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IMPACT OF WAR ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract. In the current context of war, adolescents are in a particularly difficult psychological state, where stressful situations can significantly affect their development, functioning and lifestyle. The article presents the results of an empirical study of the impact of war on adolescents' mental health. It is stated that adolescents are particularly sensitive to the impact of negative socio-psychological factors on the determination of physical and mental health. It is noted that adolescents experiencing war are subjected to a great psychological burden, which can cause the emergence of various psychological problems, such as anxiety, constant fear, depression, aggression and others. It was found that the majority of adolescents do not have depression and it is not expressed at all at a severe level. One third of respondents experienced a deterioration in their emotional state during the war. This indicates that adolescents react to negative events quite painfully. It has been determined that resilience is a favourable component for maintaining the psychological well-being of adolescents and a protective mechanism against unforeseen threats throughout. It is proposed to introduce a special training programme for emotional recovery and psychological support for adolescents.

Key words: war, mental health, adolescents, trauma, depression, resilience.

Introduction. Military conflicts always have a negative impact on the psychological well-being of people, but adolescents are a particularly vulnerable category. The experience of traumatic events, loss of loved ones, evacuation, instability and uncertainty of the future in the context of hostilities can cause deep psychological disorders in adolescents and make it difficult for them to go through this important stage of personal development. The full-scale war in Ukraine creates exactly such destructive conditions for the development of adolescents. Therefore, constant monitoring of changes in the psyche of the younger generation and work to minimise risks is an urgent task in the context of modern warfare. This is a complex challenge for society, which requires fundamental changes in many areas to preserve the mental health of young people and the future of our country as a whole. Some practical experience of working with these adolescents has been gained over time, but comprehensive empirical studies of the impact of war on their mental health are still lacking. There is a need for an empirical study of the psychological problems of adolescents in wartime and the extent to which military conflict affects various areas of their mental health.

That is why in this article we aim to analyse the psychological problems typical for adolescents in war and to investigate the extent to which military conflict affects various areas of their mental health.

The main part. Before the war, the causes and consequences of psychological trauma on children's psyche were discussed mainly in relation to children and adolescents in residential institutions. The danger of psychological trauma was seen in the fact that in adulthood they would have difficulties with socialisation, adaptation and communication. Indeed, childhood trauma is the beginning of depressive disorders that can lead to personality destruction.

According to World Health Organisation statistics, 10% of people who have experienced a traumatic event will eventually develop symptoms of psychological trauma. Another 10% will experience behavioural changes or mental disorders that interfere with normal functioning in everyday life.

The results of an international mental health survey conducted in August 2023 in 11 countries and presented at the Third Summit of First Ladies and Gentlemen show that adolescents aged 13–15 are the most vulnerable to the impact of the war in Ukraine and global conflicts.

The danger of this age is a radical perception of what is happening around you. And this is understandable, because a person has just taken the first steps into the adult world, and he or she is met with such a difficult reality. The fear of losing everything you have – life, family, home, friends – increases. All this can provoke dangerous behaviour, auto-aggression (i.e. anger at oneself, which sometimes manifests itself in injuries to the body) or even suicidal thoughts in a teenager.

War, of course, affects a child's psyche. First of all, it is reflected in anxiety. No one prepared teenagers for the war and how to perceive current events. Children are constantly in tension because they do not know what to expect tomorrow. They have breakdowns, tantrums, disobedience, and fights with other children. The second important point is socialisation. Currently, children are deprived of this, and they need communication with their peers. Its absence or insufficient amount is expressed in the need to be heard, to feel their importance and to express themselves as a person.

Most scholars rightly point out that children face two types of traumatic events during war: unexpected traumatic events and long-term adverse events that lead to the emergence of unproductive coping strategies. As a result, adolescents are much more likely than their peers without war experience to suffer from such problems as anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, dissociative disorders (voluntary social isolation, depersonalisation, derealisation, unwillingness to talk, catatonic syndrome), behavioural disorders (including aggression, antisocial and criminal behaviour, and a tendency to violence), and are more prone to alcohol and drug abuse.

The most common consequences of traumatic experiences are anxiety, depression and psychosomatic illnesses (Wenger, & Yastremska, 2016). Thus, a significant number of people face long-term mental health problems after experiencing trauma.

Every person reacts differently to stressful situations. There is a certain optimal level of stress that mobilises the body and increases productivity (eustress). However, when the critical level is exceeded, exhaustion and a decrease in efficiency occur (distress). The consequences of stress depend on the individual significance of the traumatic situation for a particular person and the development of their psychological defence mechanisms (Gerasimenko, Skrypnikov, & Isakov, 2023). The most dangerous is not very strong but prolonged stress. A short-term intense crisis can mobilise the body's resources, after which all indicators return to normal. Instead, not very intense but long-term stress.

Changes in adolescence are rapid, encompassing both physical and mental spheres (Jaworska, & MacQueen, 2015).

According to scientists, adolescents are particularly sensitive to the impact of negative socio-psychological factors on the determination of physical and mental health because they have not formed or have poorly developed mechanisms of psychological self-defence.

During adolescence, an individual style of coping with stressful situations has not yet been formed. Adolescents use strategies suggested by their environment and do not yet prefer any particular one. However, in older adolescence, models of seeking social support and aggressive behaviour begin to prevail. This is a transitional age when the behavioural vector can easily change towards adaptive or maladaptive behaviour. Therefore, adolescents need timely external assistance that strengthens their internal and external resources and promotes flexible, socially adaptive behaviours.

Modern psychological research pays particular attention to the long-term impact of war on adolescents. Sudden traumatic events or prolonged adverse conditions can lead to unproductive behavioural patterns. Typically, adolescents experiencing war suffer from stress, depression, anxiety disorders,

and a loss of sense of identity. They often withdraw into themselves, deliberately isolate themselves from society, or engage in antisocial behaviour as a maladaptive response. All of these manifestations are normal reactions to abnormal events (Joshi, & O'Donnell, 2003).

Internal and external challenges for adolescents as a result of the war provoke feelings of fatigue, powerlessness, anxiety, and anger (Stoliarchuk O. et al., 2022).

Research by the analytical company Gradus Research states that 75% of children show symptoms of mental trauma due to the military conflict in Ukraine. Out of these 75%, one in five children has sleep disorders, and one in ten has a decreased desire to communicate, nightmares and memory impairment. As a result, these conditions further lead to social maladjustment, and in more severe cases, to mental disorders due to dysregulation of mental functions. Researchers have concluded that children who have experienced an event that had a strong impact on their mental state are more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder than adults (Ukrinform, 2022).

In the case of the development of post-traumatic stress disorder on the background of excessive stress or anxiety, the following symptoms can be diagnosed: hyperexcitability, insensitivity, avoidance, repeated experiences (intrusions) (Titarenko, 2018; Shebanova, 2021).

Adolescents who survived the war are characterised by anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, dissociative disorders (voluntary social isolation, depersonalisation, derealisation, unwillingness to talk, catatonic syndrome), behavioural disorders (aggression, antisocial and criminal behaviour, and a tendency to violence).

However, psychologists advise not to perceive adolescents exclusively as passive victims of war, as they are members of society with their own active life position and are able to make their own decisions, create their own survival strategies (Dupuy, & Peters, 2010), show resilience in adverse conditions (Jones, 2013; Ferrari, 2013) and become full-fledged people despite the circumstances.

Methodology and organisation of the study. The study was carried out using a set of methods «Psychological Health of Adolescents in War» which included diagnostic techniques aimed at studying various aspects of adolescent psychological health. The survey was conducted using Google Forms.

The Bechterevo Depression Scale questionnaire was used to diagnose depressive states in adolescents (Zlyvkov, Lukomska, & Fedan, 2016).

In addition, in order to make the study more accurate and thorough, the questionnaire «The Impact of War on the Occurrence of Depression in Adolescents» was developed, which consists of 12 questions, including 8 test questions and 4 detailed questions. Some of the questions are mandatory and some are optional. The questionnaire was created to understand how the onset of depression is related to how closely the war affected a particular respondent. For example, it helps to find out what was the reaction of a particular individual to the beginning of a full-scale invasion, his or her emotional state when mentioning and discussing military topics, the presence or absence of relatives, friends, acquaintances who are (or were) involved in military operations or who they lost as a result of the war. In addition to this information, the questionnaire allowed us to study other, equally important information that was useful for a more complete interpretation of the results obtained, which are related to the previous methods.

The mathematical processing of the survey data was carried out using the SPSS software package (version 26.0) by calculating the average and percentage values of the diagnostic values. The study was conducted in May 2023.

The study involved 443 adolescents from educational institutions in different regions of Ukraine. Of these: 46.7% – boys, 53.3% – girls.

The age distribution of adolescents is shown in Figure 1. It is worth noting that 1.8% of respondents did not indicate their age. Accordingly, at the time of the survey, all respondents were in the country.

Results of the study. First, let us analyse the results of the study aimed at identifying depressive states of adolescents.

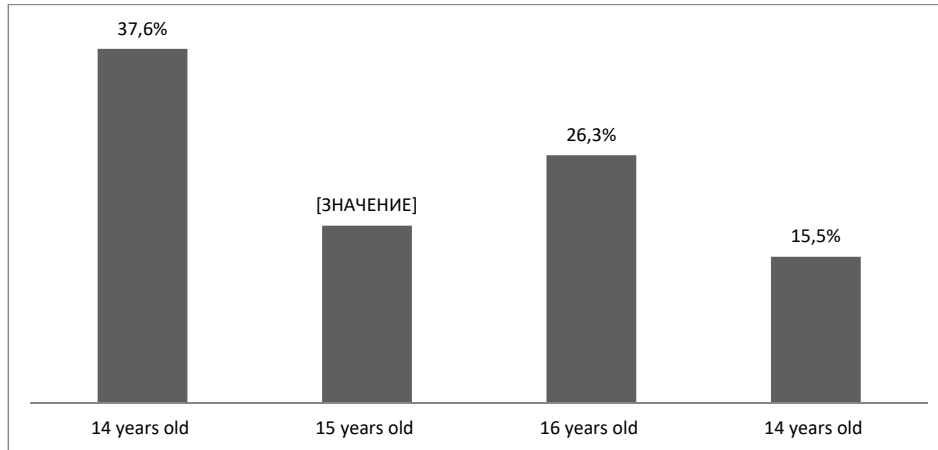


Fig. 1. Distribution of respondents by age

The data presented in Fig. 2 show that 16.6% of the respondents have mild depression, of which 85.7% are female and only 14.3% are male.

A moderate level of depression is present in 2.4% of the respondents, among whom there are only women. The onset of depression in these individuals may be caused by the fact that they repeatedly heard the sounds of explosions, spent a long time or temporarily stayed in areas where active fighting was taking place, and some even got directly into the explosion zone.

The majority of those with mild or moderate depression, namely 62.5%, continue to live in the war environment, i.e. they either did not change their place of residence or moved to another region of our country, having acquired the status of internally displaced persons.

27.5% of respondents lost relatives, friends or acquaintances as a result of the war, 2.5% lost their homes, and 50% changed schools. All these facts had a significant impact on the onset and development of depression in adolescents.

The rest of the study participants, who make up 81%, do not have depression, and none of the respondents have severe depression.

With the help of the questionnaire "The impact of martial law on the onset of depression in adolescents", we also learned many important aspects related to the war about the subjects. Their reactions to the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine were mostly that they were afraid, upset,

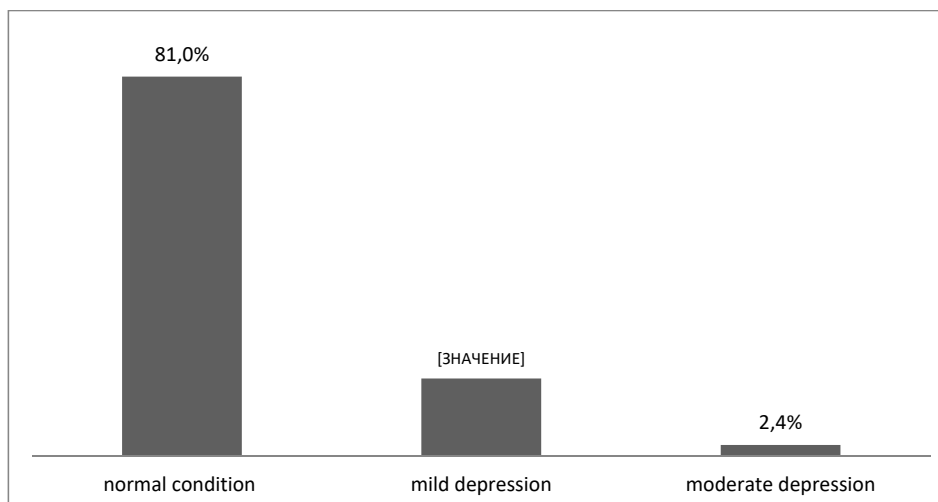


Fig. 2. Expression of depression levels in adolescents

surprised, in a state of shock, and some adolescents said they felt despair, hatred of the enemy and a lack of understanding of what would happen next. 41.9 per cent of respondents had to leave and then return to their community because of the war, 28.5 per cent moved to another region of Ukraine, and 29.6 per cent stayed in their community permanently. When fleeing the war, the individuals who took part in the study found refuge abroad in Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States.

It is also worth noting that the emotional state of 23.8% of respondents worsened during the war, 19.1% remained unchanged, 45.2% changed several times in positive and negative directions, and only 11.9% improved. Therefore, as of today, compared to the beginning of the war, 38.1% of respondents have no different attitude towards it. The adolescents argued that the war is not over yet, it continues, and because of it a large number of people continue to die for their homeland every day; that they have now seen and understood what a real war is and what its consequences can be; that they could not have imagined that the hostilities would last for such a long time; that although they are not in Ukraine now, they have relatives, friends, acquaintances here, for whose fate they are very worried.

Another 38.1% of the survey participants had changed their attitude to the war. They explained this by the fact that they have become accustomed to war and it does not cause the same fear as before; that they have become more patriotic and are convinced that victory will be Ukraine's and will happen very soon; and that many people have changed their minds about the war because they have either moved to more peaceful Ukrainian territories or emigrated abroad. However, it is noteworthy that another 23.8% of respondents have not changed their attitude to the war.

The most frequent answers to the question of whether children feel fear and anxiety when reading disappointing news about the war or when it is mentioned were «yes» and «partly», which means that the war does have a significant impact on the mental state of adolescents.

Music (38.9%), computer and phone games (45.6%), communication (38.6%), the Internet (49.1%), walks (34.4%), and sports (31.3%) are the most common distractions from bad news, anxiety, and worry. In this context, they also mention learning foreign languages and studying, reading, and spending time with four-legged friends. Teenagers say that they are inspired by people, and when they are in a bad mood, they can be comforted by music and conversations with friends. At the same time, 36.5% of young people found it harder to find friends during the war.

When asked «Who is their support?» adolescents said the following. 81% of respondents consider their parents to be their support now, and for 55%, their parents are role models. Half of the adolescents (50.9%) look up to the military, and a quarter (24.4%) to volunteers. Teachers are more likely to be role models in such times (11.3%).

69.7 per cent of adolescents are motivated by events in their home country to help the Armed Forces in bringing victory closer. Children do this in a variety of ways: they weave camouflage nets for the army, make trench candles, participate in charity events, organise fairs, buy and send food to the frontline through volunteers, etc. Such work helps to improve the psychological state of 76.2% of respondents.

Thus, it can be concluded that adolescents react to negative events in a rather painful way.

Of course, prolonged exposure to such negative and destructive emotions and feelings does not lead to positive outcomes. Often, this is a serious blow to emotional, mental and physiological health and, as a result, contributes to the loss of moral strength and the emergence of depression.

In this regard, professionals are faced with the task of providing these children with adequate support and assistance so that these wounds can heal.

According to researchers, resilience is a favourable component for maintaining the psychological well-being of adolescents and a protective mechanism against unforeseen threats throughout life (Khanlou, & Wray, 2014).

According to N. Frolova, N. Hrysenko, H. Ilina, the course of the identity crisis characteristic of adolescents is determined by the degree of self-determination and national self-awareness. The

authors proved that adolescents with a high level of national self-awareness have a high psychological potential of the personality, in particular: resilience, life awareness and self-actualisation (Frolova, Hrysenko, & Ilina, 2016).

During adolescence, stress is common and can affect adolescents more than adults. Each adolescent has their own unique response to stress and their own characteristics in responding to stressful situations, and it is important to provide them with support and assistance to manage stress effectively. Stressful situations can be managed, and its negative impact on an adolescent's physical and mental well-being can be reduced by using external and internal resources. Building resilience and effective coping skills is important to support adolescents in their psychological development and well-being.

That is why it is important to ensure safety and stability in the space where adolescents are. This can be achieved by creating a favourable physical and emotional environment. They should be given the opportunity to maintain a normal daily routine, comfort, and encouraged to develop healthy habits such as good nutrition, physical activity and adequate sleep, etc. It is also important to provide adolescents with the opportunity to share their feelings and thoughts by creating a safe place for them to express their emotions.

In addition, adolescents need to learn effective stress management strategies. War can lead to increased anxiety and feelings of helplessness. Informed parents can provide adolescents with relaxation and meditation skills to help them calm down and de-stress. It is also important to teach them time management, prioritisation and decisiveness skills to help them feel more in control of their lives.

It is important to provide adolescents with support and recognition. Adolescents experiencing war may feel vulnerable and alone. The environment can foster a sense of community by providing opportunities to participate in group activities that promote cooperation and compassion. It is also important to support positive self-esteem by emphasising their achievements and positive traits.

At the same time, adolescents need to learn effective communication skills. They may experience stress and conflict in their relationships with others. Conflict resolution training can help teach adolescents how to listen to others, express their feelings and opinions, and build healthy relationships with others.

Overall, it is important to remember that adolescents are a vulnerable group, especially in times of war. They should be provided with practical guidance and support to build resilience and reduce stress. Creating a safe environment, teaching effective stress management strategies, providing support and acceptance, and developing communication skills are just a few of the ways in which psychologists can help adolescents improve their psychological well-being and adaptation to military conflict.

The data obtained indicate the expediency of developing a special training programme for emotional recovery and psychological support for adolescents, taking into account individual psychological indicators of affective disorders in adolescents and selected technologies for the development of such qualities as flexibility, agility, strength and resilience of character, as well as the ability to adapt to functioning in different external conditions. There is also a need for more intensive educational work with adolescents on mental health in general, the impact of full-scale war on it and the means to support it.

Conclusions. Thus, the above issues highlight the importance of providing psychosocial support and assistance to adolescents experiencing war. Early detection of psychological problems, psychosocial support and access to psychological services can contribute to the preservation of adolescents' mental health. Thus, the study can serve as a basis for psycho-correctional work with problem areas of adolescents, such as emotional and self-awareness. The purpose of such sessions is to transform emotional stress and anxiety into a search for self-supportive activity of adolescents. It is important to show adolescents the importance of different situations and actions in their lives not only for external

evaluation, but also for increasing the content of their own self-images, finding criteria for assessing themselves and the situation, and thus increasing their capabilities.

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