

The Impact of Working in the Ukraine on the Mental Wellbeing of NGO Staff

The Mental Health for Ukraine (MH4U) Project was initiated in 2019 with the intention of supporting policy changes, improving mental health services, and addressing mental health stigma in Ukraine. At this time, Russia had already annexed Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The MH4U project was supporting communities western and eastern Ukraine, who had been directly impacted by war, to improve mental health services. Unexpectedly on the 24 February 2022, there was a significant escalation of Russian aggression toward Ukraine



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with a full-scale invasion of the country. Despite this, the MH4U team members continued to deliver the project's mission while taking on additional projects and personal humanitarian responsibilities.

This case study presents the findings of a [Mental Wellbeing Impact Assessment](#) (MWIA) undertaken to understand how the mental health and wellbeing of staff was impacted by the war and steps that could be taken to support staff wellbeing,

Key findings

- **Support Staff with Children and Other Caring Responsibilities:** fear for the safety of family and loved ones, and their ability to care and protect them, is likely to have a significant impact on the wellbeing of staff, particularly those who have children and/or caring responsibilities for older or disabled relatives.
- **Build a Sense of Safety:** war affects people's sense of personal safety in multiple ways including risk of harm from shelling at home or when travelling between regions, fear of conscription and sexual violence.
- **Address Financial Security:** war increases a sense of financial insecurity with rising food and fuel costs. Staff who have internally displaced (IDP) status are likely to be at greater risk. Being employed on the MH4U project offers staff some short-term financial security.
- **Create a Sense of Control:** war limits peoples' general sense of control and ability to plan for the future. There are also a greater number of unexpected needs and requests at work that require a quick response which can contribute to workplace stress. However, this can also offer an opportunity for personal growth. Working from home in overcrowded conditions makes managing work more difficult.

- **Support Emotional Wellbeing:** staff are living and working in an environment where they fear for their own safety and that of their family and loved ones. They have concerns about economic security, face an uncertain future and are regularly exposed to the trauma of war. These ongoing stressors are likely to have a significant impact on emotional and physical wellbeing.
- **Highlight Meaning and Purpose:** in an uncertain world, where people have a limited sense of control, or the ability to plan for the future, feeling that there is something that they can do to make a difference is important.
- **Encourage Self Care:** people recognised the importance of self-care and the need to ‘renew and recover.’ Many had self-care strategies in place, but the war made it more difficult to keep them up.
- **Build Peer support:** being part of the MH4U team was regarded as a protective factor for people’s mental health and support from the manager and colleagues was highly valued. Generally, online team meetings were regarded as a source of support but were not the same as meeting in person. People were tired of communicating solely online. Opportunities to meet together in person, such as the awayday, are limited due to the risks of travel, but were greatly appreciated.

What happened as a result?

An action plan was coproduced with staff to address each of areas highlighted by the process.

Key outcomes included:

Increased sense of safety:

- The house of one of the staff members was identified as a ‘safe place’ that all the team could access in an emergency. The organisation ensured that it was fully equipped and energy independent.
- The organisation lobbied to be accepted as a ‘vital organisation.’ As a result all project employees are now protected from conscription.

Increased economic security:

- The long-term commitment of the project was reiterated and confirmed for at least 4 years.
- Staff salaries were increased, and a one-off payment made.

Increased support for emotional wellbeing

- Support was provided to staff to access psychological therapies.
- Opportunities for peer support were increased.

“The best result of the MWIA was to have a clear action plan. It gives a sense of control and a feeling that I can do something tangible to help my team from abroad. I received a lot of appreciation for taking those concrete steps and it definitely helped to improve commitment, well-being and performance.”

Project Leader

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