

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY OF VOLUNTEERS DURING THE WAR

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The article is aimed at determining the indicators of psychological safety inherent in volunteers with signs of emotional exhaustion in combat zones.

**Methods.** The study included the following methods: a) testing: Emotional Exhaustion Questionnaire (EEQ), Psychological Safety of Individual Questionnaire; b) statistical analysis: methods of descriptive statistics (percentage, minimum, maximum, range, standard error, mean, standard deviation). The group of respondents included 48 people, who were involved in volunteer activities in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine from March 2022 up to November 2022.

**Results.** It was determined that the largest subgroup in the general group of respondents were volunteers with a high level of emotional exhaustion (46%) - these are people who feel general tension and do not remember the last time they experienced positive emotions. Among all the indicators of psychological safety, the indicators of moral-communicative and internal comfort turned out to be the least developed.



**Conclusions.** Volunteer groups need specially organized psychological help and support, just like military or military medics. The constant danger of the activity, the need to be in contact with different people, moral fatigue lead to rapid emotional exhaustion and can cause health disorders or even cost the volunteer's life.

**Key words:** psychological safety, war, volunteers, resilience, team.

## INTRODUCTION

Volunteering became one of the most significant phenomena of the war in Ukraine, which manifested itself as the ability of ordinary Ukrainians who had nothing to do with the army or work in emergency situations, to unite and act for the benefit of the army and the civilian population in the affected areas (Stepaniuk, 2022). During the armed conflict in Ukraine, two main volunteering areas can be distinguished: aimed at supporting the army and aimed at helping civilians in the zone of active hostilities. The army is supported through the uniting of people through large foundations that specialize in the search and purchase of medical equipment, weapons. Such volunteering most often requires specific knowledge, competences and connections and is carried out by a well organized group of people. However, aid to the civilian population is provided by a large number of people who are organized in smaller groups and focus on the evacuation of people from dangerous areas, the organization of the delivery of food and medicine to the war-affected area, and the organization and support of places of residence for forcibly displaced persons.

These volunteers work without days off or holidays for many months and the only motivation for their activity is to save more lives. The activities of such volunteers are associated with both physical danger and excessive pressure of stress and moral burden. Risking their lives on a regular basis, they observe human grief, death, destruction and do not allow themselves the right to rest and reset. In this context, the investigation of the psychological indicators of the safety of volunteers providing assistance to victims in various conditions gains special importance.

The phenomenon of psychological safety was first described in the context of willingness to take risks in interpersonal relationships in the work environment (Tsuei et al., 2019). At the same time, the phenomenon of psychological safety has both an external (social) and an internal (personal) dimension. The external dimension of psychological safety is reflected in the relationships, practices and values that a person encounters regularly in the environment in which he/she works and resides. The internal dimension reflects the peculiarities of a person's perception of external conditions. Thus, the ability to ignore minor flaws in the external environment, the ability to focus on the positive aspects of life can increase the overall level of social safety even in a hostile social environment. And vice versa: excessive suspicion, proneness to conflict, attribution of destructive motives to others will work to reduce the overall level of psychological safety. Therefore, this

construct is studied through the analysis of a person's subjective perception of the surrounding reality.

Studies indicate the existence of a statistically reliable inverse correlation between the level of psychological safety and emotional burnout of an individual (Sherf et al., 2021). People who perceive the conditions of their work as psychologically dangerous are more prone to rapid emotional burnout. The consequences of emotional burnout are: emotional fatigue, reduced efficiency, depersonalization (Bocheliuk et al., 2020). In the context of volunteer activities in the combat zone, this can have tragic consequences for both the lives of the volunteer group and the people they help.

Studying the activities of teams of different sizes and activity types allows scientists to establish that a positive example of a leader affects a person's sense of psychological safety and general psychological well-being (Miao et al., 2019), care and involvement of such a leader in working with team members (Zhao et al., 2020), improvisational team building and creativity development of team members (Perrmann-Graham et al., 2022). Nevertheless, all these studies were held in the conditions of companies operating in a relatively stable and peaceful environment, without threat to life. In addition, all participants of the listed studies were paid employees of companies, and did not perform their activities for free, motivated by moral feelings. The psychological safety of volunteers in combat conditions remains an extremely understudied topic, which in the future makes it difficult to quickly organize and provide psychological assistance to representatives of this group.

### *Aim of The Research*

The article is aimed at determining the indicators of psychological safety inherent in volunteers with signs of emotional exhaustion in combat zones. Determining the characteristics of psychological safety, which are the worst expressed in volunteers with signs of emotional burnout, will allow to determine of the top priority areas of psychological assistance.

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- Studying the signs of emotional burnout of volunteers in the war-affected area;
- Determining the characteristics of psychological safety in the activities of volunteers in the combat zone;
- Determining indicators of psychological safety found in volunteers with pronounced signs of psychological burnout.

## METHODS

The criteria for inclusion in the study sample were: volunteer activity in the combat zone since the beginning of the full-scale invasion; visiting the war zone at least twice a month; volunteering more than 30 hours per week

(75% of working time); No military education or combat experience; work in a permanent volunteer team, which includes at least three participants. When forming the sample, it was important for us that the participants of the study were civilians who did not have the detached and rational attitude to war that can be observed in the military (Varpio, 2021). It was also important to select those people who were engaged in volunteer activities from the very beginning of active hostilities and did not interrupt it for vacation or reset. Of particular interest were those volunteers who actually replaced their professional activities with the help of others, and also systematically faced the unpredictability of combat operations, going to the front line. This group of volunteers is the most vulnerable to emotional burnout. The requirement to study activities in a permanent volunteer team is due to the fact that it is in a permanent team that a person can form a sense of trust and psychological safety.

As a result, the group of respondents included 48 people, of whom 18 were women (average age  $M=38.2$ ,  $SD=5.7$ ) and 30 men (average age  $M=41.6$ ,  $SD=7.9$ ), who were involved in volunteer activities in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine from March 2022 up to and including the time of the study (November 2022). Their main activity was focused on the evacuation of civilians from flash points, the delivery of humanitarian aid to front-line settlements. The research was conducted in a face-to-face format.

The study included the following methods: Emotional Exhaustion Questionnaire (EEQ) (Hills, 2019) and Psychological Safety of Individual Questionnaire (Prihodko, 2012).

The Emotional Exhaustion Questionnaire (EEQ) is focused on evaluating a person's emotional state with no reference to the type of activity, which qualitatively distinguishes this questionnaire from similar ones that focus on work or educational burnout. The short length of this questionnaire is another advantage. It contains 8 statements that should be rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 - *Not at all*, 4 - *Extremely*). It allows to determine of three levels of emotional fatigue: low - 0-8 points, medium - 9-23 points, high - 24-32 points. In the process of approbation, the questionnaire showed a high prognostic ability in predicting depression, anxiety disorder and burnout.

The Psychological Safety of Individual Questionnaire is created for a person to assess the environment in which such a person lives or carries out professional activities. The advantage of this questionnaire is the absence of references to specific types of professional activity, which makes it somewhat universal and allows its use in the context of assessing the psychological safety of volunteering. The questionnaire consists of one hundred statements, which are evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale (0 - *It's not about me at all*, 6 - *It's about me*). The questionnaire allows to determine 4 indicators of psychological safety: moral-communicative, motivational-volitional, value-meaningful, internal-comfort (the maximum score on each scale is 150). Based on the addition of points on all scales, an integrative indicator of psychological safety is calculated (the maximum score is 600).

The following is used for statistical result data processing: methods of descriptive statistics (percentage, minimum, maximum, range, standard error, mean, standard deviation) – to describe the results of the study, ANOVA with a Tukey’s range test – to compare the level of expression of indicators of psychological safety in volunteers with different levels of emotional exhaustion.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

The first stage of the study analyzing the results of the Emotional Exhaustion Questionnaire (Table 1) in order to determine the level of emotional exhaustion among volunteers in the war zones.

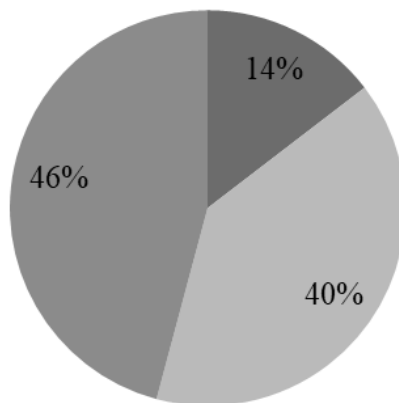
**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics of the Emotional Exhaustion Questionnaire scale*

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation
					Statistic	Std. Error	
Emotional Exhaustion	48.00	23.00	7.00	30.00	20.75	1.12	7.79

Source: own research.

■ Low ■ Average ■ High



**Figure 1**

*Distribution of respondents depending on the level of emotional exhaustion (%) (n = 48)*

Source: Own research.

It was determined that the mean for the indicator of emotional exhaustion was  $M = 20.75$ ,  $SD = 7.79$ , which corresponded to the average level for this indicator. At the same time, the range of results is 23 points, which indicates that among the volunteers there are both those who have all the signs of emotional exhaustion, and those who maintain general optimism and are characterized by a healthy experience of emotions. To determine the ratio of persons with different levels of emotional exhaustion, percentages were calculated (Figure 1).

It was determined that the largest subgroup in the general group of respondents were volunteers with a high level of emotional exhaustion (46%) – these are people who feel general tension and do not remember the last time they experienced positive emotions. The second largest is the subgroup of volunteers with an average level of emotional exhaustion (40%). These volunteers try to maintain optimism, but regularly face manifestations of low mood, lack of motivation for activities. The smallest group was a volunteer with a low level of emotional exhaustion (14%) – these people manage to keep a positive picture of the world and get joy from life.

At the second stage of the study, volunteers were tested using the Psychological Safety of Individual Questionnaire (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Descriptive statistics of the Psychological Safety of Individual Questionnaire scale*

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Moral-communicative	48	106	39	145	72	33.26
Motivational-volitional	48	40	59	99	81.83	12.31
Value-meaningful	48	26	78	104	90.15	7.37
Internal comfort	48	89	55	144	82.81	23.49
Integrative index	48	221	246	467	326.79	60.84

*Source.* Own research.

It was determined that psychological safety was developed among volunteers at an average level ( $M = 326.79$ ,  $SD = 60.84$ ) with a range of 221 points, which indicates the representation in the group of respondents with very different perceptions of psychological safety.

The moral-communicative indicator, which indicates the respondent's ability to find common ground with team members based on shared values and views, is developed at a level below the average ( $M = 72$ ,  $SD = 33.26$ ) with a range of 106 points, which implies pronounced problems and possibly even value conflicts in volunteer teams.

The motivational-volitional indicator was developed at an above average ( $M = 81.83$ ,  $SD = 12.31$ ), which indicates a high level of motivation of

the volunteers' activities, which did not decrease over time and supported them during the long months of the war.

The value-meaning indicator was also developed at an above-average level ( $M = 90.15$ ,  $SD = 7.37$ ), which reflects the presence of a clear and orderly value system among volunteers, which gives their lives sense and meaning.

Internal comfort turned out to be developed above average ( $M = 82.81$ ,  $SD = 23.49$ ), but the range of 89 points indicates that the distribution of points for this indicator in the group of respondents is very uneven: there are those whose internal comfort is developed at a high level, and those who have it at an extremely low level.

To check the normality of the distribution, the Shapiro-Wilks test was used, which showed the absence of statistical differences between the normal and empirical distributions: Emotional Exhaustion (statistic = 0,968,  $p = 0,218$ ), Moral-communicative (statistic = 0,973,  $p = 0,344$ ), Motivational-volitional (statistic = 0,973,  $p = 0,347$ ), Value-meaningful (statistic = 0,969,  $p = 0,25$ ), Internal comfort (statistic = 0,967,  $p = 0,2$ ), Integrative index (statistic = 0,972,  $p = 0,323$ ).

An ANOVA statistical analysis was carried out to determine the characteristics of the manifestation of psychological safety indicators in volunteers with different levels of emotional exhaustion (Table 3).

**Table 3**  
ANOVA results

	Low		Average		High		F.	Sig
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Moral-communicative	133.42	12.92	84.1	9.98	42	3.03	368.78	0.00
Motivational-volitional	87.14	9.15	81.15	13.29	80.72	12.36	0.76	0.47
Value-meaningful	93.57	5.19	90.10	7.51	89.09	7.76	0.98	0.38
Internal comfort	125.85	12.1	91.57	2.73	61.54	5.09	351.88	0.00
Integrative index	440	27.04	346.94	14.63	273.36	16.15	262.73	0.00

Source. Own research

A comparison of the levels of manifestation of psychological safety indicators in volunteers with different levels of emotional exhaustion made it possible to determine reliable differences in the moral-communicative, integrative indicator, as well as in internal comfort. For a more detailed study of the nature of the differences, a Tukey's range test was used (Table 4).

**Table 4**  
*Tukey Multiple Comparisons*

Dependent Variable			Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.	
Moral-communicative	Low	Average	49.32*	0.00	
		High	91.42*	0.00	
	Average	Low	-49.32*	0.00	
		High	42.10*	0.00	
	High	Low	-91.42*	0.00	
		Average	-42.10*	0.00	
	Motivational-volitional	Low	Average	5.98	0.52
			High	6.42	0.46
Average		Low	-5.98	0.52	
		High	0.43	0.99	
High		Low	-6.42	0.46	
		Average	-0.43	0.99	
Value-meaningful		Low	Average	3.47	0.54
			High	4.48	0.35
	Average	Low	-3.47	0.54	
		High	1.01	0.90	
	High	Low	-4.48	0.35	
		Average	-1.01	0.90	
	Internal comfort	Low	Average	34.27*	0.00
			High	64.31*	0.00
Average		Low	-34.27*	0.00	
		High	30.03*	0.00	
High		Low	-64.31*	0.00	
		Average	-30.03*	0.00	
Integrative index		Low	Average	93.05*	0.00
			High	166.63*	0.00
	Average	Low	-93.05*	0.00	
		High	73.58*	0.00	
	High	Low	-166.63*	0.00	
		Average	-73.58*	0.00	

Source. Own research

It is reported that volunteers with a low level of emotional exhaustion have a higher level of moral and communicative index, internal comfort and psychological safety in general. The other way around, with an increase in the level of emotional exhaustion, a statistically significant decrease in the level of these indicators is observed. This indicates that the most sensitive aspects of psychological safety for volunteers are the maintenance of inner comfort and the ability to constructively and non-violently communicate about their values and ideals.



## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study determines that almost half of the volunteers involved in providing assistance to the civilian population in the combat zone are characterized by a high and average level of emotional exhaustion. A constant feeling of danger, a busy work schedule, the unpredictability of everyday life leads to a decrease in the ability to enjoy life and creates conditions for the emergence of anxiety-depressive spectrum disorders. Research conducted by Ukrainian scientists among teachers and students showed that emotional burnout and low mood were observed during the war even in those people who are at a considerable distance from the hostilities (Kurapov, 2022). A study devoted to emotional burnout in medical workers during war is closer to the topic, revealing that personnel involved in providing assistance to war-affected soldiers show much more pronounced signs of emotional burnout due to constant contact with pain, suffering and death (Sargent, 2016). As with the volunteers in the study, such workers have a decrease in the level of positive emotions, a lack of desire to make plans for the future, and a general aloofness.

The paper argues that among all the indicators of psychological safety, the indicators of moral-communicative and internal comfort turned out to be the least developed. Research shows that during war, a crisis of self-understanding is exacerbated, accompanied by a painful awareness of oneself and one's difference from the "enemy" (Foster, 2020). In these conditions, a person is prone to more conflictual behavior due to the need to demonstrate their belonging to the group of "his" and in every way to demonstrate their difference from the enemy. Since volunteers usually do not have real contacts with representatives of the aggressor country, signs of the enemy begin to be seen in relatives and colleagues, which leads to quarrels and disputes on the basis of moral issues. Such disputes can create excessive tension in volunteer groups and lead to deterioration of the general perception of psychological safety of volunteer group members.

In the context of the research results, it becomes obvious that volunteer groups need specially organized psychological help and support, just like military or military medics. The constant danger of the activity, the need to be in contact with different people, moral fatigue lead to rapid emotional exhaustion and can cause to terrible health disorders or even cost the volunteer's life. The system of psychological support should be focused on building a support system in volunteer teams through improving the skills of constructive interaction, non-conflictual communication, ecological expression of opinions. Work with the self-image of the volunteer, development of self-help skills and self-diagnosis of threatening mental states also deserve special attention. Only consistent work on building a harmonious perception of oneself and the volunteer team can ensure a sense of psychological safety for all its members.

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