

Chapter 4. Emotional Difficulties Faced by Ukrainian Teachers: Working with Emotions

<https://doi.org/10.33989/pnpu.1095.c3926>

Based on our nationwide surveys and group trainings, we identified several difficulties commonly faced by Ukrainian teachers living and working under war conditions. From the perspective of Morita Therapy, these difficulties can also be understood as expectations—that is, wishes or hopes that arise from the desire to live better under extremely difficult circumstances.

At the individual level, teachers face the following difficulties:

Fear of dying and persistent anxiety, for oneself, loved ones, and frontline soldiers, accompanied by unstable mental states and a lack of positive emotions.

→ Expectation: a wish to control fear and anxiety and to increase positive emotions.

Accumulation of fatigue and depletion of internal energy, caused not only by emotional exhaustion but also by limited rest and multiple roles (teacher, parent, supporter, counselor).

→ Expectation: a wish to restore internal energy.

Difficulty finding meaning in life and work under prolonged uncertainty and loss.

→ Expectation: a wish to rediscover meaning and purpose.

At the environmental level, teachers face additional challenges:

Impoverishment of the physical environment, including shortages of water, gas, electricity, shelter living, and constant sirens.

→ Expectation: a wish to maintain mental health in such conditions.

Impoverishment of the mental environment, characterized by reduced constructive communication and experiences of moral degradation, leading to feelings of isolation.

→ Expectation: a wish to connect hearts and minds and to protect one's energy from disappointment and despair.

Our group work was designed with these difficulties and expectations in mind. Rather than applying Morita Therapy unchanged, we have been developing a “Ukrainian Morita Therapy”—a creative adaptation suited to the realities of a new form of hybrid war. We hope that teachers can gradually become practitioners of this approach in their own lives, strengthening themselves and supporting those around them.

Morita Therapy and Emotions

Morita Therapy places particular importance on working with emotions. Many psychological problems arise when people believe that certain emotions or bodily sensations are abnormal and must be eliminated. This leads to constant struggle with one's inner experience.

Morita Therapy offers a different perspective: emotions such as fear, anxiety, sadness, or tension do not need to be eliminated. By recognizing emotions as natural, we reduce the need to fight against them and become less entangled in them.

From the perspective of Morita Therapy, emotions have several important characteristics:

First, emotions are a natural human phenomenon and cannot be controlled by willpower. Feelings such as anxiety, nervousness, or sadness arise spontaneously and do not disappear simply because we want them to.

Second, emotions cannot be selectively avoided. It is not possible to eliminate unpleasant emotions such as fear or shame while keeping only pleasant emotions.

Attempting to do so often increases suffering.

Third, emotions do not need to be judged as good or bad. Just as we are not responsible for the weather, we are not responsible for the emotions that arise within us. Self-blame only adds additional suffering.

Emotions are not static. They change through natural processes: When emotions are allowed to exist without interference, they tend to rise and fall gradually and eventually subside on their own. Repeated exposure to similar emotional experiences often leads to habituation; what was once overwhelming may become more tolerable over time. When attention becomes strongly focused on emotions or bodily sensations, they tend to intensify. New experiences and repeated actions can gradually cultivate new emotional responses, even when fear or anxiety is present. These processes suggest that emotions do not require direct control in order to change.

The Relationship between Emotions and Actions

A central principle of Morita Therapy is the distinction between emotions and actions. Emotions cannot be controlled by willpower, but actions can be chosen. Even when fear or anxiety is present, people are often able to act—for example, to speak, to teach, or to complete necessary tasks.

When actions are taken despite unpleasant emotions, the emotions themselves often fade naturally, while the fact of action and its outcome remain. However, actions should not be used as a tool to eliminate emotions. When action is taken with the goal of “making fear disappear,” this often leads to disappointment and renewed struggle.

In Morita Therapy, actions are taken because they are necessary and appropriate, not because they promise emotional relief.

Ukrainian Ways of Dealing with Emotions: Practical Suggestions

Based on our work with teachers, we offer the following suggestions adapted to the Ukrainian context: When fear or anxiety arises, recognize it as natural and allow time for it to pass. If emotions are overwhelming or exhaustion is severe, temporarily “freezing” the emotional struggle may be helpful.

Teachers do not need to hide fear or anxiety completely. Expressing emotions in a moderate and authentic way—being “as one is” (arugamama)—can foster empathy and meaningful communication with students.

Continue to do what is possible despite fear and anxiety, such as teaching, preparing lessons, or maintaining daily routines. When acting, it is important not to think, “This will make my anxiety disappear,” but simply to focus on the task itself.

Discussion Note: Voices from the Group

From the group discussions, several important patterns became clear.

First, teachers are living under extremely severe conditions. Daily shelling and air-raid sirens mean that they cannot fully relax even for a short time. Many remain in a constant state of tension and anxiety, with no psychological “off time.”

Second, many teachers expressed a strong desire to control both the situation and their own emotions. At the same time, they clearly recognized that such control is impossible under current conditions. This gap between wanting to control and being unable to do so creates a deep inner conflict, which itself becomes a major source of psychological suffering.

Third, teachers repeatedly asked for concrete techniques to improve mental health and emotional stability. It seems important to explain that psychological support includes both external approaches (behavior, routines, physical activity, communication) and internal approaches (acceptance, self-compassion, and attitude change). Teachers appeared to intuitively sense that combining these two is necessary.

Finally, teachers showed a strong openness to learning. They clearly feel a lack of psychological knowledge and practical tools for restoring mental health, and

they expressed a strong motivation to acquire such knowledge.

Teachers' Voices from Group Discussions

Teacher A emphasized that all emotions are normal, including negative ones. She stated that teachers should accept their own emotions and help children accept theirs as well. At the same time, she expressed anxiety about teachers' mental health, saying that without proper care, teachers may eventually need psychiatric treatment. She raised the issue of emotional control repeatedly, asking how emotions can actually be managed in practice. She admitted openly that teachers do not yet know how to do this and need help.

Teacher B focused on existential themes. She stated that teachers need to explain to children both the joy of life and the fear of death. She emphasized the importance of controlling the situation, but also acknowledged that this is often impossible. Therefore, she suggested that teachers must learn to go beyond excessive focus on their own fear and health, and instead learn how to shift attention to other tasks and roles. She raised an important question: whether it is necessary to divert children's attention away from war-related topics, and if so, how this should be done appropriately.

Teacher C described psychological training itself as something new and valuable. She emphasized that teachers must begin by helping themselves if they want to help children. She stated that self-control and self-regulation are prerequisites for supporting students. She also noted that this knowledge should be used not only at school, but also within the family, which is also suffering during the war. She expressed the view that teachers do not need to save the whole world. Instead, they must first save themselves, and only then can they support their children. She emphasized that war is an unprecedented experience and that survival must be psychological as well as physical.

Teacher D stated that teachers have very little knowledge about how to resist the psychological impact of war and how to protect themselves, but they are open to

learning and clearly need help. She described strong emotional burnout and exhaustion, along with an inability to control emotions. Despite this, teachers continue trying to support children, provide positive emotions, and maintain a constructive attitude toward the world. She noted that physical exercise, creative activities, nature, collegial support, and art play an important role in maintaining mental health. However, she also raised a serious concern about quiet, withdrawn children—those who do not speak, hide their faces on screen, and do not express their condition. She stated that teachers do not know how to approach such children and suspect apathy or depression. She explicitly requested concrete techniques for improving both teachers' and students' mental and emotional states.

Across all discussions, teachers expressed a strong sense of responsibility toward students while simultaneously experiencing severe exhaustion and inner conflict. A shared theme was the recognition that emotions cannot be fully controlled, alongside a desire to learn how to live and act meaningfully despite fear, anxiety, and fatigue.

These voices strongly indicate the need for a psychological framework—such as Morita Therapy—that does not demand emotional calmness, but instead supports purposeful action and continuity of life even when emotions remain difficult.