%), as were residents of other parts of Ukraine (31.7%). A moderate level of "Personal Strength" was most prevalent among those living abroad (64.3%) and in western Ukraine (62.1%). High levels of "Personal Strength" were most frequently found among individuals residing abroad (22.9%) and in Kyiv and the surrounding region (14.8%). Respondents living in extended families (61.6%), with children (59.9%), or with a spouse/partner (59.5%) were more likely to have a moderate level of "Personal Strength". Those living alone (32.9%) or with a spouse/partner and children (31.7%) often reported low levels of "Personal Strength". Conversely, high levels of "Personal Strength" were more commonly found among

individuals living with roommates/friends/companions (20.5%) and those living with children (15.2%).

Respondents living with a spouse/partner and children (44.5%) and those living with parents (44.2%) frequently exhibited a moderate level of "Appreciation of Life". In contrast, those living alone often had a low level of "Appreciation of Life" (36.3%), while a high level was observed more frequently among individuals living with children (35.4%) or in extended families (32.4%). The distribution of "Personal Strength" across income levels demonstrated that, with increasing income, the score on the "Personal Strength" scale increased. Low-income respondents (33.3%) often had lower levels of "Personal Strength", while those with middle or higher incomes showed higher levels (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation between the place of residence, income level, and levels of "Personal Strength" and "Appreciation of Life"

Socio-demographic characteristics		Levels of "Personal Strength"			Level of "Appreciation of Life"		
		low	moderate	high	low	moderate	high
Place of residence	Frontline or occupied areas	30.9%	57.5%	11.6%	Not detected		
	Western Ukraine	29.1%	62.1%	8.8%			
	Living abroad	12.9%	64.3%	22.9%			
	Other parts of Ukraine	31.7%	58.3%	10%			
	Kyiv and the surrounding region	24.6%	60.6%	14.8%			
<i>Pearson's correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 39.379, p < 0.001					
Current state of residence	Living alone	32.9%	54.3%	12.8%	36.3%	36.9%	26.8%
	With a spouse/partner	29.5%	59.5%	10.9%	28.3%	42.2%	29.5%
	With parents	29.8%	59.2%	11%	30.8%	44.2%	25%
	With roommates/friends/companions	25.3%	54.2%	20.5%	30.1%	41%	28.9%
	With spouse/partner and children	31.7%	59.1%	9.1%	26.8%	44.5%	28.8%

Table 2, Continued

Socio-demographic characteristics		Levels of "Personal Strength"			Level of "Appreciation of Life"		
		low	moderate	high	low	moderate	high
Current state of residence	With children	24.9%	59.9%	15.2%	22.2%	42.4%	35.4%
	Living in extended families	29.2%	61.6%	9.2%	28.5%	39.1%	32.4%
<i>Pearson's correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 36.662, $p < 0.001$			Chi-square (χ^2) = 47.604, $p < 0.001$		
Income level	Low	33.3%	56.8%	9.9%	Not detected		
	Below average	32.1%	57.7%	10.2%			
	Moderate	27.9%	61.5%	10.6%			
	Above average	24.8%	61.4%	13.9%			
	High	25.6%	46.5%	27.9%			
<i>Pearson's correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 52.157, $p < 0.001$					

Source: compiled by the author

Statistically significant differences in various levels of awareness regarding positive internal changes were identified concerning general healthy lifestyle (HLS) indicators. Among those who considered themselves to partially adhere to a healthy lifestyle under current conditions, individuals with moderate levels of positive personal changes were more common (62%). Those who reported not following a healthy lifestyle tended to have low levels of "Personal Strength" (42.4%). By contrast, individuals who fully adhered to a healthy lifestyle were more likely to exhibit high levels of positive personal changes (14.6%).

There was also a statistically significant difference in leading health-related practices based on levels of positive personal changes. Individuals with a low level of "Personal Strength" were more likely to focus on abandoning harmful habits and maintaining existing health-promoting behaviours (32.3%). Meanwhile, respondents with moderate (62%) and high (11.9%) levels of "Personal Strength" were more inclined to develop new habits aimed at improving health and well-being. Those who lacked stable health-related habits were generally found to have a low level of "Appreciation of Life" (44.7%) (Table 3).

Table 3. HLS indicators and focus areas for maintaining health in wartime: Correlation with levels of "Personal Strength" and "Appreciation of Life"

General Healthy Lifestyle Survey (HLS)		Levels of "Personal Strength"			Level of "Appreciation of Life"		
		low	moderate	high	low	moderate	high
Do you think that you currently follow a healthy lifestyle (as you understand it)?	Yes	32%	53.4%	14.6%	Not detected		
	Rather yes	27.1%	62%	10.9%			
	Difficult to answer	31%	59.9%	9.1%			
	Rather not	30.2%	61.9%	7.9%			
	Not	42.4%	49.4%	8.3%			
<i>Pearson's correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 72.615, $p < 0.001$					
What would you focus on when considering a healthy lifestyle in current conditions?	Abandoning harmful habits	32.3%	57.2%	10.5%	31.6%	41.5%	26.9%
	Maintaining existing health-promoting behaviours	32.3%	58.2%	9.6%	31.2%	42.7%	26%
	Developing new habits to improve health and well-being	26.1%	62%	11.9%	24.1%	43.7%	32.3%
	All of the above	30.6%	58.5%	10.9%	27.1%	42.8%	30.1%
	None of the above	31.9%	59.6%	8.5%	44.7%	36.2%	19.1%
<i>Pearson's correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 14.564, $p = 0.068$			Chi-square (χ^2) = 33.596, $p < 0.001$		

Source: compiled by the author

Respondents frequently (33.5%) reported psychological losses, such as loss of trust, confidence or values, a lack of personal loss experiences (31.2%), and the death of a friend or relative (27.6%). Among those who had no war-related loss experiences, lower levels of "Personal Strength" and "Appreciation of Life" were more prevalent. Participants who reported experiencing two losses exhibited moderate levels of awareness in both domains. Those who reported three or more losses were more likely to demonstrate high levels of "Personal Strength"

and "Appreciation of Life". Individuals without any wartime experiences often had lower levels of "Personal Strength" (32.4%). Those with two distinct wartime experiences typically demonstrated moderate levels of "Personal Strength" (66%). In contrast, individuals with three or more types of wartime experiences (e.g., disaster recovery, medical or pre-medical assistance, combat or military service) more frequently exhibited high levels of "Personal Strength" (26.2%) (Table 4). Among respondents without any experience of displacement, lower levels of

“Personal Strength” were more common (32.2%). Those with displacement experiences both within the country and abroad were more likely to have moderate (62.5%) and high (16.7%) levels of “Personal Strength” (Table 4).

Table 4. Wartime experiences and forced displacement: Correlation with levels of “Personal Strength” and “Appreciation of Life”

Wartime experiences		Levels of “Personal Strength”			Level of “Appreciation of Life”		
		low	moderate	high	low	moderate	high
Experience of forced displacement	Displacement within the country	27.2%	60.6%	12.2%	Not detected		
	Displacement abroad	23.3%	60.3%	16.4%			
	Displacement both within the country and abroad	20.8%	62.5%	16.7%			
	Any experience of displacement	32.2%	58%	9.9%			
<i>Pearson’s correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 36.370, $p < 0.001$					
Loss experiences (quantity)	1 loss	28.5%	62.1%	9.5%	27.3%	43.9%	28.8%
	2 losses	26.5%	63.1%	10.4%	20.8%	44.7%	34.6%
	3 losses	25.4%	61.2%	13.4%	22.2%	43.6%	34.2%
	4 or more losses	30.2%	55%	14.8%	24%	39.4%	36.6%
	No losses	36.6%	52.5%	11%	36.4%	40.1%	23.4%
<i>Pearson’s correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 69.157, $p < 0.001$			Chi-square (χ^2) = 117.667, $p < 0.001$		
Distinct experiences (quantity)	1 experience	29.4%	60.4%	10.2%	Not detected		
	2 experiences	20.5%	66%	13.4%			
	3 or more experiences	18.4%	55.1%	26.2%			
	No experiences	32.4%	57.2%	10.4%			
<i>Pearson’s correlation coefficient</i>		Chi-square (χ^2) = 50.274, $p < 0.001$					

Source: compiled by the author

The results indicate that the dynamics of positive personal changes during the war are connected with socio-demographic factors such as gender, age, education, place of residence, living conditions, and income. Awareness of enhanced personal resilience is positively associated with an individual’s ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle under wartime conditions. Differences in healthy lifestyle practices are associated with varying levels of “Personal Strength” and “Appreciation of Life”. Those who exhibit a higher level of awareness of their own ability to effectively cope with war-related trauma are more likely to engage in developing new health habits, while individuals with a lower level of “Personal Strength” often focus on quitting unhealthy habits and maintaining familiar health-promoting routines. Those with a diminished appreciation for life are more likely to lack purposeful engagement in healthy lifestyle practices during wartime.

Personal growth indicators emerge directly through war-related experiences. The highest growth in “Personal Strength” and “Appreciation of Life”, reflecting internal resilience, is observed among individuals who have experienced displacement both within the country and abroad, have suffered three or more losses, and have a broad spectrum of war-related experiences. The study’s findings demonstrate a connection between socio-demographic characteristics and levels of awareness of personal strength development and recognition of the value of one’s life during wartime, which aligns with current research on mindfulness. Thus, the idea of exploring

previously unexamined indirect interactions with mindfulness is reflected in recent discussions on regenerative dynamics, regenerative practices, and the emerging concept of a regenerative impulse in the study of sustainable human resilience practices (Fischer *et al.*, 2024). According to the results, most respondents demonstrate a moderate level of positive internal change, which is sufficient for developing strategies for conscious and responsible coping with war-related experiences. In this regard, the findings of a study by Y. Gu *et al.* (2024), which examined mindfulness techniques and short-term awareness inductions as a means of processing personal experiences, are relevant. The group subjected to mindfulness induction was less likely to attribute positive experiences to external events but tended to attribute negative experiences to themselves. In addition, the mindfulness group was less inclined to blame others and took greater responsibility for negative events, while the control group exhibited a strong tendency to detach from negative experiences. Based on these findings, most respondents demonstrate moderate indicators of positive internal change in coping with wartime experiences, suggesting a general ability to withstand the negative effects of war-related losses and a certain degree of resilience. Thus, these findings align with scientific research conducted since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which examined mindfulness-based interventions as tools for emotional regulation, aimed at improving individuals’ ability to cope with the general stress caused by coronavirus infection,

restrictions on freedom, loss of loved ones, or loss of stable employment. As a broader conclusion, researchers have noted that coping strategies centred on mindfulness have been effective in managing uncertain, rapidly evolving situations that provoke stress, anxiety, depression, and other symptoms of emotional dysregulation, ultimately fostering resilience (López-Ramón *et al.* 2023). These findings highlight that socio-demographic factors such as gender, age, education, place of residence, living arrangements, and income significantly influence levels of “Personal Strength” and “Appreciation of Life” during wartime. Individuals with higher resilience and awareness demonstrate better coping strategies, including the formation of new health habits, while those with lower resilience focus on maintaining familiar routines or struggle with developing purposeful lifestyle practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The theoretical and empirical analysis of mindfulness mechanisms during wartime underscores the necessity of exploring ways to balance coping with traumatic experiences and strategies for maintaining a healthy lifestyle among Ukrainians affected by the war. In summarising the findings, it is evident that personal indicators of post-traumatic growth among most respondents are at a moderate level, enabling them to focus on forming new habits to enhance health and well-being under wartime conditions. The analysis of the connection between socio-demographic variables and levels of “Personal Strength” and “Appreciation of Life” as indicators of post-traumatic growth revealed that women tend to

exhibit greater personal strength and heightened life appreciation than men. Young adults aged 16-25, as well as individuals aged 50 and above, demonstrate greater resilience in coping with wartime experiences compared to other age groups. Those with higher education more frequently demonstrate significant positive internal changes. The lowest indicators of post-traumatic growth are observed among individuals residing in frontline and occupied areas compared to those living abroad or in western Ukraine.

The increase in “Personal Strength” and “Appreciation of Life” correlates with social surroundings. Individuals living in extended families with children or with a spouse/partner exhibit a higher potential for post-traumatic growth compared to those living alone. Moreover, as income levels rise, indicators of personal strength also increase. The findings of this study do not fully exhaust research on the role of mindfulness in mitigating the adverse effects of pathogenic psychological reactions during wartime. However, they confirm that positive internal changes are associated with the conscious development of strategies for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Future research should delve deeper into mindfulness-based strategies for restoring a healthy lifestyle and fostering conscious personal resilience under wartime conditions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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Роль усвідомленості у подоланні досвіду війни: аналіз емпіричних даних

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Анотація. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена пошуком особистісних захисних факторів, які забезпечують пом'якшувальний ефект та сприяють посттравматичному зростанню особистості в умовах війни. У статті аналізувались емпіричні дані щодо ролі усвідомленості у подоланні досвіду війни. Емпіричні дані були зібрані за допомогою шкал «Особиста сила» та «Цінність життя» опитувальника посттравматичного зростання, а також опитування «Здоровий спосіб життя українців під час війни». Вибірка дослідження становила 6042 респонденти (60 % чоловіків і 40 % жінок, середній вік = 37,9 року; мінімальний = 16, максимальний = 77 років). Дані збиралися за допомогою Google Forms (кінець 2023 – початок 2024 року). Результати показали, що динаміка позитивних особистісних змін у воєнний час пов'язана з такими соціально-демографічними факторами, як стать, вік, рівень освіти, місце проживання, життєва ситуація та дохід. Так, жінки частіше демонструють підвищене відчуття особистої сили та вищу цінність життя порівняно з чоловіками. Молодь віком від 16 до 25 років та дорослі віком 50 років і старші виявляються більш стійкими до переживань воєнного часу, ніж інші вікові групи. Особи з вищою освітою частіше демонструють високий рівень позитивних внутрішніх змін. Найнижчі показники посттравматичного зростання спостерігаються серед мешканців прифронтових зон та окупованих територій порівняно з тими, хто перебуває за кордоном або мешкає у західних регіонах України. Люди, які проживають у розширених сім'ях, з дитиною/дітьми чи з партнером, демонструють більше потенціалу для посттравматичного зростання, ніж ті, хто живе сам. Крім того, показники «особистої сили» зростають із рівнем доходу. Особистісні показники посттравматичного зростання у більшості респондентів перебувають на середньому рівні, що дозволяє зосередитися на формуванні нових звичок для покращення здоров'я та благополуччя в умовах війни

Ключові слова: здоровий спосіб життя; усвідомленість; уважність; посттравматичне зростання; подолання досвіду війни