

# Challenges to mental health in Ukraine

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As the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues, the pressures on civilian population as well as the Armed Forces are tremendous. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that mental health of individuals suffers. The state of invasion started in 2014 and has intensified over the last year or so. Consequently pressures on veterans have increased and there is a gap to provide mental health support which continues to widen on a daily basis.

Previous findings reported by IREX (2021) as well as the Ukrainian Veterans Fund (2022) ПОРТРЕТ ВЕТЕРАНА РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ 2014 - 2022 рр. ЛИПЕНЬ – СЕРПЕНЬ 2022 р.р. [https://veteranfund.com.ua/opportunity/portret\\_veterana/](https://veteranfund.com.ua/opportunity/portret_veterana/) demonstrated that nearly one third of men and almost half (47%) women in the Armed Forces are in need of mental health services. These observations are echoed by Deahl and Andreasson Martin P Deahl, Michael Andreassen in their paper (in this issue). More worryingly according to the two reports three-quarter of military personnel think that their colleagues need help. This need for psychological support is both urgent and lacking. Not surprisingly often veterans do not like to admit this need by themselves perhaps because of self-image and stigma but more importantly due to limited resources. IREX (2021) noted that veterans often presented with thoughts of self-harm, feelings of fear and anxiety and sleep problems. None of these symptoms should be surprising. The challenge is how to deliver what is needed. Reintegration into civilian life can be problematic and it has been observed that circle of friends starts diminishing after entering civilian life. Thus, social support can be of importance. In a survey of social workers last year, we (Горбунова, В. В., Савиченко, О. М., Тичина, І. М., & Портницька, Н. Ф. (2022). found that in their daily work, social workers identified symptoms of sleep disturbances, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress reactions and deregulation of emotions. In addition, families of veterans faced further problems which included financial difficulties, marital problems, difficulties in adjustment and building relationships in civilian life. Children of veterans were reportedly showing learning difficulties, emotional problems such as dysregulation and anxiety. None of these findings are particularly surprising.

Findings from the Ukrainian Veterans Fund (2022) illustrated that over 59% of veterans had to return to their units since the current invasion began more than a year ago. The demand for mental health support was expressed

by 17% and more than a third (38%) pointed out that their families need psychological support. An overwhelming proportion of civilian population (94%) reported that veterans need psychological support

Under the circumstances, it is not a surprise that even healthcare professionals are under a lot of stress and there is a paucity of training in working with veterans. Hence the work of Deahl and Andreasson becomes crucial in delivering training, support and mentoring. Furthermore, there are key challenges in tackling stigma and discrimination. Even if veterans are willing to seek help and if adequate resources are not available, it is more likely to add to stigma. This is where external support becomes relevant and important. Even access to recent literature is patchy. Again support from mental healthcare organisations from other countries would be helpful. In teaching Deahl and Andreasson have highlighted issues related to healing, managing and dealing with sexual and gender based violence as well as meeting the needs of veterans and military personnel have provided a way forward and solace that we are not alone.

This commentary is based on discussions with Ukrainian psychologists and psychology students and we are looking at the situation from both inside/outside to give an objective a view as possible. Not surprisingly at this point, Ukrainians feel confused, afraid as well as angry. The support by Deahl and Andreasson to the mental healthcare specialists highlighted that understanding clinicians' needs is of great importance where people delivering health services can be free to express concerns and be supported. Importance of preparedness, self-care and planning for the future were key lessons. In working with military personnel, their families and veterans it is crucial that clinicians involve communities, families and larger society in delivering psychosocial support (SMH Zhytomyr Conference, 2022).

Educational support from the world community of specialists is extremely helpful and essential. In working together mental healthcare professionals can be effective in looking after vulnerable populations.

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