

VOLUNTEER SUPERVISION GROUPS IN WARTIME UKRAINE: REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

One of the reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine at dawn on 24 February 2022 was a creative and bold effort to support Ukrainian psychotherapists who are providing mental health services to people whose lives were disrupted by displacement and trauma. This effort brought together volunteer group supervisors from many democratic countries and volunteer Ukrainian psychotherapists, and interpreters to manage the language barrier between them. Given the quickness of mobilization and the wide variety of needs expressed, these groups often encompass a variety of emphases including supervision, consultation, support, and psychotherapy. The dedicated professionals who answered this call had little or no time to prepare for their task or to consider the complexity and uniqueness of this situation. Now, with the war in its third year, some have begun to examine their work in light of available related literature to better understand their experiences and offer recommendations for future similar efforts.

Since the volunteer supervisors are mostly from other countries, this necessitated the use of interpreters to facilitate communication with Ukrainian therapists. A further complication is that some of the therapists and interpreters remained in Ukraine, and some fled to other countries. All group meetings were conducted via an online platform that brought together volunteer professionals living in different time zones. The interpreters are Ukrainians, some of whom are therapists themselves, but others with little or no experience in mental health settings.

The phenomenon of the present volunteer supervision initiative lies in the cohesion of the international therapeutic community and digital technologies. Tools such as social networks, messaging platforms, and videotelephony have facilitated an ad hoc and prompt global response to an extraordinary situation.

These technologies not only rendered the initiative feasible but also remarkably efficient, eliminating the need to organize the process through an established institution or allocate substantial resources at its inception.

The project was initiated by a group of Ukrainian psychotherapists (PsyCrisis Ukraine) and endorsed by members of the International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes (IAGP) in March 2022. Through an initial email to the IAGP network, the volunteer initiative has, since March 2022, overseen more than 45 supervision groups, support groups, therapy sessions, and individual supervision sessions. This has empowered over 450 Ukrainian psychotherapists to persist in voluntary engagement, providing therapeutic support to Ukrainian refugees, displaced persons, the military, and all those adversely affected by the war. In 2023, the initiative experienced further growth with the addition of eight new group leaders, facilitating the conduction of 27 groups. As of December 2023, a noteworthy 18 of these groups continue to remain active at this writing, with a majority having been operational since 2022. In the course of 2023, over 300 Ukrainian psychotherapists availed themselves of the support and supervision services offered by the initiative.