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The Compounding Effect of COVID-19 and War in Ukraine on Mental Health: A Global Time Bomb Soon to Explode?

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Two years after COVID-19 stroke the globe, a new health crisis emerged. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 soon resulted in thousands of injuries and deaths and millions of displacements internally and neighboring countries -and more are anticipated during this protracted and escalating conflict. What the globe presently is dealing with is a twofold emergency (COVID-19 and the war) that will severely compromise physical and mental health globally, affecting Ukrainians in particular. The conflict in eastern Ukraine since 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic already had a tremendous toll on the health of citizens and healthcare providers (Dragioti et al., 2022), and resulted in disruption of the healthcare system. Compounding this effect, the war in Ukraine will further affect people's health and healthcare systems worldwide.

The devastating consequences of war concern combatants and civilians, displaced people, and those left behind (Bryant et al., 2022). The health of children (Ludvigsson & Loboda, 2022), women, older people, and people with disabilities is likely to be severely jeopardized. The rate of acute and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety will increase profoundly. Ukrainians may manifest alarming rates of complex posttraumatic stress disorder because of the repeated and prolonged traumatic experience of the war, and the prolonged grief disorder could increase in the years to come because of the thousands of deaths (Shevlin et al., 2022). Kurapov et al. (2022) have already shown alarming findings with 97.8% of Ukrainians reporting mental health deterioration.

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Refugees are at profound risk of various health issues (e.g., spreading infectious diseases -COVID-19 included-, discontinuation of chronic diseases care), and also stress-related disorders (e.g., acute and posttraumatic stress disorder). Psychosocial issues, such as abuse, sexual violence, and rape, separation from loved ones, bereavement, are likely to exacerbate their pre-war overwhelmed mental health.

The pre-pandemic compromised healthcare system in Ukraine, already been challenged because of COVID-19, currently suffers severely (e.g., damage to health infrastructure). Similar challenges might suffer the hosting countries, the healthcare systems of which struggle to meet the needs of their citizens. The healthcare professionals worldwide already dealing with symptoms of burden, secondary traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, etc., are currently invited to meet the health needs of civilians, combatants, and refugees.

People worldwide will not spare the threat. Daily exposure to distressing news from media is likely to result in mental health symptoms (similarly to COVID-19; Kellerman et al., 2022). People with a history of previous trauma (e.g., abuse), and preexisting mental disorders will be particularly affected.

Many other potentially alarming situations with unknown repercussions are presently emerging in the world, such as the conflicted relations between China, Taiwan, and the U.S.A. In light of the consequences of the war, safeguarding peoples' mental health is an imperative target of health policies. Professional associations, voluntary organizations, and people worldwide should join forces in ending the war and work collaboratively to address the mental health needs of the, directly and indirectly, war-affected populations. If not, could the current global health crisis be a time bomb soon to explode?

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