

Poland: Understanding the mental health and psychosocial needs of Ukraine's refugees – Olga's story



PUBLISHED MAR 22, 2022
BY [WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION](#)

Olga is a 20-year-old medical student who we met at a makeshift refugee shelter in eastern Poland. A few days ago, she was studying in Kyiv, but is now one of the millions of refugees from Ukraine who have fled because of the Russian military offensive and who is seeking protection in Poland.

Following a 20-hour trip to Poland, including 2 hours spent waiting at the border crossing in the cold and snow, Olga is starting to come to terms with the reality of her situation.

“I’ve heard of this condition called refugee syndrome and I think I’m feeling the effects,” she says. “So far, I have not found a way to stay calm. I feel scared all the time. People like me need mental health support because we feel completely disoriented and lost. My mother is the same – she cries, she checks the news on her phone and has no idea what will happen next. My little sister too – she doesn’t want to play or engage with anyone; she just wants to go home.”

Yet, at the moment, Ukraine’s millions of refugees have no idea when or if they will be able to return home – nor when they will next see the husbands, sons and fathers that have had to remain in the country to fight.

Olga, too, has family that have stayed in Kyiv. “My aunt is hiding in the basement,” she says. “They don’t have food or mobile phones, so we are praying every day that they are still alive. Yet we hear all the time about the shootings and bombings that are taking place there. I’m really worried for them.”

Selma Sevkli is a mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) expert deployed by WHO to Poland to coordinate the MHPSS response.

“We are seeing people arriving scared and distressed,” says Selma. “Although they feel safer being in Poland, they face such uncertain futures and are naturally anxious for the people they have left behind. Many people I have spoken to at the different reception centres and at border crossings along the Polish border are in transit – their journeys are not finished and they have more challenges yet to come.”

Although grateful for all the support she has received at the border and in the reception centre, Olga too is keen to move on.

“We’ve just arrived in Poland; it’s our first day here. I am aware that more than 2 million Ukrainians have already come to Poland. All my friends are very grateful for the health care, the food, the toys, the clothes. We have everything we need so far in this reception centre, but I am lucky: I have a friend who is waiting for me here in Poland who will come and collect me.”

The way people cope and can be supported to cope when they face so much uncertainty and anxiety in their lives is something for which Selma has a wealth of knowledge and experience.

“In an emergency, how people react to adverse situations depends on their past experience, their resilience, any previous or current mental health conditions, and the support they are provided with,” she says. “Feelings of distress, fear and anxiety are completely normal reactions to adversity and usually improve over time with support. I have been giving the women I meet with tips to help deal with these feelings. What is important is that we work with them to address the overriding uncertainty of their situation: listening to them carefully to understand the coping mechanisms they use and finding ways to activate them; letting them express their feelings; and linking them to the necessary services while being mindful of giving wrong suggestions or false hope. Only in this way can we help reduce the mental impacts of the crisis on people and avoid these turning into more complicated mental health problems or disorders later.”

During her visit to the refugee shelter, Selma met with Olga and was able to give her some useful advice. “You might feel that this is overwhelming right now, but know that this is normal,” says Selma. “Take it day by day and do anything that helps you to keep calm and feel safe. That means reducing your exposure to news, making sure you eat well, and doing activities that help you relax. Our team is here

to understand your needs and support you where we can.”

WHO has set up a Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Technical Working Group in Poland for coordination of MHPSS services to understand the needs, provide guidance, translate resources, and give technical support to partners.

Press release distributed by Wire Association on behalf of World Health Organization, on Mar 22, 2022. For more information subscribe and [follow](#) us.

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