

## Ukrainian-German Conference on Mental Health, Psychosocial Support and Rehabilitation

A report with a special focus on children, adolescents and young adults

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A medical conference to support mental health, psychosocial support and rehabilitation in Ukraine took place in Berlin on 1 and 2 February 2024. The conference was organized by the psychiatrist Professor Malek Bajbouj (Managing Senior Physician, Charité) and the surgeon Professor Matthias Münzberg (Medical Director, BG Unfallklinik Frankfurt) was held under the patronage of the two First Ladies Olena Zelenska and Elke Büdenbender and focussed on trauma care and the prevention of long-term consequences. The spectrum ranged from acute trauma surgery care and medical support by taking over patients with oncological diseases that can no longer be treated in Ukraine, especially in the paediatric and adolescent sector, to traumatic war injuries that cannot be treated or are difficult to treat given the destruction of hospitals by air raids.

For this reason, the first part of the conference was held at the BG trauma surgery hospital in Berlin. In addition to trauma surgical care, the main topic was physical rehabilitation with suitable prostheses, possible digital developments in this area and the accompanying psychosocial support, trauma therapy and psychological rehabilitation of the war wounded.

An important part of the conference was dedicated to the stress experienced by children, adolescents and young adults. NGOs such as Girls and HIAS presented the results of [studies on the psychological stress of war](#). One working group focussed on an as yet unpublished cross-sectional survey of young students on their mental health at the beginning of the war and after two years of war. The results were presented by Professor Irina Pinchuk, Director of the Institute of Psychiatry of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and President of the Ukrainian Psychiatric Association, who is also one of our cooperation partners in the Competence Center Mental Health Prevention in Ulm, Germany.



*Photo 1 Discussion panel; copyright: BG Kliniken*

UNICEF addressed issues of health care and child protection under the special conditions. The situation in the field of child and adolescent psychiatry, with a lack of specialists with adequate

training and far too little specialist training (usually six months to a year after adult psychiatric training, no independent medical specialist) was also addressed. Ms. Nataliia Masiak, a child and adolescent psychiatrist from Ukraine, who had received a grant to attend the ESCAP Congress 2023 in Copenhagen and had been involved with the symposia on the situation in Ukraine, was also present and reported on the local difficulties in practice and the lack of interconnection between the individual pillars of psychosocial care.



*Photo 2 Prof. Jörg M. Fegert, Ms. Nataliia Masiak, Prof. Dennis Ougrin at the ESCAP Congress 2023 in Copenhagen*

The presentation of a network of GPs or family doctors who have been trained according to the WHO's mhGAP concept via e-learning programmes and webinars was impressive. In contrast to psychiatry, which unfortunately still suffers from the stigma of mental illness everywhere, as well as a particularly negative history as a post-Soviet authoritarian institution, they are highly accepted by the population. They are central and very motivated "gatekeepers", but they also need opportunities and perspectives for referral to specialised institutions and for clarification by specialists, especially if they are sensitised to better recognise mental stress.

Professor Jörg M. Fegert, as head of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry/Psychotherapy at the University Ulm and as ESCAP President, presented the activities of ESCAP right after the beginning of the war with webinars ([recording available on YouTube](#)), resources and the publication of articles ([War hits children first](#); [The impact of war](#)). He described the specific symposia at the ESCAP Congress in Copenhagen and the support of Ukrainian colleagues through travel grants made available from European specialist societies.

He announced that the German specialist society would also be providing travel grants for specialists from Ukraine to attend the German Congress for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Psychosomatics and Psychotherapy which will take place from 18 September to 21 September 2024 in Rostock. Furthermore, Professor Fegert presented a new project that is being rolled out in cooperation with



*Photo 3 Dr. Viktor Liashko, Ms. Nataliia Masiak, Prof. Jörg M. Fegert*

the Karasin University in Kharkiv and UNICEF. The project aims to develop a common language and basic knowledge for dealing with psychological trauma at all levels, from local psychosocial care to specialised care, e.g. in large institutions for children and young people with disabilities or orphans. To this end, an e-learning programme is to be developed in line with [an initiative by EU President Ursula von der Leyen and President Zelenskyy](#), which had been announced on the International Children's Day in 2023.

The second day began with introductory speeches by the German Federal Minister for International Cooperation, Ms. Svenja Schulze, the German Minister of Health, Professor Karl Lauterbach, and the Ukrainian Minister of Health, Dr. Viktor Liashko. The latter gave an impressive presentation including a wealth of data to highlight the specific health situation relating to injuries, war trauma, rehabilitation and the specific focus on mental health.



*Photo 4 Ms. Svenja Schulze, Prof. Karl Lauterbach, Dr. Viktor Liashko; copyright BMG/Schulten*

An extensive exchange on the podium between the two First Ladies, who were patrons of the conference, led to the topic of "mental health". Ms. Zelenska emphasised how major campaigns had been rolled out aiming to reduce the stigma of seeking help and at the same time raise basic awareness of mental health. The "How are you?" campaign is one such attempt, which invites everyone to ask their family members, neighbours or colleagues how they are and thus facilitate emotional conversations about how they are feeling.

Ms. Büdenbender underlined the specific strain on the children, who also suffer from the psychological stress of their parents, who are often dependent on their mothers to keep acute stress away from them in order to avoid potentially traumatising situations.



*Photo 5 Dr. Viktor Liashko, Ms Elke Büdenbender, Ms. Olena Zelenska, Prof. Karl Lauterbach, Ms Svenja Schulze; copyright BMG/Schulten*

Ms. Oksana Zbitnieva, Head of the Coordination Center for Mental Health in Ukraine, presented insights from a global research study on mental Health. The study had been conducted for the Summit of First Ladies and Gentlemen by the British company Alligator and analysis by BDRC, part of the BVA

family, in collaboration with the Mental Health Coordination Centre of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine as part of The All-Ukrainian Mental Health Program, initiated by the First Lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska. [The presentation of the study results](#) was kindly made available for us to share.



*Photo 6 Ms. Oksana Zbitnieva; copyright BMG/Schulten*

The study was conducted online in local languages between 1 and 24 August 2023 in the following 11 countries: Argentina, Brazil, Croatia, Germany, Israel, Japan, Poland, Turkey, Ukraine, UK, and USA. Results were first presented at the Third Summit of First Ladies and Gentlemen, which took place in Kyiv on 6 September 2023.

The countries were selected to cover all regions of the world as well as the countries which are now facing or faced war in the past. They represent a diverse range of

cultures, languages, and traditions, global perspectives and encompass a range of socio-economic statuses.

People aged 13 years and over were included in the research for which 11,000 interviews were conducted in total with 1,000 in each country. A blended approach, giving equal weight to each nation (not weighted by population) was adopted. The results show clearly, that mental health is recognized as a top challenge across all countries not only for the next five years but the next 20 years, too with **the younger generation considering mental health a greater challenge than older people.**

Several external and internal factors were identified in affecting population mental health, such as the worldwide economic challenges, the consequences from the Covid-19 pandemic, war and politics. Personal factors such as bereavement, relationship breakdown and jobs further affect us.

It can be seen that war not only affects those in the conflict zones, but repercussions were felt more widely. For the Russian-Ukraine war specifically, nearly 1 in 2 people felt affected on average with **13–15-year-olds most likely to feel affected by the conflict.**

When asked to rate the state of their mental health, on average, people described it as “quite good”. **Young people aged 18-24 reported the lowest ratings for mental health.** Despite this, 18-24-year-olds appear to also be the most resilient and optimistic about the future, more than any other age group. The most commonly reported diagnostic categories named were depression, anxiety, stress and PTSD.

Self-care, such as exercising, time with nature, hobbies and travelling as well as socializing were the most prevalent coping strategies. With professional help such as psychotherapy or counselling was being taken up the most in Germany.

Respondents were asked about their attitudes towards mental health which could be interpreted as potential for stigma and the results varied across countries. Adolescents were the most likely to perceive people with a mental health condition as “strong/brave/courageous/inspiring” and were also found to be amongst the most tolerant of people with mental health issues within a society.

Stigma of mental health issues still exists and 24% of responders would feel uncomfortable speaking to a medical professional about their mental health. Reasons why people might feel uncomfortable speaking to a medical professional about their mental health. **More young people than others,**

**stated that talking about mental health would be embarrassing (44%), would worry friends or family too much (38%) or would affect their ability to get or stay in a job (33%).**

More access to mental health services, more mental health education including online resources, training, and schooling were considered most helpful in improving people's attitudes towards mental health.

As European child and adolescent psychiatrists, we are moved when we realise that young adolescents in and after puberty react very strongly to stress caused by global conflicts and that young people in transition to adulthood currently rate their own mental health particularly poorly. Child and adolescent psychiatry and cooperation in relation to the transitional age, i.e. supporting the transition into adulthood, are major challenges for all societies, but also important topics to which our discipline is able to contribute considerable expertise.

Already at the ESCAP Congress 2017 in Geneva, ESCAP and the congress host, the Swiss Society for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychotherapy under the presidency of Professor Stephan Eliez, had focussed on the topic of "transitional psychiatry". At the 2022 Maastricht and 2023 Copenhagen congresses, the mental health of children and adolescents in the face of multiple crises and coping with the coronavirus crisis were key topics. The World Health Organisation calls for preparedness and rapid response in dealing with crises. This conference in Berlin also made it clear that we cannot wait until the armed conflict is resolved or until multiple crises are over, but that better child and adolescent psychiatric care in the context of a stepped mental health concept is existential, especially for children and adolescents in crisis situations.

On 1 February 2024, the EU Council agreed the midterm revision of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-2027. To finance the priorities identified including continued support for Ukraine, cuts were made in a number of areas, including EUR 2,1 billion being redeployed from Horizon Europe and EUR 1 billion will be redeployed from the EU4Health programme. While the EU Council states that the reassignment of a total of EUR 10,6 billion will not undermine any political priority within the current MFF, it is worrying to see the health budget be cut in such a substantial way. Support is urgently needed in both areas and they should not be played off against each other.



*Photo 7 Prof. Jörg M. Fegert, Ms. Elke Büdenbender, Ms. Olena Zelenska; copyright BMG/Schulten*