First-ever meeting of WHO mental health coalition focuses on Ukrainians' resilience and concrete steps towards change

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The first-ever meeting of the Pan-European Mental Health Coalition, a new network of organizations and individuals aiming to transform mental health systems across the WHO European Region, gathered to discuss ways to support the mental health of people in Ukraine.

The meeting, held on 4–5 May, kicked off with an hour-long briefing led by WHO experts and mental health care practitioners supporting Ukraine. This focused on the extraordinary efforts being made to maintain the Ukrainian mental health system and support the mental health needs of people in Ukraine, as well as refugees fleeing into neighbouring countries.

The war in Ukraine is affecting the mental health of millions through direct exposure to violence and atrocities, displacement and family separation. The health system in Ukraine has been similarly impacted, with WHO recording over 200 attacks on health care since 24 February.

"Weeks of war in Ukraine have led to incalculable uncertainty, insecurity, grief and loss. Attacks on health care are depriving countless people of hope and access to services. Food insecurity and safety concerns are rampant in Ukraine and neighbouring countries. Hostilities are causing immeasurable loss of lives and livelihoods, forced displacement and family separation," said Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

"Ukraine's mental health system, strengthened over several years following WHO's special initiative on mental health, is already responding – through large-scale training of volunteers, promotion of self-care tools, and support to the most vulnerable in institutions

across the war-torn country," he added.

"There is not a boy, a girl, a woman or a man who is not affected by the current crisis," said Alisa Ladyk-Bryzghalova, National Professional Officer at the WHO Country Office in Ukraine. "And we try, as WHO, to support people as much as possible to overcome the consequences of the crisis for their mental health."

Ms Ladyk-Bryzghalova and her colleague, Fahmy Hanna, Technical Officer at the WHO Department of Mental Health and Substance Use, spoke via video message after an airstrike which disrupted internet services in Lviv.

Speaking during the meeting, Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, said that the war in Ukraine "compounds the mental health challenges that we have before us," – many of which were revealed by COVID-19. "And that's why this Coalition is so vital."

Meeting people's mental health needs during emergencies is a key area of work for the Coalition, 1 of 6 working packages discussed over the 2 days, by over 150 participants – including country representatives, staff of international nongovernmental organizations, mental health experts and people living with mental health conditions.

These working packages aim to position mental health as not merely one sector of the health-care system but as the heart of any functioning society – supported in workplaces, schools and communities, for all ages and groups. In more concrete terms, Coalition members are working on identifying good practices and tools and then delivering a framework for these practices to be easily adapted to specific settings and cultures.

"We should aim at a fully inclusive European plan that would boost Member States to foster a new approach to the concept of mental health," said Stelios Kympouropoulos, Member of the European Parliament. He called for mental health to be a political priority for all governments, with "significant financial investment at the level of scientific research and human resources".

The Ukraine briefing illustrated that a well-planned mental health system made up of well-trained, motivated professionals and volunteers can endure even in the most dire circumstances. Oleksii

Kostiuchenkov, a psychiatrist of the Community Mental Health Team in Donetsk oblast in Ukraine, spoke of the adaptability of his team in spite of large-scale evacuations of patients with mental health conditions. “We continue to consult with our patients online and by phone,” he explained. He was followed by Natalia Morhun, a family doctor from the same area implementing the WHO Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGap).

Within days of the outbreak of war, WHO/Europe deployed a team of mental health professionals to Ukraine and neighbouring countries, setting up and leading working groups to coordinate with governments and other aid organizations, including the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). These partners worked together to provide survivors with all manner of mental health support – from basic security and family support to specialized services for people with severe mental health conditions. Ms Ladyk-Bryzghalova highlighted a stress management programme that WHO had jointly organized with the Ukrainian ministries of health and social policy.

Hope for change, and determination to see that change through, was the main focus throughout the Ukraine briefing and the remaining 2 days of the Coalition meeting, when members met in small working groups to begin designing the working package content. There are plans to test some of the working packages in several countries by year end.

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