

Chapter 10. Psychological self-help in the context of the impact of war on family and personal life

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This chapter is based on questions repeatedly raised by Ukrainian teachers in our previous meetings. These questions reflect deep concerns about family relationships, communication, and psychological wellbeing under prolonged wartime conditions. Broadly, they can be grouped into four main themes:

1. How attitudes toward human relationships change during wartime (including emotional burnout and withdrawal).
2. How to maintain bonds with family and close loved ones under separation, loss, aggression, depression, and military involvement.
3. How to communicate with people experiencing various mental health difficulties.
4. The negative health consequences of living under constant danger and uncertainty.

Below, we address each theme in turn.

1. How People Change in Times of War

Survival Mode and Adaptation

During war, many people quickly enter a survival mode, in which priorities shift toward safety and basic needs. This adaptation affects interpersonal attitudes and communication in several ways.

First, people often become more cautious, reserved, or pragmatic in their relationships. Emotional openness may decrease as energy is redirected toward coping with daily threats.

Second, attention tends to focus on family and a small circle of close relationships. In crisis, relatives may become more protective and nurturing toward each other, while becoming less socially engaged with others.

Third, prolonged exposure to danger, uncertainty, and loss places heavy psychological strain on individuals. Heightened anxiety, withdrawal, irritability, or aggression can appear as coping responses rather than personality changes.

Fourth, moral and ethical perceptions may shift. Under wartime pressure, behaviors once considered unacceptable may be rationalized as necessary for survival, blurring previously clear moral boundaries.

Fifth, people respond differently to prolonged distress. Some develop increased empathy and solidarity, while others experience compassion fatigue, becoming emotionally exhausted and less responsive to others' suffering.

Finally, for some individuals, war brings increased resilience and a stronger sense of purpose. These people often channel their energy into helping others, supporting communities, or sustaining meaningful work despite hardship.

2. How to Maintain Bonds with Family and Loved Ones

1) Maintaining Bonds During Family Separation (Ukraine and Abroad)

In many Ukrainian families women and children relocate abroad, while husbands or elderly parents remain in Ukraine. Financial responsibility often stays with those inside the country, creating unique pressures.

This situation may lead to emotional strain, resentment, or loneliness among family members who bear economic and caregiving burdens. Differences in living conditions abroad can also create cultural and value-based misunderstandings.

At the same time, many families demonstrate remarkable resilience. Separation can deepen appreciation for each other's safety and strengthen emotional commitment, even across distance. Helpful approaches include: Setting shared family goals (saving money, planning reunion, maintaining routines); Sharing daily life through journals, photos, or short messages to maintain emotional continuity; Sustaining hope for reunion and future stability by focusing on small, meaningful daily actions.

2) Managing Aggression Within the Family

Aggression within families often increases under chronic stress. Helpful strategies include recognizing triggers, encouraging physical outlets for tension, and establishing predictable daily routines that restore a sense of stability.

Creating “cool-down spaces” at home allows family members to step away when emotions escalate. Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is particularly useful in expressing feelings and needs without blame and reducing escalation during conflict.

3) Depression and Apathy in the Family

Depression and apathy are common reactions to prolonged stress and loss. Families can support recovery by maintaining simple, purposeful routines and avoiding overwhelming expectations.

Encouraging gentle physical activity, spending time outdoors, and normalizing conversations about mental health can reduce isolation and stigma. Importantly, seeking professional help should be framed as strength, not weakness.

3. Communicating with People Experiencing Mental Health Difficulties

When interacting with individuals experiencing PTSD, panic, despair, hysteria, or emotional breakdowns, it is important not to feel pressured to “fix” them.

From a Morita Therapy perspective, presence itself is support. Being with someone—listening quietly, sharing silence, offering a hug, or simply saying “I’m glad we could meet today”—often has greater healing power than advice or explanations.

At the same time, healthy communication requires clear boundaries. Acknowledging personal limits prevents burnout and allows relationships to remain sustainable.

Flexibility is also essential. War changes people and relationships, and communication styles must adapt accordingly. Patience, openness, and acceptance of change help preserve bonds during instability.

4. Health Consequences of Constant Danger and Uncertainty

Living under ongoing threat affects both physical and mental health. Chronic hypervigilance exhausts the nervous system, weakens immunity, disrupts sleep, and increases psychosomatic symptoms.

Self-help in this context does not mean eliminating fear, but learning to live with it while protecting one's health. Small daily practices—rest, routine, movement, meaningful contact, and self-compassion—help stabilize the body and mind over time.

In wartime, psychological self-help is not about achieving calm or happiness. It is about continuing life, relationships, and responsibility while fear and uncertainty remain. By accepting change, maintaining connection where possible, and caring for oneself alongside others, individuals and families can preserve their psychological strength even under extreme conditions.

Discussion Note: Voices from the Group

Question: Share your successful or unsuccessful experience of maintaining relationships (in the family, in the teaching staff, etc.) during the war.

Teacher A said: I live in Zaporizhzhia, but my mother lived in the Kherson region when the war began. The situation in Kherson and the Kherson region is very dangerous, Kherson and part of the Kherson region were occupied. Then Kherson was liberated by Ukrainian troops, but part of the Kherson region remains under occupation. I persuaded my mother for a very long time to move to Zaporizhzhia so that we could be together. But she did not agree for a long time. And for several years it was a big problem for me, because I could not save my mother. However, now the situation has worsened so much that my mother still decided to move to me. We are now together. My mother has the status of an internally displaced person. She cannot return to her home because her village is completely destroyed. But my

mother supports me morally in Zaporizhia. We are together, and this is the most important thing for me now. However, a lot of people still remain in the dangerous territory. They love their land, their homes, and do not want to leave despite the shelling. And I cannot convince other people to move to a safe place. I feel how the relationship between us is changing, because the distance between Zaporizhia and the Kherson region is great. We cannot meet often. We often exchange messages and photos, but this cannot replace live communication. In addition, no pictures can reduce the feeling of anxiety, because we are in the line of fire every day, we are shot every day. Therefore, the feeling of anxiety does not leave us. I think that many more years will pass before we can get rid of the feeling of anxiety. Every day we are shot at. We go to work and are afraid, we return from work and are also afraid, and every night we experience a new horror. Therefore, the connections between people who find themselves in different territories during the war are being destroyed. We do not know what awaits us in the future.

Teacher B said: I myself am from the city of Kramatorsk, Donetsk region. My hometown Kramatorsk is almost completely destroyed. I now live in Zaporizhia. My mother stayed in Kramatorsk for a long time. She was not ready to move to Zaporizhia for a long time. But the time came and she agreed. However, she often has panic attacks and depression because she is torn from her hometown and her house is no longer there. Relations in our family are very tense because we live without light and without joy. We cannot feel joy because we are constantly under gunfire. We are bombed every day. And we have no hope that anything can change.

Teacher C said: I can build successful communication in the family, as well as at school with students and their parents. But the bombings are very difficult every day. We cannot live a full life in conditions of constant danger. Similarly, relationships cannot be full-fledged in conditions of constant danger. We all feel the instability of life and know that at any moment it can change dramatically. We often

help others, but we forget about ourselves. We restrain our emotions and try to keep ourselves within certain limits. We cannot give freedom to our emotions, so we often experience depression. You either break dishes or don't want anything...I often go to the field and scream there. I scream in the field because I can't do it at home or at work. I'm afraid to upset my children or loved ones. Therefore, I have to restrain my emotions or scream in the field so that no one hears except the wind.

I have to scream and cry at a certain moment, because otherwise there may be mental disorders.

One of the author, Psychologist Lyubov Kremenetska said: There is a special technique for living negative emotions. In a box you need to put things that remind you of negative emotions. From time to time you need to open this box and experience your emotions, cry, scream. This box can then be closed and put away. But when the time comes, it can be opened again. There can also be a box of positive emotions. We need positive and negative emotions, then we can feel like a full-fledged person.