
Preventive program for developing psychological resilience in people living in countries neighboring international military conflicts

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Abstract: Presented paper includes description of psychological risks and protective factors connected to the threat resulting from military conflict, and description of a preventive program aimed at increasing resilience of people living in close proximity to military conflict. Such programs are crucial but currently they are not available to the public.

Key words: resilience, prevention, well-being, countries neighboring military conflict

INTRODUCTION

The military conflicts have an enormous impact on physical and mental health, and general well-being of civilians who are under its direct or indirect influence. Due to lack of psychological safety and general instability an increase in levels of stress, anxiety and depression symptoms or some form of so-called survivor's guilt is observed in groups of direct survivors of the conflict and in citizens of other regions in close geographical proximity to the conflict. Usually in the literature negative social, and economic consequences of wars are mentioned together with data on increased mortality rates and significant decrease in quality of life. At the same time, there are many psychological consequences of military conflicts. There are correlations between traumatic experiences and psychological problems reported by individuals. The mental well-being of persons living in close proximity to military conflicts is lower in individuals suffering other difficulties, such as family or interpersonal problems, or not having any social support. It was also discovered that females in comparison to males experience more intensive psychological consequences of military conflicts².

Most of the data published in the literature concerns the functioning of survivors of military conflicts, but there are study results proving the decrease in mental health of people living in neighboring countries after the escalation of military conflict in Ukraine³. Among the mental problems observed in residents of neighboring countries there were symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD. It is underlined in the literature that military conflicts heavily influence psychological well-being and may lead to serious, long-lasting consequences in mental health of people involved in the conflict as well as in people living in countries neighboring the conflict⁴. The quality of life observed in countries directly neighboring an area affected by armed conflict may decline as a result of the increased level of uncertainty and fear for one's own future and security. The standard of living may decline due to the economic, social and natural consequences of the conflict. Additionally,

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² R. Srinivasa Murthy, Rashmi Lakshminarayana, *Mental health consequences of war: a brief review of research findings*, in "World Psychiatry", 5(1), 25-30, February, 2006, pp. 25-28.

³ Angelika Kleszczewska-Albińska, Krystian Ptak, Małgorzata Wiśniewska, Agata Wziątek, *Funkcjonowanie psychologiczne wybranych studentów psychologii i bezpieczeństwa narodowego w obliczu konfliktu zbrojnego na Ukrainie*, in „Studia Społeczne”, 39(4), 7-23, 2022, pp. 7-22.

⁴ Mateusz Babicki, Krzysztof Kowalski, Agnieszka Mastalerz-Migas, *The outbreak of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war: mental health of poles and their attitude to refugees*, in "Frontiers in Public Health", 11, 1-9, June, 2023, pp. 1-7.

environmental pollution, increased exposure to radioactive substances, heavy metals or infectious diseases can lead to increased anxiety levels.

Among other important factors leading to decrease of the mental well-being of residents of countries neighboring the areas of armed conflicts there is the feeling of helplessness. Such a feeling results from inability to modify the observed situation. It can lead to the development of depressive symptoms, especially in the long-term period. The migration of civilians from the war zone is also heavily influencing the well-being of citizens of countries neighboring the area of armed conflict. It results in an increase of stress, and can cause secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue due to the exhausting process of helping the migrants. As it was proved in previous studies, engagement in helping, providing support and compassion to people who have recently experienced traumatic events increases the risk of secondary trauma in helpers. The highest risk of secondary trauma is observed in persons with previous traumatic experiences, and people suffering from mental disorders⁵.

In the literature there are mentioned protective factors important in maintaining high levels of mental well-being. They include a small number of mental problems, especially lack of previous traumas experienced before the exposure to the military conflict, social support and resilience. Also helpful in sustaining good mental conditions are psychological support, engagement in religious practices, and adaptive coping strategies⁶. It is therefore crucial to plan and organize supportive programs aimed at increasing the levels of resilience presented by citizens of countries neighboring to the areas of armed conflicts. Such programs are crucial since mental health problems contribute to socio-economic problems of societies and result in decrease of general well-being and happiness of entire populations, but currently they are not available to the public.

RESILIENCE ITS DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE

Resilience is defined as a process responsible for successful adaptation to difficult and challenging life experiences. It is connected to high emotional and behavioral flexibility and openness to new reactions in response to external and internal demands. Among factors responsible for high levels of resilience there are individual beliefs about oneself, others and the world, individual coping strategies, availability and quality of social resources⁷. According to the studies published up to date it was proved that resilience can be developed and strengthened⁸.

Resilience is achieved by overcoming everyday adversities, challenges and traumatic events that lead to significant stress. It is perceived as a process of recovery from difficult experiences and opportunity for personal growth. Resilience is connected with an ability to differentiate between controllable and uncontrollable situations that develops based on considerable emotional distress that an individual overcomes. It involves certain behaviors, thoughts and actions that people can learn thorough their lifetime.

⁵ Ali Jawaid, Magdalena Gomolka, Anastasiia Timmer, *Neuroscience of trauma and the Russian invasion of Ukraine*, in "Nature Human Behaviour", 748-749 June, 2022, 6, pp. 748.

⁶ Emilia Zamora-Moncayo, Rochelle A. Burgess, Laura Fonseca, Mónica González-Gort, Ritsuko Kakuma, *Gender, mental health and resilience in armed conflict: listening to life stories of internally displaced women in Colombia*, in "BMJ Global Health", 1-13, October, 2021, 6(10), pp. 1-11.

⁷ Anat Shoshani, Michelle Slone, *The resilience function of character strengths in the face of war and protracted conflict*, in "Frontiers in Psychology", 1-10, January, 2016, 6, pp 1-9.

⁸ Erio Ziglio, "Strengthening resilience: a priority shared by Health 2020 and the Sustainable Development Goals", World Health Organization, Italy, 2017, pp. 4-7, 19.

Since resilience depends mostly on social interactions and resources⁹ preventive programs for developing resilience should include modules aimed at increasing individuals' knowledge about the importance of social relationships, and connections. It is important to increase individuals' levels of empathy and skills important for active listening. Social connections are important, because they improve the quality of social support. Helpful in the process of strengthening an individual's resilience is engagement in helping others. Therefore it is important to teach people useful tools they can apply while helping others. At the same time it is crucial to give them some tips on how to prevent their own well-being while helping others.

Strengthening resilience also requires validation of all the feelings an individual experiences. It is therefore required to offer people psychoeducation on the role and meaning of emotions and to teach them adaptive ways of coping with emotions. Data on basic self-care methods is also needed while developing resilience of an individual. It is therefore important to help people to discover their strengths and pleasurable leisure activities. Another factor helping maintain high levels of resilience is connected with an individual's meaning of life, and having measurable short-term and long-term goals. During preventive programs aimed at developing resilience people are taught to set reasonable, measurable and achievable goals.

In order to become resilient or to sustain high levels of resilience an individual has to trust themselves in solving problems and making appropriate decisions. It is often connected with the need to see specific problems in a broad context. Additionally, resilient behaviors require some levels of positivity and optimism for the future. Therefore whenever an individual is facing adversities in their life they should have an opportunity to discuss the situation they experience. Also they need to identify their own strengths and opportunities in those challenging experiences. Since difficulties usually lead to changes in life it is important to help people to prepare for those changes. It can be helpful to underline the inevitability of change, and to find a way to use it as an asset in life.

Development and maintenance of resilience in some cases requires involvement of professionals who serve as models. They also provide necessary information, scientific data and offer specific tools helpful in the process of discovering individuals' strengths and weaknesses, and providing adaptive coping methods useful in difficult situations. It is therefore crucial to offer people an opportunity to participate in preventive programs and supportive groups in which they will be able to discover their ways for developing resilient attitudes.

Maintenance of high levels of resilience requires high levels of awareness of individual strengths. It is connected with individuals' beliefs about their competencies and confidence. Keeping high levels of resilience is possible for persons who stay connected with others and for those who develop and sustain healthy interpersonal relationships. It is also connected with an ability to ask for help when it is needed, and use of adaptive, and situationally adequate coping strategies and stress management techniques. It also requires constant attentiveness, awareness of difficulties and willingness to learn new methods of problem solving. Therefore, a high level of resilience is usually connected to high openness to experience, proneness to accept uncontrollable events and modify situations controlled by an individual. It also requires high levels of optimism, and a task-oriented approach in which an individual believes they are able to achieve their goals, and they take the responsibility for their actions. Resilience also correlates with highly developed abilities for planning¹⁰. All of the above mentioned factors should be strengthened in persons developing and maintaining their resilience.

⁹ Linda M. Hartling, *Strengthening resilience in a risky world: it's all about relationships*, in "Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women", 1-12, 2003, Paper No. 101, pp. 1-9.

¹⁰ Elisabeth S. Blanke, Florian Schmiedek, Stefan Siebert, David Richter, Annette Brose, *Perspectives on resilience: Trait resilience, correlates of resilience in daily life, and longer-term change in affective distress*, in "Stress Health", 39(1), 59-73, February 2023, pp. 59-70.

PREVENTIVE PROGRAM FOR DEVELOPING RESILIENCE IN PEOPLE LIVING IN COUNTRIES NEIGHBORING MILITARY CONFLICTS

People living in close proximity to the military conflict suffer many psychological problems that in the long-term can lead to the general decrease in the mental well-being and quality of their lives. They can experience heightened levels of anxiety and depression symptoms. Young people and women are especially vulnerable to the development of mental problems as a result of military conflicts. Additionally, people who help and volunteer asylum seekers and refugees are at higher risk of depressive and anxiety symptoms. People helping others coming directly from the war zone are also more prone to the development of secondary traumatic stress. It is therefore important to offer those people help and support they need. As it was stated before, one of the most important factors corresponding to the mental well-being of an individual is resilience. It is then justified to develop preventive programs aimed at development and strengthening resilience of the citizens of countries neighboring military conflicts.

Preventive program devoted to the resilience of citizens of countries in close proximity to military conflicts should start with a thorough diagnosis of individuals' needs and problems. At first the conceptualization of individuals' life lines with special attention to current factors contributing to increased stress and mental health concerns should be prepared. Such diagnosis should be addressed especially to people volunteering and offering help since they are at greater risk of developing compassion fatigue¹¹. Whenever persons helping others experience feelings of helplessness, become less empathic and sensitive, feel overwhelmed, exhausted, detached, numb or emotionally disconnected they should be offered psychoeducation on compassion fatigue and given useful tips concerning adaptive coping strategies. After the psychoeducation phase people should be offered a chance to participate in a support group. Additionally, they can be offered individual or group professional help. It is important to underline that all the above mentioned interventions cannot be obligatory. They will be more effective in situations in which people get the chance to decide for themselves whether they are interested in participating in such activities.

After people decide to join support groups, ask for individual or group help aimed at developing their resilience they should be offered a chance to better understand their strengths and weaknesses and to learn about the impact their past experiences have on their present functioning. During the activities in support groups individuals will get the chance to observe and listen to others and – based on their experiences – learn more about their own history. In therapeutic groups individuals will be offered not only the knowledge about other people's experiences but also psychological knowledge concerning specific mechanisms described during the group meetings. Finally, during individual sessions persons will be able to discover their own beliefs based on their previous experiences and to understand an impact their past had on their present well-being. Support groups are therefore the least personalized support methods while the most individually oriented are individual sessions with a professional. At the same time it has to be underlined that the best way to increase or maintain resilience in persons living close to military conflicts would be to combine engagement in support groups and individual sessions with a professional.

The next step of developing resilience should be devoted to the recognition and application of individually fitted adaptive ways of coping. Based on previously discovered individual histories and preferences, individuals should be able to learn about coping techniques used by other people, and decide whether those methods are useful for them. While working in a group led by professional participants can receive additional psychoeducation on each coping method described by group

¹¹ Compassion fatigue is a result of helping others who experience many psychological problems and distress, and in some cases were exposed to traumatic events. It is connected with emotional exhaustion and numbness, psychological overwhelm, and deep fatigue. In the long-term it can cause emotional burnout.

participants, while during individual work participants will be able to analyze all the advantages and disadvantages of each coping method. Additionally, while working individually, people will be able to test every coping method during the session and in real life situations and later will be able to discuss the outcomes of every method for their functioning in order to decide which of the coping strategies are the best for them.

Another important factor corresponding to the increase of resilience is self-compassion. Therefore, after gaining knowledge concerning individual strengths and weaknesses, and learning how to cope with adversities in an individually oriented manner there is a time for learning how to be kind and compassionate about oneself. During supportive group meetings individuals can therefore learn how other people deal with critical thoughts about themselves, and how they overcome unpleasant emotions about themselves. In professionally lead group interventions participants will receive additional psychoeducation concerning efficacious methods of self-compassion. During individually oriented sessions participants not only learn about self-compassion but also have the chance to practice different methods before deciding which to use on a daily basis.

Generally speaking while helping people living in close proximity to military conflicts to sustain in good mental condition and to develop resilience it is important to learn how they cope in the beginning. It is crucial to learn about their life history and previous adversities they've experienced in their lives and to recognize the main problems they are facing in the current situation, then to teach them about the most adaptive coping strategies they can apply in different conditions. In order to increase resilience levels it is necessary to develop self-compassion, develop and maintain supportive relationships with others, and learn how to ask for help from others. All the main steps needed while developing and maintaining resilience of people living close to military conflicts are given in Table 1.

Table 1. *Elements of resilience increasing program for people living in close proximity to the military conflict*

Type of activity	Module	General aim of the module
Supportive groups	Recognizing individual strengths, weaknesses, and needs	Learning about oneself, one's needs, abilities, and its connection to the resilience
	Developing self-supportive network	Giving individuals an opportunity to meet other people who share similar experiences and learning from them
	Strengthening individual skills	Giving individuals an opportunity to discover and develop their skills while helping others experiencing similar difficulties
Group work with a professional	Psychoeducation	Providing current empirically-based knowledge on compassion fatigue, burnout, coping strategies, self-compassion
	Activities aimed at strengthening individual abilities to help others	Giving individuals an opportunity to share their knowledge with other group members, offering individuals opportunities for serving as an expert in certain domains, encouraging people to help other group members
	Activities aimed at strengthening individual abilities for self-help and search for help from others	Giving individuals an opportunity to learn from their own experiences, encouraging individuals to ask for help from others, reinforcing individual's behaviors aimed at searching support from others

Individual work with a professional	Diagnostic assessment	Recognition of individual strengths and weaknesses, case conceptualization
	Recognition of individual needs	Recognition of basic problems that cause individual's emotional suffering
	Recognition of individual styles of coping with adversities	Recognition of preferred styles of coping needed for individualized preventive programs, finding the best, most adaptive ways of solving problems adequate for an individual
	Recognition of individual preferences in self-care	Identification of self-care methods used by an individual on a daily basis, finding the best individually fitted methods of self-care
	Supportive sessions	Discussing the outcomes of individual sessions, identifying problems, and looking for solutions
	Mentoring sessions	Giving individually fitted advices adequate to the needs and constitution of an individual

All of the activities described in Table 1. can be used independently or can be offered as separate parts of one complex preventive program. Independent modules can be useful especially for people that do not have much contact with military conflict abroad, for those who only hear or read about it in the media. People who are living close to the borders should be offered at least the possibility of participation in support groups and professional group interventions. All persons directly engaged in helping others and having direct contact with refugees, people seeking for shelters etc. should be offered all three types of interventions, since they are at greater risk of developing compassion fatigue, secondary stress or emotional burnout. Activities aimed at increasing or maintaining resilience can help people to sustain good mental health, overcome adversities, and model adequate coping behaviors for others. Greater resilience can serve as a factor decreasing the risk of psychological crises. Whenever simple support and activities aimed at increasing levels of resilience are not sufficient it is recommended to search for empirically-based therapeutic interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Taking into account the number of ongoing military conflicts across the world it is necessary to plan and organize help for people indirectly engaged in war-related situations, such as citizens of neighboring countries, volunteers helping refugees etc. Offering those people support developing, increasing, and maintaining their resilience can result in an increase of the general well-being of those people as well as in other persons they're working with. Such correspondence is possible, since data published up to date proves that psychologically stable individuals helping others contribute to better functioning of persons they offer their support to¹².

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING RESILIENCE: FINAL REMARKS

Living in a close proximity to the military conflict can cause high levels of emotional distress, symptoms of anxiety and depression and in some cases secondary traumatic stress. It is therefore important to provide citizens of countries neighboring with military conflicts with preventive programs aimed at development and maintenance of resilience. Increasing resilience is a time consuming process that includes taking necessary steps to improve social interactions, and developing social support, developing adaptive methods of coping with adversities and investing in

¹² Kathryn Bamforth, Pamela Rae, Jill Maben, Helen Lloyd, Susie Pearce, *Perceptions of healthcare professionals' psychological wellbeing at work and the link to patients' experiences of care: A scoping review*, in "International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances", 5, 1-24, December 2023, 5, pp.1-21.

self-care techniques. Methods of work offered for persons living in a close proximity to the military conflict should be diversified according to the needs of individuals. Special attention should be given to people helping others since they can experience compassion fatigue and are at heightened risk of secondary traumatic stress. All of the methods aimed at resilience development and maintenance can be divided into self-help supportive groups, group interventions offered by professionals and individual interventions led by professionals. All of those approaches aim at the increase of individual self-awareness and self-compassion, lead to the development of efficacious coping strategies, and underline the role of social support and ability to ask for help when needed.

Regardless of the method used for supporting its development certain conditions have to be met in order to increase the levels of resilience. An individual has to experience positive, empathetic, trustworthy and compassionate interpersonal relationships, they have to feel they are not alone in difficult situations. Also important is asking for help from others and accepting the support they offer. Sometimes in order to receive adequate help and support it is helpful to be a part of a bigger group. Practicing mindfulness can increase self-awareness and self-acceptance, and decrease the symptoms of stress and anxiety that is needed for high resilience levels. In order to maintain resilience it is necessary to learn how to cope with stress and regulate emotions in an adequate way. Higher levels of resilience are observed in people perceiving their life as meaningful, so in order to sustain resilient it is important to set short-term and long-term realistic goals as well.

Crucial for well-being and high levels of resilience is also awareness of individual strengths and successes. It is important to notice any struggles and individual attempts to overcome those, and to interpret such situations as evidence of success. Whenever some anxious thoughts or catastrophic visions come to mind it is necessary to identify its irrationality, and make an effort to adopt a more balanced thinking pattern. When needed it is also recommended to modify previous goals in such a way it will be possible to fulfill it in specific socio-cultural and historical circumstances. It is also important to take into consideration past personal experiences and life events. Based on previous experiences it is possible to identify successful methods of overcoming new adversities. Finally, when all other methods and individual attempts fail it is needed to ask for professional help. Then it is recommended to engage in a therapeutic process based on empirically verified methods of work.

While providing help and support for others, e.g. refugees from war zones it is also important to be attentive not only to the needs of those people but also for one's own feelings. It is recommended to work in a group of people, to have leisure time, and some time for pleasant activities and hobbies as well. Crucial for sustaining a good mental condition is working in a community that is able to offer support when needed. It means that offering help to others requires giving attention to oneself as well, and whenever it is necessary to take care of one's own emotional and mental condition.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the information given in the previous sections it can be stated that resilience as a process of successfully overcoming difficulties, adaptation to challenging life events can be developed or increased during the lifetime. In order to do so an individual has to take into consideration their needs, develop optimistic instead of catastrophic expectations, develop and sustain supportive relationships. Since resilience is based on previous experiences, its development requires an ability to learn from previous situations, to have an open mind, accept changes, and practice self-compassion. It is also important to set realistic goals, work on skills development and have purpose in life. When it comes to the resilience development in the face of close military conflict it is important to pay attention to everyday activities, basic beliefs, and emotions of individuals. Different approaches and models of support can be offered for persons simply living in a country in

direct proximity to military conflict, for those living close to the borders, and others offering help and support for refugees, and other people in need in the war zone.

It should be underlined that the ideas presented in the article are theoretical. Therefore they can serve only as an introduction to the topic of resilience of people living in close proximity to the war zone and do not present fully worked out solutions to the problem. In the next steps, the focus should be directed to diagnosis of the citizens of countries neighboring military conflicts. Data concerning psychoemotional condition of people living in countries close to the war zones should be collected. It is necessary to describe the prevalence of the psychological, and emotional problems observed in people living close to the military conflict. It is justified to analyze those people functioning according to their age, gender, work experience, and other sociodemographic variables. Next, it is necessary to develop preventive programs that help them to increase their levels of resilience. In the next step short-term and long-term effectiveness of such programs should be empirically verified.

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