



EUROMIL Wednesday Q&A series

“How to prevent and destigmatise mental health issues in the Military?”



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What are the primary factors contributing to a higher prevalence of mental health issues among military personnel?

The experience of life in Ukraine currently differs from that experienced by residents of other countries. This, of course, also applies to military personnel. It would be fair to say that it concerns military personnel the most. If the mental health of soldiers from different countries is negatively affected — and there is no doubt about this — separation from loved ones, then for a Ukrainian serviceman/woman this situation is usually worsened by a higher percentage of the risk of never seeing their family or close people again. Moreover, in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, this risk is two-sided: not only a soldier can be killed or go missing on the front line, but also his/her loved ones can suffer. For us, unfortunately, this is not a theory. Such cases, when the relatives of a soldier die from Russian shelling while he or she was at the frontline, really do happen. In addition, relatives and friends of such a serviceman/woman may find themselves under occupation — those people may be captured or even killed if enemies find out that their family member is military serviceperson. A person can actually be traumatized every day by being aware of these risks. There are also quite a few cases when entire families stand up to protect the country. In such circumstances, when not only you are at the front, but also your brother or sister, partner, parent, the level of anxiety increases significantly.

The same applies to the trauma caused by the loss. While military personnel around the world, unfortunately, can lose comrades, for the defenders of Ukraine such losses are an accomplished, constantly repeating fact almost from the first days of being on the war field. It is also worth noting that the majority of Ukrainian servicepeople receive contusions, injuries and wounds. Experiencing physical pain causes significant psychological trauma. Despite this, the military, after getting back on their feet, return to the front line. Of course, I don't want to compare who has it harder. What I want to convey is the opinion that in the conditions of a real permanent war on the territory of your country, maybe even your native region or city, all the psychological traumas inherent in the profession of a military serviceperson are significantly scaled not only in terms of the number of people who are exposed to trauma, but and in the plane of the individual, as such. This is a significant challenge that other countries and armies should consider when training personnel involved in psychological rehabilitation.



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Does the stigma still exist in the barracks or in workplaces? If so, what actions are key in tackling this phenomenon?

In general, military culture has a fairly widespread stigma around mental health, which can prevent people from seeking help. The fear of being perceived as weak, unable to cope with the problem on their own, can discourage military service members from seeking the necessary support and treatment. However, I again assume that the circumstances in Ukraine diverge from the way it happens in other countries. Not for the worse and not for the better, the current realities of Ukrainians are simply different.

Considering the fact that the number of traumatized people is extremely large, and the dialogue in society on this issue is gaining momentum, military personnel may feel less stigmatized in their environment.

However, we already have research showing that veterans may have difficulty finding future employment precisely because of their potential mental health issues. What is more, we receive such alarming guesses from both sides: both from the side of employers who are cautious of hiring a veteran, and from the side of veterans who are afraid of not getting the desired job after returning from the area of hostility. According to our observations, some military personnel avoid visits to psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists in order not to receive a diagnosis that may harm their career in the future.

Therefore, the continuation of military service during the war and after our victory, as well as the transition to civilian life, especially in the matter of mental health, acceptance and understanding of what a person had to go through at the front line, and understanding that psychological problems can be overcome if asking for help, is a significant challenge for us now.

In Ukraine, when the war ends, there will be millions of veterans. How should issues related to mental health be addressed?

In fact, we, as a professional trade union of military personnel, we are already fully working in this direction. This includes assistance to individual servicepeople, which is carried out thanks to our partners, and educational work on suicide prevention with the involvement of professional psychologists, and the development of a whole plan of action, including the creation of an International Centre for Social and Medical Support, whose specialists, in particular, will deal with issues of physical, psychological and so-called Professional rehabilitation.

Of course, in this matter we expect the assistance of both the Ukrainian authorities and the international community, because when we talk about military personnel, veterans and members of their families, as well as family members of those who died defending our freedom, we mean millions of people. It is necessary to clearly realise that these people saw death, felt a lot of physical and mental pain, witnessed terrible events, experience losses. These people will react sharply to sudden movements or loud sounds, have a heightened sense of anxiety, an even more acute sense of justice.

There will also be specific disorders caused by trauma. Society must realise this challenge in order to be able to accept those who return from the front lines with a willingness to understand, hear and help. At the same time, it is worth understanding that, in general, the entire Ukrainian society is traumatised by the war to one degree or another. And this means that it is time for a broad public dialogue, education and enlightenment.

We must build a space where active military and veterans are heard and protected. And already now servicemen should know that Ukrainians and people of the entire civilised world will accept those who took up arms to defend our freedom and yours, in whatever physical and psychological condition they returned from the areas of hostilities, will help them adapt, rehabilitate and feel that they are finally at home.