

Chapter 2. What Ukrainian Teachers Are Experiencing: Findings from our surveys in 2024

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Background: Teachers and Students under Prolonged War Conditions

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian students and teachers have been living and learning under continuous threat and instability. In early 2023, Professor Olha Nikolenko of Poltava V. G. Korolenko National Pedagogical University and her colleagues conducted a nationwide study on students' psychological conditions and the role of teachers in providing support during wartime. The study revealed that 68% of students identified “coping with fear” as their most pressing challenge (Nikolenko et al., 2023). Creative approaches such as art therapy were reported as effective, and everyday practices—sharing daily routines, expressing empathy, and maintaining emotional presence—were highlighted as key forms of teacher support.

These findings raise an important question: what about the mental health of those who support students—the teachers themselves?

Even before the war, Ukrainian teachers faced excessive workloads and high psychological stress (Dziuba et al., 2021). Under wartime conditions, these burdens have intensified. In response, the Ukrainian government and international organizations have introduced various forms of psychological support, including resilience training and coping programs (Tolstoukhov & Lunov, 2023), stress management seminars, counseling, and group-based interventions (Chorna, 2024). Other approaches, such as remote Psychological First Aid (Shragal & Pushkarskaya, 2025), positive psychology, self-development programs (Ignatovych, 2023), cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and related methods, have also been implemented.

However, many of these interventions tend to emphasize symptom reduction and positive thinking, while paying less attention to the deeper emotional struggles

teachers experience under prolonged threat. Research by Nadyukova and Frenzel (2025), involving 724 secondary school teachers, showed a strong reliance on problem-focused coping and emotional suppression. The pressure to function as a “model teacher” was associated with avoidance of negative emotions, contributing to emotional labor, burnout, and depletion of psychological resources (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Zagefka, 2022).

Against this background, alternative psychological frameworks—such as mindfulness, which encourages nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment, and Morita Therapy, a Japanese psychotherapeutic approach—have attracted growing attention.

Overview of the Two Nationwide Surveys (2024)

To better understand the psychological experiences of Ukrainian teachers under prolonged war conditions, we conducted two nationwide surveys in 2024. The aim of these surveys was not only to assess psychological distress, but also to explore how teachers continue to cope, adapt, and support students in extremely difficult circumstances.

The first survey was conducted in January 2024 and included 506 teachers from across Ukraine (Zhao, Nikolenko, Nikolenko, & Zhdanova-Nedilko, 2024).

It focused on teachers’ own psychological distress, their observations of students’ psychological difficulties, and the practices they found helpful in supporting students during the war. The findings revealed high levels of psychological strain among teachers, alongside continued efforts to maintain their professional roles. At the same time, many teachers demonstrated an ongoing capacity to cope and remain engaged in teaching, despite severe and persistent stress.

Building on the first survey, a second nationwide survey was conducted in October 2024 with 667 teachers (Zhao, Nikolenko, Nikolenko, & Zhdanova-Nedilko, 2025). This survey had two primary aims: To examine changes in teachers' mental health and coping over time as the war continued; To explore the applicability of Morita Therapy's theoretical mechanisms, particularly those related to pathological processes such as Morita neuroticism and avoidance.

Mental Health and Resilience across the Two Surveys

Across the two surveys, indicators of psychological distress showed a gradual worsening over time. The proportion of teachers whose K10 scores suggested possible mental illness increased from 53.4% in January to 57.3% in October, reflecting the cumulative burden of prolonged war-related stress.

In contrast, overall levels of resilience remained relatively stable (January: 80.24; October: 79.58). This pattern suggests that although psychological distress increased, many teachers continued to draw on internal and external resources to sustain daily functioning.

Applicability of Morita Therapy

Morita Therapy was introduced in both surveys as a psychological framework for understanding distress and continuing daily life under extreme conditions. In both surveys, approximately 95% of teachers reported that Morita Therapy was helpful for their mental health. In the second survey, we examined Morita Therapy's theoretical mechanisms more closely, focusing on Morita neuroticism and avoidance. These factors showed close associations with both psychological distress (K10 scores) and resilience, suggesting the theoretical applicability of Morita Therapy for understanding teachers' psychological experiences under prolonged stress (see Table 1).

Table 1 Correlations of the main variables

	Resilience	Morita Therapy's pathological mechanism	Hope for the end of the war	Preference on internal aspects of psychological training
K10	-.32 **	.42 **	.24 **	.01
Resilience	1	-.34 **	.22 **	-.03
Morita Therapy's pathological mechanism		1	-.07	.08
Hope for the end of the war				-.03

** $p < .01$

Alongside the survey research, we have been developing a Ukrainian version of Morita Therapy together with teachers from across Ukraine, including educators in the Zaporizhzhia region. Through this collaborative process, Morita Therapy has been adapted to local educational contexts, demonstrating its practical applicability as a psychological framework for teachers living and working during war.

We will introduce more of the findings of the second survey. The following sections describe in detail teachers' psychological states, students' school life and anxieties, coping strategies used in educational settings, difficulties faced in supporting students, and teachers' views on useful psychological training.

Participants: A total of 667 teachers participated in this survey. The gender of participants was 23 male (3.4%), 638 female (93.7%), and 6 (0.9%) did not want to answer. In terms of age, 31 participants (4.6%) were in their 20s, 120 (17.6%) were in their 30s, 162 (23.8%) were in their 40s, 257 (37.8%) were in their 50s, and 97 (14.3%) were in their 60s. The majority of participants had been teaching for more than 10 years (584 participants, 87.6%). Participants were from 21 regions in eastern, central, and western Ukraine.

1. Teachers' Psychological States

Teachers were asked to evaluate their current mental state compared to when the war started in February 2022. In the second survey, 10.4% reported that their

mental state had “improved,” 42.7% reported it was “the same,” and 46.9% reported it had “worsened.” In the first survey, 29.2% reported improved mental health, 42.3% reported it was almost the same, and 28.5% reported it had deteriorated. Overall, the second survey showed more worsened data than the first survey.

This result suggests that many teachers had not been able to fully recover from the psychological shock experienced at the beginning of the war. Free-text responses indicated several reasons for deterioration, including: “Hopelessness” (24 participants), such as “I don't see a way out of the situation.”; “Unable to control emotions” (17 participants), such as “I can't always control my emotions.”; “The constant trials of war” (7 participants), such as “Missile attacks on our town have gotten worse.”

At the same time, teachers who reported improvement since the beginning of the war (multiple responses allowed) described reasons such as: “I have learned to manage my emotions” (258 participants); “I have a concrete understanding of the situation and know what to do” (204 participants); “I have built my daily routines” (140 participants) These responses show two realities occurring at once: ongoing deterioration for many teachers due to prolonged war conditions, and gradual adaptation for others through emotional skills, clearer understanding, and rebuilding routines.

2. Students' School Life, Students' Anxiety and Fears, and Teachers' Coping Strategies in Educational Settings

Teachers reported that missiles and raid sirens repeatedly interrupt students' normal daily life, and that students must go to shelters (81.3%). This ongoing disruption means concentration is impaired and students remain under tension.

Teachers reported the following daily anxieties and fears among students (multiple choice): Uncertainty in everything (366 participants); Fear for the safety of family and friends (299 participants); Fear for their own safety (285 participants); Fear of losing their homes (141 participants). Compared to previous results, the response “uncertainty in everything” stood out.

Teachers reported techniques they taught students to cope with anxiety and fear (single choice): Tell them it is fine to be afraid (28.0%); Hold common creative projects (26.8%); Talk about their daily lives (24.9%); Talk about their anxieties and fears (14.3%); Tell them not to be afraid (6.0%). Free responses also described helpful practices, such as: “In the evening, teachers read fairy-tales to students to emotionally prepare for calm sleep.”

Overall, most teachers used methods that recognize fear as a natural emotion, discuss it openly with students, encourage attention to everyday life, and use creative activities. Fewer teachers taught students “not to be afraid” than in the previous survey. This suggests that teachers have come to better recognize the importance of “coexisting with anxiety.”

Examples of successful cases (multiple choice) included: Sharing emotions, jokes and life stories (251 participants); Joint events for small groups of students (watching movies, discussing books, going to the theatres) (168 participants); Contests of creative works (56 participants); “Jokes and life stories” was derived from the “Other” responses in the previous survey and was included as a response option for the first time in this survey. It became the most frequently selected option, representing a significant finding of this study.

In the context of extreme stress, such as during wartime, sharing humor and life stories is not merely casual conversation—it can play an important role in fostering psychological resilience and building social support networks. Humor is

widely recognized as an effective strategy for coping with stress. Martin (2007) explains that humor serves both an emotional regulation function by alleviating negative emotions, and a social function by enhancing interpersonal relationships. Sharing laughter within a group creates a sense of belonging, which can counter feelings of isolation and helplessness, particularly vital in war-affected environments (Fredrickson, 2001). In such circumstances, laughter becomes a tool for survival, helping individuals sustain hope and emotional connection.

Meanwhile, sharing life stories supports individuals in restoring a sense of self-continuity and meaning making in the face of trauma. According to McAdams (2001), narrating one's life as a coherent story deepens self-understanding and allows people to discover meaning and value even in adversity. In educational settings, when teachers share personal stories with students, it helps build psychological closeness and mutual trust (Noddings, 1992). This narrative engagement can be seen as a concrete practice of care in education.

Teachers also reported cases of teaching difficulties (multiple choice), including: Students who had suffered great losses (family, friends, home, etc.) in the war (308 participants); Students' panic attacks (254 participants); Students with a passive attitude to life (96 participants); Loss of family, friends, or home can lead to grief, trauma, and emotional withdrawal. According to Bowlby (1980), such loss disrupts attachment and affects a child's emotional and learning capacity. Panic attacks suggest extreme anxiety; when students are overwhelmed, they cannot stay within the "window of tolerance" for learning (Siegel, 1999). A passive or hopeless attitude may reflect learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). These students may lack motivation and feel there is no point in studying, especially when their basic needs are unmet.

Overall, these findings show that teachers are facing serious emotional challenges in the classroom and need more support. Trauma-informed approaches

and psychological resources are essential for both students' recovery and effective education.

3. Useful Psychological Training for Teachers

Responses to the question “What content have you found useful in the psychological trainings?” revealed a relatively balanced interest between external treatment training (48.3%) and internal treatment (51.7%). This suggests that teachers see value in both practical intervention strategies and internal psychological coping methods when supporting themselves and their students during the war.

External treatment training typically includes behavioral techniques, classroom management strategies, and crisis-response tools. Its popularity reflects the need for concrete, action-oriented methods in highly unstable environments. In crisis situations, structured external interventions can restore a sense of order and provide immediate support (Hobfoll et al., 2007).

On the other hand, the slightly higher preference for internal treatment points to recognition of emotional processing, self-awareness, and stress regulation as vital components of long-term psychological resilience. Internal approaches often include mindfulness, self-compassion, or Morita Therapy—methods that may help teachers manage their own emotional responses and model psychological flexibility for students (Neff, 2003; Hayes et al., 1999).

Overall, the nearly even split indicates that effective psychological training in conflict settings must integrate both external and internal strategies. Teachers are not only first responders but also emotional anchors for students. Thus, programs that balance classroom techniques with personal coping skills are likely to be the most impactful.