












REVIEW

Development of Psychological Support Programs for Military Personnel Considering Combat Experience (Ukrainian Case)

Desarrollo de programas de apoyo psicológico para personal militar que tenga experiencia en combate (caso de Ucrania)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Russian aggression against Ukraine has revealed the need not only to counter direct military aggression, but also in the development of effective programs for psychological support of those soldiers who directly performed their duties on the contact line. The purpose of the article is to explore approaches to the development of psychological support programs for military personnel (on the example of Ukraine).

Method: to realize this goal, the method of content analysis of professional scientific literature and the method of comparison were used, that allowed us to trace changes in the understanding of the ways of reintegrating veterans of into society and peaceful life.

Results: it was found that the inclusion of educational elements in psychological support programs will contribute to accelerate the recovery process and allow for the partial involvement of servicemen to their rehabilitation. The main components of psychological support programs psychological support programs include individual and group psychotherapy, psychotherapeutic interventions, reintegration programs, educational activities, and accessibility of assistance. The experience of Ukraine has shown that the use of collective support and active involvement of specialists in the development and testing of reintegration programs has a positive impact.

Conclusions: to further implement effective programs of psychological support and reintegration psychological support and reintegration programs, it is necessary to provide additional social guarantees to help servicemen find their place in civilian life after completing their service.

Keywords: Post-Traumatic Stress; Psychotherapeutic Interventions; Reintegration of Veterans; Psychological Rehabilitation; Combat Injuries.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la agresión rusa contra Ucrania ha puesto de manifiesto la necesidad no sólo de contrarrestar la agresión militar directa, sino también de desarrollar programas eficaces de apoyo psicológico para los militares que desempeñan sus funciones directamente en la línea de combate. El objetivo del artículo es estudiar los enfoques de desarrollo de programas de apoyo psicológico para el personal militar (tomando

como ejemplo Ucrania).

Método: para lograr este objetivo, se utilizó el método de análisis de contenido de la literatura científica profesional y el método de comparación, que nos permitió rastrear los cambios en la comprensión de las formas de reintegración de los veteranos a la sociedad y a la vida pacífica.

Resultados: se encontró que la inclusión de elementos educativos en los programas de apoyo psicológico contribuirá a acelerar el proceso de recuperación y permitirá la participación parcial de los militares en su rehabilitación. Los principales componentes de los programas de apoyo psicológico incluyen la psicoterapia individual y de grupo, las intervenciones psicoterapéuticas, los programas de reintegración, las actividades educativas y la accesibilidad de la asistencia. La experiencia de Ucrania ha demostrado que el uso del apoyo colectivo y la participación activa de los especialistas en el desarrollo y la prueba de los programas de reintegración tiene un impacto positivo.

Conclusiones: para seguir implementando programas efectivos de apoyo psicológico y de reintegración, es necesario brindar garantías sociales adicionales para ayudar a los militares a encontrar su lugar en la vida civil después de completar su servicio.

Palabras clave: Estrés Postraumático; Intervenciones Psicoterapéuticas; Reintegración de Veteranos; Rehabilitación Psicológica; Lesiones de Combate.

INTRODUCTION

Servicemen and women who took part in military operations faced numerous psychological challenges that can have an impact on the development of their psychological health. Prolonged exposure to extreme combat conditions, a sense of constant threat to life and health, loss of comrades-in-arms, guilt, stress, and, after completion of service, the need to adapt to the civilian life they were used to after military service, create significant obstacles in the lives of veterans. One of the most common dangers is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which occurs when a person faces the consequences of difficult life events that could leave a deep emotional imprint on the human psyche.⁽¹⁾ During the period of PTSD, it is extremely important to maintain internal balance and the ability to adapt to civilian life. The psychological state of servicemen and their return to civilian life is a multifaceted process that requires a comprehensive approach. The researchers paid attention to the American experience of counteracting psychological trauma with the use of medications,⁽²⁾ the experience of creating specialized programs for reintegration into civilian life,^(3,4) the challenges faced by vulnerable American veterans when leaving the service,^(5,6) and the impact of emotional intelligence in the military environment.^(7,8) Representations of traumatic experience among demobilized Ukrainian servicemen with post-traumatic problems,⁽⁹⁾ methods of diagnosis and treatment of PTSD in the military were also studied.^(10,11) One of the important factors affecting the process of recovery and order is the reintegration of veterans into society.⁽¹²⁾ This approach avoids fixation on negative experiences and allows them to better perceive reality and find constructive ways to resolve difficult situations. This is facilitated by psychological rehabilitation after combat trauma, a topic that is becoming increasingly prominent in contemporary scientific discourse.⁽¹³⁾ Although the proposed study will primarily focus on the specifics of overcoming combat trauma, additional relevance may also be due to the fact that in the modern world, the number of stressful and traumatic events is increasing: military conflicts, natural disasters, pandemics, or complex personal losses have a profound effect on the psyche. In such circumstances, the search for effective methods of supporting mental health becomes a necessity.

The proposed article aims to explore approaches to developing psychological support programs for military personnel (on the example of Ukraine) who have been through combat operations. The realization of this goal implies the identification of several tasks. First of all, we are talking about analyzing the existing scientific research on this issue, determining the peculiarities of the formation of PTSD, and organizing psychological rehabilitation of military personnel with gradual integration into normal social life.

METHOD

In order to further fulfill the purpose of the study on approaches to the development of psychological support programs for military personnel (on the example of Ukraine) who have been through combat operations, the scientific method of content analysis of scientific literature and the method of comparison were primarily used. For this reason, the proposed study is a mixed-methods research.

Data analysis

The search for professional literature was conducted using the PRISMA scientific approach. In particular, certain types of scientific sources were chosen to include research in the formation of relevant conclusions. First of all, attention was paid to such scientific and metric databases as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.

The following keywords were entered into the search databases: post-traumatic stress, psychotherapeutic interventions, reintegration of veterans, psychological rehabilitation, combat trauma, Ukrainian experience. At the beginning of the study, the authors had nine publications that were used to write similar articles earlier. Initially, 1680 items of relevant literature were traced in these databases. At the first stage of selection, all repetitions were rejected - 397 items. Later, we eliminated those results that had relevant words only in titles and keywords. The resulting 438 items were omitted due to the following exclusion criteria:

1. Date range: from 2015 to 2024.
2. The study describes the elements of psychological rehabilitation and integration of the military into civilian life.
3. The study defines the formation of the PTRS.
4. The study describes different strategies for recovery from traumatic events.
5. Language of the study: English. Those studies that included comprehensive English-language abstracts were also included (see fig 1).

The method of systematization and coding was used to analyze the data. In particular, the sources found were divided into key topics: post-traumatic stress, psychotherapeutic interventions, reintegration of veterans, psychological rehabilitation, and combat trauma. This made it possible to systematize the results. Comparisons with other scientific results will allow us to refute or confirm the theses.

Another important method was observation, which was conducted among participants who had experienced traumatic events during military service. In particular, direct observation of participants in their natural environment or during specially organized meetings played an important role. This made it possible to obtain impartial data on the behavior of victims in real-life situations.

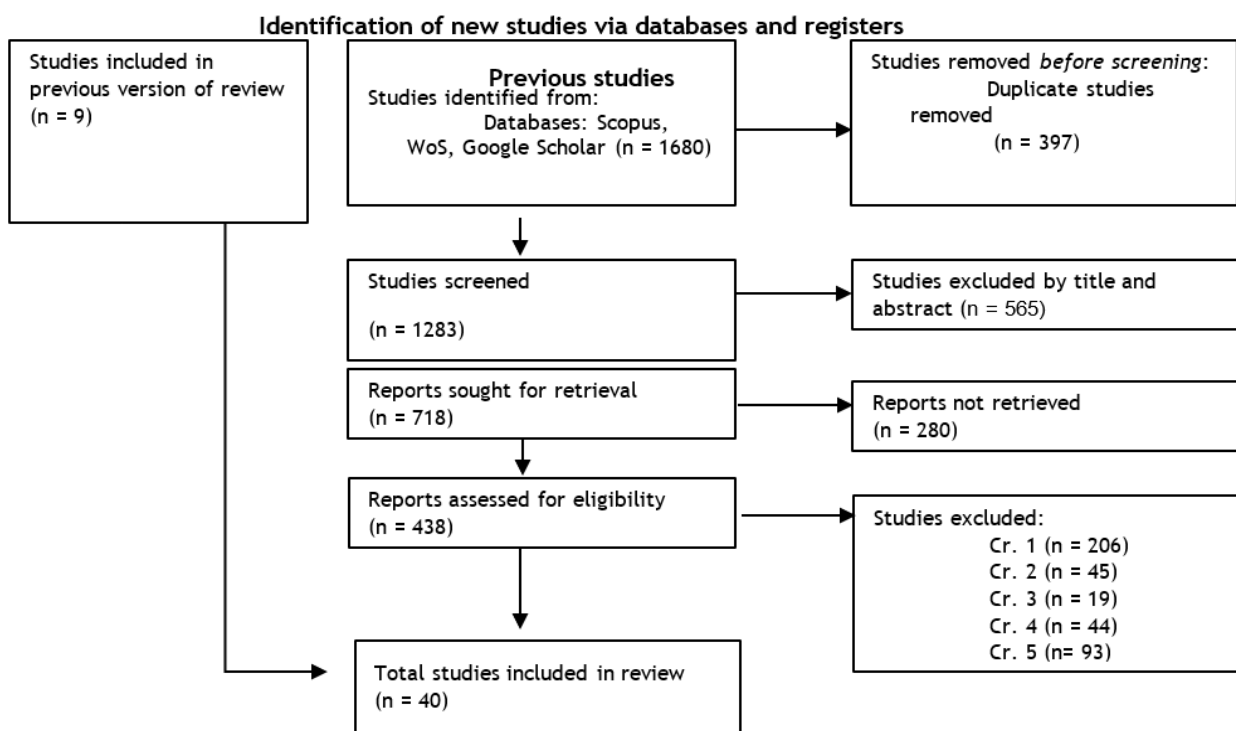


Figure 1. Using the PRISMA approach

RESULTS

According to scientific estimates, most people in general have experienced a traumatic event at least once in their lives. In particular, experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) conducted a study on the impact of trauma in 24 developed European countries (more than 68 000 clinical cases were processed).^(14,15) Accordingly, 70 % of respondents indicated that they had experienced a traumatic incident at least once in their lives.⁽¹⁵⁾

However, in the United States, where a separate methodology was used to summarize the results of a medical and sociological study, this figure was generally recorded at 85 %.^(15,16) A significant portion of the respondents were military personnel who participated in peacekeeping operations of the US government and served in hot spots in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A significant number of trauma survivors will have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁽¹⁷⁾ At the same

time, most people who have experienced a traumatic event recover naturally.

Identifying the causes and aggravating variable symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is crucial due to the high level of pain and functional impairment associated with PTSD. Military personnel are at particular risk, as the level of stress and its impact on the psyche is extremely high. The Armed Forces of Ukraine have not yet conducted such measurements, but it is already clear that there is a need to develop the necessary programs for the reintegration of servicemen into civilian life.⁽¹⁸⁾

So, post-traumatic stress disorder is a complex of symptoms, mental and physical disorders that develop after a trauma. The latter can be both psychological and physical (e.g., traumatic brain injury). PTSD does not develop overnight; there are several important stages on the way to its formation, which are primarily characterized by different durations.

At the same time, the complex of combat stressors varies among servicemen. It can be a combat injury, the death of a comrade-in-arms, injury or loss of limbs, or severe wounds.⁽¹⁹⁾ These factors are important for further psychological rehabilitation, as psychologists, knowing the cause, will have a better chance of providing active and effective assistance.

The researchers propose several key aspects that are extremely important for the further development of psychological support and rehabilitation programs for Ukrainian soldiers with significant combat experience, which in the future may also be useful for soldiers from other countries.^(6,9,20)

First of all, the psychological state of the military is significantly deteriorating as a result of prolonged and continuous stay in the combat zone, which has a direct impact on the formation of high levels of PTSD, psychological depression and many other anxiety disorders of the mental system (including the development of suicidal syndrome).

Also, based on the analysis, it was found that effective psychological support programs should take into account the specific combat experience of military service.^(21,22)

First of all, there is a need to adapt psychological rehabilitation programs to the specific conditions of military service, the duration of their participation in combat, and to identify individual psychological characteristics, which will allow to direct therapy in the right direction. In addition, the authors emphasized the implementation of an important method of collective support, consisting of group therapy (including support for active military personnel - combat sworn brothers),^(7,9,23) which allows for a more effective recovery process from the effects of stress.

The analysis of existing practices has also shown that the integration of servicemen into the process of developing psychological rehabilitation programs is extremely important.⁽²⁴⁾ Military personnel with proper combat experience are able to properly advise medical professionals, who, in turn, can more effectively use the available arsenal of therapies, making psychological support more effective. In addition, there is a need to use training activities aimed at educating servicemen and their families on how to deal with stress disorders in the future.

The use of psychological support programs for servicemen and women is now reasonably considered to be the main process of reintegration into civilian life, overcoming the effects of stress and psychological traumatic events. Researchers note the main elements of such programs, emphasizing the importance of their comprehensive use to combat combat trauma (see table 1).

Table 1. The main elements of psychological support programs

Element	Characteristics
Individual and group psychotherapy	These programs consist of individual sessions with psychologists or psychotherapists (depending on the degree of trauma). ^(25,26) During these sessions, servicemen and women will be able to discuss their experiences. The main goal is to develop stress management skills and overcome traumatic events. Similarly, group sessions allow servicemen to share their own experience of overcoming problems.
Psychotherapeutic interventions	These are special medical techniques that aim to improve mental health and change destructive behavioral patterns. In particular, cognitive behavioral therapy is aimed at changing negative thoughts. ^(27,28) This makes it possible to correct negative behavioral manifestations. Psychodynamic therapy is based on methods of studying subconscious conflicts that can affect a person's behavior and emotional state. ^(10,29) At the same time, it also emphasizes the importance of self-development and self-expression, which helps to distract from negative thoughts. It is important to note that psychotherapeutic interventions can be adapted to the individual needs of each patient.
Reintegration programs	The Ukrainian experience shows the importance of reintegrating military personnel before they return to civilian life. This includes special programs that provide opportunities for vocational training, social support and treatment. ^(3,4,12) An important element of such programs is the use of the family as a recovery environment, meaning that reintegration programs also include appropriate work with the families of servicemen and women so that they can effectively help their loved ones during rehabilitation.

Training and accessibility of assistance	In such circumstances, conducting appropriate training becomes a necessary part of organizing reintegration programs. Educational activities are primarily aimed at military personnel, who are encouraged to cope with stress symptoms on their own. ^(30,31,32) However, it is also important to note the need for training for military families and, importantly, for psychologists. ^(18,33) The latter aspect is often neglected, but military psychological trauma has a different nature than the corresponding trauma in civilian life.
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Given the peculiarities of combat experience, the development of appropriate programs for psychological support and reintegration into civilian life should take into account the cultural and social realities of each individual country. The formation of relevant international experience consists in creating certain algorithms of action, but the content of these algorithms may vary.

DISCUSSION

This article aims to analyze approaches to the development of psychological support programs for military veterans (on the example of Ukraine). As a result, the article examines the peculiarities of the formation of PSSPs, the organization of psychological rehabilitation of military personnel with gradual integration into normal civilian life. In particular, it was found that a significant number of servicemen will have post-traumatic stress disorder.

Military personnel are at particular risk because their level of stress is extremely high. These results confirm the researchers' opinion that PTSD is generally more common in military personnel, as the stress on their mental system is much more significant.^(1,5,19,34) Accordingly, the researchers' views that military rehabilitation programs are somewhat different from the usual reintegration programs for people with PTSD are further proved.^(14,35)

The proposed article determines that the complex of combat stressors among servicemen is not the same (combat injury, death of a combat sworn brother, injury or loss of limbs, severe injuries). The psychological state of the military significantly deteriorates as a result of prolonged and continuous stay in the combat zone.

Accordingly, effective psychological support programs should take into account the specific combat experience of military service and its duration).^(17,36) This confirms the conclusions of scientists that the process of developing PTSD in general has a rather individual course, and therefore taking into account the personal experience of a serviceman is an important element for his further treatment.^(37,38)

Taking into account individual characteristics will contribute to the formation of an appropriate therapy trajectory, which, as scientists rightly note, will require a comprehensive approach.⁽³⁹⁾ The proposed results also demonstrate that other military personnel should be involved in the process of psychological rehabilitation, as they will be able to advise medical professionals with their experience.

The importance of this component in the exchange of knowledge and practical experience has also been noted by other researchers. However, there is also a scientific position that military personnel should not be involved in rehabilitation, as only specialists can provide professional medical and psychological assistance.^(26,40)

Such versions require further research and are not currently supported by most scholars. On the contrary, the use of people with military experience will allow doctors to better understand the nature of the problem and organize therapy accordingly.

CONCLUSIONS

The integration of an educational component into psychological support programs will make it possible to intensify the recovery process and shift part of the rehabilitation to the loved ones of servicemen.

The main elements of psychological support programs are individual and group psychotherapy, psychotherapeutic interventions, reintegration programs, training and accessibility of assistance.

Ukrainian experience has also demonstrated that the use of collective support methods and the active involvement of specialists in the creation and testing of reintegration programs have a positive effect. The continued use of effective psychological support and reintegration programs will require additional social guarantees that will enable servicemen to find themselves in civilian life after completing their service.

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