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# PROBLEMATIC ISSUES OF MODERN PRACTICE OF PROVIDING PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE TO PERSONNEL DURING COMBAT OPERATIONS AND POSSIBLE WAYS TO SOLVE THEM

The article considers the peculiarities of implementing a study to identify problematic issues of the current practice of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of the National Guard of Ukraine during combat operations and to determine possible ways to solve them. The results of this study are presented.

The expediency and relevance of identifying the existing array of problematic issues in this area and determining ways to solve them are substantiated. The algorithm of research actions, the qualitative and quantitative composition of the involved carriers of important research information, and the methods used to obtain the necessary information are revealed.

On the basis of the data obtained from the carriers of important research information, using the methods of interviews, written surveys of experts, group discussions with combatants, studying the experience of psychological support of combat activities of the National Guard of Ukraine formations, their analysis and generalisation, a list of problematic issues of modern practice of providing psychological assistance to personnel is established. This list is presented according to the information, organisational, practical and implementation components of psychological assistance. In accordance with the nature of the identified problematic issues and the assessment of the possibilities of their solution, the author's vision of possible ways to improve the situation in this area is proposed.

It is proposed to use the above research material as a basis for the implementation of organisational and methodological improvements in the practice of providing psychological assistance to personnel during combat operations.

**Keywords:** service and combat activity, combat operations, subjects of moral and psychological support, psychological suspical assistance, professional competence.

Statement of the problem. The current practice of combat use of the National Guard of Ukraine (NGU), analysis of the experience of performing assigned tasks by personnel of military units and subunits during the anti-terrorist operation, the Joint Forces Operation and in the course of repulsing the large-scale armed aggression of the Russian Federation against our country require increased attention of officials at all levels of military command to ensure the reliability of the activity and mental functioning of servicemen in extreme conditions of combat activity. One of the ways to ensure the professional and functional reliability of combatants, and, accordingly, psychogenic losses of personnel, is to provide and adequate quality psychological assistance (PA) to servicemen and women in need. After all, a significant vital threat and the impact of extreme combat stressors cause combat mental trauma to a certain number of servicemen and women, leading to a partial or complete loss of their combat capability. These can be both non-pathological psycho-emotional reactions to an extreme situation and pathological ones – psychogenics. However, in any case, the performance of combat missions in extreme conditions does not pass without a trace for a person's mental health. The only question is the severity and timing of psychogenic disorders.

In this regard, the issue of ensuring that the scientific, theoretical, organisational, methodological, logistical and technical basis for providing adequate psychological assistance to servicemen in need is in line with the current requirements of combat practice. This is achieved primarily by solving urgent problems in this area.

In scientific sources, the concept of "problem" is interpreted as a state of uncertainty that arises as a contradiction (or discrepancy) between the expected and the actual, between the needs that have arisen and the possibilities to fulfil them, between the needs of practice and the insufficient scientific and theoretical development of ways to meet these needs, etc. At the same time, broad social practice shows that chronic unresolved urgent problems lead to a decrease in the quality of functioning of a particular system, unrealised goals of its development, regression, frustration of society and other consequences. Solving the problems actualised by practice has the opposite effect: it gives a positive impetus to the development of a particular system, increases the efficiency of its functioning.

The same applies to the psychological support system. An objective and complete understanding by the subjects of moral and psychological support (MPS) – commanders, specialists of personnel work, psychological support and officials of headquarters, support services, etc. – of the actual problems of the practice of providing psychological assistance to the NGU personnel during combat operations allows to ensure a prompt response to their solution, adequate elimination of factors that complicate the implementation of MPS tasks, and thus to improve the organisational and methodological basis for its implementation in the field. Therefore, the study of the existing array of problematic issues of the current practice of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of the NGU units during combat operations and ways to solve them is considered appropriate and relevant.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Various aspects of the theory and practice of psychological assistance to persons who, in the course of their lives, experience various difficult life situations, crises, extreme events, etc., as well as to specialists in risky activities who perform tasks in extreme conditions and, accordingly, have mental functioning disorders, certain considered, in particular, in the works of such V. Krainiuk, M. Korolchuk. N. Onishchenko, E. Potapchuk, I. Prykhodko, A. Romanishyn and O. Boyko, O. Timchenko [2–9], etc.

A significant contribution to the theory and practice of psychological assistance to servicemen, including in combat conditions, is the work of scientists from the National Academy of the National Guard of Ukraine [10–14]. They are multidimensional, based on the latest research and have a modern applied focus.

However, a study of the array of scientific sources of the relevant context has shown that there is currently a lack of presented works that would systematically cover research material on existing problematic issues of modern practice of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of the NGU during combat operations to repel the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and ways to solve them. This is the purpose of our work.

The purpose of the article is to reveal, on the basis of empirical research, the existing problematic issues of the current practice of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of the NGU during combat operations and to identify ways to solve them.

**Summary of the main material.** To ensure the realisation of the above goal, the research activities were carried out according to the following algorithm:

- 1) determination of the qualitative composition and number of carriers of important research information that should be involved in the process of identifying the above problematic issues;
- 2) specifying the methods, means and conditions for obtaining the necessary information from the involved respondents;
- 3) obtaining and summarising the information, presenting it in the form of a list of problematic issues and identifying possible ways to solve them;
- 4) obtaining feedback from the respondents on the objectivity of the existence, correctness of wording and completeness of the presentation of the array of problematic issues of the current practice of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of the NGU during hostilities, as well as on the feasibility of the proposed ways to solve them;
- 5) adjusting the list of problematic issues and ways to solve them based on the feedback from those involved in the study, as well as their final presentation.

In the course of the study, the following were involved as carriers of the necessary information: officials of the entire vertical of the NGU psychological service (from the psychological support unit of the Personnel Department of the Main Department of the NGU to battalion-level psychologists of various operational-territorial associations) – 8 people; officers of the personnel bodies (from brigade to company level) – 10 people; academic and research staff of the NGU Academy of Sciences with experience in providing psychological assistance to combatants – 3 people, as well as 4 unit commanders. A total of 25 people.

The following methods of obtaining research information were used: interviews (with those officials with whom it was possible to communicate face-to-face or by phone); group conversation

(during the psychological support measures conducted by the academic staff of the department with military personnel of the NGU military units who were undergoing rehabilitation as a result of rotation); expert survey (by means of relevant questions to officials sent by phone and receiving written responses from them); studying the experience of psychological support for the combat activities of the NGU formations.

Thus, the implemented algorithm of the above research actions made it possible to identify the main problematic issues of the current practice of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of the NGU units during hostilities. We differentiated the list of these issues by their belonging to the informational, organisational and practical-implementation components of providing psychological assistance to personnel.

Problematic issues related to the informational component of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of the NGU military units.

- 1. There is a lack of legal regulation and certainty in the provision of psychological assistance to personnel, especially in implementation of the process of restoring the combat capability of servicemen after the period of active hostilities, and conducting social, and medical psychological rehabilitation. Insufficient coordination of actions to implement the tasks of psychological assistance of the defence forces (AFU, NGU, SBGSU) jointly involved in combat operations. The provisions of the guiding documents, as well as the content, organisational and technological aspects of providing FA to personnel, contain significant differences. This also applies to the definition and implementation of levels of psychological assistance, psychological recovery programmes, decompression, etc.
- 2. Regulations and other guiding documents on psychological support of the NGU SCA, including the provision of psychological assistance to personnel, have not been fully updated in line with current needs and experience in combat operations.
- 3. The system of professional psychological training as a means of developing the necessary competencies in military personnel to recognize negative mental reactions and states, to perform first (emergency) psychological aid measures, taking into account combat experience, experience of being in captivity and encirclement, requires substantial improvement, as well as the use of advanced modern technologies to strengthen the mental stability of personnel, formation of teams at

the stages of both combat coordination and restoration of combat capability.

- 4. Inadequate awareness of the NGU MPS subjects about the existing protocols for providing first psychological aid to servicemen in case of negative mental reactions and conditions, developed by the researchers of the NGU MPS Research Centre of the NGU in 2018, indications for referring personnel for rehabilitation, as well as their place and role in the three-level system of first psychological aid. The criteria and mechanisms for the transition to providing assistance to traumatised servicemen and women from the 1–2 levels to the higher levels need to be more clearly defined.
- 5. There is a lack of standardisation and information and methodological support for the actions of the MPS actors in relation to persons with alcohol, drug or gambling addiction who take part in hostilities.
- 6. A significant number of servicemen do not have clear and objective ideas about their personal responsibility for maintaining a proper state of combat readiness and the resources that should be used for this purpose, about the possibilities and positive effects of timely and high-quality psychological assistance to servicemen in need. There are distorted perceptions of the content and nature of psychological assistance, a lack of faith in their professional qualifications, and a biased attitude towards psychological interventions.

Problematic issues related to the organisational component of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of military units of the NGU.

- 1. The professional and psychological selection of persons subject to mobilisation for participation in hostilities is not carried out with sufficient quality. It does not ensure an adequate level of functional reliability of conscripts, especially during service in units directly involved in combat operations. The issues of sending conscripted servicemen who are limitedly fit for military service for psychological, physical and psychophysiological reasons to units that do not take part in hostilities, as well as the dismissal of those who, due to physical and mental injuries, are unable to fully perform their duties even in such units, are not fully regulated.
- 2. The need for staffing to provide specialised psychological assistance to military personnel participating in hostilities is not fully met. Currently, there is an urgent need to fill a significant number of vacant positions with psychologists capable of providing quality psychological assistance to combatants. Despite the presence of

unemployed psychologists on the labour market, there is a lack of specialists who would agree to work in conditions of frequent business trips, discomfort, and provide psychological assistance proactively, without "waiting for clients in the office". This state of affairs leads to overloading psychologists with professional tasks, as the norms of workload are not observed (no more than 300 people of the regular number of personnel per psychologist in a military (special) period). At the same time, there are no freelance psychological assistants in the units, or they are formally appointed, usually without proper training, and the position of mental health instructors has not been introduced in military units.

3. Insufficient organisational, methodological and logistical support for the work of mobile psychological support groups (MPSGs). The lack of transport at their disposal limits their ability to arrive promptly at the locations of servicemen in need of assistance, especially in the context of a stretched combat front.

The management of the units does not fully consider feedback from members of these groups. At the same time, there are cases of insufficient quality and systematic monitoring of the psychoemotional state of members of MPSGs, when these specialists need supervision.

Problematic issues related to the practical and implementation component of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of military units of the NGU.

- 1. The competence of the majority of personnel to provide self-help and adequate first aid to other servicemen in combat conditions (at the first level) is insufficiently developed. First of all, this concerns mobilised servicemen, both privates unfortunately, sergeants and officers. Classes with the personnel are not conducted at the appropriate theoretical, methodological and organisational level, there is no systematic and consistent approach to the development of these competences. Officials responsible for conducting such training do not have adequate knowledge of PD, relevant methodological skills, as well as motivation and ability to train subordinates.
- 2. In the course of psychological support of combat missions by personnel, psychological monitoring of social and psychological processes in military teams, factors that cause a decrease in the moral and psychological state (MPS) of units, existing typical psychological problems of servicemen, their actual needs and requests is not fully implemented. Therefore, the focus of psychological work with personnel does not sufficiently meet current needs, as well as the content of managerial decisions to maintain an

appropriate level of MPS, mental health of servicemen, and the socio-psychological climate in units.

3. Often, due to the lack of personnel, commanders are unable to promptly implement the psychologist's recommendations to remove servicemen with negative mental states and manifestations of maladjustment from combat missions, to allocate time for the psychologist to work with personnel, and to send participants in psychotraumatic events for debriefing.

The lack of space and proper conditions for individual and, especially, group work by specialists of mobile psychological support groups does not contribute to the quality of FA services. At the same time, the interagency coordination of these groups with the relevant combat stress control groups of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is also weak.

The analysis of these problematic issues related to the provision of psychological assistance to the personnel of the NGU military units made it possible to identify the following possible ways to solve them.

1. Generation of specific proposals by tacticallevel MPS actors for regulatory and legal regulation and improvement of the organisation of psychological assistance to personnel and sending relevant appeals to senior management through the management vertical.

Operational level MPS actors should collect and summarise such proposals, provide relevant information through designated channels to senior management to initiate changes and improvements, determine mechanisms for their implementation and submit relevant projects to the Verkhovna Rada, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, relevant ministries and agencies, etc. At the same time, it is important for all officials of the military-management vertical to realise that their initiative, activity and interest in improving the regulatory framework and clear definition of the issues of providing personnel with quality psychological assistance directly determines the level of moral and psychological state of personnel, their motivation, psychogenic losses combat missions and the effectiveness of combat missions, as well as the social well-being of society.

The situation is similar with the improvement of the professional and psychological selection of persons to be mobilised for participation in combat operations, and with the regulation of the issue of sending conscripted servicemen who are limitedly fit for military service due to psychological, physical and psychophysiological indicators to units that do not take part in combat operations, as well as with the dismissal of those who, due to physical and mental injuries, are unable to fully perform their service tasks even in such units.

- 2. Establishment of a working group at the level of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine consisting of representatives of the Defence Forces that jointly participate in combat operations to promptly coordinate and resolve issues of ensuring unified approaches to the content, organisational and technological aspects of providing FA to personnel and to coordinate the relevant provisions of departmental guidelines, and thus to coordinate efforts to improve regulatory and legal support in this area.
- 3. At the level of the Department of Personnel of the NGU, in the context of existing problematic issues of organising and providing psychological assistance to personnel in combat conditions, as well as other related areas of psychological support of the SCT NGU, monitor the necessary changes to existing guidelines and ensure their proper and consistent updating in line with current needs and experience of combat operations.
- 4. Directing the combined efforts of the NGU scientists and heads of psychological support units of the NGU to solve the problems of content and methodological updating of the system of professional psychological training of personnel of military units and subunits, taking into account combat experience, experience of being in captivity and encirclement, as well as using advanced modern technologies to strengthen the mental stability of personnel, forming teams at the stages of both combat coordination and restoration of the state of combat capability of the troops. At the same time, special attention should be focused on developing the necessary competencies in recognising negative mental reactions and states and performing first (emergency) psychological aid, as well as developing objective ideas about the possibilities and positive effects of timely and high-quality selfhelp or psychological aid to fellow servicemen in need, as well as about their personal responsibility for maintaining a proper state of combat readiness and the availability of personal resources that should be available for this purpose.
- 5. Use of effective information influence on all categories of personnel to overcome biased attitudes to the implementation of psychological support measures, distorted perceptions of the purpose and tasks of psychological work with personnel, as well as underestimation of the role of the psychological component in ensuring mental stability and combat capability of military personnel. At the same time, considerable attention should be paid to ensuring

that commanders at all levels have the right ideas about their direct involvement in addressing the issues of mental health of subordinates, a deep awareness of their role and place in the system of psychological assistance to personnel, as well as responsibility for the formation of an appropriate level of theoretical, methodological and practical training in this area and demonstration of exemplary skills in mastering first aid and self-help techniques.

A significant role in the implementation of these measures should be played by raising the level of professional competence of psychological service specialists and optimizing their personal professional position in the military team and their ability to interact with other subjects of the MHL, as well as the ability to teach servicemen and commanders of all levels to recognize negative mental reactions and states, to train them in the application of first (emergency) psychological aid measures in the course of professional psychological training and special psychological training.

6. Implementation of the important need for a reliable and up-to-date source of information aimed at promptly meeting the needs of psychological support practice, responding appropriately to existing problematic issues, adjusting certain approaches to psychological work, disseminating best practices, promoting professional awareness and methodological literacy of psychological care providers regarding algorithms and mechanisms for solving urgent problems, including the use of first aid protocols, bringing to the attention of the public the Therefore, it seems appropriate to publish a periodic electronic newsletter to meet these needs of officials of military units and subdivisions of the NGU. Given the conditions of martial law, each issue of such an electronic bulletin should be small in size, contain very clear, verified, reliable information, address current practice requests, identify appropriate approaches in the work of relevant officials and ways to solve existing problems, and contain a rubric for improving the information, organisational and practical implementation components of both psychological assistance and the overall psychological support of combat activities of personnel. The availability of an electronic mailbox for this newsletter will allow for prompt feedback on the subsequent provision of relevant materials on unresolved problematic issues, satisfaction of the practice of psychological eduction with educational and methodological materials, etc.

Of course, the production of such an electronic newsletter requires considerable effort to create a staff and select competent members of the editorial board capable of implementing its mission, considerable attention of relevant officials of the psychological service to the content and quality of the information disseminated, ensuring adequate funding, prompt processing and summarising of feedback from the electronic mailbox, etc. However, the practical effect of implementing such a periodical electronic publication can be quite significant.

7. Regulation of social, legal, organisational and other aspects of actions of the subjects of MHL in relation to persons with addictive behaviour at the level of Ukrainian legislation, considering the world military experience, as well as implementation of information and methodological support for such actions.

The presence in units of persons with alcohol, drug or gambling addiction certainly has a negative impact on the moral and psychological state of personnel, the effectiveness of combat missions, creates additional moral tension, causes collective and group psychological problems and distracts the subjects of MPS from solving urgent tasks of service and combat activities, so this issue should be promptly resolved.

8. Implementation of an integrated approach to staffing the needs for specialised psychological assistance to military personnel participating in combat operations. It consists of the following. Firstly, it means expanding the number of channels for placing relevant requests and advertisements about available vacancies and the intensity of their use, not only through the labour exchange or employment agencies, but also through television channels, speeches by spokespersons of the NGU military units in the media, interaction with officials of the terrritorial recruitment center on this issue, volunteer activities, etc. Secondly, to increase the volume and improve the quality of training of professional military psychologists in military educational institutions and additional training of civilian specialists at the NGU military educational institutions, considering the experience of modern warfare, the needs of military units and the peculiarities and conditions of performing their duties in combat. It is also advisable to resume the training of psychological support specialists at the operational level in the NA NGU, since experience shows that there is a need for scientifically based improvement of the organisation and provision of psychological assistance to personnel in combat conditions, and psychological support of the NGU's SCD in general, which can be realised with the appropriate managerial competence of the heads of the psychological service at the operational level. Thirdly, it is necessary to introduce the position of a mental health instructor in military units and to carry out high-quality selection (training) of personnel for these positions.

9. Increase the attention of the officials of the Main Department of the NGU to the issues of organisational, methodological and logistical improvement of the work of mobile psychological support groups. Ensure their effective mobility and provide the necessary means and resources for the quality performance of their tasks, as well as strengthen the personal responsibility of the heads of these groups for their rational use and preservation of their efficiency.

10. Improve the quality and systematic nature of psychological monitoring of social and psychological processes in military teams, factors that lead to a decline in the morale of units, existing typical psychological problems of servicemen, their current needs and demands. Ensure that the results of such monitoring are promptly communicated to the relevant officials to be considered in the process of working with personnel and making managerial decisions to maintain an appropriate level of MPS, mental health of servicemen and the sociopsychological climate in units.

Thus, the above array of major problematic issues of the current practice of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of the NGU units during combat operations and possible ways to solve them can become the basis for organisational and methodological improvement in this area.

## Conclusions

- 1. The need to ensure that the scientific, theoretical, organisational, methodological, logistical and technical basis for providing adequate psychological assistance to servicemen in need of it meets the modern demands of the practice of warfare determines the expediency and relevance of researching both the existing array of urgent problematic issues in this area and ways to solve them.
- 2. In order to identify the main problematic issues of the current practice of providing psychological assistance to the personnel of the NGU units during combat operations, the research algorithm was implemented, as well as the appropriate methods of its implementation were used and the necessary carriers of important research information were involved. All of the above made it possible to obtain a list of problematic issues under study, differentiated by their belonging to the informational, organisational and practical implementation components of providing psychological assistance to personnel.
- 3. On the basis of the array of main problematic issues of the current practice of providing psychological

assistance to the personnel of the NGU units during hostilities and ways to solve them, it is possible to implement organisational and methodological improvements in this area, which is an appropriate direction for further scientific and applied research.

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## ПРОБЛЕМНІ ПИТАННЯ СУЧАСНОЇ ПРАКТИКИ НАДАННЯ ПСИХОЛОГІЧНОЇ ДОПОМОГИ ОСОБОВОМУ СКЛАДУ ПІД ЧАС ВЕДЕННЯ БОЙОВИХ ДІЙ І ШЛЯХИ ЇХ ВИРІШЕННЯ

Розглянуто особливості реалізації дослідження з установлення проблемних питань сучасної практики надання психологічної допомоги особовому складу Національної гвардії України під час ведення бойових дій, а також визначення можливих шляхів їх вирішення. Наведено результати цього дослідження.

Доцільність і актуальність установлення існуючого масиву проблемних питань у зазначеній сфері й визначення шляхів їх вирішення автори пояснюють необхідністю забезпечення відповідності сучасним запитам практики ведення бойових дій науково-теоретичного, організаційного, методичного, матеріально-технічного підтрунтя надання адекватної психологічної допомоги військовослужбовцям, які її потребують, а також відсутністю презентованих наукових праць, де б систематизовано висвітлювався такий дослідницький матеріал.

Розкрито алгоритм дослідницьких дій, розроблений для забезпечення реалізації мети наукового пошуку, наведено якісний і кількісний склад залучених у ході проведення дослідження військовослужбовців.

На підставі даних, отриманих від носіїв важливої дослідницької інформації методами інтерв'ю, письмового опитування експертів, групових бесід з учасниками бойових дій, вивчення досвіду психологічного забезпечення бойової діяльності формувань Національної гвардії України, їх аналізу та узагальнення, встановлено перелік проблемних питань сучасної практики надання психологічної допомоги особовому складу. Цей перелік презентовано за належністю до інформаційного, організаційного та практично-реалізаційного складників здійснення психологічної допомоги. Відповідно до характеру встановлених проблемних питань та оцінки можливостей їх вирішення пропонується авторське бачення можливих шляхів поліпшення ситуації в цій сфері.

Запропоновано використовувати наведений дослідницький матеріал як підгрунтя для реалізації організаційно-методичних удосконалень у практиці надання психологічної допомоги особовому складу під час ведення бойових дій, що є доцільним напрямком подальших науково-прикладних досліджень.

**Ключові слова**: службово-бойова діяльність, бойові дії, суб'єкти морально-психологічного забезпечення, психологічне забезпечення, психологічна допомога, професійна компетентність.

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