



Supporting Healthcare Worker Well-being in Ukraine

**Practical guide for Mental Health,
Psychosocial Support and Staff Care**

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Abbreviations

CME — Continuing Medical Education

FGD — Focus Group Discussion

HCW — Healthcare Worker

IRC — International Rescue Committee

KII — Key Informant Interview

MEAL — Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning

MENAU — Middle East, North Africa and Ukraine

MHPSS — Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

PSS — Psychosocial Support

TOT — Training of Trainers*

WASH — Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

WHO — World Health Organization

Introduction



Healthcare workers in Ukraine have been working under exceptional and prolonged pressure for the past decade. Even before the full-scale war, the health workforce had been navigating significant systemic changes through health system reform, followed by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since February 2022, these pressures have been compounded by continued exposure to armed violence, air raids, attacks on healthcare facilities, staff shortages, increased workloads and the growing complexity of patients' health and psychosocial needs. WHO reported over 3,100 attacks on healthcare since the beginning of the full-scale war, with over 250 healthcare workers losing their lives while carrying out their duties. Nevertheless, healthcare workers have continued to provide essential services throughout this period, often while facing the same threats, uncertainty and disruption as the communities they serve. The prolonged nature of the conflict has therefore placed considerable pressure not only on the health system, but also on the well-being of the people sustaining it.

Against this context, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), together with the National Agency ZDOROV, conducted an assessment to better understand the impact of prolonged conflict-related stress on the mental health and well-being of healthcare workers in the most conflict-affected regions of Ukraine. The assessment sought to identify the main challenges affecting healthcare workers' well-being, understand the coping strategies they were using, and identify areas where additional support could be provided.

The findings indicated that the prolonged conflict is having a substantial impact on healthcare workers' well-being, with one in five healthcare workers surveyed demonstrating negative coping, with the greatest challenges observed in personal well-being and the workplace environment. Personal well-being showed the highest level of negative coping, at 30%, followed by the workplace environment at 26%. Well-being capacity accounted for 16%, while interpersonal well-being showed comparatively lower levels of negative coping at 9%.

The strongest concerns related to healthcare workers' personal well-being were associated with persistent stress, difficulty relaxing and uncertainty about the future. More than half of respondents reported that they were only sometimes or rarely feeling relaxed, while 46% reported similar difficulties with feeling optimistic about the future and 45% with feeling cheerful. Around 30% also reported difficulties managing difficult feelings in healthy ways.

The qualitative findings further illustrated the lived experience behind these results, with healthcare workers describing air-raid alarms, nearby explosions and concern for the safety of patients and family members as persistent sources of stress. Many described an uncertain future and a tendency to focus on getting through each day rather than making longer-term plans. For healthcare workers, the psychological burden is further complicated by the responsibility of remaining at work and caring for patients during emergencies, including when their own safety is at risk.

The assessment also identified important challenges within the working environment. While many healthcare workers described positive relationships with colleagues and strong team spirit, support from managers and health facilities was perceived as inconsistent. Thirty percent of respondents reported that their manager or supervisor did not consistently demonstrate care for their well-being, while 28% reported that their health facility did not provide sufficient support to frontline workers coping with emergency work. The qualitative findings similarly highlighted gaps in support following emergencies, including limited access to psychological support and group debriefing.

Furthermore, younger and less experienced healthcare workers generally demonstrated greater difficulties with coping and workplace support than their older and more experienced colleagues. Medical doctors recorded the highest overall level of negative coping among the

professional groups assessed, while healthcare workers working alone or in smaller teams also showed higher levels of negative coping. Interestingly, it is important to consider differences in professional experience, team structures and working conditions when designing staff-care and well-being interventions.

At the same time, healthcare workers consistently described their colleagues and teams as a major source of support. Sharing experiences, talking with colleagues and supporting one another were among the most commonly reported ways of managing stress. Strong interpersonal relationships and a sense of solidarity within teams can therefore play an important role in protecting well-being in high-stress environments. However, the findings also indicate that informal peer support alone is not sufficient to address the level and persistence of stress experienced by many healthcare workers.

There are also significant gaps in healthcare workers' access to and use of formal support since more than 30% of respondents reported that they did not have effective strategies for managing stress, while 21% did not know how to access additional help when experiencing stress. The qualitative findings highlighted barriers to accessing psychological support, including financial constraints, stigma and concerns about appearing weak or experiencing professional consequences. Availability of MHPSS support was also inconsistent across health facilities and appeared to depend largely on the resources and capacity of individual facilities rather than being systematically available.

These findings demonstrate that supporting the well-being of healthcare workers needs to go beyond the provision of individual psychological services. A comprehensive approach should also strengthen the capacity of healthcare workers to recognize and manage stress, create supportive working environments, strengthen peer support, and enable managers and health facilities to respond appropriately to staff experiencing distress. Such measures are particularly important in a context where healthcare workers are expected to continue providing essential services under prolonged and unpredictable conditions.

The assessment therefore highlights the need for a more systematic and context-specific approach to staff care and healthcare workforce well-being in Ukraine.

This guide has been developed in response to these findings. The aim is to translate the evidence from the assessment into practical approaches that MHPSS providers, health facility managers and healthcare workers can use to strengthen staff well-being, improve supportive working environments, and promote appropriate coping and access to support.

Assessment of intervention effectiveness

Following the healthcare workers' (HCW) well-being survey conducted in 2024, the impact of the conflict was evident. The personal well-being of health staff was significantly affected with many reporting increased anxiety, uncertainty, and a decline in life satisfaction.

Furthermore, the assessment revealed differences in coping strategies among HCWs. While some demonstrate resilience and continue to perform their duties effectively, others struggle with burnout and a negative outlook on the future, which could further jeopardize their ability to provide critical health care.

As a response to the needs of HCWs, IRC has piloted a newly developed specific stress management training designed for HCWs in Ukraine and adapted to fit their busy schedules. The training was designed to counteract the negative effects of stress in the workplace and support participants in adapting to the everyday challenges and stressors experienced within the Ukrainian context. The one-day training was designed to familiarize HCWs to:

- The specific stressors and challenges they may encounter in their line of work.
- The importance of self-care and strategies for maintaining their well-being.
- Practical self-care exercises and techniques they could use.

The total number of participants enrolled in the pilot training was 133, across Dnipro, Kharkiv, and Mykolaiv regions. Majority of participants were Nurses (42%), followed by Medical Doctors (12%), administrative staff (4%), midwives (3%) and other (39%). Almost all the participants were females (97%).

To measure the effectiveness of the training intervention, the same well-being survey was administered at the baseline point (before training) and endline point (2 months after). Initial results showed that while there were some improvements related to well-being, however some participants had a difficult time recalling some information about the training. This may have been influenced by their continued exposure to significant stressors and traumatic events, including air raid alerts, explosions, and the management of mass casualty incidents. These findings could suggest that the effects of a single training session might diminish over time in a context characterized by persistent stress and insecurity. As a result, moving forward, the endline well-being assessment was conducted two weeks after the training to better capture its immediate effects on participants' well-being. Furthermore, the training modality proposed should include short follow-up sessions every two weeks, with the aim of reinforcing key concepts and sustaining the intervention's benefits.

After conducting the training, and after the endline measurements, three FGDs were conducted with participants, as well as three KIIs with hospital management to provide qualitative insights about the training.

The survey conducted measured well-being in 4 different areas

- Personal well-being
- Interpersonal well-being
- Capacity and skills to manage stress
- Working environment

The greatest level of improvement was measured in the personal well-being section. On average the improvement in well-being ranged between 25-30%, with significant changes in managing difficult feelings, being more optimistic about the future, and feeling more relaxed.

Regarding the interpersonal well-being, the baseline was quite high in terms of positive answers. Nevertheless, there was additional improvement in being able to recognize signs of stress in team-mates and being able to support them in stressful situations.

When it comes to well-being capacity, there has been significant improvement (20%) in two critical areas: having good understanding about the kinds of stress they may encounter while working in emergencies and having effective strategies for managing stress.

And lastly, perceptions of support within the work environment improved significantly across all areas of the survey. The most significant improvements were in perception of manager/supervisor cares about their well-being), manager/supervisor support in distress, as well as view of hospital's provision of useful support to front line workers in coping with emergency work. This change may reflect the participation of hospital managers in the training and ongoing efforts to strengthen healthcare workers' well-being.

Qualitative results were measured through FGD with participants and KIIs with hospital managers to get different insights and points of view on current problems facing healthcare workers, future needs, as well as impact of the training.

FGDs have highlighted the significant challenges associated with working as a first responder in a conflict-affected environment, particularly responding to air raid alarms, treating civilians injured by shelling, and coping with concern for the safety of patients and their own families. Participants emphasized the importance of peer support during such incidents and reported that the training was highly relevant, with breathing and grounding exercises being the most frequently applied techniques in practice. Perceptions of management support varied across facilities, with some participants reporting strong support and others expressing dissatisfaction, particularly in locations exposed to higher levels of insecurity. Participants consistently identified a need for both individual and group psychosocial support, preferably provided by external professionals due to confidentiality concerns, and highlighted peer connections as a key source of resilience. While the end of the conflict was seen as the most important factor for improving well-being, participants expressed a strong desire for continued psychological support.

Through KIIs, the health facility managers consistently identified the ongoing conflict as the primary challenge affecting healthcare workers' well-being, particularly the demands associated with responding to mass casualty incidents and emergencies following attacks and shelling. Managers reported that, at the beginning of the conflict, staff struggled to manage stress and maintain effective communication under pressure; however, psychological support and training provided by IRC helped strengthen teamwork, mutual support, and coping capacities. Managers described healthcare staff as relying heavily on peer support and highlighted the positive contribution of individual counseling and stress management training. While facilities strive to support their personnel, managers acknowledged limited capacity to provide specialized psychosocial assistance and emphasized that support delivered by external providers is generally better accepted due to concerns around confidentiality and stigma. Managers also noted the absence of formal protocols for staff psychosocial support and referral pathways, with current support mechanisms relying primarily on ad hoc communication with IRC psychologists.

About the guide

This guide is informed by both field experience and evidence gathered through a baseline and endline outcome evaluation conducted among healthcare workers who participated in IRC's stress management training. The evaluation demonstrated positive changes in coping capacities and psychosocial well-being among healthcare workers operating in a high-stress, conflict-affected environment. Field implementation also generated practical lessons on how such support can be delivered effectively within healthcare settings. The recommendations presented in this guide are therefore grounded in both demonstrated outcomes and lessons learned through implementation.

The guide is organized into three complementary sections. The first section provides detailed technical guidance for psychologists and mental health professionals responsible for delivering the intervention to the healthcare workforce. The second section outlines recommendations for health facility managers to strengthen organizational support for staff well-being and create enabling conditions for effective psychosocial support. The third section provides practical self-care recommendations for the health workforce, designed to be distributed as a handout during training and used as an ongoing resource to support individual well-being and stress management after the training has concluded.



Section One



Guidance for MHPSS providers

Delivering mental health awareness sessions

Mental health awareness sessions can be delivered within healthcare facilities as regular awareness-raising activities, conducted once or twice per month. These sessions are intended to provide healthcare staff with practical information on common mental health and well-being topics, increase awareness of available support services, and facilitate early identification of staff who may require additional assistance.

Mental health awareness sessions should adhere to the following recommendations:

- Limit sessions to 30 minutes in duration.
- Include maximum of 30 participants per session.
- Have a specific topic/ objective for each session, such as stress management, burnout prevention, self-care, or effective communication skills. These sessions should be structured and informative rather than open discussion forums.
- Deliver information sessions using simple, non-technical language to support understanding and enable participants to recognize warning signs and reflect on their own well-being.
- Use the sessions for identification of staff who may require additional support through observation of warning signs, discussion of participants' questions and concerns, and the promotion of a safe and non-stigmatizing environment for help-seeking.
- Make sure to use PowerPoint presentations, visual aids, or other educational materials where available to reinforce key messages and improve participant engagement.

Make sure to clearly communicate available support services and referral pathways, including information on how participants can access further assistance if needed at the end of each session.



Delivering group support sessions

Two types of group-based psychosocial support interventions can be provided to healthcare workers: structured support group sessions and non-structured psychosocial support (PSS) sessions. Both approaches aim to promote well-being, strengthen coping mechanisms, and create opportunities for mutual support among participants. The decision to use one approach or the other should be decided by participants' needs, the severity of identified warning signs, and the intended results.

For example, more complex or shared problems that have a significant impact on healthcare workers' well-being are better addressed through structured group support sessions. These sessions provide an opportunity to:

- Share experiences and coping strategies;
- Provide peer-to-peer support;
- Create a safe space for participants to express and discuss their concerns; and
- Help participants recognize that others may be experiencing similar challenges.

Less complex problems that cause lower levels of distress can be addressed through non-structured PSS sessions.



Structured support group sessions for medical staff

A support group is a group of individuals with shared experiences or challenges who come together to provide mutual emotional and moral support. These sessions should offer a safe and supportive environment where participants can discuss common concerns, share experiences, and learn from one another.

Structured support groups should adhere to the following recommendations:

- Have one or two trained facilitators (mental health professionals) for each group with experience in delivering group support interventions.
- Guide the discussions in a healthy and meaningful manner while encouraging active participation from group members in addressing specific issues. For example, the support group can be designed for staff experiencing emotional distress following large-scale attacks, or staff experiencing anxiety and distress about the safety of their families during air alerts while they are working at the health facility. Ideally, facilitators should speak less than participants and create opportunities for mutual support and discussion.
- Try to include a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 10 participants to allow for meaningful interaction and adequate individual participation.
- Focus on a specific theme or topic for each session, such as shared challenges faced by staff, stress reactions following large-scale attacks, or strategies for managing stress during challenging times. Depending on the complexity of the topic, a full support group may run for 5-10 sessions.
- Follow a structured pre-prepared plan that addresses the selected theme while allowing participants to share experiences, discuss concerns, and support one another.
- Make sure sessions last 60-90 minutes to allow participants to share their experiences. Try to fix the schedule of weekly session on the same day every week.
- develop the rules for support groups with participants before or during the first session. These may include:
 - Listening to others without interrupting
 - Avoiding personal or side conversations during the group
 - Respecting differences in experiences, perspectives, and opinions
 - Refraining from judging or criticizing others
 - Respecting each participant's opinions and experiences
 - Refraining from discussing highly polarizing topics, such as political or religious views
 - Using first-person language (e.g., "I" statements) when sharing personal experiences
 - Sharing the available time so that everyone who wishes to speak has an opportunity to do so

Non-structured (soft PSS) sessions

Non-structured sessions are group activities that engage participants in activities that indirectly address psychosocial well-being themes.

Non-structured PSS sessions should adhere to the following recommendations:

- Include activities such as stress coloring, relaxation exercises, or handicraft activities.
- Conduct a guided reflection after the activities, to allow participants to discuss their overall well-being and mental status.
- Have one facilitator in the session, who is responsible for guiding participants through the activity and supporting the self-reflection process afterwards.
- Include no more than 10 participants in each activity session to allow them to share their experiences.
- Incorporate a psychosocial support theme in each session, such as internal resources or healthy coping strategies.
- Prepare all required materials in advance according to activity needs (e.g., paper, coloring materials, glue, yarn, etc.)



Delivering individual counseling sessions

Short-term counseling should be provided to health staff that require more specialized support. This should be considered for staff who are showing significant signs and symptoms that impair their daily functioning, such as:

- Disturbed sleep
- Disturbed appetite
- Inability to carry out routine daily activities.
- Persistent changes in mood
- Persistent inability to concentrate at work

The following should be considered when delivering individual sessions:

- Individual counseling sessions should be provided by experienced psychologists or specialized mental health professionals trained to develop short-term action plans.
- Focus on addressing the most critical needs and concerns of the HCW. The number of sessions should generally not exceed 6-8 sessions in short term counselling.
- Develop an action plan with objectives and theme for each session.
- Base the action plan on the most important priorities mentioned by the client during the first session.
- Identify and apply appropriate techniques to deal with/overcome their problems in the sessions, such as relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, activity scheduling, engaging in the social activities, reactivation of social networks, helping them to regain control of their lives.
- Make sure each session lasts between 45-60 minutes.
- Conduct sessions once or twice per week, depending on the level of support required.



Delivering Stress management training

Healthcare professionals should receive stress management training as part of their continuing medical education. This can help prepare new staff joining health facilities and strengthen the coping capacity of existing staff. Stress management training has been requested by healthcare workers in multiple locations and identified as an important resource and coping strategy during focus group discussions.

Each stress management training should be adapted to the needs and context of the healthcare staff. These needs can be informally assessed through discussions during awareness sessions, allowing the facilitator to contextualize selected elements of the training. However, the overall structure and core topics should remain consistent across trainings:

- Due to the limited availability of health staff, the training should not exceed one day (7-8 training hours)
- Make sure to have the appropriate number of participants in each training, ideally 20 participants.
- Encourage all health facility staff to attend the stress management training, including doctors, nurses, midwives, paramedics, and administrative staff.
- To ensure quality of care, include all health facility staff in initial stress management training, followed by refresher sessions at least every two months.
- Facilitate stress management training by one or two trainers/ facilitators, depending on the number of participants and the experience of the trainer.
- Make sure to include the following core topics in each training:
 - Specific stressors for health workforce
 - Definition of Stress
 - Types of stress
 - How do we respond to stress
 - What is Burnout and how to recognize it
 - What is selfcare
 - Self-comfort vs Selfcare
 - Healthy vs unhealthy coping
 - Selfcare strategies
 - Practical exercises: Breathing exercises, Internal resources exercise, Mandala colouring

Section Two



Guidance for Health facility managers

Healthcare staff managers play an important role in promoting staff well-being and creating a supportive work environment, especially during challenging times. The following recommendations may help managers recognize signs of stress, provide appropriate support, and strengthen team functioning.

- Whenever possible, ensure access to external providers for individual counseling. Healthcare staff often feel more comfortable discussing their concerns and challenges with external providers rather than in-house psychological services, mainly due to concerns about confidentiality and stigma.
- Empower and support staff to seek professional help when needed. This may include facilitating contact with their family doctor, primary healthcare center, or mental health professional.
- Learn how to recognize signs of stress reactions within the team. Staff may not always realize that some symptoms are stress-related, and you should be able to recognize it before they do. Early warning signs of increasing stress levels in the work environment could be presented as changes in behavior, reduced productivity or increasing conflicts between staff members.
- Help staff identify their triggers. Encourage them to reflect on whether they are stressed and what is causing this stress, such as air alerts, response to mass casualties, etc. It can be helpful to share your observations in a supportive and non-judgmental manner.
- Provide basic psychoeducation such as normalizing the feelings of stress and reassuring staff that many stress responses are understandable and may improve over time. It is important to focus on supporting the person, and not only on the problem.
- Establish honest and open communication with the team. People are generally more likely to discuss personal concerns when they feel safe and trust those around them. Develop a healthy relationship within the team before trying to help.
- Ask staff how you can help. Where possible, support them in addressing sources of stress. Look for solutions that address their concerns, as well as include them in thinking of solutions to their triggers.
- Listen to how staff are feeling. Just being there for them will help a lot.
- Maintain regular contact and follow up with them every now and then. Casual conversations can identify concerns early and demonstrate ongoing support.
- Encourage staff to learn and practice some self-care techniques, including those mentioned above. Dedicating time for staff to practice self-care in the work environment, as this can contribute to reducing stress levels.
- Don't forget to look after yourself. If someone around you is severely stressed, you might become stressed too. If this happens, try to take a step back and look after your own well-being.
- Promoting teamwork and communication between the staff can:
 - Improve productivity
 - Allow for timely and effective problem-solving
 - Encourage flexibility
 - Allow ideas to flourish and support more efficient achievement of goals
 - Reduce conflict between staff

Managers can additionally strengthen teamwork by:

- Set clear objectives for team tasks and responsibilities.
- Set realistic timelines and deadlines for each task.
- Delegate tasks appropriately across the team. This ensures that each team member knows what is expected from them and what needs to be accomplished.
- Encourage respect to each other's opinions and suggestions during group discussions.
- Create a friendly and supportive environment, and where appropriate schedule out-of-work social gatherings and activities.
- Use and promote practical communication skills, such as engaging in active listening, using positive nonverbal gestures, and being empathetic towards others.
- Discourage work-related gossip.
- Avoid criticizing, complaining or blaming within the team.



Section Three

A woman with dark hair pulled back, smiling slightly, stands in front of a window. She is wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt under a dark vest with a white fur collar and a white patterned vest. The window has white lace curtains with a floral pattern. Two indoor plants are visible on either side of the woman. The background is a bright, slightly overexposed window.

Guidance for Health staff on Self-care

Physiological recommendations

- Try to take time to eat, rest and relax. Do this even if only for short periods during stressful times.
- Establish regular daily routines. Keeping at least one routine can help you stay focused, build confidence, and reduce stress. Try to have regular times for eating, sleeping, praying, working, or studying.
- Follow a healthy and balanced diet. Eat from all the food groups. Practice mindful eating: eat slowly, notice the smell and taste of the food, and feel of the food.
- Stay physically active. Make time for at least 20 minutes of moderately intense physical activity per day, or 2-3 hours per week.
- Limit or minimize your intake of alcohol, caffeine, or nicotine and avoid taking medications that are not prescribed.
- Try your best to maintain a regular sleep pattern of around 7 to 9 hours of sleep each day. Good sleep hygiene refers to appropriate sleeping habits such as:
 - Having a consistent bedtime routine such as going to bed when you are tired and using the bed for sleeping only (not for watching television, reading, or eating) as well as always getting up at the similar time in the morning.
 - Try to minimize the environmental noise. Ensure the bedroom is quiet, relaxing, dark, and of comfortable temperature.
 - Remove any unneeded electronic devices from the bedroom (e.g. televisions, computers, tablets, smartphones, etc.). Avoid using electronic devices before sleeping; this can be challenging sometimes if you need to stay updated about air alerts or security concerns. Try to set up an alarm if there is incoming danger instead of regularly checking your phone.
 - Replace using electronic devices before bedtime, with reading a book or magazine.
 - Before bedtime, avoid large or heavy meals, spicy food, drinking alcohol, coffee, tea, or any other stimulants, including nicotine.
 - Plan your regular physical activities throughout the day, not before you go to bed.
 - If you are unable to have a restful sleep at night, consider the following:
 - Try to keep yourself busy during the day with engaging in interesting activities
 - Try to take short rest breaks or naps through the day (15-20 mins whenever possible)
 - Try having a walk or some other lighter physical activity
 - Make sure you drink enough water and eat regularly
 - Avoid drinking too much coffee, or tea

Managing stress in the work setting

- Practice time management. Try to keep reasonable working hours so you do not become too exhausted. Ensure that you have a realistic and balanced workload.
- Make a list of priority tasks. Instead of trying to pursue many tasks at once, choose to focus on one or two tasks with highest priority for you. This will help simplify your daily or weekly schedule and allow you to direct your energy and time towards the most important or urgent tasks.
- Break larger tasks into smaller and more manageable ones. Focusing on achieving smaller tasks instead of just focusing on the final outcome will keep you motivated and not overwhelmed. This is especially useful in emergency and unpredictable situations.
- Keep your expectations realistic. Being realistic will increase your chances of meeting the desired goals. Putting too much pressure on yourself by setting high and unrealistic expectations can easily be demotivating.
- You may feel frustrated when you cannot solve all the problems faced by patients or colleagues. Remember that it is not your responsibility to solve every problem. Do what you can to help people without becoming emotionally involved. Acknowledge what you were able to do to help others, even in small ways. This is critically important in your daily work, as medical staff need to be clear minded during emergencies, which is difficult if you identify with patients or survivors.
- Learn to reflect on what you did well and accept what did not go well. Acknowledge the limitations of what could be achieved under the circumstances.
- Recognize and celebrate your achievements by rewarding yourself. Your reward could be anything from spending quality time with your loved ones, or doing something enjoyable for yourself (shopping, walking, etc.)
- Talk about your experience with a supervisor or a colleague you trust.
- Maintain appropriate professional boundaries. Keep workplace relationships courteous but professional. Maintain clear professional boundaries (avoid expressing personal emotions or behaviors), even with colleagues with whom you have close personal relationships.. Moreover, ensure that you always act professionally and with courtesy with people you do not necessarily get along with on a personal level.
- If your workload seems overwhelming, or if you are experiencing conflict with your colleagues that you cannot resolve, talk to your manager, human resources staff or a trustworthy colleague.
- Always try to engage and participate in team building activities with co-workers, like having lunch, or other social activities.

Psychological recommendations

- Remember that your feelings are normal responses to different situations. It is normal to feel overwhelmed or frustrated during challenging times.
- Take time to understand yourself and what you're going through, including your strengths, abilities, and limitations in relation to the specific challenging situation.
- Reflect on what has helped you cope successfully in the past and what you can do to remain strong.
- Try to regulate your emotions during stressful times, and emergency situations. When facing a challenge, reconnect with yourself by asking these questions:
 - Why am I doing this?
 - What was the main reason I set out on this path?
 - What do I need right now to focus on helping my patients?

Practice self-compassion, an easy-to-remember tool for practicing mindfulness and compassion. It is called **RAIN**:

- **R—RECOGNIZE WHAT'S GOING ON.**
'Recognizing' means consciously acknowledging feelings, thoughts or behaviors that affect you.
- **A—ALLOW THE EXPERIENCE TO BE THERE, JUST AS IT IS.**
'Allowing' means letting the feelings, thoughts or behaviors that you recognized in step 1 to simply exist without any attempt to fix or avoid them.
- **I—INVESTIGATE WITH KINDNESS.**
Once you've recognized what's going on and allowed the experience to be there, focus your attention deeper through investigation. To investigate, rely on your natural curiosity
- the need to know the truth - and focus your attention on your current experience. Ask yourself:
"What needs attention the most?
How am I experiencing it in my body?
What do I need the most?"

When investigating, it is critical to approach your experience in a way that is non-judgmental and kind. This attitude will help create a sufficient sense of safety, making it easier to honestly connect with your fears.
- **N—NON- IDENTIFICATION.**
Self-compassion often develops naturally when you recognize that you are not feeling well. Try to feel what is bothering you the most and what are the most important needs. Then offer some act of care that might address this need. Do you need a message of empowerment and reassurance? Do you need to rest? Try and see which intentional act of kindness helps to comfort you.

Manage your stress, especially in difficult situations and emergencies by using the following steps – *Avoid-Alter-Accept-Adapt*

Avoid the stressors

- Avoid unnecessary stress and “hot-button” topics.
- Learn how to say no, when appropriate
- Limit contact with people who stress you out or bother you
- Take control of your environment and surroundings
- Write down your list of tasks, prioritize the most important things to be accomplished

Alter the stressors

- Express and communicate your feelings openly rather than keeping them for yourself
- Be willing to compromise.
- Be more assertive and communicate limits of your abilities to people around you
- Manage your time efficiently and realistically

Accept the stressors

- Accept the things you cannot change.
- Do not try to control the uncontrollable.
- Practice positive self-talk and focus on positive aspects of your life
- Use humor when appropriate.
- Share your feelings with someone you trust
- Learn from your mistakes and use them as opportunities to grow

Adapt to the stressors

- Take a moment to look at the big picture:
- Adjust your standards and your expectations
- Be more flexible
- Practice thought-stopping techniques to reduce repetitive or distressing thoughts.



Maintain a positive attitude by applying the following:

- Start your day with positive affirmations. Using positive self-talk, such as “today will be a good day” or “I am going to do great today” can help you maintain a positive and optimistic attitude throughout the day.
- Focus on positive things. You might face difficulties and stressors throughout the day. When you face a challenge, focus on the positives, no matter how small or insignificant they seem.
- View mistakes as learning opportunities. Instead of focusing on how you failed, think about what you will do better next time. Start thinking about other ways that can help you prevent making the same mistake in the future. This will support you in turning mistakes into lessons learned, helping you manage problems in the future.
- Surround yourself with positive friends, mentors and co-workers. When you surround yourself with people who have a positive attitude, you will have positive outlooks, positive stories, helpful advice and positive affirmations. This will affect your own thinking, which then affects your behavior and attitude, helping you decrease your stress level and manage stress in a healthy way.
- Transform negative self-talk into positive self-talk. Negative self-talk happens easily and is often hard to notice. These negative thoughts turn into feelings and might reinforce negative conceptions of yourself. When you catch yourself thinking negatively, stop and replace those negative thoughts with positive ones. For example, if you are doubting yourself because of a work-related decision, tell yourself that you will improve the next time and appreciate the learning opportunity.
- Recognize your strengths. Strengths are positive qualities that you have. For example, the abilities and skills that you are efficient in, like treating patients, diagnosing, playing sports, etc. Or positive support systems around you like friends, family, and internal resources.
- Focus on the present moment “here and now. Direct your attention to what is happening here and now, the exact moment you are in. This will allow you to make objective decisions and manage your stress without being emotional.

Relaxation techniques

Practice breathing techniques

- Get in a comfortable position; you can lie on your back in bed or on a mat on the floor; or you can sit in a chair with your shoulders, neck, and head supported against the back of the chair.
- Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest.
- Breathe in through your nose; as you breathe in, feel your belly rise and push your hand out. Your chest should not move.
- Breathe out through your lips as if you were whistling. As you breathe out, feel your belly lower.
- Do this breathing 3 to 10 times. Take your time.
- Notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.

Visualization

- Create an image in your mind of an ideal place for you to relax. It can be real or imaginary, somewhere you feel rested, safe and happy.
- Imagine the place in as much detail as you can – use your senses to make it feel as real as possible.
- Close your eyes (or keep them open if you feel uncomfortable closing them) and take slow, regular breaths through your nose.
- Stay engaged in this exercise for ten to twenty minutes.

Quick muscle relaxation

- Sit in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes (or keep them open if you feel uncomfortable closing them) and focus on your breathing. Slowly breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth and exhale.
- Form a fist with one hand, then squeeze it tightly. Hold the squeeze for a few seconds.
- Slowly open your fingers, feel the difference and notice the tension leaving.
- Try the same with your other hand and repeat.
- Attempt this with different group of muscles, for example, neck, back, legs.

References

International Rescue Committee. (2024). "I have nightmares about explosions": State of mental health among Ukraine's health workforce"

International Rescue Committee. (2026). Training of Trainers of the Mental Health in the Workplace Initiative: Training Handbook

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (2012). Caring for Volunteers: A Psychosocial Support Toolkit.

International Organization for Migration. (2025). MHPSS and livelihood integration (MLI) manual.

Notes

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been working in Ukraine since February 2022. Together with Ukrainian partners, we strive to best serve people affected by the war. The IRC works in the Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, Sumy, Dnipro, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Donetsk regions, supporting communities in major cities and hard-to-reach rural areas closer to the frontlines.

Together with our local partners, we distribute essential basic items, provide cash assistance to families in need, and ensure that children, vulnerable groups and people with special needs are protected. Furthermore, we have been at the forefront of health system recovery and strengthening, through a combination of lifesaving mobile medical units, rural health facility rehabilitation, targeted capacity-building initiatives, and community-based physical and mental health, reinforcing overstretched health services in some of Ukraine's most conflict-affected regions.

Since the onset of the full-scale war, through its direct operations and supporting partners, we have delivered over 300,000 outpatient consultations and 30,000 mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services. More than 150 health facilities have received critical medical supplies, physical rehabilitation, energy resilience and WASH support, and over 10 local health organizations have been supported through strategic partnerships and funding.

We are scaling context-sensitive, needs-based health interventions that are both immediate in impact and sustainable in design. Our programs support access to quality healthcare and psychosocial services for conflict-affected communities, particularly elderly, women, persons with disability and mental health conditions in rural and hard-to-reach communities, as well as healthcare workers, social workers and teachers, while contributing to longer-term health system strengthening.

The IRC is continuing its efforts in Europe and the US to match the growing scale of needs of Ukrainians. We have emergency programs in Poland and are also supporting Ukrainian refugees in Poland, Italy, Greece, Germany, and the UK.