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**The experience of launching a psychological hotline across
21 countries to support Ukrainians in wartime**

Journal:	<i>Mental Health and Social Inclusion</i>
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Manuscript Type:	Opinion Piece
Keywords:	crisis interventions, psychological hotline, psychological first aid, Russian invasion, Russian-Ukrainian war, war-related trauma

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The experience of launching a psychological hotline across 21 countries to support Ukrainians in wartime.

Abstract

Purpose – The current work and further steps of the psychological hotline launched by the National Psychological Association of Ukraine (NPA) are discussed along with a call for action to mental health professionals worldwide.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper describes the training and support of the NPA’s hotline staff as well as reflections on the hotline’s work from June 2022 to April 2023.

Findings – With broad international support, the NPA’s psychological hotline currently operates in 21 countries providing psychological assistance and referrals to other service providers within Ukraine and abroad. We propose further steps of its work, including international collaboration.

Originality/value – Providing citizens of Ukraine with broad public access to evidence-based remote psychological support through NPA’s hotlines is a high priority considering the war’s negative impact on mental health diverse and the limited capacity of the state mental health system.

Keywords: crisis interventions, psychological hotline, psychological first aid, Russian invasion, Russian-Ukrainian war, war-related trauma.

Paper type Opinion Piece.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, affected millions of people, forcing them to fight, survive, grieve, and take refuge in other parts of Ukraine and abroad. Xu and colleagues reported a surge of mental health issues in Ukrainians by March 2022, namely high psychological distress, anxiety, and depression (Xu *et al.*, 2023). Similar to the psychological consequences of the 2014 Russian invasion measured in 2016 and 2017 (Osokina *et al.*, 2023; Roberts *et al.*, 2019), further war-related psychological symptoms are expected in the coming months and years, as well as in the coming decades and even future generations (Shevlin *et al.*, 2022). The ongoing war

requires mental health professionals to remain engaged with their Ukrainian clients while navigating multiple war-related obstacles and receiving ongoing training and support from peers and professional associations (Matiashova *et al.*, 2022). According to Chaaya and co-authors (Chaaya *et al.*, 2022), Ukrainian mental health professionals should conduct systematic screening of different segments of the population for mental health issues, provide psychological first aid and additional care to vulnerable individuals (Ellevåg and DeLisi, 2022; Velykodna *et al.*, 2023). Providing broad public access to evidence-based remote psychological support through hotlines or chatbots (Frankova *et al.*, 2022) is a high priority considering the war's diverse and widespread psychological impact on the population, many of whom have experienced or witnessed multiple traumas over the course of the war.

Preparations to launch a psychological hotline for Ukrainians started in early March 2022 after the Portuguese Psychological Association (Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses) provided their first training course on post-disaster crisis counselling to the National Psychological Association (NPA) of Ukraine. NPA developed and launched the psychological hotlines during the following two months along with the support of international specialists in crises and trauma, as suggested by leading mental health professionals (Bai *et al.*, 2022). The hotline staff provides rapid crisis interventions as well as referrals for further psychological, psychosocial, legal, or medical care. Well-trained and experienced Ukrainian psychologists work on the hotline for up to five hours per day and receive four hours of weekly supervision in order to prevent burnout and depression (Pinchuk *et al.*, 2022). Self-care is particularly important given that the duration of the war remains unclear.

Since its inception, psychological hotline staff have completed over 30 advanced training courses and a number of group supervision sessions provided by experts from the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations, American Psychological Association, American Association of Suicidology, Portuguese Psychological Association, McGill University, Carleton University, Dublin City University/Children's Health Ireland, University of the Andes, University of Central Lancashire, George Washington University and others. Trainings have focused on tele-counseling skills, psychological interventions for acute stress and trauma, working with soldiers and civilians from recently liberated territories, support for victims of violence and torture, working with children and adolescents in crises, and psychological self-care skills, including managing vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue. These trainings have enabled the psychological hotline workers to provide specialized psychological first aid and crisis intervention to callers from diverse backgrounds.

To date, the NPA's psychological hotline team has completed more than 3800 audio and video sessions as well as expanded beyond Ukraine to serve the needs of Ukrainians who have fled abroad. Currently, the hotline has separate toll-free phone numbers for calls from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, and the UK (see figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Given recent efforts to strengthen interagency coordination and intersectoral cooperation in mental health care in wartime Ukraine (Quirke *et al.*, 2022), the Ministry of Healthcare of Ukraine has implemented the 'All-Ukrainian mental health program at the initiative of [First Lady] Olena Zelenska' with the

support of the World Health Organisation and the NGO «Barrier-Free». NPA's psychological hotline was listed as a top priority on the website for this initiative entitled 'How are U?' (launched March 2023) for individuals seeking mental health assistance in Ukraine, among other hotlines that focus on specific populations. Besides, NPA's hotline phone numbers for calls from different countries were mentioned there as the main mental health service for Ukrainians temporarily located abroad. Several large companies and factories in Ukraine have also integrated referring to the NPA's psychological hotline into their customer's hotlines. These kinds of institutional endorsements and referrals reflect the high level of trust that government officials and the private sector have in NPA's hotline as an effective tool for psychological assistance.

We would like to highlight the following four insights after almost a year of experience managing the psychological hotline in Ukraine and in neighboring countries:

1. People's need for this psychological aid has not decreased over time.

Contrary to our expectations, our monitoring indicates that the hotline staff currently receive even more calls than they did when the hotline was launched several months after the war started. More people are seeking psychological aid due to what feels like an endless war with frequent missile attacks on cities, losses of soldiers in combat, lethal violence against civilians, destruction of houses and entire apartment buildings, and ongoing deterioration of the standard of living.

2. Some isolated segments of society lack other options and can only get psychological support through the NPA's hotline. For instance, about 10% of hotline callers are people aged 65+ as they have fewer sources of psychological support from state and NGO organizations, especially those living in rural and

recently liberated areas. The governmental mental health system and NGOs' programs sometimes neglect older adults as they focus more on other vulnerable groups, e.g., children, adolescents, displaced people, victims of violence, pregnant women, soldiers, and veterans, etc.

3. *The integration of services remains in high demand.* About every third caller to the hotline has obtained a post-intervention referral to other psychosocial, medical, or legal institutions, while some callers needed other kinds of contact information. In order to meet this need, NPA's hotline coordinators had to collect and regularly update referral contacts for a broad range of service institutions, which has been challenging during wartime as many organizations have been forced to change their locations, contact information and even the services they are able to provide.

4. *Language matters.* Millions of Ukrainians have sought refuge abroad and many were provided with local access to competent psychological services there. But many refugees have struggled to speak about their suffering in a foreign language they were learning, and felt they could tell more and receive more profound help in their native language. This frequent feedback from callers to the hotline staff has encouraged the managers of NPA's hotline to maintain its expansion to other European countries where Ukrainians remain temporarily located as the war continues.

NPA's current goals for the psychological hotline are to: (a) screen and support the hotline staff in order to reduce the risk of compassion fatigue and moral injury; (b) provide multifaceted training and supervision to support them in developing their skills and expertise in various aspects of crisis counseling; and (c) plan and implement further steps in a public mental health campaign to

promote accessible psychological first aid and secondary aid through multiple public information channels.

As an international group of mental health professionals involved in managing and supporting NPA's psychological hotline, we are calling for assistance:

(a) to provide the hotline telephone numbers to Ukrainians in your respective countries who are seeking rapid psychological aid;

(b) to launch the hotline in additional countries that are hosting refugees from Ukraine;

(c) to support hotline staff with evidence-based lectures, courses, supervision, and further training on providing psychological assistance to different segments of the population;

(d) to provide hotline coordinators with contact information for mental health clinics and humanitarian projects in various host countries so that refugees can be referred to them for ongoing local psychosocial support.

We would be glad to cooperate, share our experiences, and receive any other recommendations on how to best support Ukrainians who have been exposed to or displaced by the war.

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Figure 1

The NPA’s psychological hotline phone numbers in 21 countries



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All calls from mobile phones are tollfree in the mentioned countries
The hotline works from 10:00 to 20:00 Kyiv time

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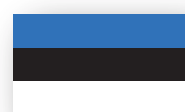
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