

# Healing the trauma of war

A new range of psychological measures is helping Ukrainians to process experiences of war, with gender-specific approaches playing a key role.



## The Challenge: The Great Need for Psychosocial Health Services

People’s experiences of war, violence, and forced displacement often leave them with deep emotional wounds. For some, these traumatic events can lead to anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Recognising mental health issues and seeking support is therefore vital. However, men are often less willing to seek help, usually due to traditional gender roles and the ‘strong man’ stereotype.

Ukraine’s health system is facing immense challenges as a result of Russia’s war of aggression – and is unable to cope adequately with the mental health stresses affecting the population.

<b>Project title:</b>	Gender-responsive approaches in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in Ukraine
<b>Commissioned by:</b>	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
<b>Implemented by:</b>	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
<b>Lead executing agency:</b>	Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine
<b>Project area:</b>	Administrative districts (oblasts) of Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kirovohrad
<b>Overall term:</b>	2023 to 2026
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Together with their partners and children, veterans are given access to high-quality family therapy.

To date, there is a lack of gender-responsive psychosocial support for veterans, internally displaced persons, and returnees. The same applies to residents of host communities, who face their own challenges when taking in traumatised people. After all, there are very few holistic psychotherapeutic approaches or special training courses available in Ukraine.

Furthermore, many healthcare institutions, schools, and social facilities often lack basic knowledge, diagnostic capabilities, or a properly functioning referral practice. Specialist expertise, such as trauma therapy, is urgently needed to treat those affected.

## Our approach: Quality Training and Community-based Work

On behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the project *Gender-Responsive Approaches to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in Ukraine* is committed to improving psychosocial care for particularly vulnerable groups in the country. Besides those who return from the war, this includes above all the families of soldiers as well as people who have been forced to leave their home region. Involvement of the entire Ukrainian society is a crucial element of the project. It is only through a collective approach that experiences of violence can be processed and strategies for a better future can be developed.

Specifically, we provide training for social workers, psychologists, and other experts in the social sector, enabling them to better support the people who have been traumatised by war. To address the needs of the respective target groups systematically, we incorporate gender-sensitive approaches. The experts apply their knowledge directly: in rehabilitation centres for returning soldiers, as well as in towns and villages, they work with veterans, their families, internally displaced people, and those living in the host communities.

At the same time, we offer low-threshold psychosocial programmes to strengthen people's mental health and resilience. These mainly focus on women and children, to help them (re-)integrate into the communities.

We also foster networking between different stakeholders in the psychosocial sector to enhance access to support services and referral systems, and to drive the development of the sector. Sharing lessons learned from working with veterans is another key priority.



'Art Brunch' for women in the municipality of Kamianske: a shared breakfast is combined with art therapy formats.



Healing through play with Little Carrot: an app helps children who have had to leave their homes to get used to their new environment.

## Our results: Tailor-made Therapy Interventions

- The *Association for Psychological Counselling and Trauma Therapy*, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), held two four-day training courses for psychologists. In these courses, 20 psychologists from the regions of Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Kirovohrad gained practical experience working with veterans' families. Sixteen veterans participated in the courses, along with their spouses and children. This training has enabled the psychologists to implement similar measures in other communities.
- In Kamianske, our project partner *Hromadskyi Dim* provides psychosocial support to internally displaced persons. Specially trained psychologists lead group sessions and offer individual consultations, with children receiving targeted psychosocial support. Speech therapists assist girls and boys whose language development has been impaired by traumatic experiences. In 286 individual and 196 group sessions, 1,194 children were able to improve their language skills.
- Together with *Opportunities.Motivation.Media*, we use digital and haptic solutions to support children with therapeutic approaches tailored to their individual needs. The *MaPanda* app helps children who were forced to leave their homes to adjust to their new environment. Psychologists use 'Little Carrot', an animated character, to interact with the children in a playful manner. So far, 971 children have benefited from one-on-one psychological support. The *Wonder Box* offers games that help children control their emotions and develop a better understanding of their surroundings and fellow human beings.
- Through the *Mobile Support Service* project, the NGO VESTA held 51 consultations and eight presentations on psychological and legal issues. These services were provided to veterans, their families, and local self-governing authorities in nine municipalities in the Kyiv region.



### 'The project has helped my son'

**Olena Zdorikova**, mother of Kostyantyn. The *MaPanda* app and the *Wonder Box* helped the five-year-old get used to his new surroundings.

*'At first, my son Kostya struggled to get used to our new home – he missed our old home a lot. The Little Carrot project helped him settle into our new apartment at the new location. After that, he would say to me every day: 'Mummy, I love you, how can I help you?' The Little Carrot taught us to make a habit of paying compliments each time.'*

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