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## THE COPING STRATEGIES OF ADOLESCENTS DURING A WAR CRISIS

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A crisis can be described as a critical psychological state wherein individuals are confronted with circumstances that threaten their emotional well-being. They find themselves unable to resolve the situation with familiar methods, nor can they entirely avoid it [5]. Ukrainian people tend to use different coping strategies to help deal with the psychological symptoms during the time of war. These strategies can be divided into problem- and emotion-oriented coping mechanisms [7; 14; 13]. Problem-oriented coping strategies (e.g. actively dealing with issues, planning and positively reframing them with the help of different structural support) show how people can solve their current problems. During a crisis and under stressful situations – perhaps as an attempt to regain a sense of security – the need for attachment increases [19] and this feeling is activated in the behavioral system. Although a crisis can ruin human relationships, the presence and availability of significant people – such as parents and teachers – can ease the negative impacts of stress by maintaining their connections and satisfying attachment needs [21]. The actual impact of the war crisis on those experiencing it is being examined by many foreign and national studies, however, they do not give a detailed description of the narratives and coping strategies of youth. This study aims to answer these questions. The research questions were investigated among adolescents (17-year-olds) living in Transcarpathia, Ukraine. In addition to the demographic data, the participants answered four main questions. Answering these questions was not mandatory, thus, in the end, 84 people responded (26 of which were adolescent boys, while the remaining 58 were adolescent girls). The aim of our descriptive research was to gain insight into the war-related experiences and coping mechanisms of Hungarian youth living in Transcarpathia.

## ІСТОРІЇ УСПІХУ ПІДЛІТКІВ В УМОВАХ КРИЗИ ВОЄННИХ РОКІВ

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**Ключові слова:** криза в умовах війни, наративи, історії успіху, проблемно-орієнтоване подолання, емоційно-орієнтоване подолання.

Криза – з погляду психології – критичний стан, ситуація, переживаючи яку індивід відчуває емоційну лабільність і змушений знаходити шляхи приборкання життєвих обставин, що ставлять під загрозу його душевну рівновагу. Потрапляючи в таку ситуацію, людина за допомогою звичних для неї засобів не здатна ані знайти вихід з неї, ані запобігти подальшому розвитку подій, які можуть мати негативні наслідки в майбутньому [5]. В арсеналі українців існують різні стратегії подолання таких ситуацій, вони допомагають їм впоратися з психологічними проявами фізичних станів, зумовлених військовим конфліктом. У науковій літературі виділяють два типи стратегії подолання стресових ситуацій: проблемно-орієнтоване й емоційно-орієнтоване [7; 14; 13]. Проблемно-орієнтоване подолання (наприклад, активна форма копінг-поведінки, планування, позитивний рефреймінг, інші види психологічної підтримки) допомагає людині знайти вихід із проблемної ситуації, у якій вона опинилася внаслідок тих чи інших подій. У кризових ситуаціях під впливом стресових чинників, а іноді і під час пошуку нових форм безпеки зростає потреба у прив'язаності [19]. У такі моменти наочно простежується поява моделі прив'язаності в житті індивіда, що призводить до запуску того чи іншого поведінкового механізму. Хоча кризова ситуація має згубний вплив на людські відносини, прояви стресу можна зменшити, чи то отримавши підтримку від близьких людей, таких як батьки, вчителі, чи то перебуваючи в довірливих стосунках з оточуючими, тобто зберігши потребу у прив'язаності, яка супроводжує людину впродовж життя [21]. У дослідженні, яке базується на засадах використання кваліметричного підходу, основна увага приділяється аналізу життєвих історій дітей підліткового віку, пов'язаних із війною. У дослідженні взяли участь підлітки, які проживають на території Закарпаття (Україна). Участь в опитуванні була добровільною, тож, зрештою, в анкетуванні взяли участь 84 респонденти, серед яких 26 хлопців і 58 дівчат підліткового віку. Мета нашого дослідження – з'ясувати, як молодь Закарпаття угорського походження сприймає події, пов'язані з війною, та які стратегії подолання кризи застосовують молоді для подолання її наслідків.

**Introduction.** We live in a time of conflict and war, in psychological terms, we are in the middle of a war crisis. According to G. Caplan's concept of crisis [5], there are two types of crises. In the first case, the root of the problem stems from an unanticipated, dangerous situation, while the other one includes issues appearing naturally during one's lifetime.

Crisis can be defined as a psychologically critical condition: it is an emotionally significant situation for people, in which they are forced to confront the circumstances that may threaten their emotional well-being. One of the condition's particularities is that people are neither able to solve the problem with already existing and known devices, nor can they completely avoid the situation [5].

Erikson sees crisis as a temporary state, a specific kind of change or even a turning point. He tries to explain this concept in his crisis theory (1958/1991), where he describes people as creative beings, who, by developing different personal strengths (this idea immediately reminds us of our resilience and ability to apply adaptive coping strategies) are capable of changing and taking control of their lives. One is forced to develop new strategies in order to manage the situation, thus, during the crisis – in addition to the difficulties of adjusting to the circumstances and the possible outcomes [16] – lies the possibility of growing and achieving balance.

During a crisis and under stressful situations – perhaps as an attempt to regain a sense of security – the need for attachment increases [19] and this feeling is activated in the behavioral system. Although a crisis can ruin human relationships, the presence and availability of significant people – such as parents and teachers – can ease the negative impacts of stress by maintaining their connections and satisfying attachment needs [21].

The actual impact of the war crisis on those experiencing it is being examined by many foreign and national studies, however, they do not give a detailed description of the narratives and coping strategies of youth. This study aims to answer these questions.

According to other studies, in those countries where no war is happening, but people have been dealing with other challenges in the last couple of years, such as climate change, the depletion of natural resources, COVID-19 [1], Barchielli et. al. [1] examined what kind of challenges have people been faced with because of these factors, and what impact the consequences have on their psychological well-being and mental health. The aim of their study of the 21st century and their effect on the psychological well-being of the population located in central and southern Italy [1].

A questionnaire containing sociodemographic characteristics, ad hoc topics, anxiety and the willingness to break different habits in the future related to the challenges of our century has been created

online, and the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Questionnaire's (DASS-21) results were obtained from the answers of 1831 participants (61% M; average age:  $47.71 \pm 17.30$ ). According to the results, younger adults reported better psychological well-being, while older ones did not show such good results. Young adults received higher points in being preoccupied and showing willingness to break their habits in the future, while older participants showed lowest scores, except when it came to the subject of breaking habits (the difference between genders was the most evident here).

In conclusion, the causes of stress in our century discussed in this study are related to personal well-being, and it is important to consider the universal mental health problems that may arise from these stress factors.

Studies conducted in countries that are in the middle of a war and/or armed conflict (e.g. Syrian refugees in Germany) show a significant deterioration in the affected population's mental health [3; 4]. The risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and other stress-related conditions have been identified [20], and the presence of these problems is more common among women, which can be associated with their experience and fear of sexual violence [15].

The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the civilians' mental health was examined [18]. The results clearly confirm the war's negative effect on one's mental health and conditions related to fear, substance abuse, stress, loneliness, burnout and more.

In this empirical study, Kostruba [17] scrutinizes the correlations between the level of media religiousness and the psychological coping strategies during the second month of the war. During the research, the following question has arisen: how to deal with negative emotions caused by the war? The study consisted of 66 young volunteers (8 men and 58 women) with the average age being 18.85 years ( $=1.94$ ). According to their answers, religious people watch more positive content on social media and there is less focus on anger, pain and memories from the past. They are not actively thinking about death either. Spiritual coping mechanisms (such as prayers, faith etc.) are prominently displayed, as well as the family members and friends are widely mentioned among students, saying that keeping in touch with them helps them calm down and bring their attention to different topics. Furthermore, the processed texts reveal and spread more awareness of the war, which is proven by the high indicators of cognitive processes (including understanding, assurance and differentiation). They clearly understand this tragedy and the nature of war, but also strongly believe in victory [17].

In a comparative study by Chudzicka-Czupala et al. [8] examined the symptoms of depression, anxiety

and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) among the population of Ukraine, Poland and Taiwan during the Russian-Ukrainian war. The researchers conducted an online survey between March 8 and April 26, 2022, using the snowball method. The survey took place in Ukraine, Poland and Taiwan and they used the help of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Questionnaire (DASS-21), while post-traumatic stress symptoms were examined based on the Event Scale (IES-R) and types of coping strategies (Brief-COPE). Multivariate linear regression was used in order to identify the factors significantly connected to the DASS-21 and IES-R scores. 1626 people participated in this study (1053 from Poland, 385 from Ukraine and 188 from Taiwan). Ukrainian participants reported significantly higher DASS-21 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and IES-R ( $p < 0.01$ ) points than Polish and Taiwanese participants. Although participants from Taiwan were not directly affected by the war, their average IES-R score ( $40,37 \pm 16,86$ ) was only slightly lower than that of the Ukrainian participants ( $41,36 \pm 14,94$ ). Taiwanese participants reported significantly higher ignorance scores ( $1.60 \pm 0.47$ ) than Polish ( $0.87 \pm 0.53$ ) and Ukrainian ( $0.91 \pm 0.5$ ) ones. More than half of the Taiwanese (54.3%) and Polish (80.3%) participants displayed anxiety symptoms after seeing different scenes of war in the media. More than half of the Ukrainian participants (52.5%) would not seek professional help despite the obviously higher prevalence of anxiety.

The assessments of multivariate linear regression found that the female gender, Ukrainian and Polish citizenships, the size of a household, the state of one's self-worth and their psychiatric history, and avoidance coping were associated with the higher scores of DASS-21 and IES-R ( $p < 0.05$ ) [8].

During their research, Xu, W. et al. [22] examined how various coping mechanisms may help the people living in Ukraine cope with their psychological symptoms caused by the war [22]. Coping strategies can be divided into problem- and emotion-oriented ones [7; 14; 13]. Problem-oriented coping strategies (e.g. actively dealing with issues, planning and positively reframing them with the help of different structural support) show how people can solve their current problems. Previous studies highlighted the role of the problem-oriented coping in the way people handle war and terrorism. For example, Afghans in post-war Afghanistan strove to earn a higher income and achieve a higher standard of living, including housing and nutriment [6]. Emotion-oriented coping (e.g. humour, religion, spirituality, acceptance, emotionally and mentally distancing oneself from a situation, accepting social support, having small pleasures) refers to a possible solution by easing the discomfort, realizing the root of problem and looking at it from a different perspective. Researchers scruti-

nized both coping mechanisms related to the war in Ukraine. In order to obtain a representative Ukrainian example, they included adults in the study by using quota samples, during which they sought answers to both the symptoms and coping mechanisms for anxiety, depression, insomnia.

52.7% of 801 Ukrainian adults had symptoms of psychological distress (average = 13.3 [SD = 4.9]); 54.1% of them dealt with the symptoms of anxiety (average = 2.9 [SD = 1.7]); and 46.8% of these people indicated signs of depression (average = 2.6 [SD = 1.6]). The criteria for the symptoms of insomnia were met by 97 participants (12.1%), (average = 10.4 [SD = 4.2]). The demographic variables (including gender, residing in an urban environment, sharing a household with children or elder people, staying in one of the areas controlled by Russian forces) were associated with the symptoms of anxiety, depression and insomnia. The feeling of being supported, distancing oneself emotionally and mentally from the situation were the most important. Furthermore, the strategy of reframing and making plans were in the centre of this part of the research.

Piotr Długosz [11] also examined the traumed caused by the war and the patterns of coping strategies when it came to the mental health of Ukrainian war refugees living in Poland. The research sample included 737 participants. According to the results, PTSD, depression and anxiety disorders were present in 73% of the participants, while 66% of the respondents dealt with psychological distress. The analyses represented a higher level of mental health disorders among women refugees who could not speak Polish. Younger participants experienced more psychological distress. The results of the study also showed that refugees applied problem-oriented coping strategies more often than others. Emotion-oriented coping strategies, such as prayers, distracting oneself by taking part in different activities or taking sedatives have not been effective among these people [11].

**The aim of the study, research questions.** In our qualitative study, we elaborated the war-related life story narratives among youth. The aim of our descriptive research was to gain insight into the war-related experiences and coping mechanisms of Hungarian youth living in Transcarpathia. The main research questions were the following:

1. How do you cope with the current situation of war?
2. What achievements in connection with the war can youth share that had a positive outcome?

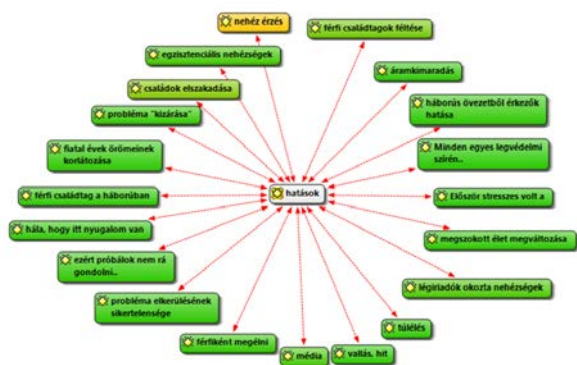
We carried out our research with the help of the ATLAS.ti 9 (2021) text-analyzing program, processed the answers using the inductive research perspective and the Grounded Theory method, in other words we examined the systematically collected answers of the participants [10; 9]. We created codes and code groups during this stage.



**Model, data collection and instruments used in the research.** The research questions were investigated among Transcarpathian Hungarian adolescents (17-year-olds) living in Ukraine. The survey was conducted online on Google Forms in the autumn of 2023. In addition to the demographic data, the participants answered four main questions. Answering these questions was not mandatory, thus, in the end, 84 people responded (26 of which were adolescent boys, while the remaining 58 were adolescent girls).

**Results. The psychological experience of the war**

The following diagram (number 1) represents the way the war effects certain areas of life of youth and their way of living itself. The most common negative experience is fear, worrying about male family members (especially fathers) and being afraid of losing and missing them. The presence of negative feelings due to family members being separated was also common among the participants. The narratives also reveal that uncertainty arising from existential difficulties, such as the deterioration of the economy, increase in prices, power outages) raises the level of stress in the lives of youth and their families.



**Diagram 1. The effects of the war**

Source: Berghauer-Olasz – Gál – Láncki, [2]<sup>1</sup>

It appears to be a common experience among the participants that their future goals and expectations have been destroyed by the armed conflict. The following quote stated by one of the respondents confirms this:

“I haven’t been able to see my brother for a year because of the war, so I am quite sad and upset, also,

<sup>1</sup> The effects are in the middle of the diagram, while in yellow and green the following can be seen: being concerned about male family members; power outage; the effect of people coming from war zones; the sound of every air raid alert; change in one’s routine; difficulties caused by air raids; survival; faith and religion; media; experience it as a man; unsuccessfully avoiding the problem; this is why I’m trying not to think about it...; feeling thankful that there is peace here; male family member serving in war; limiting the joys of the early years; ‘locking out’ the problem; family members being separated; existential difficulties; heavy feelings

many families are being torn apart and people get in crisis because of this... The shops are closing earlier, everything around us has become terrible, my friends have also moved abroad, so I can’t see them either, I would like this to end!!!” (respondent 24, a 17-year-old boy).

According to the respondents, mostly family relationships and friendships were affected negatively by the war (diagram 2). The most common answer among the participants was described as a loss of their routine, and the lack of implementation of different programs, including ones shared with family members. However, according to younger people, helping

families coming from the country’s war zones, reduced their stress.



**Diagram 2. Effects on family relationships**

Source: Berghauer-Olasz – Gál – Láncki, [2]<sup>2</sup>

As shown in Diagram 2 above, the war brought with it the loss of the concept of home and destroyed people’s expectations for the future. This is confirmed by the quotes below (table 1).

**Performance history during the war**

We attempted to examine the coping strategies of youth along the lines of performance stories in our research. Since the outbreak of the war, the participants mostly applied emotion-oriented coping strategies. This type of coping included trying to rationalize the situation, strengthening their faith and religion, finding new hobbies and sports, paying more attention towards the idea of pursuing higher education, seeking and providing social help (creating new friendships, financially, physically and emotionally supporting refugee families) (Diagram 3).

<sup>2</sup> The effects on family relationships - missing activities, taking refugees into one’s family; longing; losing the concept of home

Table 1

Experiencing losses during the war

Experiences of loss	Quoted passages from the narratives
Losing expectations for the future	“(…) my expectations that I have developed for the future so far fell to pieces, and it is really hard to hope for a better future considering that there is no present now.” (Respondent 42, a 17-year-old boy)
Losing one’s youth	“… I think that our younger years have been completely taken away from us, since these are the years that should be the most beautiful and memorable in our lives. The fact that there hasn’t been a peaceful, problem-free period for years now is really upsetting.” (Respondent 63, a 17-year-old girl)
Losing the concept of home	“… I was left with my grandparents and I lost the concept of home.” (Respondent 35, a 17-year-old girl)

Source: Berghauer-Olasz – Gál – Láncki, [2]



Diagram 3. Success stories during the crisis

Source: Berghauer-Olasz – Gál – Láncki, [2]<sup>3</sup>

As seen in Diagram 3 above, youth realized the severity of the situation and identified their emotions (including fear, loss, the sense of absence, anxiety and

hope). One of the most popular strategies involved distracting oneself with the help of sports, studies and hobbies. It can be realized in the majority of the stories that during this period the participants found the possibility of survival in their self-awareness and in the evaluation of their skills and achievements, as well as in reframing the importance of their relationship with friends and family members. They tend to proudly describe their achievements despite the drawbacks of the war. It is also important to note that since the start of the war there is a decrease shown in various addictions (e.g. gaming, smoking, consuming alcohol), so among these people maladaptive coping strategies were pushed into the background.

**Conclusions.** As seen in the relevant literature, emotion-oriented coping is the most convenient strategy to process and emotionally survive the crisis. In the case of emotion-oriented coping, people are capable of changing the given problem. Thus, the crisis can be solved if one’s abilities and resources are applied during the problem-solving process. In the current state of war, those directly affected by it are unable to change the circumstances and constantly suffer from it. Our study revealed that it is necessary to pay more attention to youth, since due to their age they are simultaneously going through a normative crisis, which is mainly described by their attempt to successfully find a life partner and a fulfilling career through self-discovery. In addition to all these burden, the negative impact of the war and the accidental crisis affected not only the previously mentioned elements, but the failure of social connections, uncertainty about life and the loss of future expectations also increased the level of stress among the youth already experiencing crisis.

**Limitations.** On the basis of the number of elements of the researched sample and our results, we can see the extension of this sample as well as the application of additional measurement instruments (i.e. questionnaire on resilience) and qualitative research methods justified in order to examine the topic in more detail in the future.

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<sup>3</sup> *Success story* is seen in the middle; successful integration; none; pride - achievements; resilient behaviour; “I am alive”; the presence of friends; successful time management; ending a toxic relationship; helping others; successful school admission; pride - accepting oneself; successfully learning a new language; passing an exam; member of a religious community; pride - survival; creating a new friendship; supporting others (refugees); good results; pride - feeling brave; realizing one’s skills; depending on gender; the importance of relationships; overcoming one’s video game addiction; “I became stronger”; hobby; “I became stronger” due to my mistakes; sports achievement

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