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Psychological consequences of warfare for combatants: ways of social reintegration and support in Ukraine

Consecuencias psicológicas de la guerra para los combatientes: vías de reintegración social y apoyo en Ucrania

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Abstract


The aim of the article is to analyse the main ways of social reintegration and support for military personnel in Ukraine through the prism of analysing the main psychological effects on the combatants' mental health. The realisation of this goal involves the use of general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, content analysis of scientific literature. The results show that the participation of servicemen in war can lead to serious psychological stress, communication, emotional, information stress. Post-traumatic stress disorder is one of the most common mental disorders among war veterans and includes various symptoms that can negatively affect physical and mental health, including repeated flashes of traumatic memories, sense of mirroring, agitation, and avoidance of certain social situations. The


Resumen

El objetivo del artículo es analizar las principales vías de reintegración social y apoyo al personal militar en Ucrania a través del prisma del análisis de los principales efectos psicológicos en la salud mental de los combatientes. La realización de este objetivo implica el uso métodos científicos generales de análisis y síntesis, análisis de contenido de la literatura científica. Los resultados muestran que la participación de militares en la guerra puede provocar estrés psicológico grave, estrés comunicativo, emocional, informativo. El trastorno de estrés postraumático es uno de los trastornos mentales más comunes entre los veteranos de guerra e incluye diversos síntomas que pueden afectar negativamente a la salud física y mental, como recuerdos traumáticos repetidos, sensación de reflejo, agitación y evitación de determinadas situaciones sociales. Para superar los

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following methods are important to overcome the psychological effects of war: cognitive behavioural therapy, support from family and friends, effective communication, regular physical activity, and a balanced diet. It is also important to integrate servicemen and women into society by providing appropriate conditions for retraining, labour guarantees, state support, preferential conditions for admission and training, scholarships, additional educational services in the public space, etc. The conclusions note that it is important to provide legal support and services in the healthcare sector.

Keywords: military personnel, psychological support, society, reintegration, psychological trauma.

Introduction

Research problem

Currently, contemporary psychological assistance is characterized by the provision of support to individuals or groups with the aim of restoring their desired psychological well-being, enhancing mental processes, improving behavior and communication, and engaging them in group activities. However, the challenges associated with the psychological rehabilitation and social reintegration of servicemen involved in combat operations, particularly within the complex framework of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war, remain inadequately explored. Brief descriptions of the context of the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war elucidate the unique challenges faced in this specific scenario. Ukrainian experiences underscore the need for comprehensive research to address both the theoretical and practical aspects of establishing such a field of activity in Ukraine. Furthermore, the development and implementation of a new, adapted system necessitate further exploration and inquiry.

Research focus

This issue is particularly relevant when considering the main psychological consequences of warfare for combatants. Today, as Ukrainian official data show, they face many different problems that often need to be solved without the help of the state or other institutions. Accordingly, the relevance of this study is determined by several important aspects. In particular, the theoretical substantiation of psychological consequences and the development of effective methods of support and reintegration are extremely important tasks for

efectos psicológicos de guerra son importantes los siguientes métodos: terapia cognitivo-conductual, apoyo de familiares y amigos, comunicación eficaz, actividad física regular y dieta equilibrada. También es importante integrar a militares en la sociedad ofreciéndoles condiciones adecuadas de reciclaje, garantías laborales, apoyo estatal, condiciones preferentes de admisión y formación, becas, servicios educativos adicionales en el espacio público, etc. Las conclusiones señalan que es importante proporcionar apoyo jurídico y servicios en el sector sanitario.

Palabras clave: personal militar, apoyo psicológico, sociedad, reintegración, trauma psicológico.

modern society. At the same time, combatants returning to civilian life may face various psychological and social difficulties, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, loss of social positioning, etc. The study may reveal ways to improve their psychological well-being and reintegration into society. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the results of the study can serve as a basis for the development of programs and policies aimed at improving the psychological well-being of combatants and their social reintegration.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to analyze in detail the main ways of social reintegration and support for military personnel in Ukraine through the prism of analyzing the main psychological consequences on the mental health of combatants. The field of research questions includes:

1. Analysis of modern literature on the research problem.
2. Characterization of the main psychological consequences of military operations for combatants.
3. Description of the areas, opportunities, and challenges of social reintegration and support for military personnel.

Theoretical Framework or Literature Review

The persistent hybrid warfare in Ukraine has exacerbated the psychological adversities confronted by combatants, manifesting in escalated levels of violence and destruction. Consequently, heightened stress and trauma have become prevalent among these individuals. Empirical investigations indicate an augmented

susceptibility to specific psychological disorders, notably chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), among combatants involved in the Ukrainian hybrid war. Notably, Hrynzovskyi et al., (2022) discerned a diagnosis rate of approximately 20% for chronic PTSD among former ATO participants and those presently engaged in the Joint Forces Operation in Ukraine.

The contemporary scholarly discourse underscores the salience of examining the nexus between warfare and mental and physical health, given the ongoing hybrid war in Ukraine. Scholarly inquiries have systematically delved into the intricacies of the psychological challenges confronting combatants, elucidating various methods for their social reintegration and support (Bowd & Özerdem, 2013; Duel et al., 2019). Current research in this domain elucidates the heightened vulnerability of combat veterans to an array of psychological issues, encompassing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and other mental health complications (Kryvolapchuk & Protsyk, 2020; Kisil et al., 2021).

Given this forecast, there is an urgent need to strengthen rehabilitation efforts by involving scientists, methodologists, medical professionals, social workers, experts from government agencies, and civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) specialists. According to the results of contemporary researchers Shynkarova, (2022) and Malachynska et al., (2022), this joint approach is aimed at responding promptly to combatants' requests for the organization and implementation of comprehensive rehabilitation measures that extend support to the families and loved ones of servicemen and women. The study by Stadnik et al., (2023) identifies the main conditions and features of the formation of the psychological well-being of cadets and Ukrainian youth under martial law. At the same time, Skrypkin (2020) analyzes the internal aspects of the requirements for the reintegration of Ukrainian combatants into civilian life based on research conducted between 2015 and 2019. The focus of this research was on the desire to be understood rather than judged, the desire for social recognition and acceptance, and the impact of high social status (Skrypkin, 2020). In addition, modern research describes the problems that affect the realities of military personnel's civilian life and determine their increased vulnerability to negative social influences (Subedi, 2018). According to Skrypkin (2020) and Andrew Castro & Dursun (2019), social and professional

adaptation can be difficult due to psychological and physical limitations, as well as social stigma. Some problems of adaptation of military personnel to previously familiar everyday life are described in Sayers (2011).

According to the concept of Tymochko (2022), government agencies develop and implement various support programs for combatants in Ukraine. The study by Fossey et al., (2019) characterizes various programs and activities that affect the social support of military personnel. These programs include psychological assistance, vocational training, and other types of support. Also, the peculiarities of cultural influence on the support of mental health of military personnel are described in Truusa & Andrew Castro (2019). The peculiarities of the reintegration of military doctors are analyzed in the analytical article by Stanton et al., (2016). At the same time, the experience of psychological and physical support for military widows is described in detail by Shynkarova (2022).

Subsequent research endeavors may concentrate on the systematic evaluation of the efficacy of support programs tailored for combatants in Ukraine. Such investigations could discern the effectiveness of these programs by gauging their influence on the mental well-being of combatants, their capacity to assimilate into civilian life, and their satisfaction levels with the provided support. Despite extant research shedding light on select dimensions of military reintegration, it is imperative to comprehensively appraise the efficacy and applicability of these programs for implementation. Consequently, the dynamic nature of the (global) Russian-Ukrainian war necessitates ongoing contemplation to address the evolving challenges associated with this issue.

Methodology

General background

The study of the psychological consequences of military operations for combatants through the prism of analyzing the main ways of social reintegration and support in Ukraine was carried out using a theoretical approach based on the analysis of literature and articles from available databases.

Materials and methods

The research methodology utilized in this investigation employs a systematic content analysis of contemporary scientific literature.

The process involves a meticulous examination of scientific articles and other scholarly sources sourced from reputable databases, including Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The selection of these databases aligns with the intention of ensuring a comprehensive review of the available literature.

The search strategy was methodically crafted around key terms pertinent to the study's focus, namely "social reintegration," "military personnel," "Ukraine," "psychological assistance," and "combatants." This strategic approach aimed to generate a robust dataset for analysis. The search on Google Scholar, based on the specified keywords, yielded a substantial total of 700 results.

To refine the dataset and ensure a more focused analysis, a judicious selection process was employed. Specifically, more than 30 papers, deemed most relevant and valuable to the study objectives, were carefully chosen from the initial pool. The emphasis during this selection process leaned towards empirical studies, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the psychological implications of military operations.

Consequently, the content analysis procedures involved scrutinizing and synthesizing the information extracted from the selected empirical articles. This methodological approach not only enhanced precision in capturing pertinent insights but also facilitated the derivation of a foundational understanding of the psychological ramifications associated with military operations. The systematic content analysis, grounded in the examination of empirical studies from reputable databases, strengthens the reliability and validity of the research findings.

Results and Discussion

Psychological Challenges of War: Disorders and Ways of Resistance

According to a study conducted by the International Organization for Migration, more than 15 million Ukrainians have reported a deterioration in their mental well-being since the start of the full-scale invasion, and almost one in four Ukrainians (23%) are in need of psychological and psychosocial assistance (Kelly, 2022). Data from the World Health Organization suggests that approximately 22% of people living in conflict-affected regions will experience some type of mental disorder within a decade (Kelly, 2022). These disorders can range

from mild conditions such as depression and anxiety to more serious mental illness. However, it has been found that military personnel who have taken part in combat are most likely to suffer from psychological problems.

Participation in combat operations exposes individuals to a myriad of stressors and challenges that can significantly contribute to the development of psychological disorders. Several factors play a crucial role in influencing the mental health of individuals engaged in combat, including, for example, exposure to life-threatening situations, witnessing violence, and experiencing personal harm or loss can lead to the development of psychological disorders. Traumatic events, such as combat-related incidents, can have a profound impact on mental well-being. The continuous exposure to high-stress environments and prolonged periods of uncertainty can contribute to the development of disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The unpredictable nature of combat situations can heighten anxiety and erode psychological resilience. Also, the experience of losing comrades or witnessing casualties can evoke intense grief and sorrow. Coping with loss, especially in the context of combat, may lead to complicated grief reactions and contribute to the onset of psychological disorders. Participation in combat operations became a main cause of social isolation. Separation from family and friends, coupled with the unique demands of military life, can result in social isolation. Lack of emotional support and a sense of detachment may exacerbate feelings of loneliness and contribute to the development of mental health issues.

Servicemen and women who participate in combat operations are partly characterized by certain traits that manifest themselves in certain mental states, behaviors, and processes. First of all, it can be a tendency to bad mood, irritability, tension, apathy, signs of depression, anxiety, phobias, guilt, aggressiveness, anger, resentment, etc. In addition, there may be a fixation on losses, problems with falling asleep, nightmares, tremors, and an inability to relieve tension (Yatsenko, 2022). All of this leads to a feeling of severe fatigue and lack of energy, memory loss, difficulties with concentration, addiction to memories of the war, various symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, social and psychological maladjustment, and limited communication.

Psychological science generally distinguishes between physiological and psychological stress. At the same time, psychological stress includes

communication, emotional, and information stress. Physiological stress is a stress response that occurs in response to stressful external factors, usually of a non-psychological nature. Psychological stress is defined as a certain reaction to the peculiarities of interaction between an individual and the world around him or her, based on cognitive processes, expression of thoughts, and evaluation situations. In this

context, there remains a unifying criterion that allows generalizing a wide range of external influences directed at a person in terms of their psychological essence for a particular individual (Haas et al., 2005). Thus, a causal factor is identified that influences the further development of behavioral and somatovegetative reactions that can affect the formation of a certain psychological state (see Figure 1).

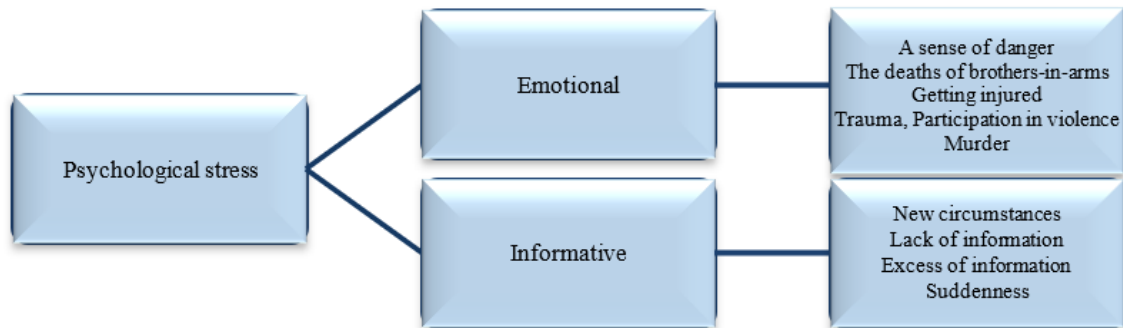


Figure 1. The structure of psychological stress
Source: Kokun et al., (2015).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one of the most common mental disorders among war veterans (Kharchenko, 2019). It is a condition where a person cannot effectively cope with the stress caused by these events and is characterized by a number of symptoms that affect their

physical and mental well-being. These symptoms can include repeated flashes of traumatic memories, feelings of mirroring, agitation, and avoidance of certain social processes (see Figure 2).

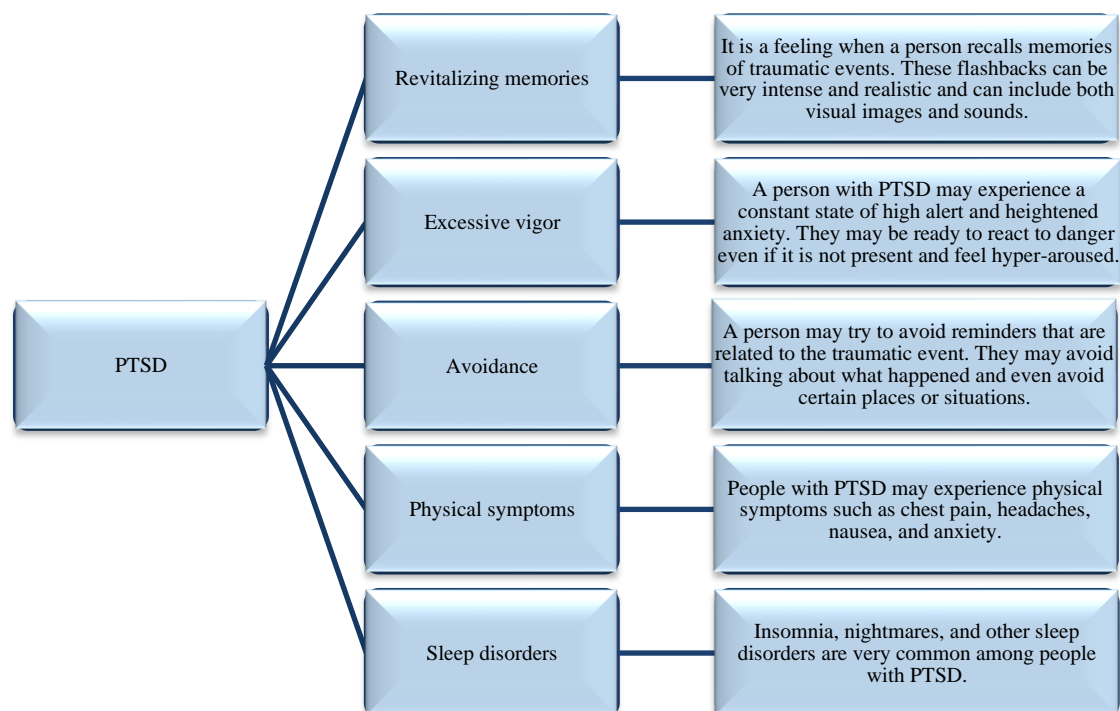


Figure 2. The main features of PTSD
Source: compiled by the authors

PTSD can occur after any type of traumatic event, including war and violence. Treatment includes psychotherapy (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy or emotionally focused therapy), pharmacological therapy, and support from loved ones. In general, professional care contributes to improved quality and informed support for a person experiencing PTSD and a gradual return to normal life (Pedlar et al., 2019).

At the same time, participation in military operations can cause anxiety reactions and various anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic

disorder, and phobias. In particular, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is characterized by excessive anxiety and worry that can affect a servicemember's ability to concentrate and perform tasks. Social anxiety disorder is an anxiety that occurs in social situations and can lead to isolation and complicate interpersonal relationships (Melnyk et al., 2019). Another serious problem can be depression, which occurs as a result of stress, trauma, and other challenges associated with military service. It can affect the mental state and physical health of military personnel and veterans. Figure 3 shows the main symptoms that indicate depression.

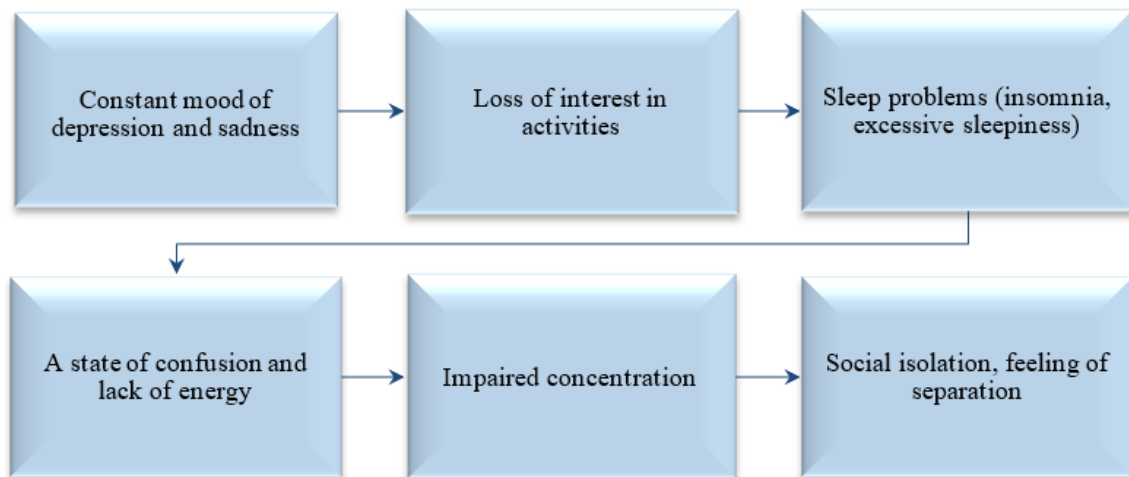


Figure 3. The main symptoms of depression
Source: authors' own development

Concurrently, evidence-based therapeutic modalities, notably cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and exposure therapy, have demonstrated efficacy in equipping service members with adaptive strategies for the management of anxiety and stress stemming from their military experiences (Xu et al., 2023). Cognitive-behavioral therapy focuses on identifying and modifying maladaptive thought patterns and behaviors, while exposure therapy systematically addresses and desensitizes individuals to distressing stimuli associated with traumatic events. Moreover, the pivotal role of familial and social networks in supporting service members with anxiety disorders and depression cannot be overstated. The provision of understanding, support, and open communication within these relationships significantly facilitates the recovery process (Xu et al., 2023). In parallel, recent investigations underscore the positive impact of regular physical activity and a well-balanced diet in mitigating anxiety and stress among military personnel (Walsh & Rosenblum, 2020). Physical health interventions complement psychological

treatments, offering a holistic approach to addressing mental health challenges.

Additionally, the implementation of group therapy or support groups tailored for veterans and military personnel presents a valuable avenue for shared experiences and communal support from individuals who have undergone similar challenges. Such group dynamics contribute to a sense of camaraderie and understanding, fostering a supportive environment conducive to the therapeutic process. In the broader context, anxiety disorders and depression within the military are amenable to intervention, and numerous service members experience significant recovery and restoration of their quality of life through appropriately tailored treatments and support mechanisms. The proactive step of seeking professional assistance is integral to this rehabilitative process, underlining the importance of accessing specialized care and expert guidance in the journey toward recovery.

Reintegration of military personnel into civilian life: challenges and opportunities

The success of the reintegration of former combatants, including men, women, and persons with disabilities, depends on various contextual factors. These factors include the length of time spent in the combat zone, the degree of displacement it has caused, and the extent to which normalcy has been restored for other members of the community. Generally, to facilitate a smooth transition, ex-combatants need support in adapting to post-conflict life, enabling them to participate in the competitive labor market alongside civilians. One of the main and urgent problems that modern veterans face after completing their military service is professional self-realization (Semenets-Orlova, 2017). Improving their qualifications, acquiring new skills, or even starting their own business become an important part of their reintegration into civilian life. According to recent studies, more than 40% of veterans change jobs after completing their service, even if they have the opportunity to keep their previous job for a certain transition period (Semenets-Orlova et al., 2021).

Veterans often face employers' reluctance to hire them because of their veteran status and the additional state guarantees associated with it, such as leave and job security (which are usually the responsibility of employers) (Skakun, 2022). In addition, professional adaptation proves to be one of the essential factors for a successful transition to civilian life. In particular, in many countries, such as the United States, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Netherlands, the state provides benefits and services for veterans in the field of employment, such as professional adaptation, education, and support for starting their own business (McKee & Murphy, 2022). These services include guarantees in the areas of education, employment, job security, and retraining. In the context of Ukrainian realities, these elements require more detailed consideration. In particular, Ukrainian legislation provides for state guarantees and preferential conditions for admission to educational institutions, preferential loans for education, scholarship programs, and additional educational services in the public space. Through this process, the labor retraining of military service veterans is realized, which ensures their active integration into Ukrainian society. The reliability of such mechanisms is backed by the experience of European countries, as well as the United States and Israel, states that have a significant number

of military veterans in their structure (Kelly, 2022).

Reintegration into normal active life is also facilitated by a well-established system of physical and mental health care (Vondrušková, 2013). For war veterans who have fulfilled their duty to Ukraine and its people, putting their health and lives at risk, medical care is becoming one of the most pressing issues (Hrynzovskyi et al., 2022). The Law of Ukraine "On the Status of War Veterans and Guarantees of Their Social Protection," as well as some other regulations aimed at these categories of people, provide a number of healthcare guarantees designed to ensure an adequate level of medical care and rehabilitation for military personnel. This includes free medicines and medical products, regular medical examinations, dispensary services, and dental prosthetics, which are an important part of the medical approach to the rehabilitation and resocialization of veterans. It is also worth paying attention to the problem of sanatorium and resort treatment, which is an important factor in restoring and maintaining the proper health of servicemen and women, and veterans. At the same time, the quality of the services provided and the limited opportunities for them to receive sanatorium treatment pose a difficult problem. In particular, under the current conditions of the Ukrainian healthcare system and lack of funding, it is almost impossible to expand the range of services.

An important area of regulation of the rights of veterans in society is to provide them with the necessary legal assistance (Shynkarova, 2022). These benefits are designed to ensure that servicemen and women can use their legal options after the war. War veterans often face the need for legal assistance, especially in matters related to their veteran status, so the right to free legal aid is very important. However, due to the lack of awareness among veterans, limited funding, and overloaded legal aid centers, this benefit is not always fully exercised. According to the European and American experience (Skrypkin, 2020), in order to ensure this benefit more effectively, it is necessary to increase funding for this area, direct efforts to expand the network of free legal aid centres, increase the number of qualified specialists and improve their professional skills through specialized training and courses.

At the same time, there are tangible difficulties that will arise on the way to reintegrating veterans into Ukrainian society. In particular, vocational training and retraining of veterans

contribute to their successful reintegration into a peaceful society. However, in order to achieve maximum effectiveness, it is important to strengthen educational and informational initiatives, including educational opportunities, advanced training, workshops, career counseling, and similar activities. Under current circumstances, the functioning of the healthcare system raises many questions (Skrypkin, 2020). In this regard, it is now necessary to immediately create an expanded set of medical services and establish effective mechanisms to monitor the timely funding of medical institutions that provide such care.

The benefits provided for combatants and persons with war-related disabilities under the Law of Ukraine “On the Status of War Veterans and Guarantees of Their Social Protection” do not include the right to psychological support, assistance, or rehabilitation. Psychological support is also necessary for family members of the deceased, other veterans, or discharged servicemen who face psychological problems, as well as for their family members. Since the field of psychological assistance is particularly sensitive, psychological services should be provided in accordance with established standards, and professionals who provide them should be trained to work with veterans and provide the most effective assistance (Stadnik et al., 2023). As we can see, in the Ukrainian reality, psychological assistance is not seen as a mandatory element of social reintegration and support. This misconception will need to be corrected in the future.

Effective psychological support can take many forms, including individual counseling, facilitating discussions on coping with crises and emergencies with veterans, and involving other military personnel in the process. At the family level, attention is focused on promoting positive interaction and maintaining healthy marital relationships with family members (Fossey et al., 2019). To this end, psychologists explain the challenges and emotions experienced by veterans, as well as how they are perceived by their families. This also includes developing behavioral guidelines for different life situations, formulating effective coping mechanisms and strategies for interacting with family members.

It is important to note that experience with Ukrainian military personnel has shown that positive results can be achieved through joint family activities. These activities can include leisure activities such as visiting museums, exhibitions, concerts, festivals, and nature walks.

In addition, trainings, art therapy (in particular, sand animation, drawing, modeling), relaxation techniques, and active recreation with elements of play have shown their benefits. It is also important to take into account specific characteristics and various factors that affect the psychological well-being of combat veterans, such as family values and how family members respond to new challenges (Subedi, 2018). In addition, family values, traditions, and preconceived notions should be taken into account.

These prospects and difficulties are generally the same as in other countries (Tymochko, 2022). In particular, researchers highlight problems with employment, as some combatants may have difficulty finding a job or keeping a job due to physical limitations or lack of relevant work experience. Housing is also problematic, which, along with other social difficulties, can lead to social isolation and even homelessness. Researchers also note the risk of suicide caused by both insufficient psychological support and society's unwillingness to support combatants (Truusa & Andrew Castro, 2019). An urgent challenge in the United States is bureaucratic difficulties associated with complex procedures and bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining benefits and support (Andrew Castro & Dursun, 2019). This problem is also relevant for Ukraine, as there are no effective mechanisms to monitor and evaluate programs and services for combat veterans to ensure their quality and relevance to the needs of veterans. In such circumstances, it is important to have public pressure that would help actualize these difficulties at the state level.

Conclusions

Hence, the matter of reintegrating servicemen post-participation in hostilities and their subsequent return to civilian life assumes paramount significance within the context of Russian-Ukrainian war. Research has substantiated that a consequential outcome of engaging in warfare is the manifestation of heightened psychological stress, comprising communicative, emotional, and informational stress components. Psychological stress, construed as a reaction to an individual's interaction with the adversarial environment, is intricately shaped by cognitive processes, thought expression, and situational evaluations.

An additional deleterious consequence is the emergence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), representing the predominant category of mental health disorders observed among war

veterans. Characterized by symptoms that exert a profound impact on both physical and mental well-being, PTSD entails recurrent manifestations of traumatic memories, a pervasive sense of detachment, heightened agitation, and deliberate avoidance of specific social processes.

Mitigating the psychological repercussions of war involves the application of multifaceted strategies, encompassing cognitive-behavioral therapy, familial and social support networks, adept communication, regular physical activity, and adherence to a balanced diet. Furthermore, a pivotal facet of rehabilitation pertains to the integration of servicemen into broader societal frameworks. This necessitates the provision of conducive conditions for retraining, labor assurances, state backing, preferential admission and educational provisions, scholarships, supplementary educational services in the public domain, and legal support. Ensuring comprehensive healthcare, resort facilities, and the provision of essential services also assume significance.

Concurrently, addressing challenges, notably those associated with bureaucratic transformations in the state apparatus and the establishment of robust psychological support mechanisms, constitutes pertinent avenues for subsequent research endeavours.

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