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Social and psychological assistance to children under martial law

Соціально-психологічна допомога дітям в умовах воєнного стану

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to identify the main psycho-emotional states and factors affecting the physical and mental well-being of schoolchildren, including during distance learning and in relationships with family members, as well as to develop areas of psychosocial assistance to children under martial law. To achieve the research purpose, an appropriate questionnaire was developed with multiple-choice questions about: dominant emotions and feelings, attitudes towards distance learning, reactions to external stimuli, the impact of martial law on the comfort of life, relationships with peers and parents, etc. A survey was conducted among 1303 schoolchildren aged 6–17, including 515 boys and 788 girls, 11 of whom live outside Ukraine. The survey found that the physical and psycho-emotional well-being of Ukrainian schoolchildren was characterised by sleep disturbances, agitation, fear, rapid mood changes, severe fatigue, sadness, longing, indignation, irritation, anger, increased conflicts (especially with parents), etc. An additional factor in the increased level of anxiety under martial law was distance learning, which makes it difficult for students to concentrate due to the difficulty of communication, shifted daily routines, worries about family and friends, changes in responsibilities and other distractions. The main directions of psycho-correction work and recommendations for the use of psychosocial

Анотація

Мета дослідження полягає у визначенні основних психоемоційних станів та факторів впливу на фізичне та психічне благополуччя школярів, у тому числі під час дистанційного навчання та у відносинах з членами сім'ї, а також у розробці напрямів психосоціальної допомоги дітям в умовах воєнного стану. Для досягнення мети було розроблено відповідну анкету, в якій сформовано питання з варіантами відповідей щодо: домінуючих емоцій та почуттів, ставлення до дистанційного навчання, реакції на зовнішні подразники, впливу воєнного стану на комфортність життя, стосунки з однолітками та батьками тощо. Проведене опитування 1303 школярів віком 6–17 років, у тому числі 515 хлопців та 788 дівчат, з яких 11 проживає закордоном. За результатами опитування встановлено, що фізичне та психоемоційне самопочуття українських школярів характеризувалося порушенням сну, збудженням, страхом, швидкими змінами настрою, сильною втомою, смутком, тугою, обуренням, роздратуванням, гнівом, зростанням конфліктів (особливо з батьками) тощо. Додатковим фактором підвищеного рівня тривожності в умовах воєнного стану стало дистанційне навчання, за якого учням важко сконцентруватися внаслідок складності спілкування, зміщеного розпорядку дня, переживання за рідних і близьких, зміни обов'язків та інших відволікаючих факторів. Розроблено основні

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assistance technologies have been developed, which will allow children to assess their current life situation, identify their strengths (resources), which will ensure their self-healing and increase their resilience.

Keywords: schoolchildren, emotions and feelings, traumatic experience, distance learning, resource, coping strategies.

Introduction

In the context of the new socio-political realities caused by the outbreak of a large-scale war in Ukraine, the most vulnerable categories of citizens, including children, need special support. It is believed that the sooner children are helped to cope with the consequences of a traumatic event, the lower the risk of future problems. A traumatic event is defined as an unexpected, unexpected, overwhelming event that goes beyond the normal human experience (Prorok (ed.), 2018, p. 24).

Thus, the primary task is to provide comprehensive psychological assistance to children, especially those who have experienced violence (against themselves and/or other people), loss (directly/indirectly), direct hostilities (explosions, fires, sirens), etc.

The purpose of the study is to identify the key psycho-emotional states and factors that affect the physical and mental health of schoolchildren, in particular in the context of distance learning, in interaction with family members, during a full-scale invasion. In addition, *the purpose* of the article is to develop strategies for psychosocial support for children under martial law.

To achieve this goal, the following tasks were solved:

- questionnaires were developed to identify the main psycho-emotional states and factors influencing the physical and mental well-being of schoolchildren;
- a survey of selected respondents was conducted on the questions of the developed questionnaire;
- collecting, processing and grouping of respondents' answers, drawing conclusions;
- taking into account the results of the survey, recommendations were developed on the use of psychosocial assistance technology for psychologists working with children who have experienced traumatic experiences as a result of military operations.

напрями психокорекційної роботи та рекомендації щодо використання технологій психосоціальної допомоги, які дозволять дітям оцінити поточну життєву ситуацію, виявити свої сильні сторони (ресурси), що забезпечить їх самоцілення та підвищення життєстійкості.

Ключові слова: школярі, емоції та почуття, травматичний досвід, дистанційне навчання, ресурс, копінг-стратегії.

Literature review

The study of the basics of psychological assistance in the conditions of military conflict was carried out by leading scientists, including K. Miller, & A. Rasmussen (2010), J. Cuartas Ricaurte, L. Karim, M. Martínez Botero, & P. Hessel (2019). N. Singh et al. (2021), N. Jain et al. (2022). An in-depth study of the phenomenon of personal psychotrauma, its nature and consequences of exposure is covered in the works of I. Keynan (2015), T. Molendijk, E. Kramer, & D. Verweij (2016), Z. Kisarchuk (ed.) (2020), B. Palamar et al. (2023). They systematized the latest experience in overcoming the consequences of psychotrauma, studied the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder in the national context, taking into account the age, psychological, social and socio-cultural characteristics of victims and the characteristics of specialists and the specifics of their practice (Kisarchuk (ed.), 2020, p. 6).

M. Costello, L. Phelps, & F. Wilczenski (1994), M. Wessells (1998), T. Betancourt, & K. Khan (2008), L. Meiqari, M. Hoetjes, L. Baxter, & A. Lenglet (2017), A. Kadir, S. Shenoda, J. Goldhagen, & S. Pitterman, (2018), J. Michalek et al. (2022), T. Kostenko, K. Dovhopola, O. Nabochenko, V. Kurinna, & V. Mykhaylyuk (2022), and others studied the peculiarities of post-crisis psychological diagnosis and rehabilitation of children.

The general conditions for social and psychological assistance to children under martial law, proposed by the above-mentioned authors, are: creating a safe environment for children at home and in educational institutions; communication, discussion of problems and expression of support; openness and honesty in communication with children about war and its threats; mandatory family support; psychological assistance, both group and individual, as well as social protection of children affected by war.

The main limitations of using the results of these studies in practice are their focus on specific

cases, which take into account the factors and circumstances of the analysed military conflicts only. That is why they need to be adapted to the realities of the Russian-Ukrainian full-scale war, and not used as a basis for use. And such adaptation is impossible without taking into account the contexts, specifics and consequences of military threats on the mental health of Ukrainian children.

Despite the fundamental works of these researchers, the issue of rehabilitation of schoolchildren under martial law has received extremely little attention. Given the specifics of the problem, as well as its focus on the most vulnerable category of the population, this topic requires going beyond previous studies.

Methodology

A questionnaire has been developed that combines the following information: demographic indicators, place of residence before the outbreak of hostilities, leading activities under martial law, dominant emotions and feelings, attitude to distance learning, the impact of the consequences of an unfavorable socio-political situation on the relationship between students and their peers, resource potential of the individual, the most common coping strategies of students and their parents.

Respondents: Schoolchildren aged 6–17. Below is a Figure 1 that provides a general idea of the ratio of the number of survey participants by age.

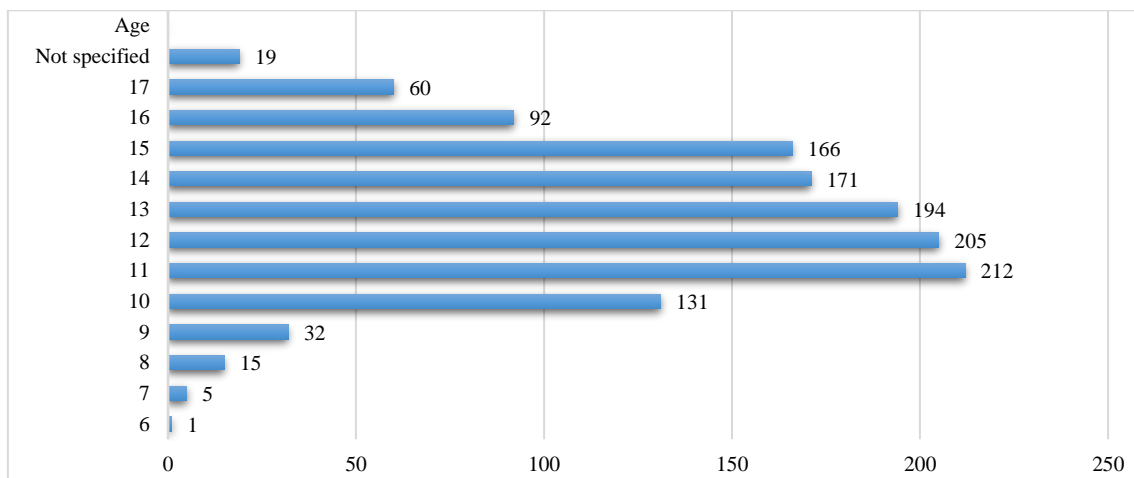


Fig. 1. Age of respondents.

Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

The gender distribution (Figure 2) of the survey participants was as follows: female (60.5%) and male (39.5%).

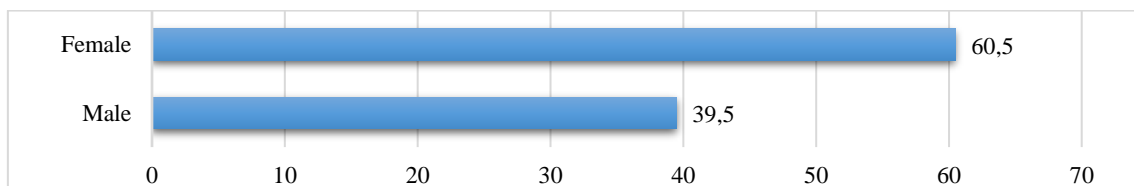


Fig. 2. Gender of survey participants.

Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

The survey found that most of the respondents lived in Uman (84.04%) and Uman district (5.6%) before the hostilities. The survey was conducted among schoolchildren in Kyiv and its

region, as well as in Kirovohrad, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Vinnytsia, Donetsk, Chernihiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Zakarpattia regions (Figure 3).

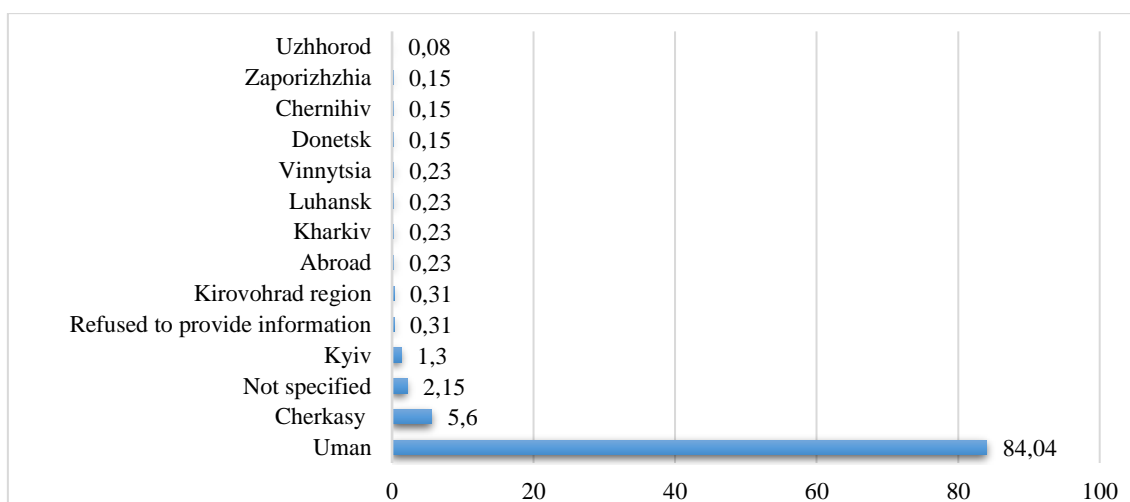


Fig. 3. Place of residence before military actions.

Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

Results and discussion

In his work “Psychological War Trauma and Society: Like a Hidden Wound”, the Israeli scientist I. Keynan emphasizes that symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder can be expressed even in people who were not in the immediate vicinity of the place of a terrorist attack or military operations (Keynan, 2015, p. 161).

Thus, a large number of people, including children, can be traumatized regardless of their location.

The question “What is the most uncomfortable thing about martial law?” provides information on what factors contribute to the deterioration of children’s psycho-emotional state and increase their experience of crisis situations (Figure 4).

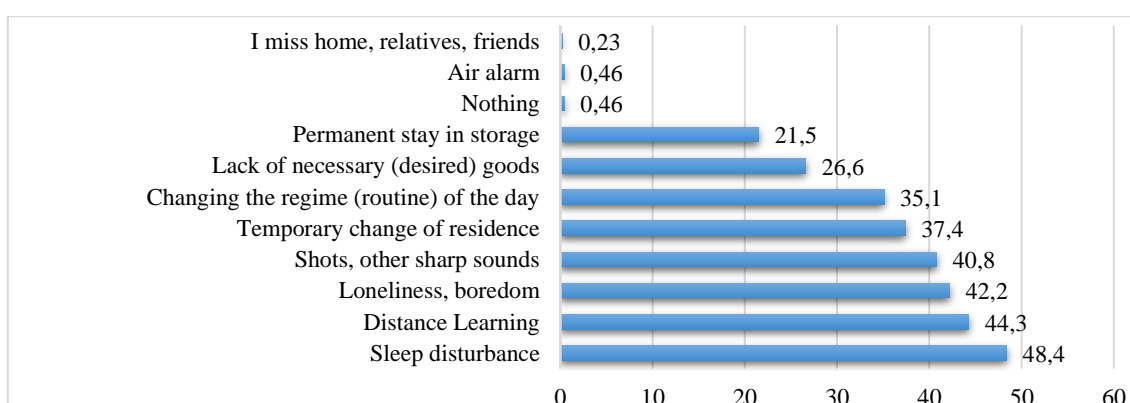


Fig. 4. What is the most uncomfortable under martial law?

Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

The most uncomfortable things about martial law, according to students, are “sleep disturbances” (48.4%), “distance learning” (44.3%), “monotony, boredom” (42.2%), “shots, other sharp sounds” (40.8%).

Obviously, under martial law, physical and mental well-being is affected by any situation of uncertainty and risk, when special responsibility is required in relation to one’s own life, decision-making in stressful situations, and management of one’s own emotions and feelings. An additional factor in increasing anxiety during this

period is distance learning, in which students cannot concentrate due to:

- difficulties in connecting (Internet speed, availability of appropriate equipment);
- shifted daily routine (sleep disturbance, appetite, increased fatigue), which depends on the situation in a particular region (which leads to interruption or postponement of the lesson(s) to another day, a large amount of material for independent study);
- worrying about family, friends and relatives;
- changes in responsibilities (helping parents, volunteering, territorial defense);

- other distractions (the atmosphere at home, thoughts and feelings about the current situation) (Bezliudniy et al., 2022; Kravchenko et al., 2022).

It is noteworthy that 0.23% of students chose their own option, stating that they “miss home, family and friends.” Most of these children were forced to leave for a safer place for a while. The total number of displaced students is 37.4%.

It was found that the most uncomfortable options, in the opinion of children, were mostly those that most clearly illustrate the violation of certain needs that are crucial (Kravchenko,

Koliada, Isachenko, & Honchar, 2021): physiological needs (sleep, necessary goods), safety needs (sharp sounds, including shots, explosions, air raid sirens, uncertainty), social needs, as well as the need for recognition (change of residence, distance learning), the need for self-expression and self-realization (constant stay in a shelter (or at home in a safe place), monotony).

The question “What did you do during the air raid?” is driven by the need to determine the level of awareness of children about the seriousness of the situation, as well as to identify activities that help relieve excessive tension in stressful conditions (Figure 5).

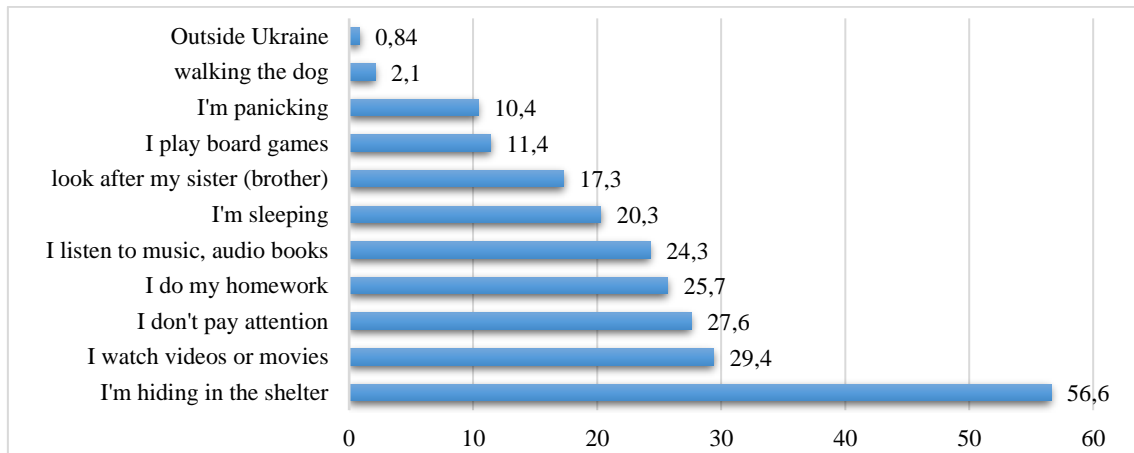


Fig. 5. What did you do during the air raid?
Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

Let’s identify the types of activities that serve as a distraction for children when they feel inner tension during air rage: “watching videos and movies” (29.4%), “doing homework” (25.7%), “listening to music, audiobooks” (24.3%), and “extra hours of sleep” (20.3%).

It is worth emphasizing that 56.6% of schoolchildren “hide in a shelter,” which indicates a high level of parental awareness of life safety, and this, in turn, shapes the child’s attitude. Air raid alerts are ignored by 27.6% of students, which suggests that they have a low level of awareness of the situation in the country and an indifferent attitude to their own safety. The number of respondents currently live outside of Ukraine is 0.84%.

The question “What emotions and feelings prevail?” allows us to determine the presence of

dominant emotions and diagnose the psycho-emotional state of a person (Figure 6).

The dominant emotions can be conditionally divided into two types: positively and negatively tinged. The first option includes the following answers: “excitement” (54.2%), “fear” (40%), “fast mood changes” (36.7%), “feeling very tired” (33.3%), “trembling, especially from loud sounds” (29.2%), “sadness, longing” (28%), “indignation irritation” (23.9%), “anger” (22.6%), “terrible dreams (nightmares)” (18%), “indifference, lack of interest in what I used to like” (16.6%), uncertainty (16.5%), “feeling of loneliness” (15.1%), “resentment” (12.9%), “indifference” (0.69%), “aggression” (0.31%). Let’s contrast the above with positively tinged emotions and feelings, which include the following: “hope that it will end quickly” (67.2%), “compassion” (20.3%), “love of life” (17.2%), “pity” (10.3%).

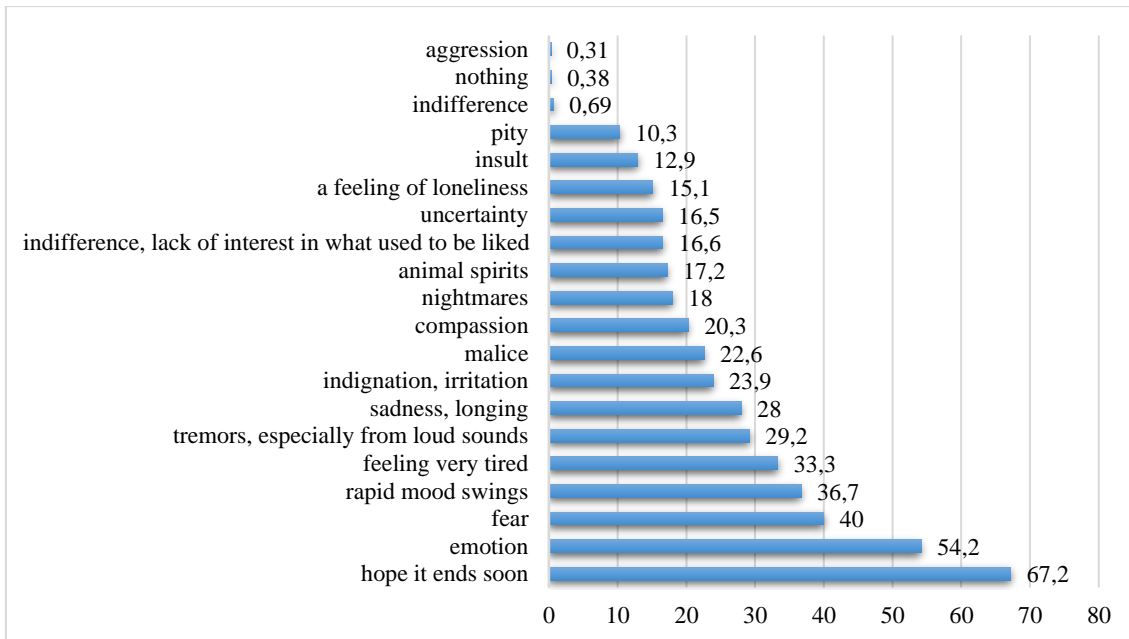


Fig. 6. What emotions and feelings prevail?
Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

Although the largest number of options belong to negatively directed emotions and feelings, in terms of percentage, it is the positive ones that cover a significant majority of students – 67.2%. In addition, given the situation of uncertainty and risk, any of these options are quite natural and even predictable.

Under martial law, distance learning has become one of the main ways for teachers and students to interact. The question “What is most annoying about distance learning?” allows us to determine the attitude of students to the educational process under martial law (Figure 7).

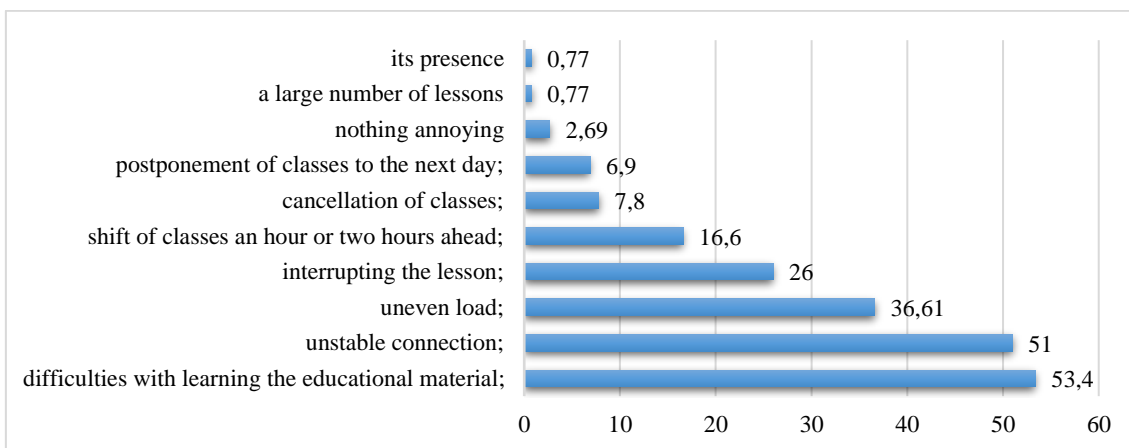


Fig. 7. What is most annoying about distance learning?
Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

Distance learning is a relatively new trend that enables students to realize their constitutional right to education. However, difficulties in organizing system and technical support, lack of resources for children to fully implement distance learning are the reasons why children find it difficult to learn the material (53.4%).

main reasons for this phenomenon, according to students, are “unstable connection” (51%), “uneven workload” (36.6%), “interruption of the lesson” (26%), “shifting classes one to two hours ahead” (16.6%), “canceling classes” (7.8%), “postponing classes to the next day” (6.9%).

Martial law education contributes to the suppression of students’ cognitive activity. The

Fully satisfied with the quality of distance learning are 2.7% of respondents, while 0.77% do not understand the need for distance learning.

This suggests that most students consciously attend classes, understand the need to launch distance learning in Ukraine, but have comments and recommendations to improve students' learning of the curriculum.

The question “Do you observe any changes in communication with your friends?” allows us to determine the impact of the effects of martial law on students' relationships with their peers and changes in values and priorities at the social level (Figure 8).

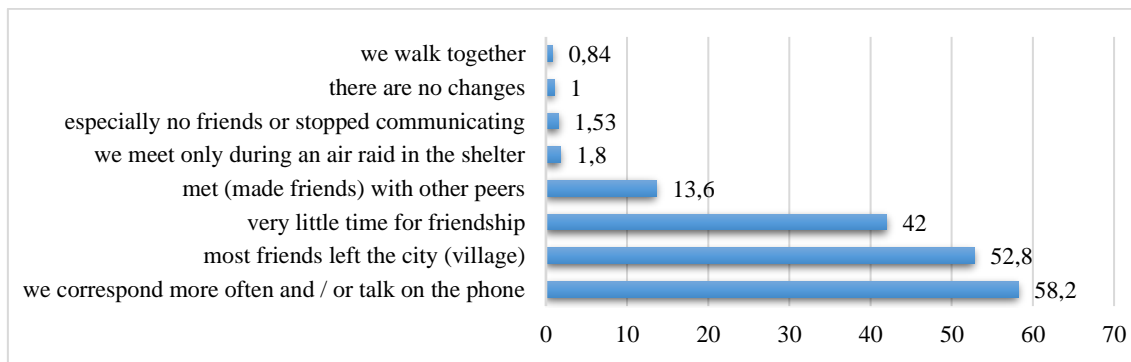


Fig. 8. Do you observe any changes in communication with your friends?

Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

Communication is a necessary component of mental health. During the period of martial law, a large number of children faced certain problems related to personal communication. Under such conditions, students “write and/or talk on the phone more often” (58.2%), complain that “most of their friends have left the city (village)” (52.8%), and do not find “time for friendship” (42%). An important ability is the ability to establish connections with other peers (13.6%). It was found that children who interacted on social media with Russian friends lost their endurance to engage in conflictual discussions and stopped communicating altogether.

Some students (1.53%) concluded that in stressful, non-standard conditions, those traits or behaviors that make it impossible to continue communicating with former friends are best noticed. Children note that they no longer understand those whom they used to consider close, and interpersonal communication with them has come to naught. However, on the other hand, the current situation allows them to identify those in their immediate environment who value them, are sincerely interested in their lives, and deserve to be trusted. Thus, students are more conscious about choosing people who will have a significant impact on their future development.

It is interesting that a condition for the emergence of friendly sympathy is territorial proximity, which makes it more accessible to establish and maintain contact with a person. That is why various situations of uncertainty and risk

contributed to the emergence of opportunities for students to “meet (make friends) with other peers” (13.6%). Sharing traumatic experiences allows children to feel kinship and mutual understanding, which can increase stress resistance and the ability to effectively regulate their emotions.

Thus, in addition to the difficult social, economic and political situation in the country, children face interpersonal problems, the solution of which allows them to increase reflexivity, critical thinking, independence, and resistance to manipulation. Identifying the factors of emotional discomfort that a child experiences when interacting with his or her immediate environment allows them to analyze the causes and consequences of interpersonal dependence, which thereby serves as a resource for redirecting internal tension, uncertainty, and fear of making a mistake to increase their own importance and self-worth.

The question “For what reason did you most often have quarrels with your parents?” allows us to study the peculiarities of child-parent relations under martial law (Figure 9).

Conflicts are an integral part of our lives. During martial law, a significant number of the country's population is under stress. As it accumulates, stress seeks a way out of the body, which leads to increased levels of aggression, hostility, frustration, anxiety, etc. Accordingly, we can see an increase in the frequency of conflicts (especially family conflicts) (Kravchenko, 2021).

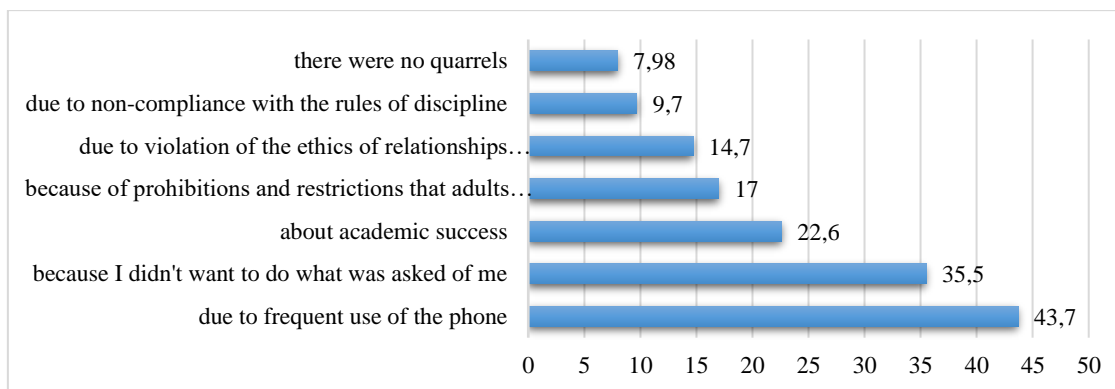


Fig. 9. For what reason did you most often have quarrels with your parents?

Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

It was determined that most conflicts occurred “because of frequent use of the phone” (43.7%), “because I did not want to do what was required of me” (35.5%), “because of academic performance” (22.6%), “because of prohibitions and restrictions imposed by adults” (17%), because of violation of ethics of relationships (14.7%), and because of non-compliance with discipline rules (9.7%). Only 8% of pupils did not have quarrels with their parents.

Thus, in the context of martial law, conflicts are an additional factor in the deterioration of general well-being, disharmonization of the interaction of the individual with himself or herself and others.

The question “What helped me the most to survive this time?” allows us to determine the range of different types of activities aimed at meeting the basic needs of the individual, to get to know the specifics of how students fill their free time (Figure 10).

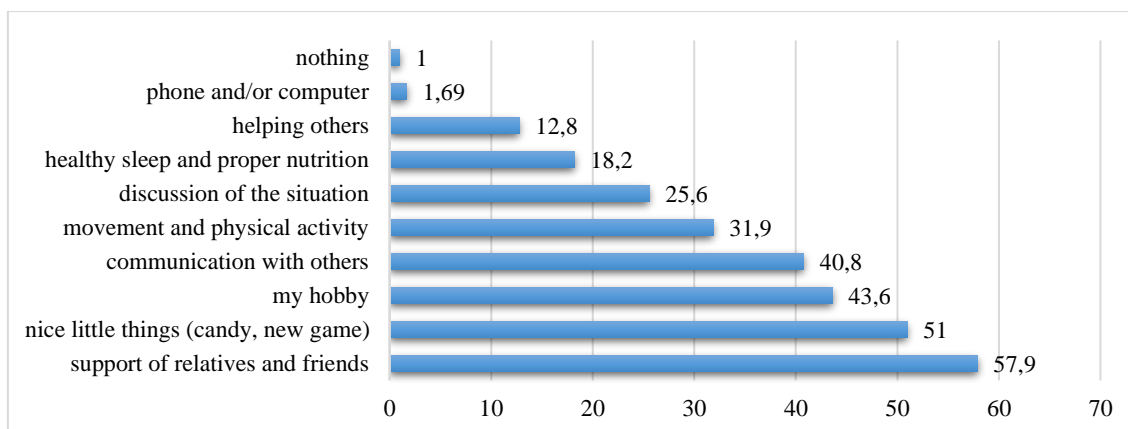


Fig. 10. What helped me the most to survive this time?

Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

According to children, the best anti-stress factors are “support from family and friends” (57.9%), “nice little things” (51%), “my hobby” (43.6%), “communication with others” (40.8%), “movement and physical activity” (31.9%). According to students, in difficult life conditions, “a telephone and/or computer” (1.7%), helping others (12.8%), “healthy sleep and healthy eating” (18.2%), and discussing the situation (25.6%) help to relieve psychological stress. The survey results show that children successfully

realize themselves in sports, creative, and volunteer activities, take care of their health and well-being, and establish positive social interaction.

With the question “What did I do most often during martial law?” we can explore the resource potential of the individual, which will help optimize the adaptive capabilities of schoolchildren (Figure 11).

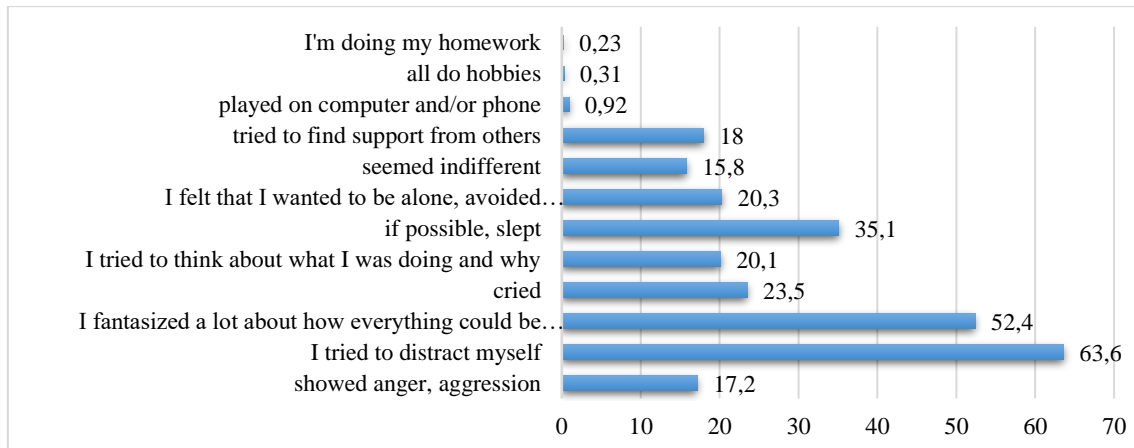


Fig. 11. What did I do most often during martial law?
Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

The internal resource of adults that helps them successfully cope with life's difficulties is associated with flexibility of thinking, behavior, and emotional response. As for children, the importance of external factors in coping with stress is greater than internal ones. For example, it was found that most children tend to "distract" from the problem (63.6%) and "fantasize about how things could be or will be in the future" (52.4%), which indicates an avoidance orientation. A somewhat smaller number of students believe that the best ways to cope with stress are "sleeping if possible" (35.1%), "crying" (23.5%), "being alone with oneself, avoiding interaction" (20.3%).

It is worth noting that there are ways to respond to a traumatic situation by showing aggression (17.2%) and remaining completely indifferent to everything (15.8%). The most optimal coping

strategies used by children are developing the habit of "thinking about what I am doing and why" (20.1%) and "getting support from others" (18%).

It should be noted that the coping strategies used by children develop in the family and depend on the coping behavior of their parents or other significant and close people. Thus, according to the survey results, a significant majority of children were able to actualize certain internal resources to cope with stressors.

The question "What did close people (parents, other relatives) do when you were particularly anxious (scared)?" allows us to identify the most common coping strategies of parents, as they affect the psycho-emotional state of their children (Figure 12).

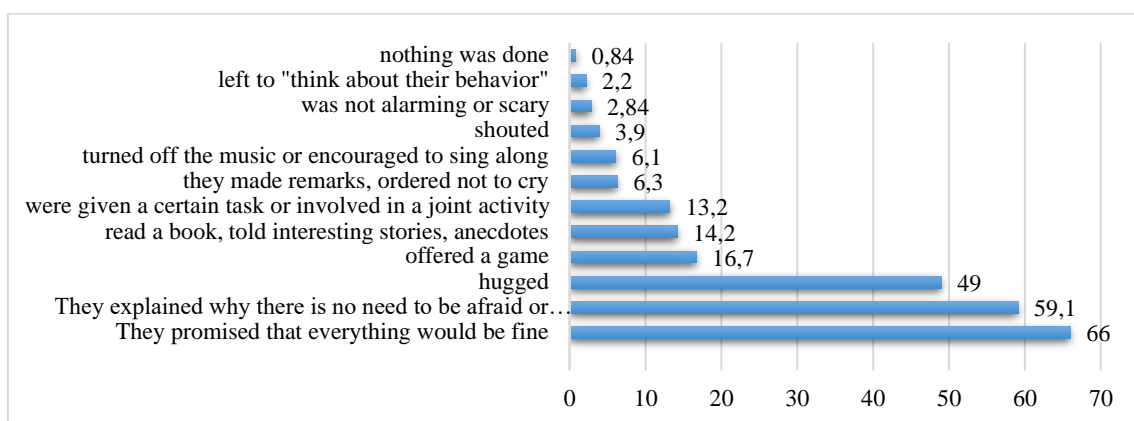


Fig. 12. What did loved ones do when you were especially disturbing (scary)
Source: Results of a survey conducted by the authors.

According to the survey, parents most often used the following coping strategies: "promising that everything will be fine" (66%), "explaining why there is no need to be afraid or what to do"

(59.1%), "hugging" (49%), which indicates their high level of self-control and self-control, ability to demonstrate courage, willpower, and optimism.

Some less popular strategies can be noted, but they are based on imagination, creativity, humor, and joint activities: “suggesting a game” (16.7%), “reading a book, telling interesting stories, jokes” (14.2%), “giving a certain task or involving in joint activities” (13.2%), “playing music or encouraging singing together” (6.1%). Some parents use ineffective coping strategies: “shouting” (3.9%), “making remarks, telling them not to cry” (6.3%), or “doing nothing” (0.84%).

Thus, it is especially important for a child to feel that close people (parents, other family members) support and ensure psychological security and well-being, especially in martial law. The ability to create a favorable psychological atmosphere reduces anxiety, helps to dispel irrational fears, improves the quality of interaction, maintains and strengthens enthusiasm and optimistic perception of reality, despite the difficult living conditions.

Specialists working with children who have had traumatic experiences as a result of military operations are offered the following psychosocial assistance technologies (group work) (Kisarchuk (ed.), 2020):

- debunking the myth of the “unique situation” (involves each participant realizing that the vast majority of those present during the training are facing a similar situation or similar obstacles);
- application of art therapy techniques (sand work, fairy tale therapy, theatricalization, color therapy, isotherapy) and MAC (metaphorical association cards);
- animal-assisted therapy (equine-assisted therapy, canine-assisted therapy);
- “Sandwich Plus-Minus-Plus” technique (a technique for providing feedback that allows you to focus on a new manifestation of constructive behavior);
- BASIC PH model (identification of the dominant channel of overcoming the consequences of psychotrauma) (World Health Organization, 2020);
- grounding and unhooking technique (to help participants “get involved” in life, start moving towards their own values, achieve a high level of concentration and awareness) (World Health Organization, 2020);
- “Wheel of Life” methodology (identifying problematic areas of life, searching for internal and external resources to improve the situation) (Korniienko, Lisovetska, Lutsenko, & Romanovska, 2017, p. 146);

- modified technique of analysis of available individual and group resources (identification of existing internal and external resources that a person can use for normal life) (Pank, & Tkachuk, 2021, p. 22-23);
- methods of working with images (framing, positive counter-images, switching off) (Smith et al., 1999, p. 19–20);
- double focus techniques (replacing a negative image with a positive one) (Smith et al., 1999, p. 22–24);
- use of a Fear Thermometer (tracking own reactions related to fear) (Smith et al., 1999, p. 34–35);
- role-playing games (allow to identify one’s own attitude to the problem, develop new behavioral strategies and test their effectiveness);
- methods of psychological self-regulation (breathing exercises; active inclusion of imagery).

The results of the study allowed us to identify the peculiarities of the functioning of children aged 6–17 during martial law. The fact that most children do not abuse indicates a high level of parental awareness of life safety, which in turn shapes the child’s position.

It has been determined that the physical and mental well-being of schoolchildren depends primarily on the influence of a combination of factors, including sleep disturbances, distance learning, monotony, as well as gunshots and other sharp sounds. An additional factor in the increased level of anxiety during this period is distance learning, in which students cannot concentrate due to certain difficulties in connecting, a shifted daily routine that depends on the situation in a particular region, worries about family and friends, changes in responsibilities, and other distractions.

Conclusions

Under martial law, distance learning has become one of the main ways for teachers and students to interact. According to the students, conducting classes in a remote format is complicated by unstable connection, uneven workload, interruptions, shifting classes an hour or two ahead, canceling classes, and postponing classes to the next day. These problematic situations increase the amount of mental, emotional, and physical stress on students, and increase the level of anxiety when assessing knowledge, skills, and abilities.

We consider hope, compassion, and love of life to be the leading emotions and feelings that have a positive impact on the formation of a child's personality in war. The dominant negative emotions are excitement, fear, rapid mood changes, extreme fatigue, trembling (from loud sounds), sadness, longing, indignation, irritation, and anger.

A large number of children faced certain problems related to personal communication, but going through a common traumatic experience allows children to feel kinship and mutual understanding, which can increase stress resistance and the ability to effectively regulate their minds.

There has been a noticeable increase in the frequency of conflicts (especially between children and parents) due to frequent use of the phone, refusal to do what adults demand, academic performance, and prohibitions and restrictions. Parents demonstrate a high level self-control, the ability to demonstrate courage, fortitude, and optimism. The coping strategies they choose are based on imagination, creativity, humor, and joint activities with their children.

The results of the study show that children successfully realize themselves in sports, creative, and volunteer activities, take care of their health and well-being, and establish positive social interaction. However, at this stage, it is extremely important to minimize the number of negative environmental factors, ensure that basic needs (including basic emotional needs) are met, and increase the number of adaptive coping strategies to activate additional resources of the individual.

The following factors should be taken into account when organizing group work with children who have had traumatic experiences as a result of military operations: age, degree of traumatic experience, nosology, level of stress resistance, etc. Thus, specialists form homogeneous (homogeneous) groups based on certain characteristics in order to provide deeper psycho-correctional work.

Psychosocial assistance technologies include the use of art therapy techniques and MACs (metaphorical association cards), animal-assisted therapy, the "Sandwich Plus-Minus-Plus" technique, the BASIC PH model, the "Wheel of Life" technique, grounding and unhooking techniques, the Fear Thermometer, a modified technique for analyzing available individual and group resources, methods of working with

images, dual focus techniques, role-playing games, and methods of psychological self-regulation. This system of methods and techniques allows the child to explore his or her own life situation, identify strengths (resources), which will contribute to the process of self-healing and increase the person's resilience.

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