PECULIARITIES OF PROVIDING PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE IN AN ONLINE FORMAT

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Summary

Introduction: In the context of growing social instability and tension, the problem of preserving and restoring the mental health of Ukrainian society is becoming increasingly important. This problem is caused by the need to provide quality psychological services to a lot of people in the shortest possible time.

Aim. To demonstrate and empirically prove the effectiveness of online psychological counseling.

Materials and methods. The study involved 820 people – Ukrainian citizens living in Ukraine, Europe and the United States. The sample consisted of 560 women and 260 men aged 18-56. This research was conducted in April-November 2023. Research methods: Stress Resilience Test, Depression Self-Assessment Scale, Anxiety Self-Assessment Scale, PCL-5 PTSD Manifestation Self-Assessment Scale.

Results and discussion. The total sample was divided into control and experimental groups. The control group (CG) included 440 people. The experimental group (EG) included 380 people who voluntarily sought help from a psychologist. The psychodiagnostics conducted at the first stage of the study (April 2023) showed the following results: in the CG, a low level of stress resistance was found in 52 %, an average level of stress resistance was found in 36.4 %, and a high level of stress resistance was found in 11.3 %; in the EG, a low level of stress resistance was found in 50 %, an average level of stress resistance in 34.2 %, and a high level in 15.8 %. The presence of depression was detected in 81.8 % of the CG and 92.1 % of the EG. The presence of anxiety in 72.7 % of the CG and 78.9 % in the EG. PTSD was diagnosed in 61.3 % of the CG and 71 % of the EG. In November 2023, after the formative stage of the study in the EG, the following results were obtained: in the CG, a low level of stress resistance was found in 47.7 %, an average level of stress resistance was found in 43.2 %, a high level of stress resistance was found in 9 %; in the EG, a low level of stress resistance was found in 26.3 %, an average level of stress resistance in 44.7 %, and a high level in 28.9 %. The presence of depression – in the CG in 88.6 %, in the EG – in 47.3 %. The presence of anxiety in 61.3 % of the CG and 28.9 % in the EG. PTSD was diagnosed in 72.7 % of the CG and 52.6 % of the EG.

Conclusions. The results of the study confirm the effectiveness of online psychological counseling. Compared to the results of the ascertaining stage, the formative stage of the study revealed significant changes in psychoemotional states in the EG, while no significant changes were found in the CG.

Keywords: psychological help, online psychological counseling, stress, psychodiagnostics, psychoemotional state

INTRODUCTION

The problem of negative psychoemotional states has been one of the central issues in modern psychological and psychiatric practice for many years. This is due to the high prevalence among the general population, pronounced economic losses associated with social and labor maladjustment, disability, and suicide-related mortality [5, p.7]. In times of global crises, pandemics and wars, the problem is exacerbated and requires the development of new protocols for both physicians and psychologists.
Today’s world requires professionals who are able to work successfully and efficiently with a large number of people and large amounts of information, while being constantly under stress. Stress is a physiological and psychological reaction of the body to negative stimuli that cause a violation of harmony and equilibrium. This concept is used in many fields of science, including psychology and medicine, and has been the subject of active research in recent decades. Stress can be caused by physical factors, such as nutrition, climate change, or trauma, as well as psychological factors, such as physical or emotional overload, conflict or poor social conditions, situations of uncertainty and loss of control, and psychological trauma. Psychological stress can be particularly harmful and can lead to various pathologies, such as depression, anxiety, or cardiovascular disease, etc. Psychologists have been studying stress and its effects on the body for decades. However, in recent years, research has focused on the role of stress in the development of mental illness and how to effectively manage stress.

To provide quality psychological assistance, it is necessary to define the concept of stress and its consequences. In the contemporary sense, stress is: a strong adverse, negative impact on the body; a strong adverse physiological or psychological reaction to the actions of a stressor; strong, both adverse and favorable reactions of various kinds; nonspecific features (elements) of physiological, psychological reactions of the body under strong, extreme influences that cause intense manifestations of adaptive activity [4, p.15].

I. Frankova notes that most people inevitably face stress from time to time. Adverse events pose a serious threat to a person’s mental health. The stress response can contribute to adaptive plasticity, improving cognitive performance, if the physiological response is effectively activated and deactivated in a timely manner. In case of dysregulation, stress leads to inadequate and harmful effects, maladaptation and psychopathology. Today, there is no doubt about the importance of studying the impact and consequences of stress on human life [11].

Stress is an integral part of everyday life and can occur under various circumstances. A growing number of people today face stress, which negatively affects their physical and psychological well-being. Understanding the causes of stress is an important step in developing an effective approach to managing it and providing prompt and high-quality assistance – psychological, medical, and social.

If a stressor acts for a long time, the body’s resources are gradually exhausted, anxiety increases and distress develops, which provokes reactive states and endogenous diseases.

Short-term stress initiates the intensive use of surface adaptive reserves, causing the activation of the body’s deep reserves. Complete and final exhaustion occurs when the dynamics of activation of deep reserves is not enough to restore adaptive reserves.

Long-term stress is characterized by the gradual activation of surface and deep adaptive reserves; the onset and course of such stress may go unnoticed. The most prolonged exposure to stressors leads to pronounced symptoms of stress. Such stress can turn into a disease. The symptoms of prolonged stress are similar to psychosomatic manifestations, as well as pathological mental states. The cause of such stress is a recurring extreme factor, which in turn leads to distress. Distress is a nonspecific reaction of the body to critical events, accompanied by a gross violation of adaptation, control of the individual and leading to its exhaustion [4, p.15-20]. Psychological signs of stress: irritability; difficulty in making decisions; constant expectation of failure; difficulties in performing routine tasks; feeling of detachment; fear of getting sick; hatred of oneself and other people; feeling of inferiority; loss of interest in work; feeling of anger, aggressiveness indifference to one’s own appearance and health; feelings of distrust; lack of self-confidence; loss of sense of humor, ability to laugh and enjoy; fear of the future; fear of criticism and judgment; loneliness; decreased concentration; changes in food preferences, appetite fluctuations, etc. These signs indicate that a person is experiencing stress and other negative psycho-emotional states, and may also indicate a deterioration in mental and physical health. The negative consequences of prolonged stress lead to depression, anxiety, acute stress disorder, PTSD, etc., which must be recognized in time to understand the need for medical and/or psychological support. Negative psycho-emotional states contribute to increased neuroticism of the individual, deepen social maladjustment, reduce quality of life, contribute to the formation of psychosomatic pathology, worsen the course and prognosis of existing somatic diseases [1; 6].

Providing highly qualified psychological assistance in a situation of stress is an important and necessary aspect, as it helps to maintain psychological well-being, mental health, recover from traumatic experiences and maintain efficiency and productivity in work. Each area of action has a certain value in itself and works best when implemented in conjunction with other areas as part of a broad and comprehensive approach [8]. Measures to provide psychological assistance to a person who has experienced/is experiencing traumatic exposure and post-traumatic stress and related disorders are implemented by trained psychologists. They organize their activities in accordance with the regulations and rules adopted by the professional community. These measures are aimed at restoring the optimal physical, intellectual, mental, psychological and social level of a person’s life [7; 8].

The essence of psychological assistance is the provision of professional support aimed at improving the
psycho-emotional state and psychological well-being of a person. This process involves active interaction between the psychologist and the client in order to understand the problem, identify ways to overcome it, and teach the client effective strategies for managing their feelings, thoughts, and behavior. When working with a client, a psychologist uses his or her knowledge and experience in the field of psychology to analyze the client’s problem and help them find rational and constructive solutions.

Psychological assistance can be provided in various formats, such as individual counseling or group sessions. Using a variety of psychotherapeutic approaches and methods, a psychologist promotes the development of consciousness and self-awareness of the client, which helps him or her change negative patterns of thinking and behavior. The main goal of psychological assistance is to achieve psychological well-being and improve the quality of life. This may include improving interpersonal relationships, overcoming anxiety, depression, or anger, increasing self-esteem and self-confidence, developing self-regulation strategies, and understanding one’s own needs. With psychological help, a person can gain important tools for solving problems, which can help become stronger, more adaptable, and more comfortable in life.

The main feature of online psychological counseling is the comfort and convenience that this format provides. Thanks to the Internet and modern means of communication, people have the opportunity to receive psychological support anywhere and at any time convenient for them. This is especially important for people who work at a great distance from psychological centers or are unable to come for a consultation due to lack of time. Online psychological counseling has many advantages that provide accessibility and convenience for clients, maintain confidentiality, and provide additional resources for effective psychological assistance and support.

**AIM**

To explain and empirically prove the effectiveness of online psychological counseling.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study involved 820 people – Ukrainian citizens living in Ukraine, Europe and the United States. The sample consisted of 560 women and 260 men aged 18-56. The study was conducted in April–November 2023. Research methods: Stress Resilience Test [3, p.15-16], Depression Self-Assessment Scale [5], Anxiety Self-Assessment Scale [6], PCL-5 PTSD Manifestation Self-Assessment Scale [1, p.30-31]. Diagnostic actions were carried out subject to written consent to the receipt and processing of personal data. The study was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethics for Psychologists, subject to confidentiality.

The following stages of experimental work were developed and implemented:

At the first stage, the sample was divided into control and experimental groups. The control group (CG) included 440 people. The experimental group (EG) consisted of 380 people, who were offered to attend 10 online psychological counseling sessions during May-October 2023. Psychodiagnostics of the CG and EG were conducted using the selected research methods and statistical processing of information.

At the second stage, online psychological counseling was provided to EG participants, who received 10 online psychological consultations during May-October 2023.

The third stage involved repeated psychodiagnostics of the CG and EG using the research methods used in the first stage of the study, statistical processing of information, and generalization of the results of the experimental research.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

At the first stage of the study, requests for psychological counseling in the EG were analyzed and grouped as follows: on the physical level – appetite fluctuations, weight changes, insomnia, deterioration of health, pain in different parts of the body (headache, stomach pain, back pain), constant muscle tension, decreased libido, etc.; on the emotional level – feelings of irritation, aggressiveness, anxiety, sadness, feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, low mood, lack of joy; on the behavioral level – loss of interests, solitude, unwillingness to socialize, unwillingness to leave the house, frequent conflicts in the family and at work, unwillingness to fulfill professional duties; on the cognitive level – memory impairment, forgetfulness, inability to concentrate, negative intrusive thoughts, slower thinking, etc. These symptoms can also indicate the presence of depression and anxiety, PTSD, and comorbid conditions in people [2; 5; 6; 7; 11; 12; 13], which led to the choice of psychodiagnostic methods.

The above methods were used at the ascertaining stage of the study in the CG and EG in April 2023 using the Google Forms application.

The «Stress Resistance» test showed that 52 % of the CG had a low level of stress resistance, 36.4 % had an average level of stress resistance, and 11.3 % had a high level of stress resistance. In the EG, a low level of stress resistance was found in 50 %, an average level of stress resistance was found in 34.2 %, and a high level of stress resistance was found in 50.8 %. According to the Depression Self-Assessment Scale, the following results were obtained: almost all study participants demonstrated...
the presence of a depressive state (score ≥7) – in the CG, 81.8 % were diagnosed with depression. In the EG, 92.1 % demonstrated the presence of depression.

According to the Anxiety Self-Assessment Scale, the following results were obtained: the majority of study participants demonstrated the presence of anxiety (score ≥7) – in the CG, 72.7 % were diagnosed with anxiety. In the EG, the presence of anxiety was recorded in 78.9 %.

According to the PCL-5 PTSD Self-Assessment Scale, the following results were obtained: the study participants demonstrated the presence of PTSD (score ≥33) – in the CG, 61.3 % were diagnosed with PTSD. In the EG, 71 % have PTSD.

In order to find out that the CG and EG do not qualitatively differ from each other, i.e., are homogeneous, the results obtained during the initial diagnosis were compared. In general, both groups have approximately the same indicators. The data obtained indicate the prevalence of stress, depression, anxiety, and PTSD in the study subjects, which negatively affects the quality of life and general well-being of people and requires appropriate support and assistance from specialists. The use of this set of methods made it possible to get a general idea of the psycho-emotional state in April 2023 and to provide psychological assistance to those who needed it. After processing the results of psychodiagnostics in the CG and EG, where high rates of negative psychoemotional states were identified, EG participants met with a psychologist online in May-October 2023. The main areas of psychological assistance were CBT, EMDR, cognitive imagery therapy, body-oriented therapy, art therapy, etc. To enhance the psychotherapeutic effect, daily dosed (no more than 20 minutes) use of the online game «Tetris» or «Farm» was suggested as an independent practice, the effectiveness of which has been proven [14]. The program of online psychological counseling included effective exercises aimed at restoring control over the body and thoughts, reducing the severity of traumatic events, reducing anxiety, instant drug-free pain relief (on request), meditation techniques, reducing stress, etc.

In November 2023, psychodiagnostics was repeated in the CG and EG using the methods used at the ascertaining stage of the study.

The following results were obtained for the «Stress Resistance» test: in the CG, a low level of stress resistance was found in 47.7 %, an average level of stress resistance was found in 43.2 %, and a high level of stress resistance was found in 9 %. In the EG, a low level of stress resistance was found in 26.3 %, an average level of stress resistance was found in 44.7 %, and a high level of stress resistance was found in 28.9 %.

The following results were obtained on the depression self-assessment scale: 88.6 % of the CG had a score of ≥7. In the EG, 47.3 % demonstrated the presence of depression, which significantly decreased. In November 2023, more participants in the CG demonstrated the presence of depression than in April. In the EG, depression rates decreased by almost half, which proves the effectiveness of the psychological assistance provided.

The following results were obtained on the anxiety self-assessment scale: in the CG, the anxiety score decreased slightly, with 61.3 %. In the EG, the presence of anxiety was demonstrated by 28.9 % of people, this figure decreased almost threefold, which also proves the effectiveness of online psychological counseling.

According to the PCL-5 PTSD self-assessment scale, the following results were obtained: the presence of PTSD in the CG was determined in 72.7 %, the rate increased in the CG. In the EG, PTSD is 52.6 %, which indicates a decrease in the manifestations of PTSD in a significant number of EG participants and also confirms the effectiveness of online psychological counseling and demonstrates adaptation and posttraumatic growth.

Generalization of the study data confirms the effectiveness of online psychological counseling. As we can see, in comparison with the results of the ascertaining stage, the formative stage of the study revealed significant changes in the EG, while no significant changes were found in the CG. Thus, the hypothesis of the study, which was based on the assumption that online psychological counseling is an effective means of stabilizing negative psychoemotional states and reducing stress, is confirmed.

CONCLUSIONS

In the course of the experimental research, it was found that:

1. The negative consequences of stress are low levels of stress resistance, depression, anxiety, and PTSD, which most Ukrainians experience in a crisis situation.

2. Psychological assistance in an online format, where the main methods of work are CBT, EMDR, cognitive imagery therapy, body-oriented therapy, art therapy, is an effective means of stabilizing negative psycho-emotional states and reducing stress levels.

Prospects for further research. The prospect of further research is to study the possibilities of providing psychological assistance in an online format to representatives of different social and professional groups. The results of the study demonstrate the high effectiveness of providing psychological counseling in an online format and can be included as a discipline «Fundamentals of Online Psychological Counseling» in the educational programs of specialties 053 «Psychology» and 225 «Medical Psychology» in higher education institutions.
FUNDING AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest. No external funding was used in the preparations of the study.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL REQUIREMENTS

The study was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethics for Psychologists, subject to confidentiality.

LITERATURE

3. Методики дослідження психічного здоров’я та благополуччя персоналу організацій: психологічний практикум / Л. М. Карамушка, О. В. Кренденцер, К. В. Терещенко, та ін.; за ред. Л. М. Карамушка. Київ: Інститут психології імені Г.С. Костюка НАПН України, 2023. 76 с. URL: https://www.uzhnu.edu.ua/uk/infocentre/get/56142
7. Пріоритетні багатосекторні заходи з психічного здоров’я та психосоціальної підтримки в Україні під час та після війни: оперативна дорожня карта. Відкритий документ (5 грудня 2022 року). URL: https://rada.info/upload/users_files/04377753/f0547f404979bb6e0a97ebed9e2fa5.pdf

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Вступ. В умовах зростаючої соціальної нестабільності та напруженості проблема збереження та відновлення психічного здоров'я українського суспільства набуває все більшої актуальності. Ця проблематика обумовлена необхідністю надання якісних психологічних послуг великий кількості людей у найкоротші терміни.

Мета. Продемонструвати та емпірично довести ефективність психологічного консультування онлайн.

Матеріали та методи. У дослідженні взяли участь 820 осіб – громадян України, які проживають в Україні, Європі та США. Вибірку склали 560 жінок та 260 чоловіків віком 18-56 років. Дослідження проводилося у квітні-листопаді 2023 року. Методи дослідження: Тест «Стійкість до стресу», Шкала самооцінки депресії, Шкала самооцінки тривоги, Шкала самооцінки проявів ПТСР PCL-5.

Результати та обговорення. Загальна вибірка була поділена на контрольну та експериментальну групи. До контрольної групи (КГ) увійшли 440 осіб. До експериментальної групи (ЕГ) увійшли 380 осіб, які добровільно звернулися за допомогою до психолога. Психодіагностика, проведена на першому етапі дослідження (квітень 2023 року), показала такі результати: у КГ низький рівень стійкості до стресу виявлено у 52 %, середній рівень стійкості до стресу – у 36,4 %, високий рівень стійкості до стресу – у 11,3 %; в ЕГ низький рівень стійкості до стресу виявлено у 50 %, середній рівень стійкості до стресу – у 34,2 %, високий рівень – у 15,8 %. Наявність депресії виявлена у 81,8 % КГ та 92,1 % ЕГ. Наявність тривоги – у 72,7 % в КГ та 78,9 % в ЕГ. ПТСР діагностовано у 61,3 % КГ та 71 % ЕГ. У листопаді 2023 року, після проведення формувального етапу дослідження в ЕГ, було отримано такі результати: у КГ низький рівень стійкості до стресу виявлено у 47,7 %, середній рівень стійкості до стресу – у 43,2 %, високий рівень стійкості до стресу – у 9 %; в ЕГ низький рівень стійкості до стресу виявлено у 26,3 %, середній рівень стійкості до стресу – у 44,7 %, високий рівень – у 28,9 %. Наявність депресії – в КГ у 88,6 %, в ЕГ – у 47,3 %. Наявність тривоги у 61,3 % в КГ та 28,9 % в ЕГ. ПТСР діагностовано у 72,7 % КГ та 52,6 % ЕГ.

Висновки. Результати дослідження підтверджують ефективність психологічного консультування онлайн. Порівняно з результатами констатувального етапу, на формувальному етапі дослідження виявлено значущі зміни психоемоційних станів в ЕГ, тоді як у КГ значущих змін не виявлено.

Ключові слова: психологічна допомога, психологічне консультування онлайн, стрес, психодіагностика, психоемоційний стан