

Nadiia KINDRACHUK,
*Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor, specialist (consultant) of the
Municipal Institution «Inclusive Resource Center of the Ivano-Frankivsk City
Council»*

Olena BUDNYK,
*Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, Full Professor,
Professor of the Department of Primary Education and Educational
Innovations, Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University*

Kateryna FOMIN,
*Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Associate Professor of the Department of
Foreign Languages, Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University*

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AT THE EPICENTER OF CHANGE: MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENTS IN A TIME OF WAR

The purpose of this article is to: (1) substantiate the key challenges encountered by the educational community in supporting students, including those with special educational needs, under conditions of martial law; (2) conduct an analysis of the relevant scientific literature on the research topic; and (3) based on a survey of higher education students, examine their emotional and psychological well-being and propose strategies for fostering a safe and inclusive educational environment aimed at enhancing psychological resilience and maintaining mental health in times of crisis.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has profoundly transformed the social, cultural, and psychological context of Ukraine, situating education within new and complex realities. While the demand for high-quality teaching and adherence to academic standards remains, the mental health of students—particularly those with special educational needs (SEN)—has emerged as a critical concern. In these circumstances, inclusive education extends beyond ensuring physical accessibility and equal opportunities, encompassing the creation of supportive conditions that address the psychological and emotional well-being of all participants in the educational process (*Main et al., 2016*). More importantly, inclusive education in wartime conditions entails creating a psychologically comfortable and safe, supportive environment for all participants in the educational process (*Piekarski et al., 2025*). Universities, positioned at the epicenter of these transformations, are required to adapt educational programs, strengthen systems of psychological support, and cultivate a culture of mutual support and tolerance (*Vasianovych & Budnyk, 2024*). The issue of the interrelation between inclusive education and students' mental health in wartime conditions acquires particular significance, as it extends beyond the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in crises and

directly pertains to the development of higher education and the long-term sustainability of society.

The article highlights the challenges faced by the educational community in preparing future specialists for a state of war. Significant attention is paid to the problem of creating a safe, inclusive educational environment for students with special educational needs, who are often more vulnerable to stressful situations. Inclusive education is interpreted as an important factor in supporting and adapting students in crises. An analysis of current scientific literature was carried out, which made it possible to determine the main factors of the war's impact on the mental health of educational process participants. Modern Ukrainian universities are presented as spaces for academic growth, psychological and pedagogical support, and student assistance in crisis conditions (war).

In February 2025, a survey was conducted among students of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University. The obtained data reflect the actual emotional and psychological state of higher education students and their needs for psychological support. Approximately half of the respondents (48%) reported experiencing symptoms of emotional burnout under crisis conditions, while an additional 28% indicated occasional manifestations of a similar state, primarily expressed as physical and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged stress.

Notably, more than one-third of the participants (32.38%) considered psychological counseling unnecessary at their age, even in crisis circumstances. Conversely, 21.3% acknowledged the necessity of professional assistance but reported being unable to access it for various reasons.

The research results confirm a high level of anxiety, stress, and psycho-emotional exhaustion among students, as constant air raid sirens, shelling, news from the front, and combining studies with volunteer or military activities create a significant mental burden.

The findings of the study made it possible to identify critical aspects concerning the mental health of future specialists, including students with disabilities, in the context of war (Budnyk, Okliievych, Smoliuk et al., 2024). Exposure to persistent stressors—such as continuous air raid alerts, shelling, and news from the frontline—places Ukrainian students in a state of chronic stress, resulting in heightened anxiety and fear. These conditions negatively influence concentration, contribute to sleep disturbances (Chaudhuri et al., 2021), and impair cognitive functions, thereby hindering the assimilation of new information (Amaral et al., 2017). Such circumstances underscore the urgent need for comprehensive psychological support aimed at enhancing the mental health of both students and educators, who are likewise subjected to these stress-inducing factors (Bushkin et al., 2021). A significant factor impeding the professional training of students with disabilities in higher education institutions is *the diminished sense of security and stability*. Consequently, the study highlights the necessity of *establishing a safe educational environment*—whether in distance, blended, or face-to-face formats—which constitutes a critical prerequisite for ensuring psychological comfort (Nazaruk et al., 2024).

Therefore, the psychological and emotional exhaustion caused by the war hurts the mental health of higher education students. Many Ukrainian students, including those with disabilities, combine their studies with volunteering, helping relatives, or even military service. Such an increased workload against the backdrop of an unstable security situation leads to emotional burnout and significant psychological discomfort.

Conclusions. The professional preparation of future specialists under wartime conditions necessitates a systematic and humanistic approach. Safeguarding the psychological well-being of students should be regarded as a strategic investment, as this cohort will play a decisive role in the post-war reconstruction and development of Ukraine. Particular attention must be directed toward individuals with special educational needs, who face greater difficulties in coping with war-related trauma. Addressing these challenges requires the joint efforts of educational institutions, academic staff, and students to foster an environment of support, resilience, and open dialogue (*Fomin, 2024*). Therefore, even under crisis conditions, it is essential to cultivate a generation of professionals capable of realizing their potential while maintaining or restoring psychological well-being. University faculty should identify and apply strategies for strengthening stress resilience, implement tools for managing fear and anxiety, and provide psychological support when required. Equally important is the development of an active and supportive academic community that promotes volunteering, professional growth, personal self-affirmation, and the acquisition of innovative practices for effective work in inclusive environments

Recommendations for overcoming trauma and enhancing stress resilience in crises include the establishment of psychological support centers, the introduction of courses on psychological resilience, the organization of peer support groups for individuals with disabilities, the provision of access to remote counseling services, the integration of stress-management practices into the educational process of universities, as well as the development and dissemination of relevant electronic resources and digital tools.

The materials of the article can be useful for educators, psychologists, higher education institution administrators, and all those involved in organizing the inclusive educational process in crisis conditions.

Keywords: inclusive education, mental health, war, safe educational environment, students with special educational needs, psychological resilience.

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