“The expression in their eyes, it shows everything”

An exploration into the mental health of Ukrainian refugees in the Republic of Moldova

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Background

Since the war began in Ukraine, approximately 100 000 refugees have sought ongoing sanctuary from the Ukraine war in neighbouring Moldova. Many of them have experienced highly distressing events, including injury, death of loved ones, loss of their homes, displacement, difficulty in accessing treatment for chronic diseases and more. The consequences of these adverse experiences lingered and impacted their mental health.

"The impact of war has given us psychological trauma. We are afraid of sounds, sirens, other loud noises. I had an unpleasant moment just now when the thunder started. When the attacks began I was outside the city - I saw seven missile strikes. Now, I am afraid to even look at the sky. Many of us Ukrainians now suffer like this when they hear loud sounds." *Female, 44, Odessa, arrived in Bălți, October 2022.*

As they fled into Moldova, the refugees were able to escape the worst of the war's violence. However, life in a different country presented a barrage of many new stressors that included separation from family and friends, loss of income, and an unfamiliar system and culture. Some refugees struggled to cope with their experiences and needed mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to meet their needs.

"We cannot disconnect completely from the war. Our men, our partners are still in Ukraine. We feel constantly anxious about the future, about how we will provide for our children. We are always looking for ways to support our fellow people." *Female, 42, arrived in Balti, April 2022.*

"Here I have a feeling of emptiness. When I shut down, I don't know what to do. Should I take tranquilizers?" *Female, 52, Odessa,arrived in Ungheni, November 2022.*

Initially, government and private resources tried to meet their diverse mental health needs, with international NGOs filling remaining gaps. Due to the large number of actors that responded, the MHPSS Technical Reference Group (MHPSS TRG) was formed in April 2022 to ensure efficient and smooth delivery of MHPSS services, provide technical support, and facilitate better coordination. 48 entities joined the group in the first year.

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At first, uptake of MHPSS was lower than expected, particularly for specialised support. The reasons for the lack of utilization were unclear, so in order to better understand the barriers to people seeking mental health, a research project was created. Better understanding of the reasons why the refugees weren't utilising existing mental health services meant that services could be adapted to become more relevant and culturally acceptable to clients.

"We are the type of people who are used to coping with our own problems. This is the way we are. We are used to coping alone. We are self-reliant". *Female, 55, origin in Ukraine unspecified, living in Chisinau since January 2023 (Patria Lukoil)*

Assessment objectives

The objectives of the assessment were to better understand the Ukrainian perspectives about mental health, how the war had impacted their mental health, current stressors, past and present coping mechanisms, and what was considered helpful for reducing distress. The assessment sought to answer the following questions:

1. *What does mental health mean from the Ukrainian perspective, and does stigma exist?*
2. *How does the war affect mental health, and what are currently the biggest stressors now?*
3. *What are past and current coping skills?*
4. *What MHPSS interventions are most helpful?*
5. *Where gaps remain, and what more is needed?*

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The research was conducted with 82 participants, most of whom are existing clients of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) MHPSS program. The sample consisted of 73 females and nine males (a proportion which reflects that the majority of refugees over 18 are female). Participants are based in 11 different locations around the Republic of Moldova.

When participants were asked to describe good mental health they used phrases such as balance, inner calm, safety, stability and making your own decisions. They described mental illness as unbalanced, nervous, depression and associated with mental disease. These descriptions imply that understanding about mental health is relatively low and that an ongoing awareness raising is needed.

Findings revealed that mental health stigma continues to be a barrier to accessing MHPSS services, and this is rooted in stereotypes, a history of institutional care and the lack of accurate information. However, this has changed recently, partly as a result of the war.

"When I hear someone is seeing a psychologist, I think 'Well done'. We should support this person. If someone believes they need this type of assistance, that is great! Now more than ever we understand." Female, 31, Sumy,arrived in Orhei April 2022.

Mental health issues aggravated by the war

Commonly reported symptoms and complaints: sleep disturbance, hypervigilance and anxiety. Some of these symptoms lessened when they arrived in Moldova, but many were still dealing with lingering effects and several expressed concerns about family members remaining in Ukraine and the long-term effect of the war on their children. Other stresses included living in a foreign land, loss of livelihoods and financial stability, and perceptions that they may be overstaying their welcome.

"War has affected us to great extent and negatively. Pain, fear, sorrow, anger. This is not curable! There is no belief it will be possible to forgive. It will take 5 psychologists to achieve this. We have changed, and we will never be the same". *Female, 37, Mykolaiv, arrived in Orhei June 2022.*

"The children are now afraid of sounds. My small daughter is afraid of sounds, even a small airplane. It is difficult to cope, and difficult especially for the children who lived underground. For us, we can cope. But it is hard for the children". *Female, 69, Kherson, arrived in Balti October 2022*

"We were freer before, we had plans. Now, we are in a constant state of uncertainty. It affects us in a lot of ways". *Female, 42, origin in Ukraine unspecified, arrived in Balti April 2022.*

"We have become more closely-knit as a community with our loved ones. In the past, we would talk to the people in our lives once or twice a month. Now we talk more often just to say, how are you?" *Female, 38 Vinnytsia, arrivedin Orhei September 2022.*

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Coping mechanisms

Past coping mechanisms included: talking to friends and family, caretaking, and spending time in nature.
New coping skills acquired through MHPSS services: discovering new interests, engaging in sports, outdoor activities (gardening, fishing, walking, swimming) and taking classes (vocational, Romanian language). A larger number of participants reported they would be willing to see a psychologist for more specialised support and many were already participating in such services.

> ***"After a few months, we made a decision to go back to life as we knew it. To find normalcy. My daughter used to do gymnastics, so we found a place here where she can do gymnastics."*** *Female, 38, Odessa, arrival date in Tiraspol unspecified.*

Awareness campaigns and psychoeducation

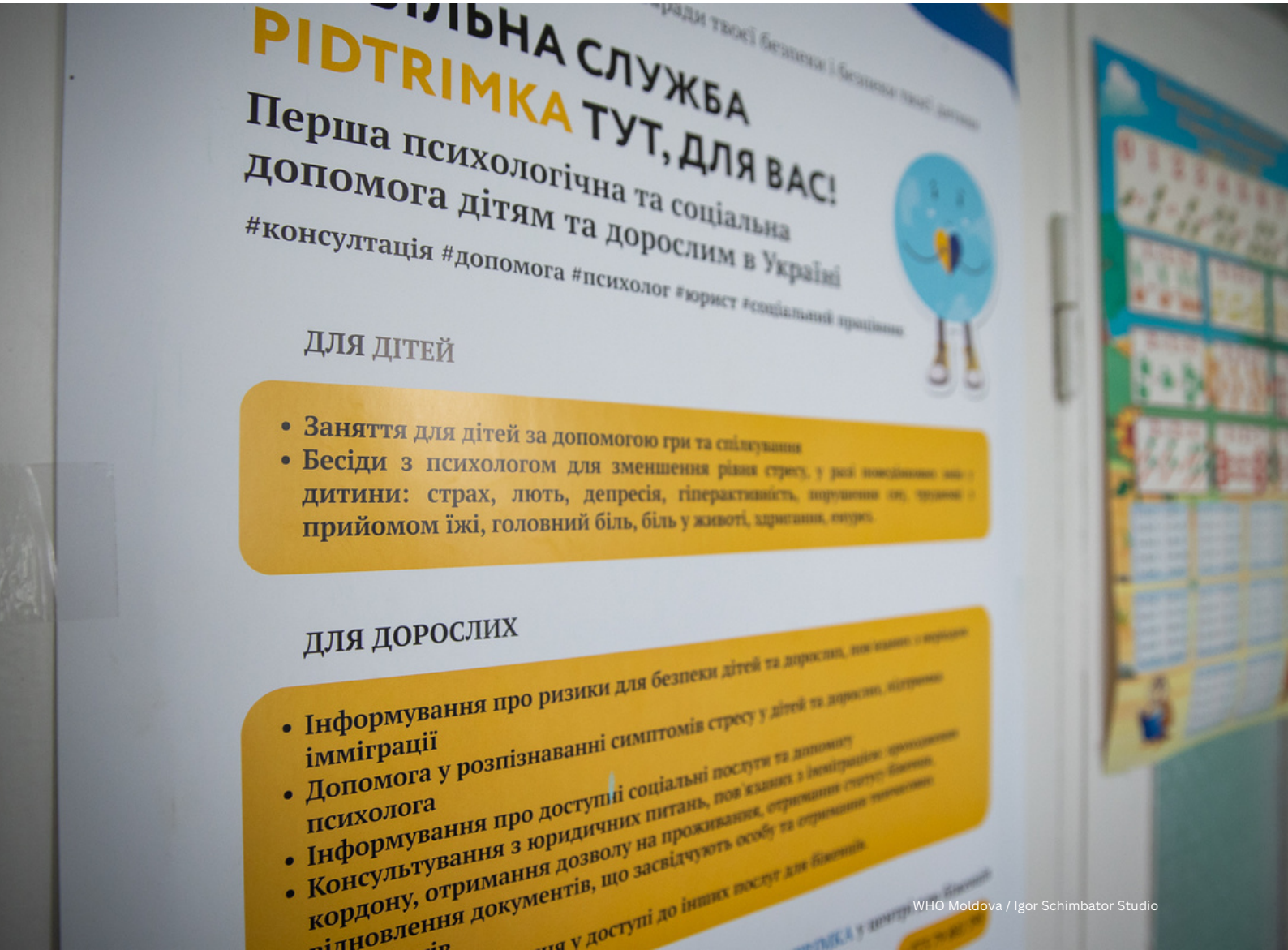
Ukrainians now have a better understanding of mental health thanks to awareness campaigns and psychoeducation, that have helped correct misconceptions. Many Ukrainians who would not have used MHPSS services in the past now utilse them without shame. MHPSS services are widely available in larger cities and the community -based approach makes them more appealing and easily accessible.

*“**In the beginning we didn’t see psychologists. We were stressed trying to survive. After a year, we realized we needed to take care of our mental health also. Even my children are also in need of support”.** Female, 43, Odessa, arrived in Balti April 2022.*

What more is needed:
Refugees request that MHPSS services include more: vocational and skills development training, excursions and Romanian language classes.

***“Maybe, more courses would be good. Before, I took a business course. Now, I am going to manicure class. We had driving classes too. We know these classes are costly, but they may help us get better income. Any additional skills training would be useful. Maybe a massage course”**. Male, 38, Vinnytsia, arrived in Ungheni February 2022.*

***“What we have now (services) is useful and good. The more support you have the better. We are filling the time and this helps us get rid of thoughts. We are now participating in Romanian classes.”** Male, 38, Vinnytsia, arrived in Ungheni February 2022.*



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Perceived gaps in MHPSS services:
Current gaps identified: MHPSS for young children, refugees in remote and/or rural locations and increased accessibility for people with disabilities

"Also, for the children, perhaps some summer camps and excursions. Moldova is beautiful, it would be nice to see it. We had clowns come before, but not anymore. And my daughter has never seen a puppet show, for example". *Female, 46, Odessa, arrived in Ungheni May 2022.*

"For the disabled people of different ages, more attention needs to be paid to them. People with cancer need support. I was very sick and was sent around to many places, it was very stressful. Kids with disabilities and other special needs (like Down Syndrome) need support." *Male, 57, Donetsk, arrived in Orhei in January 2023.*

Extremely grateful... But there is no place like home:
This research provided valuable insights into the needs of Ukrainian refugees, and they consistently expressed their gratitude for the generous support they have received thus far in the Republic of Moldova. Much has already been done to modify MHPSS services to address their unique needs, and providers continue to seek innovative approaches. Ultimately, however, what the refugees believe will help their mental health and wellbeing the most is peace in Ukraine, and the ability to return home.

"The best thing for my mental health will be when the war is over and we can go home". Female*, 43, Odessa, arrived in Balti April 2022.*

"Two years ago, I would say the grass is green everywhere. But now I say, there is no place like home. There is a different feeling here than there. We want to go home. No matter how we feel here, we are not at home. We live in a strange land, strange apartment". Female, 33, Kherson, arrived in Orhei May 2022.

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Recommendations

1

Awareness-raising campaigns to address stigma and educate about mental health

- Need for more information about mental health and MHPSS services in areas where there are no services.
- Support refugees and host community with awareness-raising campaigns that educate and challenge stereotypes, different modalities that challenge mental health stigma, support healthy behavior changes and inform about service points.
- Consider ways to bypass negative association with mental health provided in clinical settings, including services in non-traditional settings .

2

Address gaps and expand access to service

- Explore innovative options that better reach people living in remote areas with limited MHPSS services through mobile outreach teams etc
- Ensure that very young children have access to full spectrum of services in right quantities and right places
- Ensure adequate accommodation for people with disabilities to have a chance to participate in different activities
- Enhance MHPSS services by conducting comprehensive situational analysis of mental health and psychosocial needs of refugees and Moldovans, Moldovan mental health system and ongoing humanitarian MHPSS interventions.

3

Increase opportunities for community participation

- Prioritize participation and community engagement to ensure sustainability, relevance and buy-in amongst refugee population. Ensure that the Ukrainian population is playing a central role in the design, planning and delivery of MHPSS interventions targeting their community, as this will provide refugees with a sense of meaning, purpose and personal agency.
- Scale up peer support initiatives that allow refugees to support one another in culturally appropriate ways. Support Ukrainian volunteers for frontline work and assist them to get the documentation they need to work legally.

4

Include MHPSS activities that build social cohesion between refugees and the Moldovans

- Explore ways to better integrate MHPSS into existing local systems and structures that benefit refugees and the host community, including primary health care.
- Increase attention on social cohesion initiatives.

5

Expand livelihood opportunities that support economic stability now and in the future

- Provide more opportunities for refugees to engage in meaningful activities including livelihood and language classes which participants view as both calming and practical. Although classes

6

Invest in staff development to support retention, diversify skills of workforces

- Ensure that MHPSS have adequate opportunities for self-development through activities such as workshops and training. New technical skills strengthen their capacity and increase their versatility in addition to mitigating the risk of burnout.