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Effects of war on teacher mental health: a brief review of research findings

Due to the war that began in February of 2022 in Ukraine, its population found itself in a situation of real threat to human life. Employees of the Department of Occupational Psychology of Ivan Ziaziun Institute of Pedagogical and Adult Education during the applied study “Development of psychological readiness of teachers for professional activities in the New Ukrainian School” (2020–2022, RK № 0120U100227) conducted a study of signs of anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, depression and symptoms of panic disorders among teachers and practical psychologists of general secondary education. The relevance of this research is determined by the need to ensure optimal and productive professional activities of teachers and practical psychologists not only in the implementation of the concept of the New Ukrainian School (NUS), but also under the conditions of pandemic and war, when people feel a real threat to their lives.

The study found that a significant number of subjects showed signs of anxiety, depression, insomnia and panic disorders as the consequences of the impact of the pandemic threat and war on the human psyche.

The main purpose of this article is to highlight the results of the study, in particular: the dynamics of panic disorders due to being in hostilities; the main trends of their development and impact on the psychological readiness of the individual for professional activities during the implementation of the Concept of NUS under the conditions of quarantine and war.

Materials and methods

The experiment is carried out by the decision of the meeting of the Academic Council of the Institute of Pedagogical Education and Adult Education of the National Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of Ukraine on the basis of agreements concluded with the heads and teachers of experimental educational institutions. The study involves

pedagogical staff: Pereyaslav-Khmelnitsky State Pedagogical University “Hryhoriy Skovoroda” of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine; gymnasium-boarding school No. 13 in Kyiv; Bila Tserkva Institute of Continuing Professional Education; Kyiv Institute of Business and Technology of Vinnytsia Branch; Municipal Higher Educational Institution “Kherson Academy of Continuing Education” of Kherson Regional Council; Educational and Scientific Institute of Pedagogy, Psychology, Training of Higher Qualification Specialists of Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi Vinnytsia State Pedagogical University of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine; Department of Education of Sviatoshyno District State Administration in Kyiv; Anton Makarenko Kyiv Vocational and Pedagogical College; Mykolayiv Specialized School of the 1st–3rd levels of Arts and Applied Crafts “Academy of Children’s Creativity”; Specialized educational complex “Preschool educational institution-general educational institution “Lileya”, Kyiv; Specialized school of the 1st–3rd levels No. 125 with extended learning English, Kyiv.

Panic disorders as a research problem is a difficult phenomenon to study. This led to the choice of a combined approach to experimental work. To obtain reliable and valid information along with diagnostic interviews, observation, methods of self-assessment of health and mental states were used: hospital scale of anxiety and depression, HADS (Zigmond A.S., Snaith R.P., 1983), alarm scale, HARS (Hamilton M., 1959), the scale of depression, BDI (Beck A.T., Steer R.A., Ball R., Ranieri W., 1996), the method of “*Study of emotional states of personality*” (Pomytkin E.O., Pomytkina L.V., Ivanova O.V., 2020). Diagnostic interviews, observations and the above-mentioned methods used by the authors as a search for well-grounded information about the state of teachers who need help or support in the development of psychological readiness to implement educational reforms in professional activities in war and pandemic threat, which is necessary for applying the overall purpose of the experimental study.

The aim of the experimental study was to empirically study some aspects of personal and professional components in the general structure of psychological readiness of teachers for teaching in the New Ukrainian School, including empirical study of professional self-realization, professional reflection, professional communication, emotional intelligence, and mental health.

The theoretical and methodological basis of the experimental research program were the starting points of the personal-professional approach to the psychological characteristics of the teacher’s professional activity, professionalism and its highest form – pedagogical skills, professional personality, the awareness of teachers of basic concepts of professionalism, the development of pedagogical skills.

The methodological basis for the program were: psychodiagnostic method, associative experiment method, multipersonal dialogue method, which were used to identify the impact of basic personality traits on forming professionalism as a form of personal readiness of teachers for professional activities; a set of experimental methods: methods for determining the level of psychological readiness of the teacher

to work under the conditions of NUS; questionnaires to study the structure, features and trends of professional self-realization, professional self-reflection, professional communication, emotional resources of teachers of the New Ukrainian School; questionnaire "Mental health of the individual", questionnaire "Self-assessment of the readiness of teaching staff for diagnostic and counseling and correctional and developmental career guidance work."

The initial postulates of empirical research were the view that:

1. the structure of psychological readiness for professional activity consists of motivational-value (professional attitudes, interests, aspirations, value-professional orientations, professional-pedagogical orientation), cognitive-operational (professional orientation of attention, ideas, perception, memory, pedagogical innovation) thinking, pedagogical abilities, experience of creative and innovative pedagogical activity, actions, operations), emotional and volitional (emotional intelligence, feelings, volitional processes that ensure the successful course and effectiveness of professional activities of teachers; emotional tone, emotional receptivity, purposefulness, self-control, persistence, initiative, determination, independence, self-criticism, self-control (psychophysiological), psychophysiological (the ability to freely control their behavior and the behavior of others, mental health and ability to work, be active moving pace of work), reflexive-effective (professional reflection, self-assessment of their professional suitability, compliance of the individual with the requirements of the process of optimal performance of professional tasks) components;
2. the level of development of psychological readiness of pedagogical staff for professional activity under the conditions of NUS is a variable value due to age, professional, individual psychological factors and is differentiated from lower to higher manifestations: independence in defining and performing new tasks of pedagogical activity; adequacy of self-esteem, as well as self-esteem of professionally important qualities; ability to effectively and optimally perform the tasks of professional pedagogical activity in conditions of change, quarantine and time constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular during the war, when negative trends (value-semantic disorientation, increased emotional burnout, anxiety, depression, panic) interfere with effective professional activity, affecting the mental state of an individual.

Results

Despite the vast majority of people with a high level of positive mental states (well-being, activity, self-awareness, social adaptation, psychological self-regulation, stress, a sense of personal well-being), there is a category of teachers who have severe mental health deficits, discomfort, social maladaptation, psychosomatics and that is a prerequisite for the emergence of life-threatening panic disorders.

In the course of the research tasks, it was determined that the vast majority (67%) of surveyed teachers and practical psychologists of secondary schools have insufficient level of psychological readiness for professional activity in the implementation of the New Ukrainian School Concept and at the same time under unusual living conditions, threats in particular (Ihnatovych O.M., 2020; 2021). Under the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the emotional and cognitive sphere of the individual in the behavior of representatives of the above-mentioned categories of teaching staff there were significant changes in their emotional states. Peculiarities and tendencies of change of emotional states are that about 12% of respondents experience positive emotional states, while the vast majority are characterized by negative emotional states, which led to weakening the immune system, deterioration of professional duties and family relationships. Among the factors that negatively affected the emotional state, the following were mentioned as: inconsistency of information and a situation of uncertainty about further professional activity under unusual living conditions (Pomytkin E.O., Pomytkina J.B., Ivanova O.B., 2020).

Comparing the results of surveys conducted in March 2020, February 2021, March 2022, it was found that due to the influence of adverse factors (pandemic, war) there is a gradual increase in panic disorders among the studied categories of teaching staff (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3).

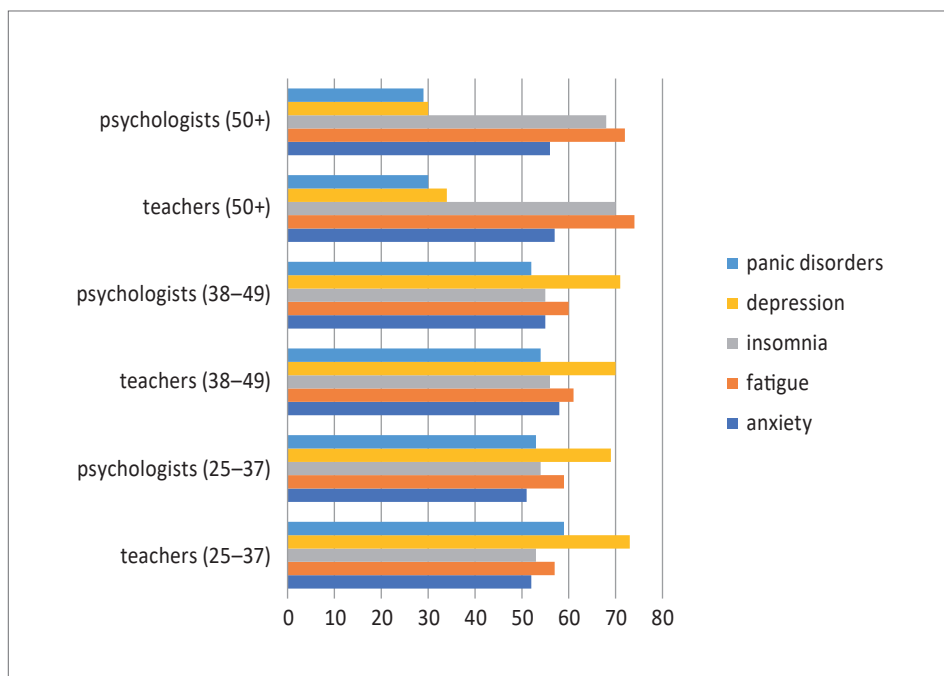


Figure 1. Distribution of anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, depression and panic disorders among those studied in 2020 (Ihnatovych, O.M., 2020)

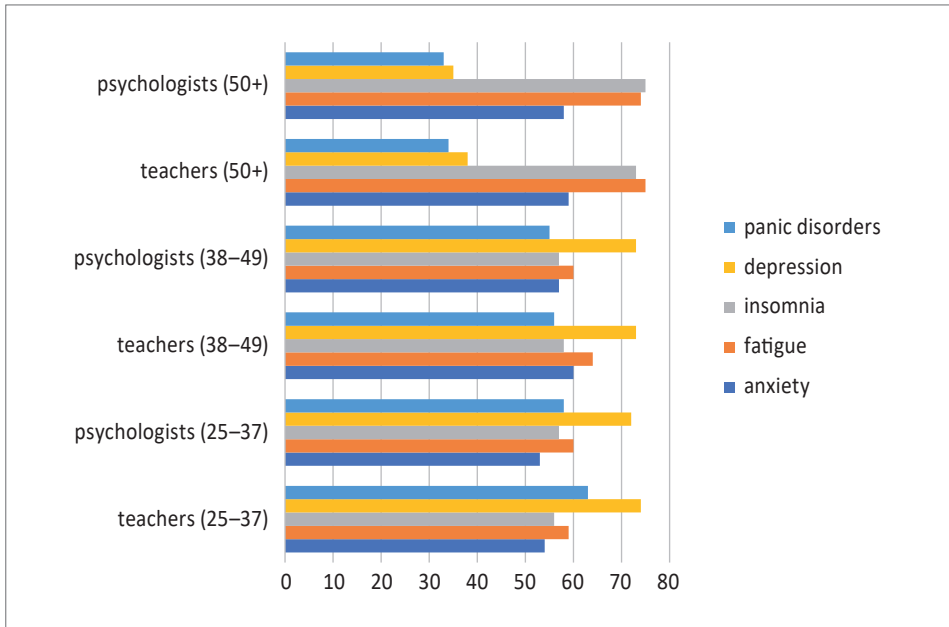


Figure 2. Distribution of indicators of anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, depression and panic disorders among those studied in 2021 (Ihnatovych, O.M., 2021)

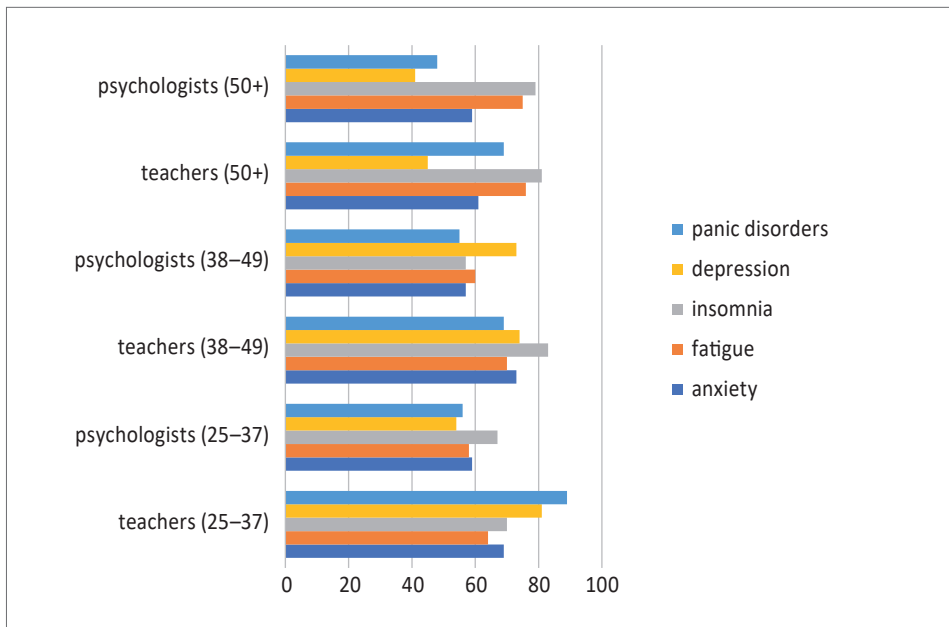


Figure 3. Distribution of indicators of anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, depression and panic disorders among those studied in 2022

A high level of anxiety was found among all age groups. Representatives of the age categories from 25 to 37 years old and from 38 to 49 years old – depression and panic disorders. Older subjects (50 years and older) have lower levels of depression but higher levels of fatigue and sleep disorders. Therefore, there is a need not only to prevent and overcome states of fatigue, depression, anxiety, and in particular psychotherapy of panic disorders, exacerbated by representatives of the studied categories during the war.

Discussion

Panic disorder, or episodic paroxysmal anxiety (Andrews G., Bell C., Boyce Ph., 2018) as a subtype of anxiety disorder of the neurotic level in the studied educators at an early stage was discovered in the syndrome of increased activation syndrome body: abdominal discomfort, urge to urinate, etc. (Bandelow B., Michaelis S., Wedekind D., 2017), and at a later stage – it is accompanied by a state of active anxiety, which occurs suddenly, reaches a limit within minutes and lasts a little more than 10–20 minutes, and then suddenly recedes.

In this case, panic disorder in older subjects is manifested in combination with other diseases: rheumatic diseases, pathologies of the endocrine and cardiovascular systems (Nardi A.E., Freire R.C.R., 2016) and comorbid disorders such as anxiety, phobic, obsessive-compulsive, post-traumatic, exacerbating the course of persons under the age of 37 – manifests itself as an independent disorder or in combination with depressive states and psychosomatic manifestations.

Different types of distress became the basis for the emergence of panic disorder in those subjects (36% of cases) who visited the war zone. Such subjects are characterized by a sudden influx of vivid memories of military events, accompanied by a sense of being in a traumatic situation. In some of them, memories arise in response to stimuli similar to those experienced during hostilities, as well as in situations associated with or reminiscent of a traumatic event.

The interaction of the identified features, especially during the war, changes the personality of the studied categories of teachers who become less sociable, more closed, seek to avoid contact with colleagues, friends, even family members, do not seek to make new acquaintances, there is a tendency to isolated and secluded lifestyle, their emotional reactions to family and friends become less pronounced, feelings of love, pity, even for the closest people, the ability to enjoy life disappear, they have complaints about the loss of meaning in life, lack of prospects, they begin to avoid long-term planning and are convinced that they will not be able to live fully and lose their professional interest. At the same time, they are afraid of hostilities, crowds, loud noise, roar, frightened by bridges, tunnels, closed housing and transport. In some cases, patients with panic disorder refuse to leave the shelter at all (Overchuk, V., Liashch, O., Yatsiuk, M., Ihnatovych, O., & Maliar, O., 2022).

In order to provide psychotherapeutic assistance to subjects with panic disorder, as well as in accordance with the existing clinical protocol at the stage of supportive psychopharmacotherapy, we started: systematic desensitization and rational influences (behavioral psychotherapy), frequency – 3 times a week, 2–3 months; identification and study of etiopathogenetic mechanisms that contribute to the emergence of neurotic states, the awareness and correction of inappropriate reactions and behaviors (individual-oriented psychotherapy), frequency 3–5 times a week, duration 3–4 weeks; the fixation of attention on relaxation, the sedation of emotional disorders, the recovery of mood (hypnotherapy) frequency – daily, only 8–20 sessions.

Also, in order to maintain mental health and prevent the effects of stressors, teachers were trained in mental self-regulation, psychological self-help, which will avoid or reduce the manifestation of negative mental states, panic disorders, and help make behavioral responses more controlled.

Conclusions

A necessary condition for this is the formation of pedagogical staff meaningful psychological attitudes, guidelines, experience, moral and ethical principles through the development of reflection, responsibility and conscious attitude to the world necessary for the organization and optimal (effective and with the least physical and mental costs) in life-threatening conditions.

The predicted results, thus, will be: maintaining the mental and professional health of the individual; reduction of the general emotional load; increasing the resourcefulness and formation of integrity of professional self-realization, professional reflection in the general system of developing psychological readiness of pedagogical staff of general secondary education establishments to professional activity under various conditions of life, including under the conditions of the war.

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Abstract

Among the consequences of the war, one of the most significant is the deterioration in the mental health of teachers. The conducted research reveals the features of the dynamics of panic disorders that arose as a result of teachers experiencing traumatic situations during military events. Prevalence rates of panic disorder among educators are related to the degree of trauma and the availability of physical and emotional support.

Key words: war, mental health, panic disorder, coping strategies.

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