

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2022.55.07.28>

How to Cite:

Romanova, I., Syniakova, V., Kononova, M., Melnychuk, M., Reva, M., & Nemesh, V. (2022). Social assistance and psychological counseling in Ukraine against the backdrop of Russian armed aggression. *Amazonia Investiga*, 11(55), 265-272. <https://doi.org/10.34069/AI/2022.55.07.28>

Social assistance and psychological counseling in Ukraine against the backdrop of Russian armed aggression

Asistencia social y asesoramiento psicológico en Ucrania en el marco de la agresión armada rusa

Received: August 1, 2022

Accepted: September 5, 2022

Written by:

Romanova Iryna¹¹⁸<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0538-8799>**Syniakova Vira**¹¹⁹<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9750-6942>**Kononova Maryna**¹²⁰<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2994-6866>**Melnichuk Maiia**¹²¹<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4111-7849>**Reva Maryna**¹²²<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5478-8855>**Nemesh Viacheslav**¹²³<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0472-1193>

Abstract

The work aims to analyze the specifics of social assistance and psychological counseling against the background of the spread of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The object of the work is psychological aid to servicemen, children, internally displaced persons, and general peculiarities of psychological counseling development in Ukraine against the background of Russian aggression. The work uses general scientific methods of research: axiological, comparative, historical, systematic, and others. The results consider the structural changes in relation to psychology and the organization of psychological help that took place in Ukraine after 2014. Particular attention is paid to the coverage of the peculiarities of assistance to children affected by war. Active hostilities affect the disruption of children's habitual life: they begin to experience fear, anxiety, and despair at the level of adults. Such

Resumen

El objetivo del trabajo es analizar las particularidades de la asistencia social y el asesoramiento psicológico en el contexto de la propagación de la guerra ruso-ucraniana. El objeto del trabajo es la ayuda psicológica a los militares, los niños, los desplazados internos y las peculiaridades generales del desarrollo del asesoramiento psicológico en Ucrania en el contexto de la agresión rusa. El trabajo utiliza métodos científicos generales de investigación: axiológico, comparativo, histórico, sistemático y otros. Los resultados consideran los cambios estructurales en relación con la psicología y la organización de la ayuda psicológica que tuvo lugar en Ucrania después de 2014. Se presta especial atención a la cobertura de las peculiaridades de la asistencia a los niños afectados por la guerra. Las hostilidades activas afectan a la alteración de la vida habitual de los niños: empiezan a experimentar

¹¹⁸ Associate professor, docent department of sexology, psychotherapy and medical psychology, therapeutic faculty, Kharkiv medical academy of postgraduate education, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

¹¹⁹ Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor Laboratory of psychology of socially maladjusted juveniles G.S. Kostiuk Institute of Psychology of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine, Ukraine.

¹²⁰ Associate Professor of the Department of Psychology Poltava V.G. Korolenko national pedagogical university, Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogy, Department of Psychology, Ukraine.

¹²¹ PhD, Associated Professor at Psychology Department Poltava V. G. Korolenko National Pedagogical University, Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, Ukraine.

¹²² She received PhD in Kyiv Institute of Social and Political Psychology National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine. She is currently an Associated Professor at Psychology Department of Poltava V. G. Korolenko National Pedagogical University. Her research interests span the areas of General and Social Psychology, Ukraine.

¹²³ Postgraduate Modern Knowledge Ukraine, Kyiv. Theme of dissertation research Emotional transformation of adolescence Passing of assistant pedagogical practice under the guidance of Vlasov O I from the University "University of Modern Knowledge", Ukraine.

conditions need correction by specialists. The paper also considers the problem of support for servicemen - veterans of the Russian-Ukrainian war. It is concluded that since the beginning of the full-scale Russian offensive (February 2022) there has been an urgent need for psychological help for many categories of the population: internally displaced persons, children, servicemen. It is noted that Russian aggression has changed the system of psychological assistance, in particular, due to the involvement of certain American models of psychological rehabilitation.

Keywords: psychological help, social adaptation, counseling, the war in Ukraine.

Introduction

Psychological support in wartime plays an important role in the rehabilitation of victims. At the same time, the Ukrainian experience is quite unique since the long confrontation with the Russian Federation and the open aggression of the Kremlin regime against Ukraine in 2022 allowed to trace in practice all strong and vulnerable places of this system. Characteristics of the use of psychological support tools that are used in Ukraine is a relevant issue for modern psychology, as it can form certain paradigms of action in the event of large-scale military action elsewhere. In addition, research into the specifics of social adaptation and psychological support for war-affected children remains an important problem. Children directly are one of the most vulnerable categories, for whom it is psychologically difficult to adapt to new conditions or to move away from acute experiences. Therefore, this article aims to analyze social assistance and psychological counseling in Ukraine against the backdrop of Russian armed aggression. In the course of realization of this goal, certain aspects of the development of psychological support will be examined:

1. Peculiarities of the introduction of psychological support and social counseling to victims of war in Ukraine.
2. Providing psychological aid to children affected by the Russian invasion.
3. Introduction of the American experience of psychological help and rehabilitation of servicemen, participants of combat operations.
4. The contemporary Ukrainian context of psychological aid to the victims.

miedo, ansiedad y desesperación al nivel de los adultos. Estas condiciones necesitan ser corregidas por especialistas. El documento también considera el problema del apoyo a los militares - veteranos de la guerra ruso-ucraniana. Se concluye que desde el comienzo de la ofensiva rusa a gran escala (febrero de 2022) ha habido una necesidad urgente de ayuda psicológica para muchas categorías de la población: desplazados internos, niños, militares. Se observa que la agresión rusa ha cambiado el sistema de asistencia psicológica, en particular debido a la participación de ciertos modelos estadounidenses de rehabilitación psicológica.

Palabras clave: ayuda psicológica, adaptación social, asesoramiento, guerra en Ucrania.

Literature review

The methodological basis of the article is the work of authors who have investigated certain aspects of the development of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the specifics of counseling and support for the affected population against the background of Russian aggression. For example, Ahmad & Carey (2022) investigated the specifics of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war on the forms of transformation of modern charitable organizations. Kharchenko (2019) characterized key cognitive representations of traumatic emotional experiences among demobilized combatants in Ukraine. This specialist surveyed 100 servicemen and concluded that most demobilized combat participants were expressed in all cognitive representations of traumatic experiences, which are close in content to feelings of injustice or humiliation. Klochko (2020) studied the problem of social assistance in Ukraine against the background of military actions. Fatyga et al. (2022) investigated the specifics of medical support for Ukrainian refugees in Poland. At the same time, Shushkevich (2022) characterized the domestic life of Ukrainians living in the war zone.

However, important for this study are the works of those specialists who also investigated the peculiarities of the spread, the main components of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In particular, Almäng (2019) studied the key features of hybrid wars, characterized their peculiarities of development. Bină & Dragomir (2020) analyzed the information component of the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war and characterized the main ways of conducting it. Ghilès (2022) characterized the political, economic, and social components of the Russian-Ukrainian war against the background of the spreading gas

crisis. However, Johnson (2022) investigated the Russian invasion of Ukraine through the prism of social transformation. Kent & Samokhvalov (2016) analyzed the historical origins of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. These experts noted that Ukraine's strategy should minimize the influence of both Russia and the "republics" on its foreign and domestic policies. Kulyk (2017) characterized the transformation of Ukrainians' national identity against the background of Russia's armed aggression. However, Manolea (2021) described key features of hybrid wars and characterized their contemporary manifestations. At the same time, Martz (2022) examined the Russian Federation's crimes against Ukraine through the prism of social and economic aspects. Materniak (2020) characterized the key lessons of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. At the same time, Yuskiv et al., (2021) investigated the specifics of the deployment of the information war between Russia and Ukraine, analyzed the main manipulative mechanisms used through Russian channels and their impact on the consciousness of the population.

However, the problem of social and psychological counseling of children, who are a particularly vulnerable category, remains understudied. At the same time, the issue of the peculiarities of the organization of psychological support for military personnel who have returned from war, captivity, and the Russian-Ukrainian war has also been little studied due to the intensity of the spread of the Russian-Ukrainian war since 2022.

Methodology

The work used general scientific methods of research: inductive, deductive, systematic, comparative, structural-functional, axiological. In particular, using the method of comparison the features of social and psychological support of different categories of the population (adults, children, military) were characterized. The axiological method allowed us to move from general (accepted in the scientific literature) axioms to specific conclusions. The systemic method treats psychological aid in Ukraine as a multi-valued system consisting of a multitude of elements. Using the prognostic method of research, the paper predicts the possibility of using certain techniques to improve the condition in adults and children affected by the war. The use of the method of concretization reflects the problem of adaptation of servicemen and the introduction of American techniques of psychological rehabilitation in Ukraine. However, additional methods of research were

historical and retrospective. In particular, based on the historical method of research the problem of development of the Russian-Ukrainian war from 2014 up to now and the peculiarities of psychological aid on the background of its spread.

Results and Discussion

Psychological Assistance to Victims: The Current Ukrainian Context

After the Yugoslav crisis of the 1990s, Europe has long been free of major military conflicts. The situation changed in 2014 when Russian troops occupied the Crimean peninsula and supported local separatists in the East. The deployment of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) escalated into a larger conflict involving military equipment, artillery, and aviation (Ghilès, 2022). Russian support with fighters and equipment froze hostilities for a time (Dijkstra et al., 2022). The start of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the deployment of Russian strikes in 2022 opened a new page in the history of European wars (Cybulsky, 2022). Along with military action came the issue of psychological care for the victims, military personnel, children, refugees, etc. (Ahmad & Carey, 2022). The Ukrainian experience with the threat is unique because other European countries have not faced challenges of similar magnitude.

In 2014, the psychological support system in Ukraine was not ready for the explosion of the first phase of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. However, in 2022, positive changes in both the development of communication with the population in general and the previously accumulated experience had an impact. Since 2018, gradual processes of digitalization of administrative services, digitalization of education, especially intensified after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the introduction of distance learning began (Ishchuk, 2022). The development of these areas greatly facilitated the provision of psychological assistance after the start of Russian aggression. Psychological help became available on the smartphone through mobile apps, messengers, or helplines. This greatly facilitated access to necessary information, as practicing psychologists were insufficient to provide prompt assistance (Shushkevich, 2022). For this reason, having received advice remotely, many parents were able to provide initial psychological support to their children and then, having evacuated to a safe place, contacted specialists later. This was also the case with the support of

the elderly who had suffered from military action. This made it possible to provide assistance much more quickly.

The methods of sociological processing of information and the development of further treatment strategies have also significantly improved. For example, according to the analysis of testimonies of rape victims in the Kharkiv region, 31% of women in the core group noted that they began to experience changes in their bodies after the violence, they became uncomfortable with their sexuality, they began to fear communication with men, they did not accept touching their bodies, etc. All these circumstances were taken into account in the next counseling session with the doctors.

Another peculiarity of psychological aid during military operations in Ukraine was the active involvement of volunteers, who were often either applicants for higher education in a relevant specialty or active citizens who were not always specialists in their field but had basic training. In particular, in the psychotherapeutic process, counselors had to be empathic, neutral, tactful, confidential, and tolerant, expressing only those judgments that would help victims to be open and feel safe and in a state of self-control.

An important element was also the public reaction to psychological aid. If by 2014 the outdated perception of psychology as a certain amusement of well-to-do people was widespread in the mass consciousness, by 2022 no one doubted anymore that survivors of war needed to be referred to specialists. For example, women's behavior after experiencing violence was influenced by incorrectly learned social precepts

and women's ideas about family and marriage, such as the need to sacrifice and endure for the sake of children, the idea of divorce or breaking up with a partner as a sign of defeat and guilt, false pity for the aggressor, etc. The current state of public opinion seeks to definitively reject such prejudices, which are unacceptable to modern psychology.

Social and Psychological Assistance for Children Affected by Military Operations

Under conditions of war, children are especially vulnerable categories of the population, acutely perceiving crisis events. This in turn entails unstable dynamics of their psychological-emotional relations with adults. Acute war events influence the disruption of children's habitual life: they push fear, anxiety, and despair to the level of adults. At the same time, given the activity of a full-scale Russian offensive (February 2022), not all psychological tools work effectively (Klochko, 2020). Even in cases where children are not directly involved in a military conflict, they still experience significant stress as her immediate surroundings are disturbed. At the same time, a child relocated with (or partially or without) her family from a war zone is exposed to a number of other stressors (Shushkevich, 2022). We are talking about a change of residence, a change in the environment, uncertainty about the future, and prospects in the future life. For this reason, such children are acutely traumatized and therefore need psychological support. In the scientific psychological literature, there are several categories of children displaced from an acute combat zone (See Table 1).

Table 1.
Main categories of children resettled from the war zone

| Main categories of children resettled from the war zone | |
|---|--|
| 1. Existence of a close environment | a) Resettled without families b) Resettled with single-parent families c) Resettled with a full family |
| 2. Exposure to a traumatic factor | a) Witnesses to shelling, bombing b) Have lost someone close to them or a family as a result of hostilities. c) Feeling a significant threat of loss of a safe environment (were not witnesses of open military combat) d) Traumatized by the loss of security due to constant anxiety as a result of mass shelling, lack of information about what is happening, lack of basic vital resources: water, heat, gas, etc. |
| 3. Peculiarity of emotional, behavioral manifestations | a) refuse any social connections and contacts with adults or professionals b) refuse contacts with specialists (psychologists, social workers). c) willingly come into contact with different categories |

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So, those children who are in the first three categories are the most traumatized and require special treatment from social workers, psychologists, or volunteers. Despite this, we note that children in general experience traumatic situations differently. Often, as a result of a lack of skills to discuss their own experiences due to age-related changes or a difficult emotional state, children do not openly express their unpleasant states (Klochko, 2020). Meanwhile, professionals who care for children can identify those who are experiencing stress. The effects of stress are observed in emotions, behavior, or bodily level. A variety of play with peers, traveling with adults, fantasizing, etc. will help to get over it. (Fatyga et al., 2022). We believe that psychological aid to children from displaced families should be aimed at elimination of consequences of being in stressful circumstances and prevention of the spread of stress disorders. The professional should understand that psychological activity with children must be comprehensive, systematic, and focused. For this reason, we can allocate such key areas of work of the psychologist with suffering children:

- 1 Activities with the child's environment
- 2 Work with the child's loved ones
- 3 Activities directly with the child.

Note that the environment in which the child is should have such features as rhythm, safety, comfort, consistency, and constancy. At the same time, activities with persons close to the child should include psychological, consultative, and educational work. Psychological work (assistance, support) with the child is key in this system. It should be aimed at restoration of the child's state of safety and psychological resources, activation of mechanisms of self-healing, adaptation to the new environment (Fatyga et al., 2022). The most accurate and effective techniques in improving the condition of children who have been exposed to complex stressors are play, sand, imaginative, psychological therapy, art therapy (drawing, molding from clay, plasticine, weaving, etc.) (Klochko, 2020).

In addition, since 2022, psychological help and support has been provided systematically in educational institutions. Consequently, as a result of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, a complex issue of the psychological health of Ukrainian schoolchildren has arisen. Therefore, one of the priority tasks of educational institutions is daily psychological support of all participants of educational activity. The first psychological support is carried out by all

teachers (as well as teachers, classmates, and medical workers). The parents of students have to be separately involved in this process.

The American system of social and psychological assistance to combatants: difficulties of use in Ukraine

Among modern countries, the United States has the most experience in rehabilitating its military. Participation in the war in the Persian Gulf, joint military actions with NATO allies against the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic in the former Yugoslavia, the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan and Iraq are only commonly known military actions. In which the U.S. military participated. They also provide significant advisory support to police and army units in South America (to strengthen the fight against drug trafficking and drug cartels), actively conduct training with European partners, since 2022 help the Ukrainian army in the war against Russia (Johnson, 2022). All this makes it possible to adopt the best examples of psychological rehabilitation currently used in the structures of the army system, which is the most experienced in this respect.

Providing psychotherapeutic care to participants in military conflicts is not new to the United States. As a result of in-depth processing of this problem, a lot of methodological medical manuals were published, specific recommendations were developed, which are of psychotherapeutic and pharmacological nature and designed to provide practical assistance to war veterans (Kharchenko, 2019). In particular, in the structure of the U.S. Armed Forces, there is a Division of Veterans Affairs (which is a structural subdivision of the U.S. Department of Defense). Specialists of this Division have formed detailed protocols on psychotherapeutic and pharmacological assistance, based on the materials of scientific methods and modern developments in the field of medical drugs (Stoner, 2022). Consequently, at different stages of the rehabilitation process, American experts suggest focusing on the prevention of trauma, when this cannot be achieved - to prevent complex and chronic manifestations of post-traumatic disorders with distinct, persistent, and recurrent symptoms that require a deep and comprehensive treatment approach (Kent & Samokhvalov, 2016).

The effectiveness of such care and counseling is measured by progress on several fronts (See Table 2).

Table 2.

The main directions of assessment of the effectiveness of psychological assistance to servicemen-participants of combat operations

Directions for Evaluating the Effectiveness of Psychological Assistance to Servicemen

1. Positive changes of a social and professional nature that will occur in the life of a veteran of a military conflict after the war.
 2. Decrease of somatic diseases, side-effects, and asocial behavior (for example, alcoholism is mentioned).
 3. General improvement of well-being
 4. Decrease of manifestations of psychological traumas
 5. Positive evaluation of veterans on the received rehabilitation services
-

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The primary focus of the relevant services is the prevention of psychological trauma and the appropriate training of fighters, with a focus on training that is as combat-ready as possible (Kharchenko, 2019). Individuals without proper training are not allowed to serve in potentially risky operations. It is believed that panic and excessive stress can be detrimental at the most crucial moment, so fighters are trained ahead of time to make direct fire contact.

In the event of a traumatic event, thorough surgical care is provided, the main task of which is to find out how deep the trauma is and whether there will be negative consequences in the future. As a rule, the human body is capable of resisting stress, so that in a few days a normal state of behavior can be restored. Thereafter, early psychological help is provided, followed, if necessary, by thorough professional treatment in appropriate structures using not only therapeutic means but also medical drugs (Wieviorka, 2022). Pharmacological medications can have a therapeutic effect, they can be used for a long time, and in difficult cases, the appropriate medications can be taken permanently. Stress relief is also provided for when certain relapses occur.

The American structure of rehabilitation and counseling assistance has been built for years, so some of its methods have already been formed and repeatedly tested (Kharchenko, 2019). For the provision of psychological assistance to the Ukrainian military in the future, this can be an extremely positive point, and the active cooperation between the Ukrainian and American military departments should also be taken into account. True, psychological counseling in Ukraine may experience certain difficulties in implementation.

Among the problematic aspects is the general distrust of psychologists in Ukraine. In fact, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century

that psychological counseling in Ukrainian society began to be perceived as a separate branch of medicine - according to outdated Soviet medical models, psychology and psychiatry were often confused (Kharchenko, 2019). Also, gradually (since the beginning of the antiterrorist operation in Donbas in 2014) there has been a perception of the need for rehabilitation services for mental recovery after combat operations. For the structure of the Ukrainian army, this need proved to be unexpected - the recruitment and training of military psychologists promptly increased, while ATO participants also turned to civilian psychologists (Materniak, 2020). Pharmacological support remains problematic - for Ukrainian taxpayers, the purchase of appropriate drugs in the necessary volumes is problematic. This issue can only be solved through international or volunteer assistance.

The biggest problem of psychological rehabilitation in Ukraine can be defined as the follow-up of traumatized servicemen. Usually, assistance is provided at the operative or early levels, while it is not customary to think about the next fate of those struck by psychological traumas. Obviously, Russian aggression actualizes this hitherto unresolved problem. Perhaps the Armed Forces of Ukraine will also need to create its own "Department for Veterans' Affairs" or at least expand the rights of the Ministry of Veterans, which until 2022 performed primarily administrative functions and did not directly provide social and medical support to combatants.

Conclusions

Thus, Ukrainian psychologists faced a tangible challenge in their work. The Russian aggression in 2014 and the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022 became a tangible crisis that showed all the advantages and disadvantages of psychological services. In particular, the current Ukrainian

experience has demonstrated that primary assistance using digital channels of information dissemination and remote work (messengers, telephone help lines) is an effective tool in times of military crisis. It makes it possible to quickly disseminate the necessary knowledge, to teach volunteers, to give advice to parents on how to calm children, etc. The use of volunteer help has also become an important aspect because the number of professional psychologists in Ukraine is not always able to cover all the victims, who sometimes had to be helped remotely. At the same time, thanks to the Russian-Ukrainian war, society felt the importance of psychological support - before 2014, Ukrainian society had a lukewarm attitude toward the work of psychologists, while now the importance of assistance is recognized as indisputable.

Helping children has demonstrated the effectiveness of modern play techniques. The involvement of teachers and instructors in providing primary aid to victims was also positive - thanks to the educational system, this category of specialists mastered some elements of psychologist training. An important problem that will still have an effect will be the psychological and mental disorders of combatants. It is proposed to use the American experience, which provides for intensive therapy in combination with pharmacological support. The problem on the way to implementing this is a lack of funding, which can be partially solved by international aid. At the same time, this problem will require additional consideration in future studies.

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