



Duquesne experts help lead support sessions for Ukrainian psychologists

Programs created for Pittsburghers are helping war victims in Ukraine



ALEX KOLLER
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

JUL 25, 2022

8:07 AM

Every other week, Oxana Bayer and her colleagues in Ukraine convene virtually to talk through the challenges of treating wartime trauma. For Bayer, the discussions are “sacred time.”

As a Ukrainian scholar doing psychology research at Duquesne University when war broke out in her homeland, Bayer responded to the crisis by mobilizing Duquesne’s mental health experts to support her colleagues in Ukraine.

Bayer — normally an associate professor of psychology at Alfred Nobel University in the eastern Ukrainian city of Dnipro — had just started her work in Pittsburgh through the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program when

Russia invaded Ukraine in late February. For the following week, Bayer, 42, said she was “not at all able to listen to anything, study anything.”

But after the initial shock, she wanted to aid her colleagues and former students back home. Bayer turned to her peers at Duquesne for help, recruiting faculty members and graduate students with expertise in trauma from the university’s psychology department to join her in launching a series of free Zoom workshops and discussion groups tailored to psychotherapists living through the war.

The biweekly meetings, usually held on alternating Wednesdays for an hour, are devoted to addressing the therapists’ questions about how to best respond to the novel mental health issues their patients are grappling with because of the war.

Ukraine’s mental health professionals are shouldering a uniquely demanding role: They’re treating patients for trauma amid an ongoing conflict, all while enduring their own harrowing war experiences.

At one of the first sessions, Bayer said she felt like she was on the verge of “bursting into tears,” seeing the vulnerability of the group of therapists.

“They were so open and sincere — sharing and grasping how difficult it was for them with people whom they don’t know, but for whatever reason they trust,” she said.

‘It’s not post-traumatic at all’

Alongside Bayer, Brad Landry, a trainee clinical psychologist and fifth-year Ph.D. student at Duquesne, has become a mainstay of the online discussions.

Bayer recruited Landry for the support project after she learned of his work with Duquesne’s military services clinic, which specializes in the psychological impacts of war and specifically serves veterans and military families. He leads the one-hour Wednesday meetings, fielding questions from the Ukrainian clinicians while Bayer translates their queries and his answers in real time.



Oxana Bayer, left, a former visiting scholar at Duquesne who has returned to Europe, participates in a Zoom call July 14 with Brad Landry. They lead online support sessions for Ukrainian therapists facing wartime trauma.

(Morgan Timms/Post-Gazette)

Landry said 15 to 20 people regularly attend the sessions, though he estimated that number has at times reached 80 or 90.

“These psychologists are in the war, too,” he said. “Yet, there are clearly these moments, like these sessions every other week, where something terribly beautiful is happening — something terribly human and transcendent.”

The military services clinic’s methods are “radically different” from conventional approaches to treating wartime trauma, Landry said. According to Roger Brooke, the clinic’s director and an emeritus psychology professor at Duquesne, the center’s practices — which draw from “knowledge of traditional warrior cultures around the world and through history” — spurn any notion that therapy is a panacea, and instead seek to respectfully acknowledge a patient’s current pain through community and storytelling.

“How do you work, supposedly on a kind of a post-traumatic model, in a situation where you can hear the bombs?” said Brooke, who has run workshops on the psychology of war for the Ukrainian therapists. “It’s not post-traumatic at all. It is a continuous traumatic stress syndrome.”

Both Landry and Brooke said they believe their techniques are more promising for treating war trauma than mainstream methods largely centered on symptom reduction. The clinic’s work “captures the fullness of

these wartime experiences in much greater detail and nuance,” said Landry.

“There’s almost something disrespectful in a therapeutic approach, which somehow suggests that if you do these mental exercises things will be better,” Brooke said. “There’s something terribly arrogant about that.”

Refashioning strategies for the front lines

When Bayer asked Duquesne faculty members Jessie Goicoechea and Eva-Maria Simms to offer trainings they created for Pittsburgh-area organizations in the virtual sessions, the two experts realized they needed to adapt their program for the Ukrainian situation. “It was humbling,” said Goicoechea, director of training at the university’s doctoral program in clinical psychology.

She and Simms, a psychology professor, had spent years developing their program — called Community Trauma and Resilience Care — to provide Pittsburgh-area social services, such as after-school programs and community health groups, “with knowledge and skills around working with traumatized populations,” according to Goicoechea.

The CTRC training consists of three modules: The first part provides an overview of trauma and its effects; the second segment examines how to establish safety in relationships and places; and the final leg focuses on grief.

The pair of psychologists designed the training to help patients who were confronting trauma from their past. But for Bayer’s colleagues and the patients they treat, their trauma is still unfolding — sometimes even during the support group’s meetings.

“Some of them said that as they listened to us, they were hearing bombings outside of their walls,” Goicoechea said.

Goicoechea said she and Simms had to pivot from their typical presentation on finding safety for the psychologists in Ukraine, for instance, out of a recognition of “how incredibly challenging that was for them when they literally weren’t safe.”

“We had very powerful discussions with them in the Q&A portion of our workshop on not letting go of that researched idea that safety is still

incredibly important — to persevere, maintain resilience in the face of trauma — but how to do it perhaps in much smaller ways,” Goicoechea said.

Simms said many of the therapists are on the front lines of the war helping patients manage scenarios they have never seen before.

“What do I do with somebody who just saw their child blown up on their way to the bunker?” Simms said, referring to the kinds of questions the Ukrainian practitioners have raised in the workshops. One psychologist on the call said they would “rather stay in their apartment in Kyiv while it was being bombed than be displaced because they knew that place — it was home. And that was a better way of stabilizing themselves than just leaving.”

Goicoechea and Simms have already led the first two modules of CTRC in the spring for roughly 30 to 40 Ukrainian clinicians and students each time, with their last workshop on grief currently in planning.

Homecoming

While Bayer has returned to Europe since finishing her semester in Pittsburgh, she said she hopes the group sessions will carry on in the months to come with the continued support of Duquesne’s psychologists.

“It does a lot, really — that people feel they’re not alone,” Bayer said.

At the end of August, she plans to travel back to Dnipro, where she expects to reunite with family, friends and co-workers after more than half a year away. Early in the war, Dnipro began receiving an influx of displaced Ukrainians fleeing warfare in other areas of the country, but it has more recently become the target of deadly Russian missile attacks.

Despite the uncertain future of the fighting, though, Bayer will bear the stories of war her colleagues shared through this project started so far from home, wherever she goes.

“I remember all of them,” she said, “because they’re all very important.”

Alex Koller: akoller@post-gazette.com

First Published July 24, 2022, 6:00am

We hope you enjoyed this free article.

Get unlimited story access for only 99¢.

Subscribe

Limited time offer.
