



DOI <https://doi.org/10.26697/Preprint.Stadnik.Melnyk.Mykhaylyshyn.Pypenko.2.2026>

The Influence of the Value of Life and Social Support on the Level of Psychological Distress of an Individual in War Conditions

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1 July, 2026

Abstract

Background and Aim of Study: The ongoing war in Ukraine is putting unprecedented psychological pressure on the population, not only in areas close to the front line, but throughout the country. The main causes of psychological distress include changes in individuals' attitudes towards the value of life and the importance of social support.

The aim of the study: to identify the characteristics of the relationship between the value of life, social support and psychological distress in a wartime.

Material and Methods: In April 2026, a study was conducted amongst 96 students and staff members of Uzhhorod National University, aged between 18 and 45. The study involved administering adapted versions of the Value of Life Questionnaire (VLQ-12), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) via the Google Forms platform.

Results: Research has shown that a relatively low regard for life (an average of 76%) can lead to problems with social support, such as value conflicts and emotional exhaustion. This increases anxiety levels, with 27.1% experiencing moderate anxiety and 22.9% experiencing mild anxiety, and heightens distress. Therefore, a cycle of psychological maladjustment is formed: increased distress leads to a loss of meaning in life, resulting in social isolation, which then leads to further distress.

Conclusions: The findings highlight key areas for psychological support in the context of the full-scale war in Ukraine: improving social connections, strengthening meaningful work centred on the value of life, and addressing levels of anxiety and depression.

Keywords: psychological distress, value of life, social support, the individual in wartime.

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Cite this preprint as:

Stadnik, A. V., Melnyk, Y. B., Mykhaylyshyn, U. B., & Pypenko, I. S. (2026). *The influence of the value of life and social support on the level of psychological distress of an individual in war conditions*. KRPOCH Publishing. (Preprint/KRPOCH). <https://doi.org/10.26697/Preprint.Stadnik.Melnyk.Mykhaylyshyn.Pypenko.2.2026>

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Introduction

The prolonged, large-scale war in Ukraine is having an unprecedentedly stressful impact on the mental health of the population in terms of both scale and duration (Krut et al., 2026; Wilson & Maceviciute, 2025). According to Gradus Research (2024), 77.0% of Ukrainians surveyed in 2024 reported experiencing stress or severe nervous tension. 72.0% of respondents cited the full-scale war as the main source of stress, while 40.0% said they had needed psychological support in the previous six months. Unlike isolated traumatic events, the stress experienced in Ukraine as a result of war is chronic, cumulative and often unrelenting. Living in a constant state of uncertainty gradually depletes people's coping resources, leading to distress. Psychological distress does not necessarily indicate the presence of a mental disorder. In many cases, it is a natural response to abnormal situations (Melnyk et al., 2024). However, prolonged exposure to traumatic factors combined with a lack of recovery and insufficient support can lead to the development of persistent anxiety, depressive or somatoform disorders (González-Calderón et al., 2025; Winger et al., 2016).

One of the ways psychological distress can develop is through changes in an individual's attitude toward the value of their own life and social support (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Stadnik et al., 2026). A devaluation of life, manifested as indifference towards the future, refusal to plan and fatalistic attitudes, rarely arises suddenly. It is a gradual process that depletes the psyche's defence mechanisms, contributing to the development of distress (George & Park, 2016; Melnyk et al., 2020; Mykhaylyshyn et al., 2024). In addition, social networks are undergoing restructuring. While some connections are lost due to migration, family breakups and bereavement, others transform, taking on new functional significance (Jafry et al., 2021; Melnyk et al., 2025; Pypenko et al., 2023; Stadnik et al., 2023). This is precisely why a systematic analysis of the value of life and social support as factors contributing to psychological distress is a pressing scientific and practical issue.

The aim of the study

To examine the features of the relationship between the value of life, social support and psychological distress in wartime, with the aim of identifying areas where psychological assistance is needed.

Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted among 96 students and staff members aged 18 to 45 at Uzhhorod National University in April 2026. Of these, 5 (5.2%) were men and 91 (94.8%) were women. Due to the war in Ukraine, the study was conducted by sharing psychological questionnaires via Google Forms with potential participants. All groups of participants were also observed during remote and in-person sessions. Individual interviews were conducted as required. The Value of Life Questionnaire (VLQ-12) was used to assess participants' perception of the value of life. Developed by the KRPOCH Scientific Research Institute (Melnyk & Stadnik, 2026), it was validated among young people in the context of the war in Ukraine (Stadnik et al., 2026). The VLQ-12 is a diagnostic tool that can be used to assess individuals of different age groups. Its application is particularly relevant during crises and extreme circumstances, when a person's priorities in life or their attitude towards the value of their own life may change. The questionnaire contains 12 statements. Each statement is scored on the following scale: 1 point – strongly disagree; 2 points – disagree; 3 points – somewhat disagree; 4 points – somewhat agree; 5 points – agree; 6 points – strongly agree. The total score is calculated by taking the correction coefficient into account. For negative responses (strongly disagree, disagree, or somewhat disagree), a correction coefficient of 1 is applied. For positive responses (somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree), a correction coefficient of 2 is applied. Therefore, a single statement can receive a score ranging from 1 to 12 points. The total possible score across all statements ranges from 12 to 144 points. In addition, the questionnaire comprises four criteria (with three statements for each), which reflect the extent to which various components of the value of life are manifested: individual characteristics; personal experience; social environment; and cultural-historical context. It should be noted that low scores on a particular criterion do not constitute an abnormality in themselves, as this requires further investigation using specialised research methods.

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) questionnaire was used to measure perceptions of social support. This reliable and user-friendly tool can be used to identify individuals who may be at risk of social isolation or loneliness. It can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions designed to strengthen social support. The MSPSS comprises 12 items, each of which is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate a greater perceived level of social support from three sources: family, friends, and close associates. According to the MSPSS scoring guidelines, an average score of between 0 and 1.9 indicates low social support; between 2 and 4 indicates moderate support; and between 4.1 and 6 indicates high support. The present study used an adapted Ukrainian version of the methodology (Melnyk & Stadnik, 2023).

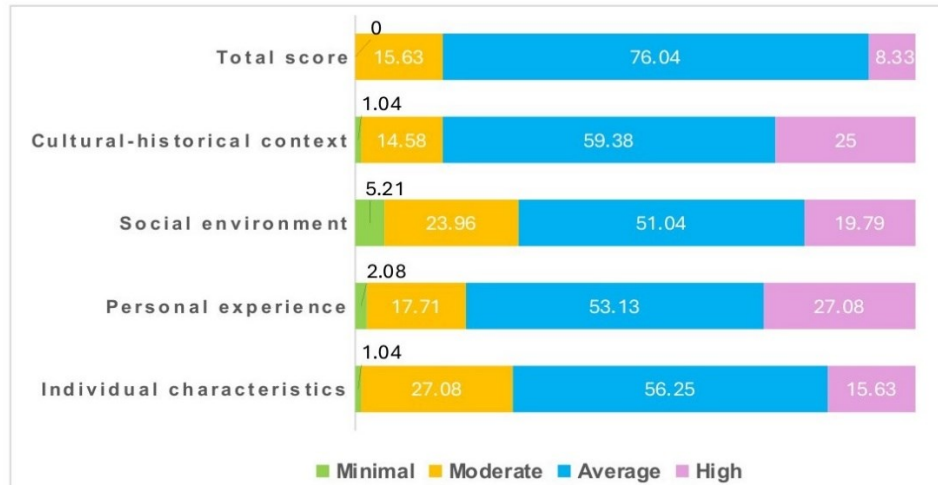
The Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) was used in the study to assess the severity of psychological distress and its components (anxiety and depression) on a self-report basis. This scale is easy to use and the results are simple to analyse, making it suitable for the initial screening of anxiety and depression. The HADS comprises 14 items, which are evenly distributed across two subscales: seven items assess anxiety and seven assess depression. Each item focuses on emotional symptoms, such as feelings of tension or restlessness. Respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they experience these symptoms on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (none) to 3 (maximum severity). This structure allows for a thorough evaluation of anxiety and depression, which are key indicators of psychological distress. According to the guidelines, higher scores indicate a higher level of anxiety and depression (Zigmond & Snaith, 1983). The cut-off points for the HADS subscales are as follows: 0–7: normal; 8–10: mild; 11–15: moderate; 16–21: severe.

Results

Figure 1 shows indicators of the value of life of individuals during wartime.

Figure 1

Levels of the Value of Life of Individuals during Wartime (%)



As we can see, the vast majority of respondents scored an average (76.0%) or moderate (15.6%) on the overall value of life scale. Although only 8.3% of respondents scored highly, no respondents scored the lowest on the overall value of life indicator. This suggests that the vast majority of those surveyed have moderate psychological characteristics, are well-adapted to their living conditions and have satisfactory, neutral relationships with their family and friends. They are interested in national culture and religion, concerned about their personal health, and cautious about putting themselves in danger.

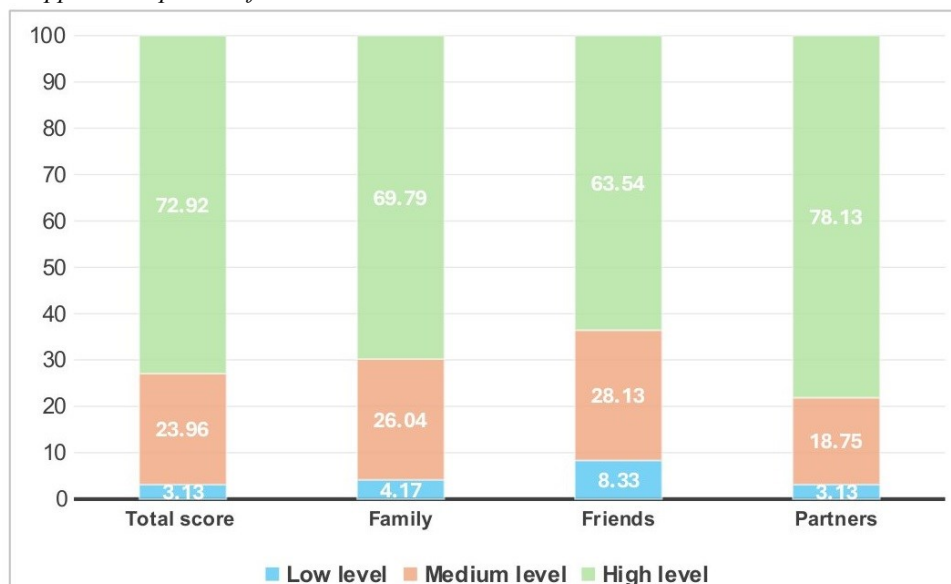
Examining the components of the value of life in greater detail reveals that the highest proportions of respondents who place a high or medium value on life are related to cultural and historical context (25.0% and 59.4%, respectively) and personal experience (27.1% and 53.1%, respectively). This indicates that their worldview is significantly influenced by their upbringing, education, personal knowledge and experience, national cultural heritage and religious beliefs when it comes to their values regarding the value of life. The lowest figures for the minimum level of regard for life are observed in relation to the social environment factor (5.2%), which suggests problems in their social circles, such as with colleagues and friends.

A study was subsequently conducted to assess the level of social support among the respondents using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) questionnaire. This measures an individual's perception of external social support and identifies those prone to social isolation or loneliness. This study used three components to reflect participants' overall perception of social support: family, friends, and close partners.

Figure 2 shows the levels of social support components for individuals in wartime.

Figure 2

Levels of Social Support Components for Individuals in Wartime



As we can see, the vast majority of respondents reported high (72.9%) and moderate (24.0%) levels of social support. Further analysis revealed that respondents received the greatest amount of support from their partners (78.1%) and families (69.8%). This was most often manifested as care and understanding during difficult times, providing an opportunity to talk things through, offering practical help with everyday matters (such as lending money or providing food), giving advice on solving problems and supporting difficult life decisions. Meanwhile, a low level of social support was particularly prevalent among friends, with 8.3% of respondents reporting this.

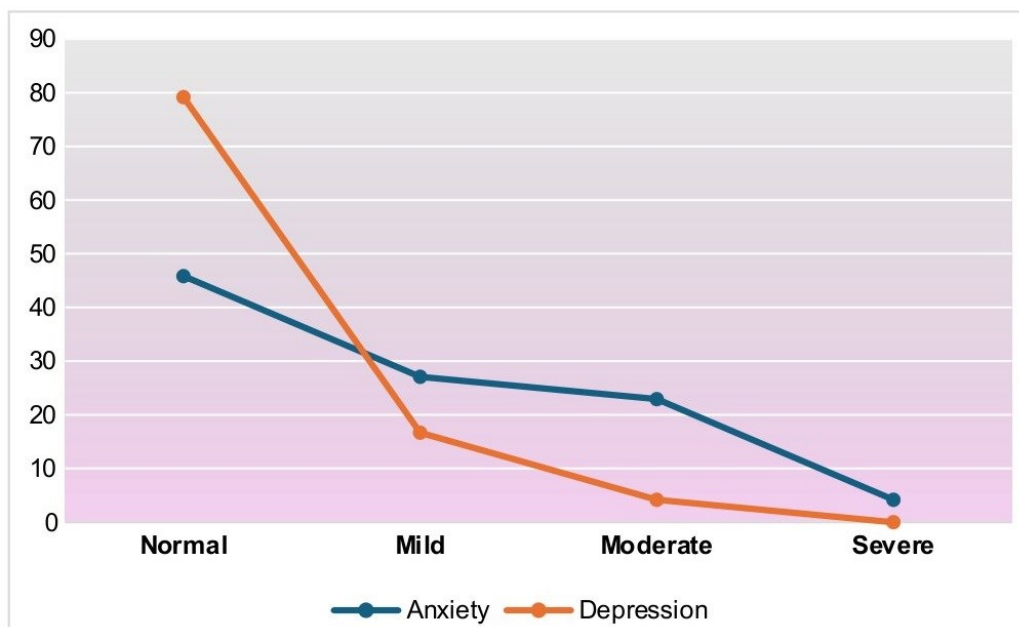
This confirms the issues identified in the previous study (VLQ-12) regarding the social environment. In our view, this is linked to the significant impact of war on friendships. War radically alters friendships, often dividing people into those who remain close during the most difficult moments and those whose paths diverge forever. War acts as a harsh filter, revealing values, empathy, and a willingness to support one another. Differences in political views, language or attitudes towards events, or indifference on the part of one of the parties, can erode trust. A lack of resources to maintain the relationship due to personal stress, fatigue, and the struggle for survival leads to people naturally drifting apart.

Therefore, it can be surmised that a protracted war affects an individual's life values and social support. However, it should be emphasised that a high level of social support from partners and family, and a low level from friends, reflects the psychological problems experienced by individuals in a wartime context, such as conflicts of values and emotional exhaustion.

Further research aimed to determine the level of anxiety and depression experienced by individuals during the war (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Indicators of Anxiety and Depression in Individuals during Wartime (%)



In the present study, most respondents had moderate (27.1%), mild (22.9%) or severe (4.2%) anxiety levels. Normal levels of anxiety were observed in less than half of the respondents (45.8%). These levels were linked to uncertainty about the future, a loss of control, and threats to safety during the war. At the same time, the majority of respondents had depression levels within the normal range (79.2%).

The prevalence of anxiety, a universal adaptive response, indicates the extent and severity of distress experienced during wartime. During this period, individuals attempt to activate coping strategies to overcome numerous problems (Kessler et al., 2005). These strategies can manifest as tension, fear, vigilance, obsessive rumination about threats, insomnia and irritability. All of these symptoms are linked to the mind's mobilisation in the face of danger. Anxiety can perpetuate exhaustion and insomnia, while decreased activity levels can exacerbate feelings of helplessness and anxiety.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the specifics of the relationship between the value of life, social support and psychological distress in individuals in a wartime context, with a view to identifying possible avenues for psychological support.

The issue of the value of life occupies a special place in psychology. This is because it is considered a vital aspect of mental health, linked not only to human survival, but also to a person's purpose in life and their understanding of their existence.

According to contemporary psychology, the value of life manifests as a sense of conscious purpose, a connection to others and inner coherence in one's life story (Hill, 2018).

According to Frankl (1972), the primary motivating force for human beings is the desire to find purpose and meaning in life. This shapes one's life values, which remain intact even when a person is facing difficult circumstances, loss, or suffering. Yalom (1980) regards these values and the search for meaning as key to overcoming suffering and extreme situations in life. Humanistic psychology regards the value of life as essential for psychological well-being (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961).

The theory of self-determination has significantly contributed to our understanding of life's value. It asserts that three basic psychological needs are required for mental health and full development: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is defined as experiencing one's actions as voluntary and consistent with one's own values. Competence is defined as a sense of effectiveness and mastery, while relatedness is defined as the experience of warmth, belonging, and feeling valued by others (George & Park, 2016). Martela and Steger (2016) define the value of life as a sense of life's significance. This relates to the ability to attribute the right value to life, and to recognise that life is worth living.

King and Hicks (2021) argue that experiencing the value of life involves at least three components: purpose (a sense of direction), significance (the feeling that life has value and weight), and coherence (understanding one's life). Significance is particularly important. It is the way a person perceives their own life as intrinsically valuable, worthy and justified. This perception transforms life from a series of events into a psychological reality worth preserving, developing and protecting.

Our analysis of the literature has revealed that a strong sense of the value and meaning of life serves two key functions: a motivational function, providing an internal guide for the conscious and responsible development of reasons for living and spiritual values, and a regulatory function, enabling individuals to set life goals and envisage the future (Greenwald et al., 2026; Atran et al., 2025).

Recognising the value of life has two main functions: a protective function, which reduces psychological distress in crisis situations (Ventriglio et al., 2025); and an integrative function, which promotes post-traumatic growth and helps individuals to overcome traumatic events and integrate into society (Okasha et al., 2026).

We believe that the concept of the value of life is key to understanding personal functioning, mental health and a person's ability to adapt. This value is shaped by a complex interplay of individual characteristics, personal experience, social environment and cultural and historical context (Melnyk & Stadnik, 2026). Acting as an internal psychological resource, the value of life can help reduce anxiety and depression levels, lower the risk of suicidal behaviour, foster a positive self-image and encourage the development of adaptive coping strategies (Melnyk et al., 2025; Stadnik et al., 2026).

Further theoretical research has shown that social support is defined as a system of interpersonal interactions which provides individuals with resources to help them cope with stress and integrate into society (Dirkzwager et al., 2003). Most researchers identify four main types of social support: emotional support (such as empathy, care and a sense of acceptance); informational support (such as advice and guidance on how to navigate a situation); instrumental support (such as practical help and resources); and evaluative support (such as feedback and confirmation of one's own worth and competence) (Jafry et al., 2021; Wilson & Maceviciute, 2025).

According to the theory proposed by Cohen and Wills (1985), social support does not operate in a linear fashion. Instead, it acts as a buffer that mitigates the negative impact of stressors on an individual's mental health. When support levels are high, intense stress causes less severe distress. Conversely, a lack of support can lead to significant psychological distress even in the presence of moderate stressors. In times of war, the importance of this function becomes particularly apparent, as social media serves as both a source of support and a potential target for destruction. Forced migration breaks up communities, mobilisation separates families, and the loss of loved ones leaves people without their most important sources of support at the very time they need them most (Stadnik et al., 2023).

Research confirms that social support is key to promoting mental health. For example, students with low levels of social support were six times more likely to experience symptoms of depression than those with high levels (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009).

Nazzari et al. (2017) also highlight the positive impact of social support and relationships. They argue that individuals who receive social support and engage in social interaction after witnessing war experience lower levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Social support is also one of the most important factors in human well-being, positively impacting health and helping to prevent stress (Dirkzwager et al., 2003).

Further analysis of the literature has shown that psychological distress is defined as a negative emotional state that arises in response to significant stressors. It is accompanied by a sense of suffering, reduced functioning, and depleted adaptive resources. Unlike eustress, which motivates the individual, distress is disorganising in nature. If it becomes chronic, it can lead to the development of anxiety and depressive disorders (González-Calderón & Baile, 2025).

In wartime, distress exhibits specific characteristics. Firstly, rather than being triggered by a single event, it is often caused by prolonged and recurring events such as shelling, air-raid alerts and news of the deaths of acquaintances. Secondly, it occurs against the backdrop of an objective threat to life, which triggers fundamental existential fears. Thirdly, it is often accompanied by moral trauma, which involves feelings of guilt, shame or anger associated with events that contradict an individual's moral convictions. These characteristics necessitate a broader understanding of distress that goes beyond a purely symptomatic approach, incorporating the value- and meaning-based dimensions of the experience. Consequently, distress influences the formation of life values (Braun, 2026).

Summarising the theoretical analysis enables us to categorise the main manifestations of psychological distress arising from issues relating to the value of life and social support (Table 1).

Table 1*Manifestations of Psychological Distress Arising from Issues Relating to the Value of Life and Social Support*

Component	Psychological symptoms	Mental and social disorders
The value of life	A sense that the future and the past have lost their value; a feeling that existence is precarious and fleeting; a decline in motivation to make plans; suicidal thoughts; a loss of life's meaning and spirituality; existential anxiety	Disturbances in individual characteristics (psychological maladjustment), personal experience (history of psychological maladjustment), the social environment (social maladjustment) and the cultural and historical context (cultural and historical antipathy and agnosia)
Social support	Distrust of those around them, feelings of loneliness, worthlessness and hopelessness, low spirits, fear of socialising, and reduced self-esteem	Social isolation, aggression or withdrawal, alcohol and drug abuse, antisocial behaviour (offences, breaches of social norms and rules), social phobias
Psychological distress	Anxiety, depression, disturbances in appetite and sleep, autonomic nervous system disorders, emotional exhaustion, chronic fatigue, anhedonia, irritability, disturbances in appetite and sleep, aprosexia, headaches, etc.	Втрата життєвих цінностей, знецінення майбутнього та минулого (індивідуальна, соціальна, культурна дезадаптація). Соціальна ізоляція (втрата емпатії, пасивність, конфлікти та агресія, зниження працездатності, сімейні кризи, нездатність виконувати звичні соціальні функції)

Thus, theoretical research confirms our hypothesis of an interplay between the value of life, social support, and psychological distress. Diagnostic studies also showed that a relatively low level of life satisfaction (an average of 76.0%) leads to problems with social support, such as value conflicts and emotional exhaustion. This increases anxiety levels (an average of 27.1%, ranging from moderate to severe), which in turn increases distress. Consequently, a cycle of psychological maladjustment is formed: increased distress leads to a devaluation of life, resulting in social isolation and further distress. Breaking this cycle at any stage (by restoring social ties, engaging in meaningful work that reaffirms the value of life or addressing anxiety levels) has the potential to prevent further psychological maladjustment.

Conclusions

The ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine is therefore having an unprecedented impact on people's mental health. Our research has shown that the concept of the value of life is important in determining an individual's quality of functioning and their ability to adapt. It is a complex system comprising individual characteristics, personal experience, the social environment, and cultural and historical context. Social support is defined as a system of interpersonal interactions that provides individuals with the necessary resources to cope with stress, promote mental wellbeing, and integrate into society.

The main types of social support are emotional (empathy, care), informational (advice, guidance on how to navigate a situation), instrumental (practical help, resources) and evaluative (feedback). The value of life and social support are factors that influence an individual's level of psychological distress in wartime. Psychological distress is a negative emotional state arising in response to significant personal factors. It is characterised by suffering, impaired functioning, depleted adaptive resources and a diminished sense of life's value. Psychological distress is a negative emotional state arising in response to significant personal factors. It is characterised by suffering, impaired functioning, depleted adaptive resources and a diminished sense of life's value.

The diagnostic studies we conducted revealed a predominance of moderate and average levels of the value of life (76.0% and 15.6% respectively) amongst the participants, which indicates an average level of their psychological and social adaptation, as well as the presence of a sense of purpose in life and spirituality. Meanwhile, the lowest scores for the minimum level of life satisfaction were observed in relation to the social environment factor (5.2%), indicating problems with interactions with colleagues and friends. The majority of respondents reported a high level of social support (72.9%). At the same time, most of the support received by the participants came from their partners (78.1%) and family members (69.8%). Meanwhile, the lowest level of social support was found among friends (8.3%). This suggests that they experience psychological issues with those around them, such as conflicts of values and emotional exhaustion, which affect their level of psychological distress. Further research revealed that only a minority of those surveyed (45.8%) experienced normal levels of anxiety – a finding that indicates a significant level of psychological distress amongst individuals in a wartime context. This is linked to uncertainty about the future, loss of personal control, and threats to safety. It has a negative impact on social relationships and personal values.

In this study, we observed the formation of a cycle of psychological maladjustment. Increased distress leads to a devaluation of life, which increases social isolation and exacerbates distress further. This calls for measures to break the cycle. In the context of full-scale war in Ukraine, the key areas of psychological support should therefore be improving social connections, strengthening the sense of purpose that comes with meaningful work, and addressing levels of anxiety and depression.

Limitations

This study has some potential limitations, primarily because it was conducted in a country under martial law. Consequently, the respondents were living amidst a real, protracted and brutal war involving air raid alerts, power cuts, heating and water shortages, and significant loss of life and injury. Secondly, the study's scope is limited to students at a single university in Uzhhorod. The sample size is insufficient and heterogeneous, consisting mainly of women aged 18–45. The third limitation also relates to the sampling procedure. It was carried out over a short period of three weeks, which reduced the number of participants. The fourth limitation is that students' self-reports may have been influenced by the desire to appear socially desirable. Despite these limitations, the present study undoubtedly holds theoretical and practical value.

Ethical Approval

The psychological methods and research procedure used in the study were approved by the Committee on Ethics and Research Integrity of the Scientific Research Institute KRPOCH (protocol No. 028-1/SRIKRPOCH dated 10.08.2025).

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to all the students of Uzhhorod National University, Ukraine, who, despite the difficulties of martial law in the country, found the time to complete the questionnaires for this study.

Funding Source

This research did not receive any outside funding or support.

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