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PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY OF STUDENTS UNDER CONDITIONS OF PROLONGED TRAUMATIC STRESS OF WAR

Abstract. The article is devoted to the study of the impact of prolonged traumatic stress on the psychological well-being of Ukrainian students. An attempt has been made to examine the peculiarities of psychological vulnerability among students of the O. Bohomolets National Medical University, investigate the stress level, and identify the main psychological difficulties they face during their studies in wartime conditions. It is believed that studying these aspects will allow for a better understanding of their needs and challenges and provide a substantiated approach to developing strategies for psychosocial support and enhancing their ability to cope with modern challenges while maintaining stable levels of psycho-emotional and physical functioning under stress.

The article analyzes the consequences of prolonged traumatic stress on mental health, identifying factors that contribute to high levels of psychological trauma during wartime. It is substantiated that factors increasing vulnerability to stress, unrelated to the traumatic event itself, include young age, female gender, low socio-economic status, previous psychological trauma, lack of socio-psychological support, and limited access to stress-coping resources.

The study reveals that, in the context of prolonged war, students of medical higher education institutions experience a high level of stress. The most pronounced symptoms include physiological and psychological exhaustion, chronic fatigue, social isolation, high anxiety and worry, cognitive dysfunction, emotional instability,

sleep disturbances or insomnia, eating behavior disorders, and psychosomatic issues. High levels of emotional and cognitive workload adversely affect academic performance and overall productivity.

Finally, practical steps and prospects for improving educational strategies are defined, aimed at fostering psychological competence and promoting the development of resilience in future medical professionals.

Keywords: prolonged traumatic stress, psychological vulnerability, psychological well-being, resilience, educational environment, psychological competence.

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ПСИХОЛОГІЧНА ВРАЗЛИВІСТЬ СТУДЕНТІВ В УМОВАХ ТРИВАЛОГО ТРАВМАТИЧНОГО СТРЕСУ ВІЙНИ

Анотація: Стаття присвячена дослідженню впливу тривалого травматичного стресу на психологічне самопочуття українських студентів. Ми зробили спробу вивчити особливості психологічної вразливості студентів Національного медичного університету імені О.Богомольця, дослідити рівень стресу та з'ясувати основні психологічні труднощі, з якими вони стикаються під час навчання у період війни. Дослідження цих аспектів, на наш погляд, дозволить точніше зрозуміти їхні потреби та проблеми та обґрунтовано підійти до розробки стратегій психосоціальної підтримки та розвитку їх здатності протистояти сучасним викликам і підтримувати стабільний рівень свого психоемоційного і фізичного функціонування в умовах стресу.

У статті проаналізовано наслідки впливу тривалого травматичного стресу на психічне здоров'я людини, виявлено фактори, що визначають

високий рівень психічної травматизації під час війни. Обґрунтовано, що факторами підвищеної вразливості людини до стресу, які не пов'язані з травмуючою подією, є молодий вік, жіноча стать, низький соціально-економічний статус, попередні психотравми, відсутність соціально-психологічної підтримки, обмеженість доступу до ресурсів подолання стресу.

Досліджено, що в умовах тривалої війни для студентів медичного закладу вищої освіти характерним є високий рівень стресу. Найбільш вираженими симптомами є: фізіологічне та психічне виснаження, хронічна втома; соціальна ізоляція; висока тривожність та занепокоєння; порушення когнітивних функцій, емоційна нестабільність, порушення сну або безсоння; порушення харчової поведінки, психосоматичні порушення. Високий рівень емоційного та когнітивного навантаження негативно позначається на академічній успішності та загальній продуктивності.

У підсумку визначено практичні кроки та перспективи вдосконалення освітніх стратегій, що покликані формувати психологічну компетентність та сприяти розвитку резилієнтності майбутніх лікарів.

Ключові слова: тривалий травматичний стрес, психологічна вразливість, психологічне благополуччя, резилієнтність, освітнє середовище, психологічна компетентність.

Problem statement. The full-scale Russian war has inflicted substantial material and moral losses and suffering upon the Ukrainian population. According to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, in a relatively short period, this war has transformed the vast 44-million-strong nation into an “epicenter of unbearable suffering and pain”.

The ongoing threats to life under prolonged wartime conditions, widespread violence, material losses, forced displacement, family separations, and other adversities significantly traumatize the human psyche and pose serious risks to mental health. Being subjected to the long-term traumatic stress of war, the burden of social and domestic challenges, the distress caused by bombardments (especially nocturnal attacks), and the struggle to overcome economic hardships can amplify the risk of developing mental health disorders.

According to estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 10 million people in Ukraine will experience some form of mental disorder due to the war. Furthermore, approximately 3–4 million Ukrainians are expected to have moderate or severe mental health conditions requiring pharmacological treatment. Ukraine’s Ministry of Health highlights that the prolonged duration of the war and its intense traumatic impact may lead to an increase in the percentage of people with mental health illnesses, emphasizing the necessity for ongoing studies of mental health dynamics.

Students may be particularly vulnerable to stress due to the psychological and developmental characteristics of this transitional period. Key life tasks at the age of

18–25 include professional development and career planning, building social connections and independence, as well as the formation of personal and professional identity. The traumatic effects of war can hinder the natural progression of these developmental tasks.

Therefore, in the context of wartime efforts to care for students' mental health, it is critical to improve educational strategies and training programs aimed at fostering psychological competence, developing students' ability to withstand contemporary challenges, maintaining stable psycho-emotional and physical functioning under stress, and recovering from negative events while growing through these trials – a concept referred to as resilience.

Analysis of recent research and publications. To understand the consequences of prolonged traumatic impact of war on mental health, the concept of traumatic stress becomes particularly significant, enabling the exploration of the specifics of psychological responses to prolonged and intense stress factors. The term "prolonged traumatic stress" is used to describe the experience and effects of life in the context of realistic, ongoing, and persistent danger. Prolonged traumatic stress involves constant exposure to numerous and intense traumatic experiences, leading to prolonged physiological arousal, physical and mental fatigue and exhaustion, as well as increased morbidity [4].

The concept of traumatic stress is central to this study for understanding the psychological consequences of the prolonged Russian war in Ukraine. Stress, in its general sense, is characterized by a complex of psychological, physiological, personal, and medical symptoms that provoke significant emotional tension. Stress becomes traumatic when its impact results in psychological disruptions, akin to physical injuries [13]. The term "prolonged traumatic stress" describes the experience and effects of living under realistic, ongoing danger and involves constant exposure to numerous and intense traumatic events, leading to prolonged physiological arousal, physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion, as well as increased morbidity [4].

War is a traumatic event that induces significant stress and adversely affects individuals' mental health. According to the American Psychiatric Association [1], war-related stress can manifest in various forms, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, depression, adjustment disorders, and others. Its manifestations, duration, and consequences depend on numerous factors.

The conducted theoretical analysis of scientific studies indicates that the total number of traumatic experiences and the duration of traumatic events are significant indicators of the level of trauma-related symptoms [12]. The consequences of war-related distress are more profound for those who have been witnesses or victims of military violence, accounting for approximately 19% to 75% of cases [11].

Daily stressful living conditions, constant exposure to danger, frequent bombings, economic instability, and social and domestic challenges can exacerbate the negative and long-term manifestations of traumatic stress [3]. Research

conducted in Ukraine indicates that individuals who have remained in the country under wartime conditions exhibit higher levels of anxiety and more frequently experience recollections of traumatic events compared to internally displaced persons (nearly 70% of all survey participants) [7].

Young people have an increased vulnerability to stress. Published research findings reveal that in 2023, more than one-third of young individuals aged 18–30 experienced clinically significant issues related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, stress, and depression during wartime [9]. It was found that traumatic events significantly increased the risk of PTSD among students, with the experience of two or more traumatic events substantially heightening this risk. During the war in Syria, approximately 60% of students exhibited symptoms of PTSD [8].

It is well-documented that women are more likely than men to experience psychological stress, depressive symptoms, and anxiety during wartime [7]. The prevalence of PTSD among women is approximately four times higher than that of men. Women who have endured war-related stressful events have a twofold higher risk of developing PTSD [2, 10]. Severe acute stress reactions and a higher likelihood of PTSD have been observed among young women with incomplete secondary education and a history of prior interpersonal trauma [18]. Women are more prone to anxiety and somatoform disorders, while men are more likely to develop substance dependence [16].

Among students studying in Ukraine, the highest levels of anxiety and stress have been observed among internally displaced persons. Victims and witnesses of war frequently exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and psychosomatic disorders, as well as suicidal thoughts and intentions [15]. Among students who have gone abroad, the most pronounced issues include “problems with falling asleep or sleeping” (71.4% of respondents) [14]. The prevalence of PTSD among women is approximately twice as high as that among men. PTSD symptoms are more prevalent among respondents living independently (59.2%) compared to those residing with their parents (53.5%) [6].

Scientific studies indicate that during wartime, there is a high likelihood of secondary trauma occurring in individuals who have not directly experienced the traumatic event but have been witnesses or listeners to stories and experiences of those who suffered. This is caused by the emotional and psychological burden associated with exposure to others’ suffering. Those who recount violence, horrifying events of war, and endured hardships often “radiate” these traumatic impressions to others [5].

Numerous scientific studies have established that financial insecurity, relationship breakdowns, stressful academic conditions, direct impacts of war, and lack of social support can be additional factors contributing to the development of stress [9].

In such challenging living and learning conditions during wartime, studying the psychological vulnerability of students enables a deeper understanding of their

needs and challenges, as well as the identification of key factors affecting their mental health. Research into students' resilience can support the development of their ability to maintain stable mental functioning during prolonged stress, retain emotional equilibrium, and recover from adverse events – an essential component of their mental health and overall well-being.

In this regard, the study of students' psychological vulnerability under conditions of prolonged traumatic wartime stress is crucial for improving educational strategies and training programs aimed at fostering psychological competence and resilience among students.

The purpose of the article is to examine the psychological vulnerability of Ukrainian medical students under conditions of prolonged traumatic stress caused by war. This research aims to contribute to the improvement of educational strategies and training programs focused on fostering psychological competence and resilience among students.

Presentation of the main material. The national system of professional education is designed to ensure the high-quality preparation of highly skilled professionals while creating the necessary conditions for their personal development and formation. Ensuring the efficiency of the educational process necessitates the implementation of monitoring studies, the results of which are utilized to justify innovations aimed at improving training programs for specialists in the context of contemporary social conditions.

An experimental study on the consequences of the prolonged traumatic impact of war on students' mental health was conducted at the O. Bogomolets National Medical University from April 2024 to October 2024. Students from the 2nd to 4th years of the medical and dental faculties participated in the study.

The research involved collecting quantitative data and analyzing it using statistical analysis methods with SPSS software. The data collection method was an online survey, which allows for rapid data collection and swift interpretation of results.

During the analysis of the research results, descriptive statistical methods were also used, providing information about students' levels of anxiety, and stress levels, as well as the severity of intellectual, behavioral, emotional, and physiological signs of stress and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The study utilized the following methods: the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale [17], the Stress Level Assessment Methodology (by V.Yu. Shcherbatykh), and a screening questionnaire for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Additionally, socio-demographic data were collected, along with the information regarding existing traumatic experiences (witnesses or victims of crimes during the war), the impact of traumatic stress on academic performance, and resources for overcoming the negative consequences of prolonged traumatic stress of war.

A total of 152 students from the medical faculties of the O. Bogomolets National Medical University, who live in Ukraine and study offline during the war, participated in the survey.

The sample was formed based on the voluntary consent of students to participate in the study. The inclusion criterion was voluntary consent and residence in Ukraine, while the exclusion criteria were being under 18 years old and having foreign citizenship.

Sample Characteristics. The analysis of socio-demographic factors showed that the average age of respondents was 18-25 years at the time of the study. The largest sample consisted of 19-year-old students (44.64%) and 18-year-olds (24.10%). In terms of gender, the majority were female, accounting for 72.3% of the total respondents.

Most respondents (63.7%) reported having traumatic war experiences. Specifically:

- 18.4% lived in areas where hostilities took place;
- 11.8% witnessed violence or had their property destroyed;
- 21.7% had internally displaced person status;
- 11.8% were temporarily displaced abroad.

Results and Discussion. An analysis of the research results on stress levels showed that the mental state of the respondents is characterized by a high level of stress. Respondents are facing a high level of emotional and cognitive load, which negatively affects their academic performance and overall productivity.

High levels of stress were indicated by the following factors:

1. Physiological and mental exhaustion.
2. High anxiety and worry.
3. Cognitive function impairment:
 - a) Problems with concentration;
 - b) Memory decline;
 - c) Reduced cognitive flexibility.

Cognitive process impairments negatively affected students' ability to complete tasks, leading to low productivity (55.9%).

4. Social isolation and alienation.
5. Emotional instability.
6. Physical symptoms of stress: increased fatigue; sleep disturbances or insomnia; eating behavior disorders (loss of appetite or overeating); vague bodily pains, headaches.
7. Negative thoughts and overall emotional background.
8. Behavioral passivity.
9. Low productivity and self-esteem.

A detailed analysis of stress symptoms and severity among students during the war is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.*Analysis of symptoms and severity of stress in students during the war*

Symptoms of stress	Description	Percentage of respondents, %
Physiological and mental exhaustion	Increased fatigue and exhaustion	79,6%
	The feeling of lack of time	79,6%
High anxiety and anxiety	War-related anxiety, Worrying about your life, future, studies, and career.	73%
Cognitive impairment	Increased distraction from tasks	71,7%
	Difficulty concentrating on learning material and remembering new information	69,07%
	Deterioration of respondents' memory indicators	62,5%
	Decreased cognitive flexibility, manifested in a constant and fruitless rotation of thoughts around one problem	71,2%
	Difficulties in solving new problems	64,4%
Social isolation and exclusion	Reduced the time to communicate with loved ones	70,4
	Feelings of alienation and loneliness	56,6
Emotional instability	Irritability, fits of anger	63,15
	Gloomy mood	56,6
Physical symptoms of stress	Increased fatigue	79,6
	Sleep disturbances or insomnia	61,2
	Eating disorders (have lost their appetite or overeat)	55,3
	Pain in various parts of the body of an uncertain nature, headaches	53,9
Negative thoughts and general emotional background	The feeling of constant anguish, depressive moods	61,8
	Predominance of negative thoughts	56,6
	Gloomy mood	56,6
	Decreased life satisfaction	56,6
Behavioral passivity	Difficulties in decision-making, prolonged fluctuations in choice	60,52
	Passivity, the desire to shift responsibility to someone else	57,2
Low performance and self-esteem	Decreased self-esteem, the appearance of feelings of guilt or dissatisfaction with oneself or one's work	56,6
	Low productivity	55,9
	Decreased self-confidence	53,9

Thus, the results of the study indicate a high level of stress among students. The most common symptoms are *chronic fatigue, mental exhaustion, and a feeling of lack of time* (79.6%). High levels of emotional stress and constant lack of time indicate that students are often in a state of emotional overload. This leads to a decrease in the level of organization and negatively affects their ability to successfully complete educational tasks.

Daily stress from "living in war", worrying about one's life, future, studies and career lead to *high anxiety and anxiety* (73%).

Common problems are: increased distraction from tasks - 71.7% of respondents; difficulty concentrating - 69.07% of respondents; deterioration of memory - 62.5% of respondents. This leads to low productivity - 55.9%. Cognitive impairment negatively affects the ability to students successfully complete tasks, educational motivation and psychological well-being deteriorate.

Emotional instability: irritability, anger attacks – 63.15%; gloomy mood – 56.6%.

Social isolation and alienation: reduction of time for communication with loved ones (70.4%), feelings of alienation, loneliness (56.6%).

Physical symptoms of stress: increased fatigue (79.6%); sleep disturbances or insomnia (61.2%); eating disorders (lost appetite or overeating) – 55.3%; have pain in various parts of the body of an uncertain nature, headaches - 53.9% of respondents.

Negative thoughts and general emotional background: feeling of constant anguish, depressive moods (61.8%), predominance of negative thoughts (56.6%), gloomy mood (56.6%), predominance of negative thoughts (56.6%), decreased life satisfaction (56.6%).

Behavioral passivity: difficulties in decision-making, prolonged fluctuations in choice (60.52%); passivity, the desire to shift responsibility to someone else (57.2%).

Low productivity and self-esteem: decreased self-esteem, appearance of feelings of guilt or dissatisfaction with oneself or one's work (56.6%); low performance (55.9%); decreased sense of self-confidence (53.9%).

Therefore, during the prolonged war, a significant part of students experience severe emotional stress. Almost 80% of respondents indicate increased fatigue and exhaustion.

A generalized rating and prevalence of stress symptoms in students during the war are provided in Figure 1.

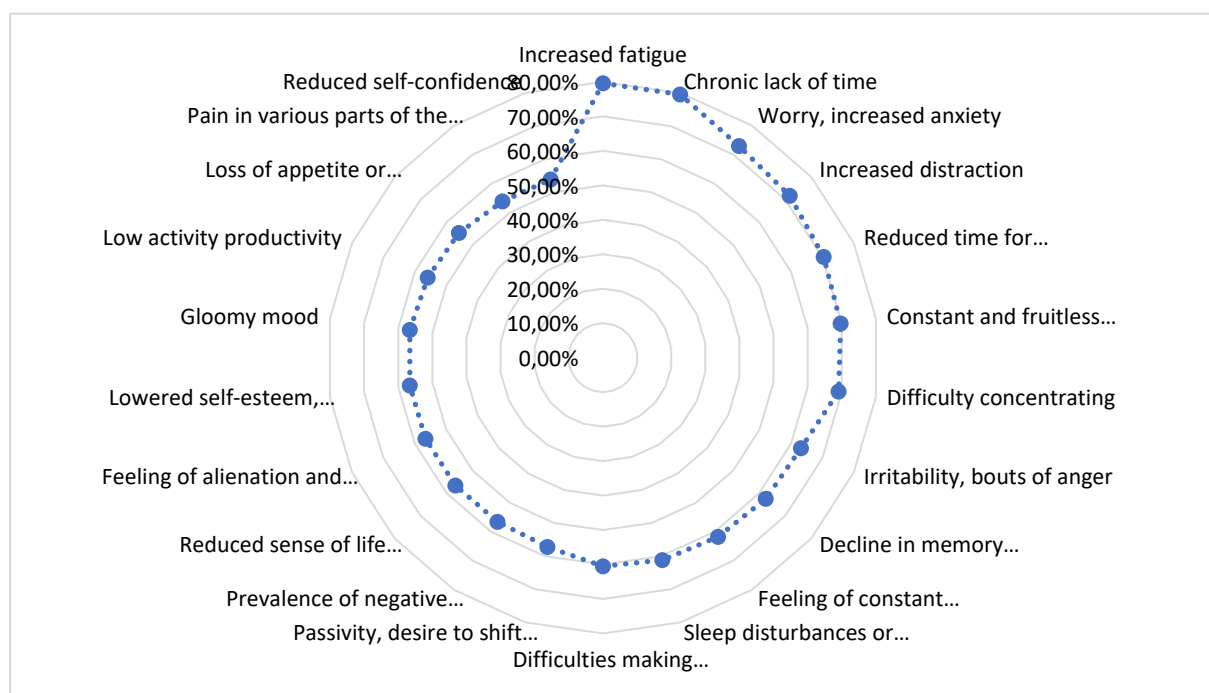


Fig. 1. Prevalence (rating) of stress symptoms in students during the war

Consequently, most students have high levels of stress, which impairs psychological well-being. Constant emotional stress, difficulty concentrating and memory impairment, physical symptoms negatively affect performance and motivation to learn.

The results of the study on the Anxiety Self-Esteem Scale show that more than 70% of students have high levels of anxiety. The most pronounced is the group of symptoms that characterize excessive excitement (often worried about trivial matters (65.1%), disturbed sleep (63.2%), nervousness and irritation (62.5%) (See Figure 2.)

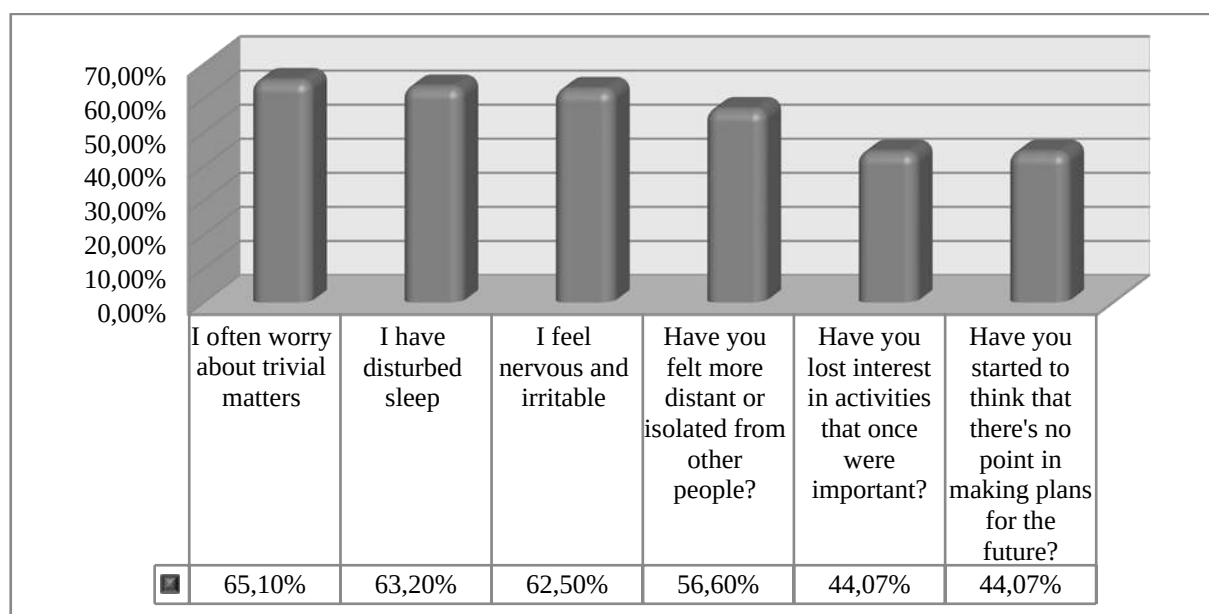


Fig.2 . Rating of pronounced indicators of the level of anxiety of students

Additionally, a significant number of students have unpleasant premonitions of something bad ahead (53.9%), find it difficult to concentrate on their usual activities (62.5%), and cannot relax and fully rest (46.7%). Furthermore, students report negative changes in their self-perception and mood, with 56.6% of respondents beginning to feel more distant or isolated from others.

Significant gender differences have been found in stress experiences. For male respondents, the predominant cluster of symptoms is negative changes in self-understanding and mood. Most male respondents report that during the war they "feel more distant or isolated from others" (64.5% of the boys in the sample). For female respondents, the most pronounced cluster of symptoms is stress and reactivity. They feel "more nervous and irritable due to usual noise or movement" – 71.6% answered "yes".

The analysis of research results allowed identifying 4 clusters characterizing respondents' psychological state:

1. **Emotional Factor:** Includes emotional reactions such as chronic fatigue, mental exhaustion, anxiety, stress, excessive physiological tension, symptoms of social isolation and alienation, depressive manifestations, etc.
2. **Cognitive Factor:** Encompasses difficulties in concentration, distraction, memory performance decline, decision-making problems, and negative thoughts. This is related to how people think and perceive the world around them, negative changes in self-understanding.
3. **Physical Factor:** Characterizes sleep disturbances, headaches, and changes in appetite.
4. **Performance Factor:** Indicates feelings of guilt, dissatisfaction with work outcomes, low activity productivity, and reduced satisfaction from activities.

Overall, the analysis of the research results shows the following:

1. **High Level of Anxiety and Stress Among Students During Prolonged War:** Nearly 80% of respondents have high levels of stress and anxiety. It has been found that students who moved from other regions to study and live separately from their parents have higher stress levels.
2. **Age Vulnerability to Stress:** Junior students are more vulnerable to stress than senior students. Almost every 18-year-old student has a high level of anxiety (93.75%).
3. **Gender Differences in Stress Experiences:** Female respondents are more vulnerable to stress than male respondents.

Conclusions. The war has a negative impact on mental health and well-being. The consequences of prolonged traumatic stress from the war in Ukraine can be significant in scale, complex, and potentially unique.

Differentiation of war stress consequences is related to individual vulnerability to stress. Important factors determining the level of traumatic symptoms include the nature of individual traumatic experiences, the total number of traumatic experiences, experience of living in combat zones, and the intensity and duration of stressors.

Students studying in Ukraine have high levels of anxiety and stress under prolonged war conditions. Common symptoms of traumatic stress among students during the war include physiological and mental exhaustion, chronic fatigue, social isolation, high anxiety and worry, cognitive function impairment, emotional instability, sleep disturbances or insomnia, eating behavior disorders, and psychosomatic disorders.

The high level of anxiety and stress among students negatively affects their academic performance. Younger students are more vulnerable to stress due to insufficiently formed stable coping mechanisms.

In overcoming difficulties, students find strength in academic success, social support and understanding from teachers, communication with friends, and active recreation. They strive to develop their psychological competence, stress management skills, resilience, and adaptive potential. Family support is an important factor in mitigating stress impact and providing necessary resources for overcoming challenges.

To address these challenges, we developed and implemented a psychological competence development program for future doctors, which allowed students to acquire self-help skills for managing stress and anxiety in various critical situations through consistent steps. It included: identifying symptoms of anxiety and stress, understanding the cause of anxiety, setting goals and planning actions to build resilience to stress factors, mastering self-help strategies for overcoming anxiety, and developing psychological resilience under war-induced distress.

Mastering psychological competencies, stress self-regulation skills, and self-help provision is essential for qualified resolution of a wide range of tasks related to mental health.

Implementing educational courses for developing students' psychological literacy, aimed at mastering skills in emotion, stress, and behavior management, will allow better self-understanding, identifying psychological problems, and adequately responding to their resolution. Psychological knowledge will help maintain positive thinking, build self-confidence, set realistic goals, and plan for the future. This contributes to resilience and the development of students' adaptive potential.

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