

# “No game or movie prepares you for this feeling. I was really scared.”

## EXPERIENCES OF UKRAINIAN YOUTHS IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

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**A study investigated how Ukrainian children and adolescents cope with the changes and traumatic experiences caused by the war and which coping strategies they apply in this context.**

*Ms. Lopatovska, you yourself have a Ukrainian background. Is this the reason why you as a U.S. scientist have conducted studies with Ukrainian young people?*

**Lopatovska:** Yes, I am of Ukrainian descent. While I came to the U.S. close to 27 years ago, I still have family and friends in Kyiv. When the war started, I felt guilty for not being able to help, for being so far from my community. During the pandemic, I was studying how teenagers were surviving in the social isolation. When the war against Ukraine started, I decided to look into how the teenagers in Ukraine are surviving this tremendous change.

*What method did you apply?*

**Lopatovska:** In-depth interviews. I conducted semi-structured Zoom interviews with 27 Ukrainian children and adolescents aged 10-18. My aim was to be very careful in the questions I am asking not to cause any distress in my participants. I planned to have 30 minutes, but I have noticed that it was not enough time, especially for the older teenagers. Participants who were 16, 17, 18 wanted to talk longer. And I thought I cannot stop these adolescents from sharing whatever they want to share. With some of them,

the conversations lasted more than an hour, and that was really great.

*What did you find out?*

**Lopatovska:** Life changed dramatically after February 24, 2022. 23 out of 27 participants reported leaving their homes within the first 2 months of the war. The 4 whose families decided to stay reported hearing almost constant sirens, they were hiding in shelters, hiding in their apartment hallways or bathtubs (Ill. 1) or moving to neighbours' apartments on the lower floors. Many families were expecting the war, like one family of the interviewee from Kharkiv, and had prepared food and water supplies. However, after 10 days of continued shelling, the constant sounds of close battles and the sightings of damage from explosions, the family decided to leave. A young man described: “When I saw all the destruction from bombs to things, like metal structures, I realized how high my chances of dying are. No game or movie prepares you for this feeling. I was really scared.”

*Which results were the most remarkable?*

**Lopatovska:** I was most impressed by how mature my participants were in handling this disruption. I tried not to cry myself; every interview was very taxing in terms of listening to their stories, remaining calm and admiring their resilience. All my participants lived through significantly traumatic experiences and they all were strong

enough to talk about them, to worry about others more than worrying about themselves, to understand themselves and apply strategies to cope with traumatic events in their lives. Children as young as 10 knew when to avoid information, for example, that would increase their trauma; sometimes they knew when to seek information or seek distraction to help themselves. Their resilience that I have seen is really inspiring to me.

*What coping strategies did the young people report?*

**Lopatovska:** Seeking **distraction** was the most frequently mentioned individual coping strategy including consumption of movies, videos, listening to music, playing a.o. video games, etc. Some dived deeper into their hobbies or distracted themselves by work for school or house chores or by going outside for a walk, playing sports outdoors etc.

The second most frequently mentioned coping strategy was **being close to the loved ones**, including friends, family and pets (Ill. 2). Some participants referred to **information seeking** as a strategy that helps them cope with the situation. An 18-year-old young man, for example, said: “I’m trying to establish a sense of control [over the situation]. (...) I read a lot of economic and political sources on the Russia-Ukraine situation, try to understand how it got to this and what I have missed.” While a certain number of participants found benefits in seeking additional

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information, others reported avoiding information consumption to maintain well-being. Positive attitude and optimistic thinking were also reported as being helpful to the participants.

### *So they were generally doing well and were stable?*

**Lopatovska:** Yes and no. I was hoping not to see any signs of traumatic experience if people were able to go to a different country or a safe place in the first days of war. But it's not true. I just didn't expect to see the signs of a traumatic experience even in the children who were able to leave their places of residence within the first 2 days of the invasion. I was hoping that they would be spared this experience. But how could they? Families are broken. For most children, their dads stayed. They saw some traumatic events on their journey. They still have friends in Ukraine who they worry about. So everyone had one traumatic experience or another.

### *What constitutes a traumatic experience?*

**Lopatovska:** Following the American Psychological Association<sup>1</sup> a traumatic event is manifested in threats to physical safety like being close to bombed areas or battlegrounds, disruption of normal school and afterschool routines, separation from family members, friends, and familiar places. For many of my interviewees, there were no "safe places", especially in the early days and weeks of war. Often, families had to make decisions on where to stay or go based on unclear information, exposing themselves to even greater dangers. The war exposed even those of our participants who considered themselves generally "lucky" – who were not injured, did

not lose their loved ones, were not separated from their entire families or trapped in besieged towns – to traumatic experiences. We definitely found signs of traumatic experiences and how they are dealing with them and how they are living through them again and again through media and news. It is still very fresh. Very few participants accepted their new realities, found ways to adapt and move on. The majority of participants was still processing their trauma and felt, for example, extreme hatred or sadness.

### *What media did the young people use in this situation?*

**Lopatovska:** Media was used a lot for **distraction**. For example, some teens watched a TikTok to distract themselves from sad news, or short puppy videos on YouTube. A student produced YouTube content about board games. Beside distraction, media was used for maintaining **social connections**, communication with friends and family. Many of the gaming platforms offer communication opportunities, so adolescents could socialize with friends who play the same games together. Media, of course, was also used for **learning**. Ukrainian schools often offered online classes, no matter

where the pupils were. Moreover, the adolescents used media for informal learning, **information seeking** and reading news. In all these 4 functions (distraction from trauma and stress, socializing with friends, continue academic pursuits and understanding the situation by accessing information), technology was the tool to support teen resilience by facilitating connections to family and communities, supporting their autonomy, a sense of purpose and self-regulation. At the same time, participants also shared report of technology avoidance, i.e. situations when they wanted to evade disturbing news. Such behaviors directed at improving mental health attests teen resilience, critical consciousness, and skills in regulating their emotions.

### *Which recommendations with regard to media content can be formulated from the study results?*

**Lopatovska:** Well, some of the recommendations came from the adolescents themselves. First, to improve social media and other types of digital platforms and make them more accessible to Ukrainians (costs, language considerations). Another thing is better filtering possibilities of social media. Because whether you try to make sense



Ill. 1: During the Russian air raids, Ukrainian children sought shelter in bathtubs, among other things



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Ill. 2: Coping strategies for dealing with traumatic experiences: distraction through, for example, video games and proximity to familiar people and pets

of the situation or seek information, or if you try to avoid talking about war, you should be able to choose your setting. For example, you should be able to not talk about war if you seek distraction from it in a video game. One of my research interests is conversational technology (like Amazon Alexa). During the pandemic, for example, I explored if it can be used to help teens relax, practice mindfulness, or positive thinking. Some of my participants in Ukraine reported sleeping difficulties and other problems, which could be alleviated by the use of such technology. However, due to a lack of Ukrainian language support for such apps, there is nothing we can offer them currently.

#### What can we do?

**Lopatovska:** In terms of teen resilience, I don't think that we can do anything about it, it's already present. The factors that help support them is definitely proximity to caregivers, mothers specifically. This is well supported by literature as well: Don't separate kids from their parents, especially mothers. Pets is a big factor for me, because

pets came in conversations. As a family member, they oftentimes were mentioned before a mom was mentioned as a calming agent. "When we hear a siren, my dog knows in advance, and it comes to me and it protects me. And it's like it calms me down and all that." I would also say we could promote certain types of literacy amongst teachers how to handle stress and trauma. And we need to develop listening skills. Whoever surrounds teens and children needs to know how to listen. Children and young people need to be heard, for example, offer them a platform, get teens together and let them talk to each other about the things they are experiencing. Such human conversations can be so helpful and a start for healing. We can also build more (hopefully) trustful agents, like computer systems or conversational systems. Because I understand that we might not always have access to humans to help other humans.

#### So is technology actually helpful here?

**Lopatovska:** Yes. Even small things like meditation, breathing, calming down, positive thinking, thinking

about something good that happened to you today or last week could be pre-programmed into an information tool. What would a friend tell you? A friend who loves you, how would they support you? Say that to yourself. Little things like that are all known to alleviate negative emotions, stress, and anxiety. These self-healing strategies would be so easy to share with teens, and we can definitely use technology for that. Perhaps we can consider using technology to talk through our own problems, develop self-compassion, but also use technology to hear others, their stories,

develop empathy and better understanding of each other. ■

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma> [14.11.22]

#### REFERENCE

Lopatovska, Irene, Arora, Kirtika, Fernandes, Flita Veleny et al. (2022). Experiences of the Ukrainian adolescents during the Russia-Ukraine 2022 War. *Information and Learning Sciences (Ahead-of-print)*. Available at: <https://irenelopatovska.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/1ukr-teens-revision00-acceptedchanges-2.pdf> [11.1.23]

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