

# **The nature of combat stress development during military operations and psychotherapy in extreme situations**

**Yanina Ovsyannikova**

Educational and Scientific Laboratory of Extreme and Crisis Psychology  
National University of Civil Defence of Ukraine  
61023, 94 Chernyshevskaya Str., Kharkiv, Ukraine

**Diana Pokhilko**

Educational and Scientific Laboratory of Extreme and Crisis Psychology  
National University of Civil Defence of Ukraine  
61023, 94 Chernyshevskaya Str., Kharkiv, Ukraine

**Mykola Krasnokutskyi**

Educational and Scientific Laboratory of Extreme and Crisis Psychology  
National University of Civil Defence of Ukraine  
61023, 94 Chernyshevskaya Str., Kharkiv, Ukraine

**Valentyn Kerdyvar**

Educational and Scientific Laboratory of Extreme and Crisis Psychology  
National University of Civil Defence of Ukraine  
61023, 94 Chernyshevskaya Str., Kharkiv, Ukraine

**Kateryna Kreshchuk**

Social and Psychological Faculty  
National University of Civil Defence of Ukraine  
61023, 94 Chernyshevskaya Str., Kharkiv, Ukraine

**Abstract.** Military operations and direct exposure to extreme conditions can deprive soldiers of a full physical and emotional life through a powerful traumatic impact that causes acute mental trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder and panic attacks, which lead to disharmony in the inner world and destruction of the perception of reality. The purpose of the research work is the theoretical and empirical analysis of the study of the nature of combat stress in military personnel and the assessment of psychotherapeutic methods of providing psychological assistance in extreme situations. The authors used the following methods to achieve this goal: method of analysis and synthesis, hermeneutic method, testing method, comparative method and generalisation method. The results of the research work have revealed the meaning of traumatic stress, psychological trauma and combat mental trauma, explained the concept of combat stress and the dynamics of its growth. The findings identified the factors of post-traumatic stress syndrome and its prevalence, tracked down the dynamics of psycho-emotional disorders and revealed the importance of military psychological selection and determination of combat readiness. The authors established the main tasks of a staff psychologist in working with military personnel, conducted an empirical study of the nature of combat stress in the military, observed main psychotherapeutic tools for the prevention of negative mental states in combat conditions and investigated self-regulation techniques of emotional, physical and mental health. The practical significance of the scientific work lies in the modern coverage of the phenomenon of combat stress and the classification of effective psychotherapeutic methods that will ensure the sustainable psychological preparation of the soldiers for extreme situations. These methods also include support of optimal psychological and emotional state, rehabilitation life-saving support for healthy mental functioning and effective implementation of strategic tasks.

**Keywords:** post-traumatic stress disorder; distress; exhaustion stage; abreaction; isometric exercises, systematic desensitisation.

## 1. Introduction

According to the Ukrainian Crisis Centre, about 70% of military personnel who took part in hostilities are experiencing combat stress, 25% are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder of varying degrees and 90% of soldiers require qualified medical and psychological support (Narrative report, 2021). The Centre for Public Health of Ukraine (Helping military personnel..., 2023) published statistics showing that 20-40% of military personnel need psychological assistance with symptoms of acute mental trauma detected in 60-80% of those who witnessed the deaths of comrades and civilians. The group at highest risk is military personnel aged 18 to 26 who had a history of excessive alcohol consumption with symptoms of depression. A significant number of the combatants are unwilling to seek psychological help because they fear disrespect from their colleagues and loss of their military career, considering such act as demonstration of weakness.

The problem of the research work is to reveal the nature of combat stress, determine the dynamics of its progression and the degree of damage, currently not sufficiently studied and limited in definitions, which further destructively affects the psycho-emotional state of soldiers, their effectiveness and results, weakens combat capability and leads to adaptation disorders.

By studying combat stress through medical psychology, O. Blinov (2022) found that military personnel exposed to combat stress has significant adaptation disorders, expressed in emotional affections, cognitive impairment, personality deformation, suppression of the motivational area and depressed mood. The affection of the psyche of the fighters takes the form of combat mental trauma, which is a consequence of combat stress. However, the researcher argued that this phenomenon is quite natural and is a normal reaction to abnormal circumstances of an acute exogenous nature.

I.I. Prykhodko (2021) characterised combat stress as the process of influence of the destructive factors in the combat situation on the psyche of soldiers, which reduces the level of psychological security. The researcher also noted that it is important to distinguish between the following concepts: combat stress, combat mental pathology and combat mental trauma. Since combat stress can manifest itself at multiple levels and affects adaptive activity in combat, the other concepts include prolonged pathological conditions of the central nervous system, where the battle stress is primary cause.

I.S. Myroniuk et al. (2022) paid special attention to psychogenic disorders that occur during military operations in both defenders and civilians. The authors have defined combat stress as mental exhaustion, which carries a number of organic diseases with it. The researchers also believed that in a few years the society would face the problem of increasing alcohol and drug addiction, while psychosomatic disorders such as oncology disorders, diabetes, asthma and arthritis can become more acute.

D. Martsenkovskiy (2020) considered the specific features of combat stress based on three levels that emerge as consequences of stressors. At the initial stage, there is an anxious reaction to the stimulus followed by resistance and finally exhaustion. Anxiety and fear are a source of emotional and physical imbalance. The researcher argues that stress can affect brain activity with increased hormonal activity suppressing neural connections and reducing brain cells responsible for emotional and cognitive functioning.

M.V. Matviychuk (2020) found that the impact of a particular factor is an individual experience, where a non-standard and extreme situation will be exciting for one group of people but emotionally unbearable and even fatal for others. The battlefield includes a variety of stress factors that together cause combat fatigue, emotional exhaustion and pessimism in the military. In the researcher's opinion, the psychological assistance should be provided as close to the front as possible to encourage abreaction and to preserve the mental health of soldiers.

The purpose of the research work is to reveal in detail the essence of combat stress and other psychological and emotional disorders that can manifest themselves in military personnel and negatively affect their combat skills. The main tasks are to find effective therapeutic methods that will stabilise the mental well-being and health of the soldiers who have experienced stressful and