# Social support as a factor of mental health in wartime conditions: Communication and interaction

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**Abstract.** According to researchers, social support is a powerful tool for maintaining a person's mental health. The aim of this study was to empirically identify the relationship between social support as a resource and the stability of an individual's mental health in wartime conditions. The following methods were used in the study: "The Mental Health Continuum – Short Form" (E.L. Nosenko, A.H. Chetveryk-Burchak), and the BASIC Ph Model. Mathematical-statistical methods applied included correlation analysis with the determination of the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) and the determination of differences using the Student's t-test. The study sample consisted of 382 Ukrainians living in Ukraine (of which 116 were men and 266 were women), with an average age of 21.3 years (ranging from 18 to 43 years). The results obtained demonstrate that more than a third of the respondents have a low level of stability of mental health, which is interpreted as a state of depression, a tense psycho-emotional state, passivity in activity and interaction with others. To overcome this state, the respondents most often resort to cognitive skills, belief and physical activity. Analysis of the relationship between mental health stability and various forms of social support revealed that communication and interaction with friends, family members, and members of organisations or communities to which one belongs are associated with higher indicators of mental health and well-being. Differences in mental health indicators and the use of social support were also found between men and women. Men are less likely to use social support as a method of coping with difficult life circumstances. The obtained data do not exhaust the problem of studying social support as a factor of mental health in wartime conditions, but they confirm that communication and interaction are associated with the psychological health and well-being of the individual

**Keywords:** mental health; psychological well-being; hedonic well-being; social well-being; social support; psychological resources

## INTRODUCTION

Sociopolitical conditions and military actions in Ukraine are a constant threat to physical and mental health. The state, in order to support citizens, is implementing the All-Ukrainian Mental Health Program and developing a system in the field of mental health and psychosocial support. In particular, a recovery-oriented approach is

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being applied. Within the framework of this approach, one of the main aspects that support life during the recovery period is the community, that is, relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love and hope. However, the extent to which society supports the mental health of Ukrainians in current conditions and whether there are statistically significant connections between mental health and the presence of social ties are questions this scientific study addresses.

A group of Spanish researchers found that perceived social support has a positive impact on the mental health of the older generation and is important for enhancing their mental well-being (Muñoz-Bermejo *et al.,* 2020). A study conducted on the same age group using the CLHLS 2018 data showed that formal social support generally improved the health indicators of older adults, while informal social support had a positive impact on their mental health (Xie *et al.*, 2022). The researchers' findings also suggest that both formal and informal social support have a positive impact on the mental health of cancer patients (Zhu, 2024).

The family as a social unit has a significant impact on a person's mental health (An *et al.*, 2024). Even perceived family support significantly improves a person's emotional well-being. Based on social support theory, a positive, supportive family environment, where every member of the social group is cared for, provides a person's basic needs for security, love, and acceptance (Stoddard-Bennett *et al.,* 2023). Emotional support, understanding, and acceptance from family members help people cope with anxiety, stress, and other emotional problems (Eisenberg *et al.,* 1997). By encouraging open communication using active listening and showing empathy, the family becomes a supportive environment where it is safe to express emotions and seek comfort (Harris, 1994). Family ties can include not only immediate relatives but also broader and extend to the community. In general, if a person is convinced of the presence of family support, this significantly increases social well-being (Addae & Kühner, 2022). A group of Dutch researchers, studying the long-term mental health risks of military personnel involved in combat and peacekeeping missions, emphasise the importance of social support after returning home and its potential to prevent long-term mental health problems (van der Wal *et al.*, 2023).

Researchers propose an integrative model of social support, based on the idea that social support can reduce distress through three different pathways: emotional state (e.g., reduction of affect), event appraisal (e.g., positive appraisal), and situation-relevant behaviour (e.g., use of constructive coping strategies) (Feeney & Collins, 2015). A psychosocial construct that aligns with these three pathways is mindfulness (the cognitive ability to be aware of the present moment) (Feldman *et al.*, 2007; Wilson *et al.*, 2020). And it is also associated with greater social support (Wilson *et al.*, 2022).

A theoretical analysis of current research on the preservation of mental health and psychological well-being confirms that formal, informal, and even perceived (or imagined) social support is an important factor in reducing distress and preventing mental health problems. Thus, the aim of this study was to test the empirical relationship between social support and mental health in the modern realities of Ukrainians.

Research objectives:

1. To identify the level of mental health stability and the most commonly used resources among the respondents according to the BASIC Ph model of coping and resiliency.

2. To analyse the relationship between mental health stability and social support as a resource for psychological resilience.

3. To analyse the differences in indicators of mental health stability and social support between men and women.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the research objectives, the BASIC Ph Model and the "The Mental Health Continuum – Short Form" (E.L. Nosenko, A.H. Chetveryk-Burchak) were used. Mathematical-statistical methods applied included correlation analysis with the determination of the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) and the determination of differences using the Student's t-test. The study sample consisted of 382 Ukrainians living in Ukraine (116 men and 266 women), with an average age of 21.3 years (ranging from 18 to 43 years). The survey was conducted anonymously, voluntarily, using Google Forms from March to April 2024.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mental health stability for the majority of respondents (56.1%) is characterised at a medium level, which is defined as a satisfactory level. A high level of such stability, which implies flourishing and experiencing symptoms of psychological, social, and hedonic well-being daily, was found in 9.2% of respondents. For 34.7%, a low level of mental health stability is characteristic, which is interpreted as a state of depression, when asthenic emotions dominate, a feeling of detachment from society, the personality does not value itself and does not strive for development. Hedonic well-being as a component of mental health stability is demonstrated at a high level by 19.9% of respondents who feel satisfaction and interest in life. The average level of such feelings is characteristic of 45.9%, the low level – 34.2% (Fig. 1). A medium level of social well-being is characteristic for the majority of respondents, specifically 54.6%. A high level was found only in 9.7% of respondents who feel the ability to act, influence the life of society, and belong to a certain social group. However, 35.7% of the respondents noted their social dis-

advantage, which implies a hostile, unfriendly attitude towards people, as well as an attitude towards events in society as meaningless.

Psychological well-being is characteristic for 48.5% of respondents at an average level. Individuals who want to develop, improve, and feel free to express their own views are 18.4% of respondents with a high level

of psychological well-being. For 33.2%, a low level is characteristic on this scale, such respondents do not believe in the successful fulfilment of everyday obligations and do not have a goal in life. The results of an empirical study of the respondents' top personal resources that they use to overcome difficult life circumstances are shown in Figure 2.
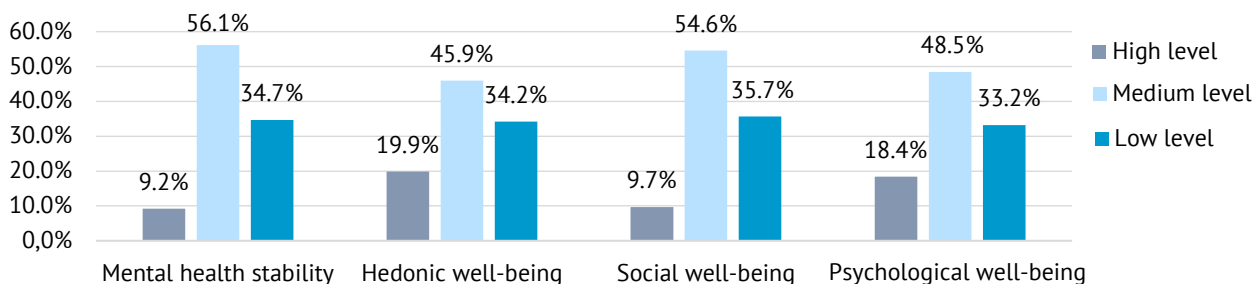


**Figure 1.** Percentage results of the distribution of respondents by the level of mental health stability and its components
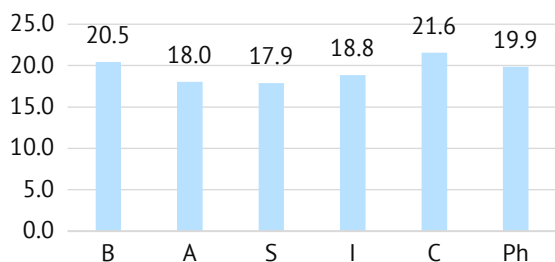
**Source:** compiled by the authors



**Figure 2.** Dominant measures of personal resources to overcome the stress of war, $\bar{x}$

**Note:** B – belief and values; A – affect (emotions), S – social support, I – imagination, C – cognitive coping, Ph – physical activity
**Source:** compiled by the authors

The respondents are most inclined to use cognitive coping skills ($\bar{x} = 21.6$), as well as belief and values ($\bar{x} = 20.5$). Many respondents tend to solve difficult life situations by relying on their own minds and logic,

analysing problems, making plans of action, or turning to believe in God, themselves, or other people. Among the frequently used coping resources, the respondents mentioned physical activity ($\bar{x} = 19.9$), which involves constructively releasing emotions through physical exertion of varying degrees of difficulty. For example, even a walk can be a way to relieve emotional tension, not necessarily running or professional sports.

Respondents often turn to imagination as a coping mechanism ($\bar{x} = 18.8$), which involves distraction through their own ideas, engaging in creativity, self-expression through art, and so on. The least popular among the respondents were affect ($\bar{x} = 18.0$) and social support ($\bar{x} = 17.9$). This means that the respondents are not inclined to share their emotions (grief, fears, anger, etc.), and do not seek support through friendship or social communities. To identify significant correlations between mental health stability and coping resources, the Pearson correlation was applied (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Relationships between mental health stability and its components and coping resources

|    | Mental health stability | Hedonic well-being | Social well-being | Psychological well-being |
|----|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| B  | 0.516** | 0.456** | 0.336** | 0.480** |
| A  | 0.289** | 0.208** | 0.070   | 0.197** |
| S  | 0.274** | 0.210** | 0.116*  | 0.211** |
| I  | 0.232** | 0.109   | 0.090   | 0.138*  |
| C  | 0.490** | 0.461** | 0.392** | 0.516** |
| Ph | 0.357** | 0.231** | 0.197** | 0.295** |

**Note:** * – p < 0.05; ** – p < 0.01
**Source:** compiled by the authors

The conducted correlation analysis allowed to identify a large number of statistically significant indicators at the level of 0.01. All coping resources correlate with

mental health stability, that is, the presence and use of such resources improve the level of mental health and vice versa. The next stage of the study involved analysing

the relationship between social support and mental health. For this, the correlation between the scales of mental health stability and its components with indi- vidual items of the social support scale of the BASIC Ph Model was calculated. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Relationships between mental health stability and its components and social support as a coping resource

|  | **Mental health stability** | **Hedonic well-being** | **Social well-being** | **Psychological well-being** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3. I seek the support of other people | **0.248**\*\* | **0.149**\* | 0.090 | **0.198**\*\* |
| 9. I have conversations with friends on the phone | **0.210**\*\* | **0.188**\*\* | **0.113**\* | **0.208**\*\* |
| 15. I try to find support from a friend or family member | **0.374**\*\* | **0.367**\*\* | **0.213**\*\* | **0.339**\*\* |
| 21. I am deeply involved in relationships with members of my community or organisation to which I belong | **0.147**\* | 0.080 | **0.168**\*\* | **0.114**\* |
| 27. I look for people to spend time with, without doing anything in particular | **0.137**\* | 0.089 | -0.047 | 0.088 |
| 33. I write letters and emails to my friends – hoping for their response | 0.032 | -0.022 | -0.051 | -0.082 |

**Note:** * – $p < 0.05$; ** – $p < 0.01$
**Source:** compiled by the authors

Seeking support from others is statistically significantly correlated with mental health stability ($r = 0.248$; $p < 0.01$), hedonic well-being ($r = 0.149$; $p < 0.05$), and psychological well-being ($r = 0.198$; $p < 0.01$). This means that the coping strategy and specific activity aimed at seeking support from others are associated with high levels of mental health stability.

Communicating with friends over the phone is directly proportional and significantly correlated with mental health stability ($r = 0.210$; $p < 0.01$), hedonic well-being ($r = 0.188$; $p < 0.01$), social well-being ($r = 0.113$; $p < 0.05$), and psychological well-being ($r = 0.208$; $p < 0.01$). Talking with friends is associated with higher mental health indicators, likely due to the opportunity to express all thoughts and feelings and receive a caring emotional response from a close person.

Seeking support from friends or family members is statistically significantly correlated with mental health stability ($r = 0.374$; $p < 0.01$), hedonic well-being ($r = 0.367$; $p < 0.01$), social well-being ($r = 0.213$; $p < 0.01$), and psychological well-being ($r = 0.339$; $p < 0.01$). Communication and interaction with friends and family are associated with higher levels of mental well-being and health.

Maintaining relationships with members of the community or organisation to which one belongs is statistically significantly correlated with mental health stability ($r = 0.147$; $p < 0.05$), social well-being ($r = 0.168$; $p < 0.01$), and psychological well-being ($r = 0.114$; $p < 0.05$). Interaction with the community and members of the organisation to which an individual belongs is associated with higher indicators of social and psychological well-being, as well as mental health. This interaction seems to create a supportive environment among people where the individual spends a significant amount of time. Seeking people to spend time with, without doing anything in particular, is directly and statistically significantly correlated with mental health stability ($r = 0.137$; $p < 0.05$). Thus, a detailed analysis of the relationship between mental health stability and various manifestations of social support has demonstrated that communication and interaction with friends, family members, and also members of an organisation or community to which one belongs leads to higher levels of mental health and well-being.

The next task of the study was to identify differences in the indicators of mental health stability and social support between men and women. Table 3 shows the results of the calculation of the Student's t-test to determine statistically significant differences in the indicators. This method of statistical analysis was chosen because the experimental data obtained follow a normal distribution.

**Table 3.** Differences in indicators of mental health stability and social support between men and women

|  | **Women** | | **Men** | | **t-test** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | **Mean** | **Standard Error** | **Mean** | **Standard Error** | |
| Mental health stability | 39.21 | 1.03 | 24.88 | 1.50 | **7.86**\*\*\* |
| Hedonic well-being | 9.17 | 0.26 | 6.67 | 0.42 | **5.08**\*\*\* |
| Social well-being | 11.27 | 0.36 | 7.48 | 0.56 | **5.70**\*\*\* |

Table 3, Continued

| | Women | | Men | | t-test |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Mean** | **Standard Error** | **Mean** | **Standard Error** | |
| Psychological well-being | 18.78 | 0.51 | 13.21 | 0.79 | **5.96*** |
| B (Belief) | 21.64 | 0.36 | 17.19 | 0.60 | **6.35*** |
| A (Affect) | 19.07 | 0.34 | 15.24 | 0.52 | **6.16*** |
| S (Social support) | 18.92 | 0.37 | 15.29 | 0.58 | **5.23*** |
| I (Imagination) | 19.70 | 0.35 | 16.55 | 0.62 | **4.43*** |
| C (Cognitive coping) | 22.25 | 0.40 | 19.41 | 0.80 | **3.17*** |
| Ph (Physical activity) | 20.72 | 0.33 | 17.48 | 0.66 | **4.40*** |

**Note:** * – $p<0.05$; ** – $p<0.01$
**Source:** compiled by the authors

The results obtained demonstrate the presence of statistically significant differences at the level of $p < 0.001$ in all studied indicators in the groups of men and women. Thus, the results obtained demonstrate that women have higher indicators of mental health stability, psychological, social, and hedonic well-being, as well as more frequent recourse to belief, social support, imagination, cognitive coping, and physical activity to overcome difficult life circumstances due to the war.

Research affirms that social support is a primary tool for strengthening mental health. A study by American researchers involved assessing the link between social support and mental health among a sample of university students. The level of social support was measured using a Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. The results showed that students with lower social support were at a greater risk of mental health issues, with a sixfold higher likelihood of experiencing depression symptoms compared to students with high social support (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). The relationship between physical and mental health and social support was studied in Canada on a sample of 220 young people. The results confirmed the existence of a positive relationship between different sources of support and levels of mental well-being and health (London-Nadeau, *et al.*, 2023). A study of the impact of social support on mental health in China during the COVID-19 outbreak showed that adolescents with moderate or low levels of social support had a significantly higher prevalence of mental health problems (Qi *et al.*, 2020). Similar results were found by researchers when studying the younger generation (Hu *et al.*, 2022). Social support is a key factor in improving mental health, so it is important to provide people with access to resources and opportunities to receive it.

## CONCLUSIONS

The conducted theoretical and empirical analysis of the features of the relationship between social support and mental health has demonstrated the validity of ideas and projects to support mental health and well-being during the war by increasing community cohesion. Overall, the results obtained indicate that more than a third of the respondents have a low level of mental health stability, which is interpreted as a state of depression, when asthenic emotions dominate, a feeling of detachment from society, the personality does not value itself and does not strive for development. Most often, the respondents use cognitive skills, belief, and physical activity to overcome and solve problems caused by the war.

The analysis of the relationship between mental health stability and various manifestations of social support revealed that communication and interaction with friends, family members, and also members of an organisation or community to which one belongs leads to higher levels of mental health and well-being. Differences in mental health indicators and the use of social support between men and women were also found. Men are less likely to use social support as a way to cope with difficult life circumstances. The results obtained do not exhaust the problem of researching social support as a factor in mental health in wartime conditions, but they confirm that communication and interaction are associated with the psychological health and well-being of an individual. The prospects for further scientific research involve an in-depth study of different types of social support and their impact on the mental health of Ukrainians in modern military and political realities.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST
None.

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## Соціальна підтримка як чинник психічного здоров'я в умовах війни: комунікація та взаємодія

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**Анотація**. За твердженнями науковців соціальна підтримка є потужним інструментом підтримки психічного здоров'я людини. У цьому дослідженні метою було емпірично виявити взаємозв'язок між соціальною підтримкою як ресурсом та стабільністю психічного здоров'я особистості в умовах війни. У дослідженні використано такі методики: Опитувальник «стабільність психічного здоров'я – коротка форма» (Е. Л. Носенко, А. Г. Четверик-Бурчак), Методика BASIC Ph. Математично-статистичні методи, що було застосовано це кореляційний аналіз із визначенням коефіцієнта r-Пірсона та знаходження відмінностей із визначенням t-критерія Стюдента. Вибірку дослідження склади 382 українці, які проживають в Україні (за статевою ознакою з них 116 чоловіків та 266 жінок), середній вік 21,3 роки (діапазон від 18 до 43 років). Отримані результати демонструють, що більше третини опитаних мають низький рівень стабільності психічного здоров'я, що інтерпретується як стан пригнічення, напружений психоемоційний стан, пасивність у діяльності та взаємодії з іншими. Для подолання такого стану опитані найчастіше звертаються до когнітивних навичок, віри та фізичної активності. Аналіз взаємозв'язку стабільності психічного здоров'я з різними проявами соціальної підтримки виявив, що комунікація та взаємодія з друзями, членами сім'ї, а також членами організації чи громади до якої належиш передбачає вищі показники психічного здоров'я та благополуччя. Також виявлені відмінності у показниках психічного здоров'я та використання соціальної підтримки у чоловіків та жінок. Чоловіки менш схильні до використання соціальної підтримки як методу подолання складних життєвих обставин. Отримані дані не вичерпують проблему дослідження соціальної підтримки як чинника психічного здоров'я в умовах війни, проте підтверджують, що комунікація та взаємодія пов'язані із психологічним здоров'ям та благополуччям особистості

**Ключові слова:** психічне здоров'я; психологічне благополуччя; гедонічне благополуччя; соціальне благополуччя; соціальна підтримка; психологічні ресурси