

The war in Ukraine: Raising the attention for mental health consequences and call for action

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After two years of pandemic, Europe is now confronted with a new dramatic emergency, a war, which has already caused civil victims, mass displacement and even fear about a nuclear war, and will cause an aggravation of the economic and the energy crisis. The nightmare of a war in the middle of Europe has suddenly become a reality. Again, Europe is preparing for new waves of war refugees, forcibly displaced people.

While advocating for a better and more responsible world, more respectful of the environment and safer for the next generations, we have been precipitated into a conflict for which we were totally unprepared. The war in Ukraine has caused hundreds civilian casualties up to now and pushed more than 3 million people to flee Ukraine to neighbouring countries, according to the United Nations. How many more millions of people there will be is not foreseeable at present. However, it is expected to be the largest wave of refugees since the Second World War. The conflict is creating humanitarian needs which European countries are trying to face with an extraordinary surge of solidarity and generosity, but at the same time with the awareness that the needs are much beyond reaction capacity of individual people and states. This moment makes the concerns of migration mental health dramatically clear.

In addition EPA likes to draw attention mental health consequences and calls for action to cope with the dramatic situation:

- Acute mental health consequences for people in Ukraine

Morina et al. (2018) pointed out, that war-affected civilians are at heightened risk of mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. The results of a Mental Health Surveys of the WHO highlighted that recovery from PTSD is particularly slow in the context of war (Koenen et al., 2017), indicating that the mental health impacts of the current crisis could be long lasting (Bryant et al., 2022). Thus, a negative impact on mental health of Ukrainian people who will survive the war is very likely. Those who leave are exposed to the trauma of leaving behind home, relatives, friends, job, habits, i.e., most of what they had built in their life, and to the unpleasant feeling of knowing nothing of what they will go through. Those who stay risk their life or physical integrity, and have to cope with grief, sorrow, fear, hunger and all sorts of adverse conditions that will adversely affect their mental

health. These cumulative effects of war and displacement are likely to predispose many Ukrainian people to adverse mental health outcomes from the current fighting (Bryant et al., 2022). An increase in the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and substance abuse has been reported in people living in war-prone regions of the globe; it is expected and even understandable (Murthy et al, 2006; Steel et al, 2009; Priebe et al. 2010; Horyniak et al., 2016). Forcibly displaced people from countries with intense human rights violations have an increased rate of psychopathological symptoms (Lindert et. al, 2018). The impact can have long-lasting consequences. Studies have shown that history of depression and PTSD increases the risk of dementia (Razik et al, 2013; Donley et al, 2018). A high prevalence of mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and dementia has been reported in military personnel who are continuously exposed to stressful environment in the war zones (Weiner et al, 2014). Gender-based acts of violence, often underestimated because of poor reporting due to social stigma and unavailable care services, further contribute to the burden of mental disorders and their short- and long-term consequences in war-affected regions. Existing evidence suggests that mental disorders tend to be highly prevalent in war refugees many years after resettlement. This increased risk may not only be a consequence of exposure to wartime trauma but may also be influenced by post-migration socio-economic factors (Bogic et al., 2015). Furthermore, the mental well-being of refugees does not always improve nor does their trauma disappear by resettling in a new country (Yun et al., 2021).

- **Transgenerational mental health sequelae for families in Ukraine**

The adverse impact even on future generations is probably less known and expected, but equally worrying (Priebe et al, 2010; Singhal et al, 2019). It has been demonstrated that stress related disorders during pregnancy affect foetal development (Glover, 2014) and may lead to low birthweight for gestational age, poor brain and cognitive development, and increased likelihood of social and behavioural problems both in childhood and later life (Jarde et al., 2016).

Children may be directly affected by being exposed to extreme adversities, but also through adverse parenting practices, as parents may change their parenting style when exposed to war traumas and to the daily struggle for their own and their children life: they may become irritable and intolerant of normal parenting demands or overprotective and excessively restrictive of their children's behaviors (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Samuelson, Wilson, Padro'n, Lee, & Gavron, 2016; Smith, 2004; Sriskandarajah, Neuner, & Catani, 2015).

Displacement may also cause changes in family structure and roles within the family, prevent access to financial resources and jeopardize the satisfaction of basic needs, thus placing an

immense pressure on parents and interfering with the quality of parent-child interactions (Farhood, 1999; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Conger et al., 2002). Parents experiencing difficulties in regulating their own emotional states might find it difficult to help their children to manage their emotional states (Kistin et al., 2014; Ruscio, Weathers, King, & King, 2002; van Ee, Lleber, & Mooren, 2012). Indeed, there is also evidence that war might increase strength and resilience within the family by enhancing compassion and connection, increasing warmth and affection toward children (Taku, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2008) and strengthening parents' perception of self-efficacy. However, in most cases those who live are confronted with what has been referred to as cultural bereavement (Eisenbruch, 1991). Cultural grief, a central aspect of migrants' experience, is influenced and mediated by the interplay of the migration process, cultural identity and cultural congruence, and biological and psychological factors. Cultural identity and congruence affect the affected person's ability to understand and process the grieving process, and disruptions in identity and congruence are likely to lead to pathological or complicated bereavement (Bhugra & Becker, 2005); i.e., the need of mourning their way of living, social bonds, and everyday habits and, overall, a huge amount of resilience is needed to overcome what people are forced to go through.

- **Somatic consequences accompanying mental health sequelae**

To further complicate the picture, the somatic responses to stress, often unrecognized as such (e.g., back pain or discomfort, headaches, fatigue, dizziness), and reflecting traditional modes of help seeking, may represent the only expression of the heavy distress the person is through due to the war and its upheavals. A recently published paper (Shastry et al. 2022) reports that the Gulf War Illness (GWI), after more than thirty years, still exerts a negative effect on at least 25 percent of the 700,000 deployed US military personnel to the 1990–1991 Gulf War. It is a chronic condition expressed as a combination of fatigue, pain, headache, difficulty concentrating, memory loss, sleep disturbance, respiratory issues, gastrointestinal problems, and skin rash. Especially when associated with PTSD it leads to long-lasting greater fatigue and negative effects on quality of life.

The consequences of these events are not certainly limited to the countries directly involved in the conflict. Neighbouring countries are confronted with the difficulty to believe that this is occurring at their borders, at a time when Europe is still sceptical about a possible gradual return to a normal life following two years of a pandemic that has threatened all our certainties, including lifestyle, health systems, economy, and interpersonal relationships. In addition, many people fear an extension of the conflict to their own country, while the world is testifying a

growing degree of environmental harm, poverty, anger and conflicts is threatened by digital disinformation and attacks, and by the increasing disregard of the rule of law, including international treaties. In this respect, many people are afraid of escalation to the point of a third world war. The energy crisis, partly linked to war in Ukraine, has already caused an increase of natural gas prices in Europe, fuelling a crisis that is already impacting consumers' bills. The impact on the economy worldwide will likely be worse than the one due to the 2008 crisis, and severe consequences on mental health can be predicted.

A Call to action to cope with the current situation successfully

The overview provided points at some issues, which are reason for concern for the mental health of European citizens and beyond. The European Psychiatric association, together with its member societies, organizations of users and relatives, and other relevant stakeholders calls for the attention of European policy makers and these issues.

In general EPA recommends mutual support and nurture problem-solving strategies as a major protective factor in buffering the impact of war, displacement and related trauma.

- Favouring family reunion
- Restoring people dignity and control over the environment through housing, job and schools
- Help children recover a more positive social reality

To help this process EPA founded a Network of Solidarity for Ukraine and initiated the following measures:

- **Trauma Resource Center:** On the EPA homepage a range of information materials available to support persons with mental health consequences of trauma
- **Help the Helpers Webinars:** EPA has initiated a series of webinars where professionals from Ukraine and other European countries having experienced similar conflicts in the past, to give lay people advice how to deal with traumatized persons in their surroundings.
- **Donations for medication and equipment:** An account was started (...) to allow donations to buy medications and equipment, which is safely transported to the psychiatric hospitals in Ukraine

In summary, we call the members of the EPA and all mental health colleagues to provide professional help and humanitarian assistance to the refugees and displaced people by this

conflict. The concerns of migration mental health dramatically clear and leads us to renew calls for humanitarian action (Bäärnhielm et al., 2017; Kronick et al., 2021).

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