

## How Wars and Conflicts Impact Mental Health Among Civilians

### Introduction

Wars and conflicts are massive crises and considered man-made disasters that can negatively impact mental health. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 22% of individuals who have been exposed to war or other conflicts in the past decade are likely to suffer from mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia.<sup>1</sup>

### Fact of the Case

Between February 2022 and October 2023, various crises occurred around the world, including the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. These have had negative impacts on both the public health scale and human lives.<sup>2,3</sup> The wars caused high mortality rates and devastating damage to infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> Such conflicts can affect the well-being of both children and adults, including their physical and mental health.<sup>2,3</sup> Multiple studies have shown that 50% of civilians or soldiers are affected by PTSD during or after war crises.<sup>2-4</sup> 20% of these cases of PTSD may lead to major depressive disorders (MDD). The Russian-Ukrainian war, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, has severely affected Ukrainian healthcare systems and districts, potentially increasing disability and co-morbidity.<sup>2</sup> This may also lead to mental health disabilities such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD, due to the impact on healthcare access, including mental health services.<sup>4</sup>

### Epidemiological Aspects

Children living in refugee camps are 60% more likely to develop stress and PTSD related to violence and displacement.<sup>3</sup> According to a survey conducted in a Gaza Strip refugee camp involving 403 children aged 8 to 12, 58% suffered from PTSD due to traumatic memories and sleep difficulties, while 70% exhibited emotional symptoms such as feeling sad, loss of pleasure, and suicidal thoughts.<sup>3</sup> In Ukraine, over 5 million people have fled their homes seeking safety in zones such as refugee camps, with 60% of these displaced civilians being women and children.<sup>1,4</sup> The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, reported that 70% of these children are suffering from PTSD and behavioral conduct disorders.<sup>4</sup> Amidst COVID-19 in Ukraine, the Ukrainian Ministry of Health reported a peak in daily COVID-19 infections, with 37,000 cases on the highest day. In 2022, over a million of the total five million cases were documented. The escalation of the conflict coincided with a surge in COVID cases, reaching unprecedented levels. The current extent of COVID-19 cases and fatalities within Ukraine is uncertain, as the country gradually ceased data collection efforts before stopping entirely.<sup>2,4</sup>

### Management of the Event

- Educate on self-diagnosing mental health symptoms and improve access to mental health services using online interventions and community programs.<sup>2</sup>
- Prioritize well-being services and basic needs, focusing on individuals with pre-existing conditions and limited healthcare access.<sup>1,4</sup>
- Strengthen mental health screenings and workforce training to offer culturally appropriate care, especially for refugees and immigrants.

- Expand specialized mental health services to manage the increased trauma from the war and support international collaboration.<sup>4</sup>
- Utilize telepsychiatry to bridge healthcare gaps and alleviate system pressures during the pandemic and conflict.<sup>2</sup>

### **Communications of the event**

- Communicate with clarity and empathy, using simple language to ensure understanding and convey the urgency of mental health support amidst conflict.<sup>1</sup>
- Provide actionable steps for accessing mental health resources, prioritizing safety, and promoting resilience and recovery.<sup>2</sup>
- Respect cultural differences and collaborate with mental health professionals to ensure accurate and sensitive messaging.<sup>3</sup>
- Use a variety of communication channels to reach a broad audience, including social media, radio, and community outreach.<sup>4</sup>

### **Summary**

The mental health impact of wars and conflicts on civilians is profound, with a significant percentage at risk of suffering from conditions like PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Children, often living in refugee camps, are especially vulnerable, with many exhibiting symptoms of PTSD and emotional distress.<sup>3</sup> The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to a healthcare crisis in Ukraine, exacerbating mental health issues among the displaced population. Effective management of this mental health disaster includes educating civilians on recognizing mental health symptoms, improving access to mental health services through online and community programs, ensuring culturally appropriate care, expanding specialized services to address trauma, and leveraging telepsychiatry to overcome healthcare system limitations.<sup>1-4</sup>

## References

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