STORIES OF STRENGTH:

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN UKRAINE

USAID
ВІД АМЕРИКАНСЬКОГО НАРОДУ

International Medical Corps
Міжнародний Медичний Корпус



International Medical Corps' history in Ukraine stretches back to 1999, with a continuous presence in the country from 2014. Since February 2022, we have rapidly expanded our services to provide emergency and primary healthcare, mental health and psychosocial support services, protection support, physical rehabilitation services and more.

To support Ukraine's health facilities, we distribute medicines, medical equipment and health supplies, and rehabilitate damaged or destroyed buildings and other critical health infrastructure. We train health workers on trauma, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and other topics. Our water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) teams ensure that people can access safe water, and distribute bottled water, hygiene kits and dignity kits. We offer multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) and nutrition services to people affected by the conflict, while our livelihoods programs support those wounded in the war. Working with authorities and local partners, we coordinate the delivery of protection-related services, and support recovery interventions and health system strengthening (HSS) along the humanitariandevelopment nexus.

As of March 2024, International Medical Corps has reached more than 9 million people in Ukraine, Poland and Moldova with critically needed supplies, health services and training.

Stryi,
Lvivska Oblast

HEALTHCARE WORKERS IN STRYI RECEIVE MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

February 2024



OVERVIEW

Even before the full-scale invasion by Russian forces in February 2022, many Ukrainians experienced barriers to mental health support, including a lack of community mental health services, limited funding.



Viktor receives individual counseling.

These challenges intensified following the invasion, with many Ukrainians suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and other conditions. Simultaneously, attacks on healthcare facilities and shortages of staff further impeded access to support. Currently, 8.1 million people face a mental health treatment gap, with only 1.6 million Ukrainians receiving assistance.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARY

Viktor is a 50-year-old man with a daughter and a wife. Before the invasion, he lived in Nova Kakhovka, northeast of Kherson. He had a successful business and loved gardening and making wine. When the Russians invaded, he had to leave everything behind and move with his family to Stryi.

Following the relocation, Viktor tried to adapt to his new life circumstances. Though he

managed to successfully rent an apartment for his family and get a job, he faced various persistent health issues. He complained of sleep and digestive disorders, blood pressure problems and body aches. Later, ceaseless anxious thoughts about the future and intrusive memories of a traumatic event in his childhood added to his distress. Doctors tried for a long time to ease Viktor's condition with symptomatic treatment—but any improvement was only temporary.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

Working with the World Health Organization (WHO), Ukraine's Ministry of Health and the National Health Service of Ukraine, International Medical Corps launched a training initiative based on the WHO's Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP). This initiative, generously supported by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, equips primary-care physicians with the skills needed to identify and aid people with common mental disorders, ensuring timely referrals to specialists. Since April 2022, International Medical Corps staff members based in Stryi have trained 120 healthcare workers in Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk oblasts.

Following the mhGAP training for primary healthcare workers in Stryi, a referral pathway with the mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) department was established. Viktor's family doctor—who had been monitoring his treatment—recognized the need for specialized assistance and referred Viktor to a local psychiatrist. After a thorough examination, Viktor finally received a proper diagnosis. The psychiatrist prescribed medication to improve his sleep and suggested that he see a psychologist from International Medical Corps. Motivated to stabilize his emotional well-



Taking care of mental health is trendy now and healthcare providers keep getting better at it. I am grateful to my family doctor for recognizing my mental health needs and connecting me with a psychiatrist and psychologist. Their support and collaborative approach empowered me to regain control over my life.

– VIKTOR

being for the sake of his family, Viktor engaged in the recommended therapy sessions and conscientiously completed his assigned tasks.

Since then, Viktor has taken positive steps. He has built new social connections, participating in group activities within the local community on Saturdays after work. He is even seeking ways to resume his favorite hobby of gardening. Although he continues to manage occasional anxious thoughts about the future and still reflects on his traumatic childhood experiences, these memories are no longer as sudden and painful as before.

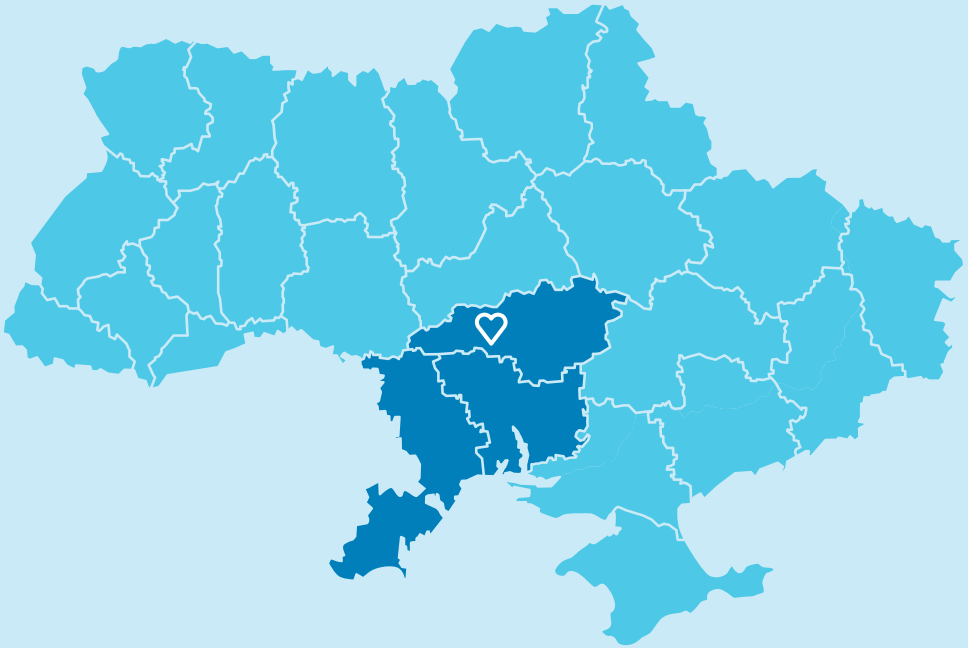
Viktor's journey highlights the positive impact of comprehensive mental health training and care. When frontline healthcare workers receive mhGAP training, they can better support their local communities—and people like Viktor can access the help they need.

By Tetiana Telnova

Holovanivsk,
Kirovohradska oblast

KIROVOHRADSKA IDPS RECEIVE MHPSS SERVICES

September 2024



OVERVIEW

Since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine more than two-and-a-half years ago, the population has been forced to endure immense suffering. Millions of civilians have lost their homes and loved ones. More than 6 million Ukrainians now live as refugees in other countries, while an estimated 3.7 million remain displaced inside Ukraine. Living through the horrors of attacks, occupation, displacement, separation from families and the stress of the ongoing conflict have had a significant impact on the affected people's well-being. Many Ukrainians have experienced significant distress, which has contributed to both mental and physical health problems. Consequently, the country's need for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services has increased significantly.

International Medical Corps' MHPSS team runs an art-based psychosocial support session for Ukrainians in Kirovohradska oblast who were displaced by the war.



INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARY

A woman named Alla is one of the millions of Ukrainians who have been directly impacted by the war. She was forced to flee her home in the south and managed to reach a relatively safe place, living as an internally displaced person (IDP) in Kirovohradska oblast. However, even though she was physically safer in Kirovohradska oblast, her suffering continued. She grew increasingly anxious and angry, beginning to suffer from physical symptoms of stress in the form of muscle pain, chronic fatigue and an accelerated heart rate.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

Alla heard about International Medical Corps' MHPSS services—which are provided through the support of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance—from another woman who had participated in a number of sessions. So, when one of our psychosocial support workers traveled to the town of Holovainsk earlier this year to hold a session with a group of IDPs there, Alla decided to join them.

Alla remained anxious at first. In the session with the MHPSS worker, she cried and said she was confused. But she was also determined. Following that first conversation, Alla agreed to return and participate in a series of weekly group sessions.

During the subsequent group sessions, Alla and her fellow participants started to share their stories. The group activities, including handicrafts, helped them to relax, open up and bond. They took turns talking and listening while also expressing their sympathy and support. The participants soon realized that they had a lot in common. They had similar experiences and stressors that affected their lives and well-being because of being forced to relocate their homes and lives. They observed that they were not alone and that the other displaced people could understand what they had been going through and acknowledge their suffering.

Through the psychosocial support (PSS) sessions, Alla and the other



The PSS group sessions included a variety of crafts for the participants to try.

Many thanks to International Medical Corps for being here—your support brought me back to life and gave me hope for the future.

– ALLA, AN IDP LIVING IN KIROVOHRADSKA OBLAST



The participants show off some of the crafts they made during the sessions.

IDPs explored various coping skills for managing stress, and learned about the importance of these healthy stress-management techniques. The specialist shared information about a range of topics, including self-help, reacting to traumatic events and living active and fulfilling lives. Alla and the others told the MHPSS worker that they were grateful for the opportunity to meet and learn from one another.

At the end of the PSS group sessions, Alla was referred to an International Medical Corps MHPSS case manager, who could offer her holistic mental health care that catered to her specific needs. Now, nearing the completion of that care plan, Alla reports that she feels calmer. She no longer cries, and once again feels able to make plans for the future.

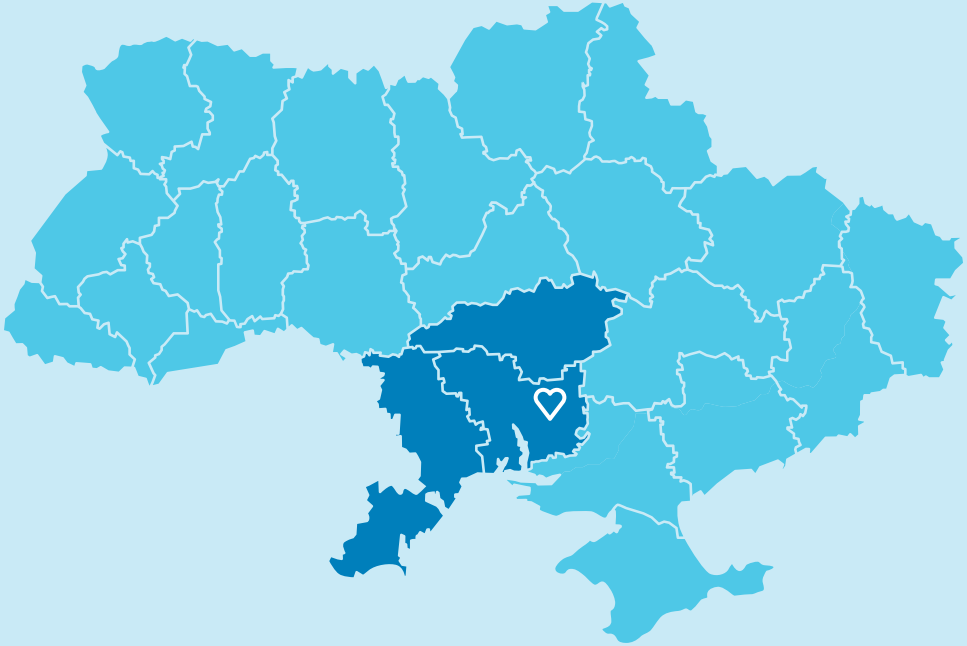
She said her husband and family have also noticed and remarked that she has returned to seeming like her old self. “Many thanks to International Medical Corps for being here,” she said. “Your support brought me back to life and gave me hope for the future.”

By Hanna Kraitor

Bashtanka,
Mykolaivska oblast

BASHTANKA MAN OVERCOMES STIGMA TO BECOME “100% HAPPY” AGAIN

September 2024



OVERVIEW

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine continues to impact the lives of ordinary citizens daily. The psychological impacts of the conflict cannot be understated: the continued stress and worry that many Ukrainians face limits their ability to function normally and feel safe, and many are struggling with symptoms such as insomnia, anxiety and lack of concentration. In fact, sales of antidepressants have increased by 50% since 2021, and the Ukrainian Ministry of Health reports that the number of people complaining of mental health problems has doubled since 2023.

The situation is especially severe in settlements that were previously occupied by Russian troops, where the trauma of the war continues to have a strong impact on the quality of people's lives.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARY

Bohdan, 64, lives in Bashtanka district in Mykolaivska oblast in southern Ukraine. When the full-scale invasion began in February 2022, he and his wife did not have time to flee before their region was occupied, and were trapped in the occupied town for eight months.

During the occupation, they spent most of their time in an underground shelter, avoiding the bombardments and fighting. They ate and slept in the dark after their flashlight batteries died. As time went on, Bohdan and his wife grew disoriented and more desperate. Sometimes, they risked their lives outside to search for water or fuel for their stove.

Their suffering lasted eight months before the town was liberated by Ukrainian forces. However, over the subsequent months, Bohdan continued

to struggle with difficult and confusing feelings. He noticed that he could no longer cope with many things that had been normal for him before the war. For example, it was difficult for him to be at home alone when his wife went to work. He became afraid of confined spaces, and he started to have problems sleeping. When he did fall asleep, his dreams were disturbing and woke him up frequently. He also felt very anxious when air alarms sounded or when missiles flew overhead.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

Fortunately, the mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) team based at the International Medical Corps office in Mykolaiv city began providing a series of awareness-raising sessions in Bashtanka district. With the support of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, the MHPSS team helped residents look more positively at the idea of seeking MHPSS help. This is important because social stigma is one of the key barriers that prevents Ukrainians—especially older people—from seeking mental health support.

One day earlier this year, Bohdan's family doctor referred him to one of the MHPSS team's workers for a consultation. Despite his initial reluctance, Bohdan opened up to the MHPSS worker about the confusing and upsetting feelings he'd been having.

Bohdan told the MHPSS worker in his first session that he didn't feel truly happy. Before the war, he explained, he had been "100% happy," but now—despite his town having been liberated for some 18 months—he still felt unable to be truly content. This troubled him because he believed that his role as a man was to be happy and strong for those around him.

Over several individual consultations, the MHPSS worker



Thanks to you, I am no longer afraid—I sleep like a bear and have the strength to continue to live. I am 100% happy.

– BOHDAN, RESIDENT OF BASHTANKA DISTRICT, MYKOLAIVSKA OBLAST

listened to Bohdan's concerns and learned about his needs, providing psychoeducation to help Bohdan understand his feelings and experiences. As the sessions continued, Bohdan learned from the MHPSS worker that his feelings were valid and that his behavior was the result of how his body and psychological state were reacting to the adversities he had experienced. He also learned that each person reacts differently to distressing and traumatic events, regardless of their gender.

The sessions were helpful for Bohdan, and he soon reported positive results. He said he was able to sleep better again, was no longer worried about being home without his wife and was feeling less anxious overall. The MHPSS worker helped Bohdan learn about and overcome the stereotypes and misconceptions about his masculinity that made him reluctant to ask for professional help.

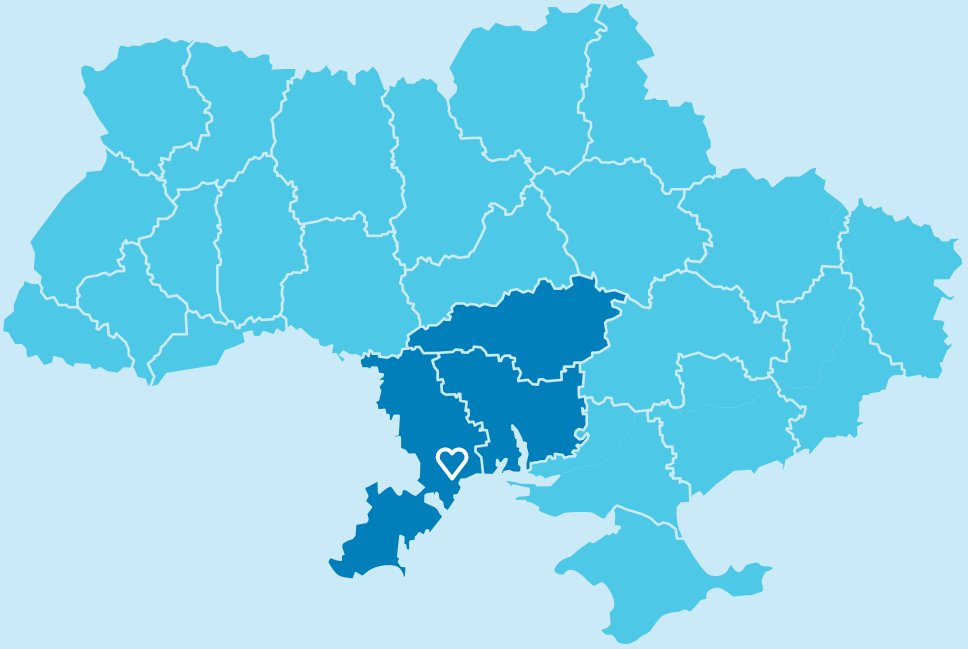
Eventually, Bohdan said he had learned how to be fully happy again. "Thanks to you, I am no longer afraid—I sleep like a bear and have the strength to continue to live," he told his MHPSS worker. "I am 100% happy."

By Liudmyla Romanenko

Odesa,
Odeska Oblast

CHILDREN FIND FRIENDSHIP AND SUPPORT AT AN ODESA LIBRARY

May 2024





OVERVIEW

The war in Ukraine has had a devastating impact on the well-being of Ukrainians, causing widespread suffering and displacement. Millions of people have been forced to flee their homes, and access to healthcare, education and basic necessities has been severely disrupted, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

Russian attacks have particularly targeted cities in the east and south of Ukraine. Recently, missile attacks on Odesa,

Children show off their crafts made during a Mother's Day session run by the International Medical Corps MHPSS team.

Ukraine's third-largest city, have increased, causing civilian deaths and injuries.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARIES

Since the outbreak of war, many Ukrainian schools have shut their doors due to safety concerns and are providing online learning to their students. For children attending school virtually, the experience can be isolating. Instead of playing on the school playground and chatting between classes, the children sit alone behind a computer screen at home.

Despite their young age, the children of southern Ukraine are very aware of the conflict occurring around them, and as a result many are suffering from stress, anxiety and disrupted sleep. The frequent alarms that ring out in their city and the constant threat of attack make it hard for them to relax, feel safe and focus on school.

Children's Library Number 24 in Odesa has been providing activities for children, giving them an opportunity to socialize and have fun with their peers despite the school closures. However, a lack of resources meant the library could only run these sessions irregularly.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

With funding from USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, International Medical Corps supports mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services throughout Ukraine. We identified an opportunity to support children's well-being through new, regular activity sessions at the library.

On the MHPSS team's first visit to the library, they noticed that the children seemed shy and uncomfortable. The team decided to plan sessions



Thank you, International Medical Corps, for supporting our children. Your work is very valuable for us. The children are happy when they come to your activities.

– SVITLANA VIKTORIVNA, GRANDMOTHER OF A CHILD WHO ATTENDS THE SESSIONS

that would help the children feel comfortable, open up to each other and build healthy relationships.

The following sessions combined crafts, games and educational content. The MHPSS staff members who ran the sessions taught the children how to identify and express their emotions, tracking their intensity using a "feeling thermometer." They also taught the children about sleep hygiene, and led exercises in mindfulness and relaxation techniques.

Enjoying the sessions, the children gradually became friends. The parents and MHPSS workers noticed that the children seemed happier and more confident expressing themselves than they had been before. The sessions had made a real difference to their well-being and confidence.

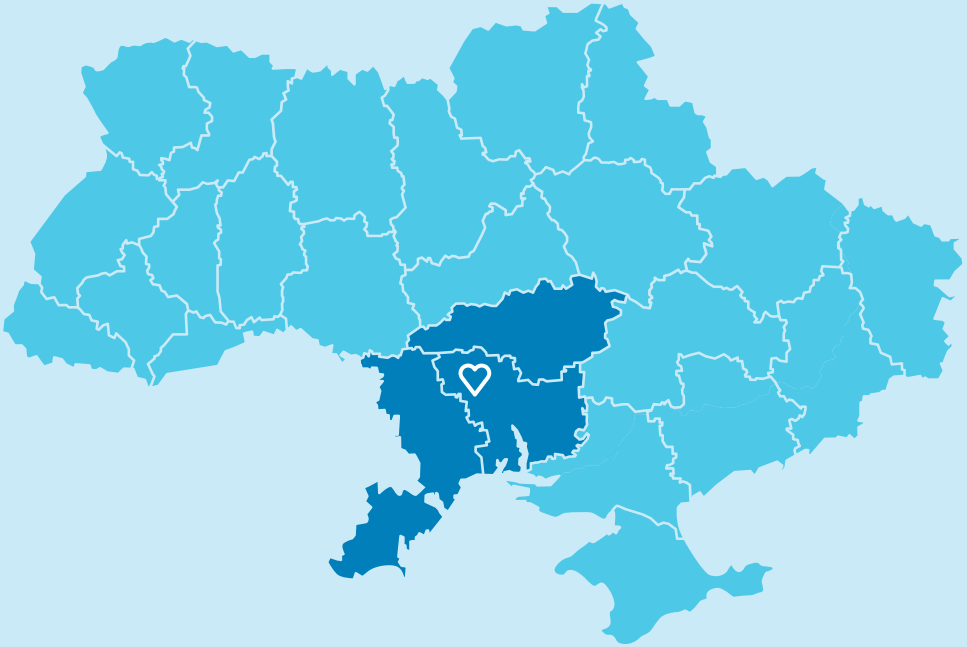
The parents thanked the MHPSS team for running the activities. As a result of the sessions, their sons and daughters could grow up with memories of a happy childhood despite the war, they said.

By Kateryna Slakva

Pervomaisk,
Mykolaivska oblast

PSS SESSIONS IN PERVOMAISK HELP A HAIRDRESSER AND HER CLIENTS

August 2024



OVERVIEW

The ongoing war has had a signficiant impact on Ukrainians' mental health and well-being. The constant stress, anxiety about loved ones, uncertainty about the future and worrying reports of hostilities significantly impact people's emotional states. Moreover, those professionals who continue to work and support others during this incredibly difficult time also require special support and resources to maintain their own mental health.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARY

Nataliia has worked as a hairdresser for many years. She has always been known for her friendliness, openness and positive outlook on life. Her clients often remark on her professionalism and the special atmosphere she creates while working.

Despite the daily challenges she faces living in Pervomaisk, Mykolaivska oblast—which is near the front lines of the



Hairdresser Nataliia, on the bottom-left, attends a mental-health awareness session in Pervomaisk, Mykolaivska oblast.

ongoing war—Nataliia always finds the strength to support others, inspire them and share positive emotions. However, even strong and cheerful people like Nataliia sometimes need extra support.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

Fortunately, Nataliia learned about and began attending mental health awareness sessions organized by International Medical Corps in Pervomaisk. The sessions—made possible through the support of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance—became an important source of knowledge for her, especially in learning how to improve and protect her mental health.

Nataliia became a regular participant in the psychosocial support sessions. The information she learned helped her overcome the daily challenges of living, working and coping during a war. She said that the sessions supported her in these difficult times, providing her with both inspiration and energy. She added that they had also "become an island of stability and hope for me."

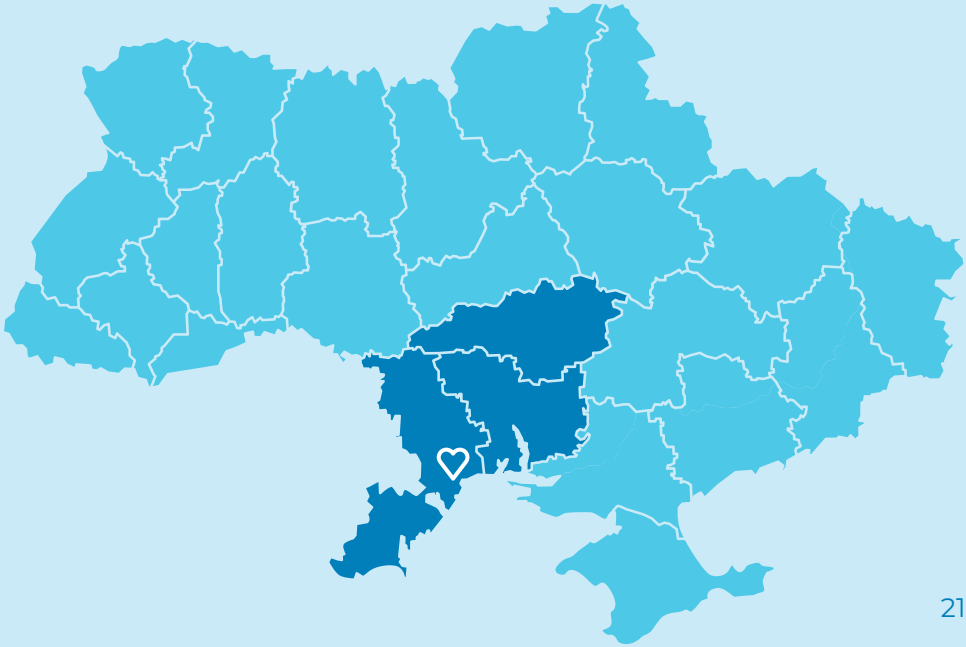
Thanks to the sessions, Nataliia not only improved her own mental health, but she became better able to support her clients. She said that she uses her new knowledge and skills to stay positive and to make others feel better about themselves and their situations. According to her clients, she remains a ray of light in their lives, helping them to take their minds off their problems and focus on the good things in life. She continues to offer them joy and hope—along with her hairdressing services.

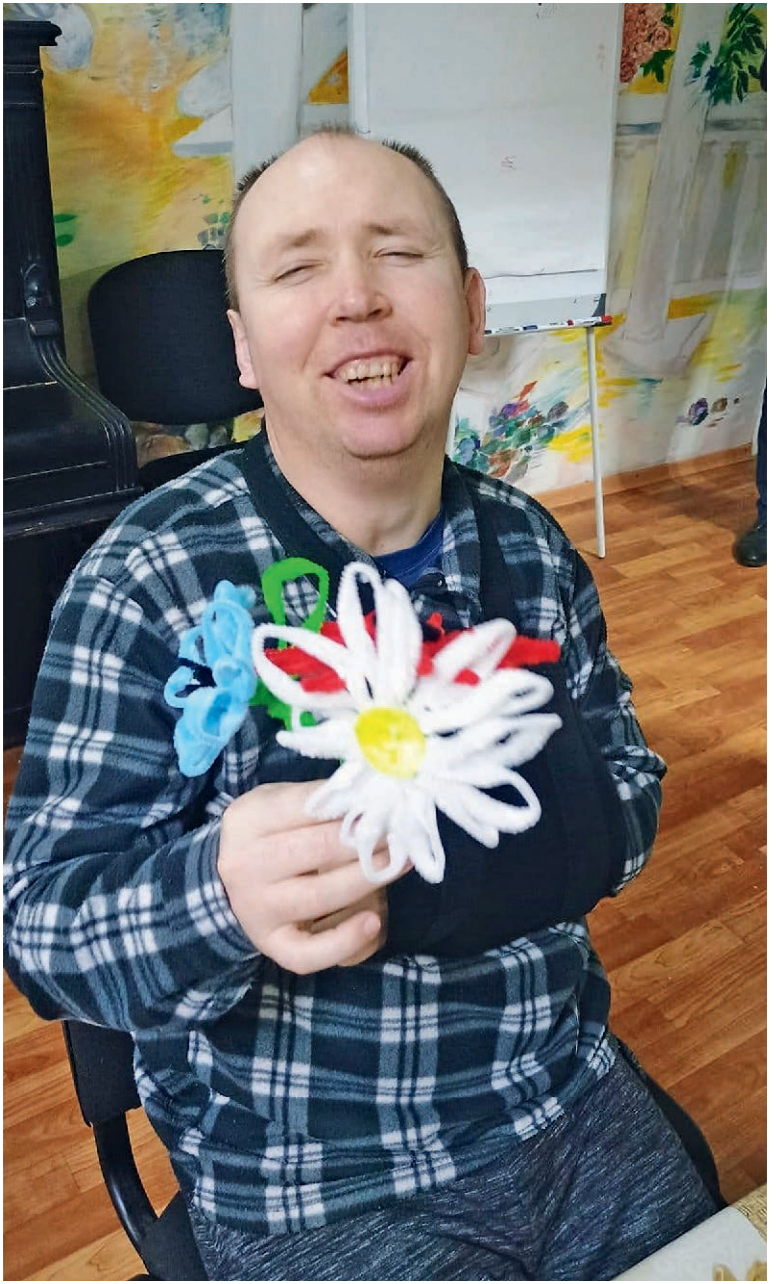
By Tamara Stakaliuk

Odesa,
Odeska Oblast

CRAFTING AT THE ODESA CENTER FOR REHABILITATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

March 2024





OVERVIEW

Living through war can increase a person's risk of experiencing a mental health condition. Research suggests that one in five people who have experienced war or conflict in the past 10 years will experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder or schizophrenia.

In Ukraine, mental health services have always been limited. The country has historically relied predominantly on in-patient mental health facilities rather than community mental health services, and stigma about mental health—especially among older generations—has discouraged people from seeking the help they need. Russia's invasion in February 2022 and its targeted attacks on healthcare

Ihor, a client of the Center for Rehabilitation and Mental Health, gives a bouquet of flowers he made to psychologist Natalia.



I like to create something new. When I see that I succeed to achieve a task, I feel myself useful. Thank you for the International Medical Corps for this session and positive atmosphere.

– IHOR, CLIENT AT THE CENTER FOR REHABILITATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

facilities have worsened the situation.

In Odesa, Russian missile and drone attacks have been causing casualties and damage since the early days of the invasion. Recently, the attacks have escalated. In March, a missile attack killed at least 20 people and wounded more than 75. As people live through the horrors of the attacks or are forced to flee their homes for their own safety, the need for strong mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services becomes more urgent than ever.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARY

Established seven years ago, Odesa's Center for Rehabilitation and Mental Health helps people with mental illnesses improve their well-being and reintegrate with society. The center offers a range of services, including teaching handicrafts and organizing sports and recreational activities. It plays an essential role in helping people with mental health conditions to socialize, learn self-care skills and improve their physical and psychological condition.

Readjusting to living in society after being treated for a mental health condition is never easy. It can take a long time and a lot of effort for the person, and the people around them, to build their self-confidence again. The road to recovery is particularly challenging in Odesa due to the stresses of living with the constant threat of attack. The Center for Rehabilitation and Mental Health helps people recover and re-enter society despite this obstacle.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

With funding from USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, International Medical Corps has been partnering with the Center for Rehabilitation and Mental Health. In early March, our MHPSS team collaborated with the center's psychologist to run a craft workshop with an International Women's Day theme.

The craft that participants carried out involved making flowers from chenille wire—a challenging activity that helped participants express themselves creatively, improve their fine motor skills and gain confidence through learning a new skill.

While participants created beautiful flowers that could be given as a gift or used as jewelry, the team encouraged a friendly atmosphere and group discussion. The participants talked about International Women's Day and its importance as they considered whom they would give their handmade flower to. They also discussed the significance of this tradition in their society.

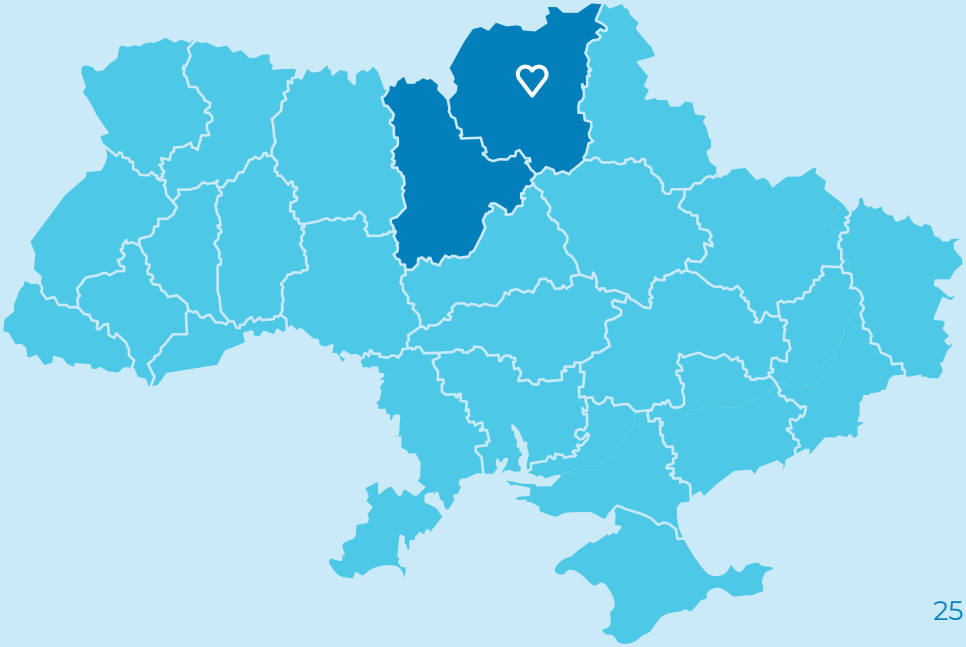
The participants enjoyed the session. Afterward, they gave two bouquets to the psychologist and to an International Medical Corps team member, expressing their gratitude for the workshop.

By Iryna Kasiian

Mena,
Chernihivska oblast

BREATHING AWAY THE STRESS

February 2024





The Voloskivtsi Gymnasium.

OVERVIEW

Mena is a village in Ukraine about 40 miles (60 kilometer) east of Chernihiv. As part of International Medical Corps' work with educational institutions of the Mena territorial community, which we launched in September 2023, our mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) team began working with the school at the Voloskivtsi Gymnasium there.

The village suffered during the full-scale invasion, with residents witnessing shelling and the passage of a huge number enemy military vehicles moving towards Chernihiv in February and March 2022.

Many people died in the village due to the war, while families were separated, with some still unable to reunite. There is a cemetery opposite from the school building that reminds

children and teachers every day of the human losses they experienced.

Because the village is located about 30 miles (50 kilometres) from the Russian border, people remain worried. Sabotage and reconnaissance groups often enter this territory and attack defenseless civilians. For all these reasons, our MHPSS focuses on supporting people, especially teachers and students, in the community.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARY

The school's principal, Olena, was worried that children suffer from fear, because the school is located on the side of a national road—meaning students often see movement of military vehicles. Because the village was under occupation, even the noise of any large vehicle moving along the road can fighten the staff and students. Some of them manage to cope with these stress reactions, but others need additional time and support. The principal noted that on one of these days, when military vehicles were passing by, a seven-year-old boy named Andrii panicked.



Andrii practices breathing techniques.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

Recently, at the teachers' request, an International Medical Corps psychologist and MHPSS worker provided an awareness-raising session on "Emotional Burnout Syndrome." Part of the information in the session was devoted to self-regulation. Our psychologist and MHPSS worker introduced self-regulation skills to the teachers, and practiced breathing techniques. Because this knowledge is important and easy to use during stressful times, our staff members suggested that the teachers use it with their students during the learning process and especially during alarms in the shelter.

"Since we know how to behave with children and we understand—thanks to the information you provided—that children have different natural reactions," Olena said, "I did not get confused [when Andrii panicked], but suggested to the boy, who was crying and shaking, to imagine that he was inhaling a pleasant smell of a yellow dandelion, and then to gently exhale through his mouth, imagining the [stress] flying away. And, you know, he quickly joined in and started breathing with me, and then gradually calmed down. It was like a small miracle, both for me and for the 7-year-old boy."

In talking to Andrii, the principal and teachers found out that the boy had panic attacks before, and that the events that he and his family experienced at the beginning of the full-scale invasion were quite traumatic for Andrii—who also is very upset about being separated from his father, who is currently fighting in the Ukrainian army.

Nataliia, a teacher at the school, proudly told us: "After your first visit to the gymnasium, where



Olena helps Andrii practice breathing techniques.

you provided self-support skills, I started practicing breathing techniques with the children, following all the recommendations, and it works!"

She also said that group sessions provided by International Medical Corps' psychologist and MHPSS worker helped her to resolve her own issues and to maintain her mental health.

Our MHPSS services at the school focus on supporting both teachers and children, so the team holds group activities and awareness raising sessions with the teachers, as well as group and individual basic emotional support session. The team also provides students of all classes with basic emotional support.

As part of their regular visits to the school at the Voloskivtsi Gymnasium, our psychologist and MHPSS worker provided a session for primary school students on emotions and feelings. When the students were asked to repeat breathing exercises together, Andrii volunteered to demonstrate the exercises together with the MHPSS worker for the whole class.

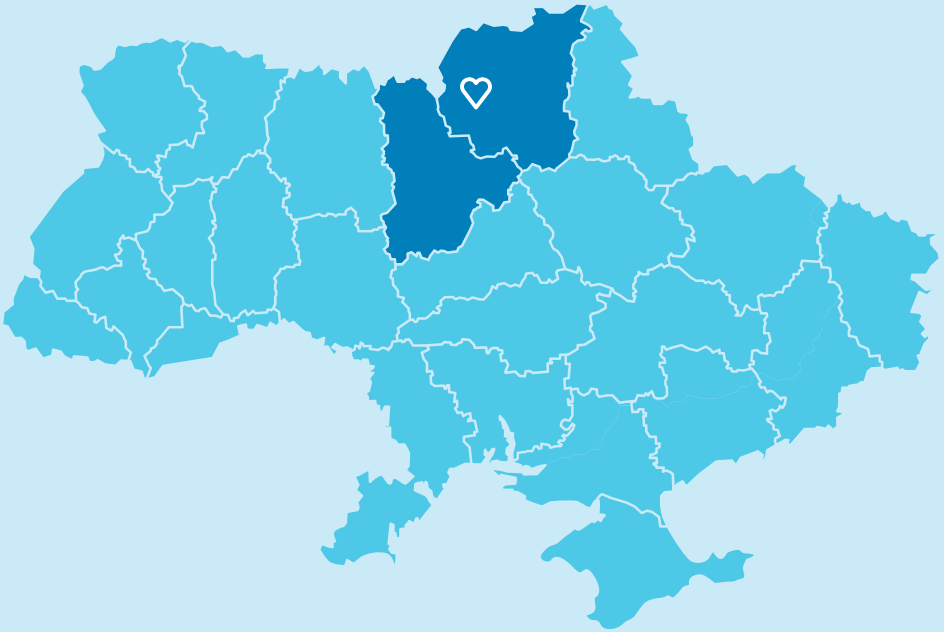
Some of the children were confident enough to repeat the exercises as if they were familiar with them. They repeated the grounding exercises with joy and enthusiasm. After the lesson, the children asked the MHPSS team to visit their class again.

By Yuliia Dykukha
and Svitlana Yushchenko

Mykhailo-Kotsiubynske, Chernihivska oblast

OLDER RESIDENTS OF A CHERNIHIVSKA VILLAGE RECEIVE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

September 2024



OVERVIEW

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, thousands of civilians have been killed or injured, and millions have been displaced. Out of the population of 35.7 million, 3.5 million have been displaced within Ukraine, while millions more are living as refugees in other countries.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARIES

Residents of the village of Mykhailo-Kotsiubynske in Chernihivska oblast know a lot about the war—having experienced it firsthand. Located just 30 kilometers from the Belarus border, Mykhailo-Kotsiubynske was one of the many villages in the oblast occupied by Russian forces—in its case, from February 24 until April 3, 2022.

The occupation of Mykhailo-Kotsiubynske may have lasted only about six weeks, but it was intense. The villagers were cut off from the rest of Ukraine, with no communication and no access to food supplies, medicine or medical care. They also lived under constant stress, faced with the cruelties of the Russian military, fearing for their lives and those of their loved ones. Many residents were left traumatized by what they had witnessed and experienced.



Members of the emotional support group in Mykhailo-Kotsiuby pose for a photo at one of their weekly sessions.

Many of those who stayed in the village during the occupation were elderly. For a range of reasons—partly because of poor health and mobility, isolation and poverty—older people can be among the most vulnerable groups during war.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

Thanks to funding from USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, International Medical Corps' Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) team is providing vital, regular support to the older residents of Mykhailo-Kotsiubynske.

Every Wednesday for more than a year, the MHPSS workers have hosted emotional support meetings for a group of people with ages ranging from 57 to 85. Initially, the support group consisted of five people. After sharing their positive experiences with friends and family, others joined the subsequent sessions.



Olha celebrates her 85th birthday at a celebration thrown by members of the support group.

The MHPSS team based the sessions on the Active Longevity program, designed to help older people understand that life can be exciting and inspiring at any age. The team ran activities that help improve physical and mental health, as well as recreational activities such as drawing,



You have all become one big family for me, and without the support of International Medical Corps psychologists and MHPSS workers, I might not be here today—you gave me strength, inspiration and desire to live on.

– OLHA, 85, MYKHAILO-KOTSIUBYNSKE RESIDENT AND SUPPORT GROUP MEMBER

modeling and weaving. Their main goals included increasing the participants' capacity to support each other in both crisis and everyday situations, to pay more attention to their health and to play a more active role in community development.

One of the oldest participants in the support group is Olha. Her life has been full of challenges: her husband was paralyzed while still young and she had to care for him while working as a teacher and raising her two sons. Now that both her sons are fighting in the war, Olha deals with frequent feelings of worry, exhaustion and isolation.

Fortunately, everything changed when Olha found the support group. "You have all become one big family for me," she said. "Without the support of International Medical Corps' psychologists and MHPSS workers, I might not be here today—you gave me strength, inspiration and desire to live on," she said. Recently, Olha celebrated her 85th birthday at a party thrown by the group.

Olha is not the only support group participant who has expressed gratitude for the program. During the weekly sessions, participants have learned to take care of themselves, deal with their emotional states, and identify and use various coping strategies. This helps them feel the pleasure of life again and better cope with the difficulties and chronic stress caused by the war. "You managed not only to unite us, but to make us a real family—a community where you can rely on each other—where you will always be supported," another participant said.

Also thanks to USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, International Medical Corps purchased and donated walking sticks to the Mykhailo-Kotsiubynske social center—enabling support group members to take part in an exercise technique known as Nordic walking, which works out the whole body and promotes overall health. The group members say they now look forward to Wednesdays, when they meet with one another and taking part in group activities. Olha summed up this sentiment best: "On Wednesdays, I can live to the fullest and feel the taste of real life again. I can do my makeup, put on my best dress, and it helps me feel different—young and full of energy to live on, enjoy life and have the strength to help others." Other participants say they have been so inspired by the group that they do additional volunteering and group activities—such as getting together with others to cook or write poetry.

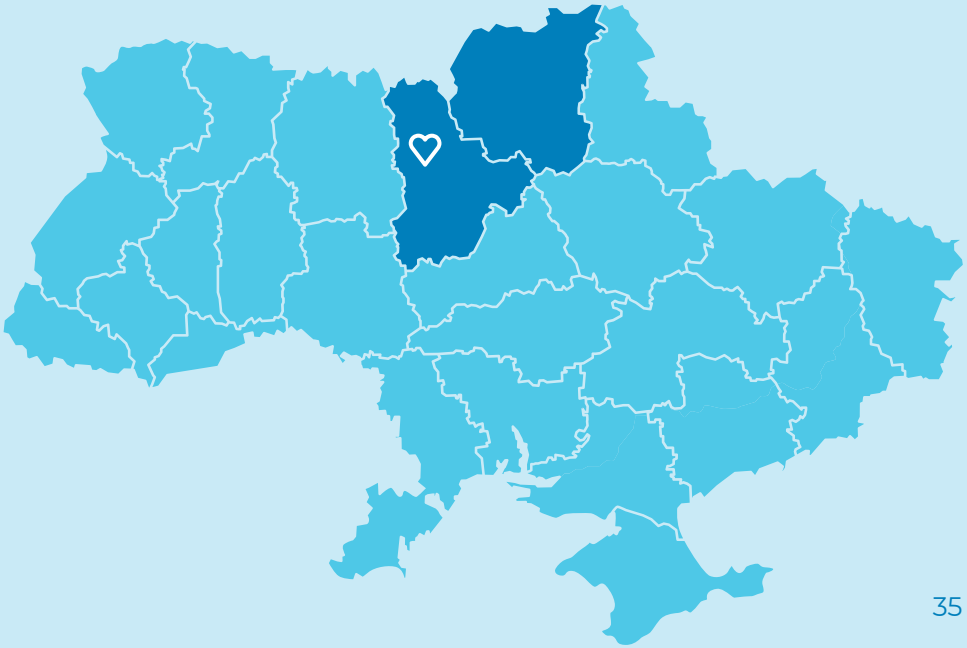
In the time since they started meeting, the group has mourned the deaths of two of their members: Ihor and Iryna. But with the emotional support and sense of community and unity instilled within the group, the residents of Mykhailo-Kotsiubynske feel stronger and more resilient than ever.

By Anna Makivchuk, Anatolii Protchenko and Mariia Chyhrynova

Borodianka, Kyivska Oblast

AT A GERIATRIC INSTITUTION IN BORODIANKA, ELDERLY RESIDENTS FIND HOPE AND A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

September 2024



OVERVIEW

The village of Borodianka is located 50 kilometers from the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. The settlement came under heavy attack from Russian forces at the start of the war, which damaged residential buildings and killed hundreds.

One of the civilian facilities in Borodianka is a psycho-neurological residential care institution with a geriatric division. When International Medical Corps' mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) team started its work in the institution in August 2022, the staff requested us to support the elderly residents. So we started the Active Longevity Program, aimed at helping older people regain their zest for life. The idea was to help people understand that life can be interesting and inspiring at any age.



Elderly people participated in the Active Longevity Program, designed by International Medical Corps, at a psychoneurological institution in Borodianka.



The Active Longevity Program is about support, unity, hope and the desire to live, understanding that life can be full and interesting for anyone at any age.

– MYKOLA KRAVCHENKO, MHPSS CASE MANAGER

The program comprised 10 sessions, designed to help participants develop a positive attitude toward life, create an atmosphere of trust and find their strengths. The sessions included topics such as confidence-building and self-expression, a connection between physical and mental health, and the importance of talking openly about emotions and life events.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARIES

Some 15 elderly people—residents of the institution aged 50–86 years—participated in the Active Longevity Program for four months. While some of them have dementia and sclerosis, some of them use wheelchairs. The war has taken a toll on them, but the longevity program has united them in ways they had not imagined. Away from families and friends, the institution has become their home, and the residents treat their peers and the institution's staff as their own family.

Hanna, 86, is from Mariinka (Donetsk region), but her house was destroyed at the beginning of the war, so she moved to Kyiv to live with her nephew. However, after he joined the armed forces, she had no one to take care



The longevity program comprised 10 interactive sessions, which helped the participants to express their emotions through art-based activities.

of her. So, she joined the geriatric division at the institution. She was alone without family and cried every day, wishing many times for death rather than living a life without purpose.

Yevhen, 63, worked as an actor in Kharkiv. After the war destroyed his home, his family moved abroad for safety. But he could not leave the country quickly as he used a wheelchair. So he, too, moved to the institution. He longed to be with his family and often thought about his life before the war changed everything. He felt lonely and shut himself off from those around him.

Mariia, 66, has lived with physical disabilities since childhood—she can't use both her hands. She and her 90-year-old mother fled the Donetsk region after shelling started. Their house was destroyed, so they sought shelter at the institution. Mariia was distraught after losing her home. She not only had to take care of herself while being physically challenged but also her elderly mother, and that too in a new place surrounded by strangers.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

MHPSS Case Manager Mykola Kravchenko started the Active Longevity Program at the institution in May 2023. All the participants initially seemed sad and lonely, as if they had lost their willingness to live and were simply existing. They felt

useless and seemed indifferent to their surroundings. “I felt it was my mission to help them regain interest in life and show them its other side, which can be wonderful and beautiful,” says Kravchenko.

The first few sessions were challenging, as the participants did not fully trust one another. They did not speak much and mainly kept to themselves. But, the MHPSS team managed to create a positive atmosphere in the group. Gradually, through art-based activities, discussions and meditations, the participants started to open up and express their feelings. They learned to embrace their emotions, no matter how difficult and frustrating they were, while respecting the sentiments of their peers. Kravchenko initiated discussions on their previous experience—how they used to help themselves before they arrived at the institution. They talked about their childhood when they felt protected in their families and relied on past good memories to improve their present state.

He also taught them skills of self-confidence and recovery through imaginary activities. He asked them to imagine themselves as clouds wandering through the sky, feeling relaxed and calm. “I told them to remember this feeling and do this exercise whenever they felt anxious or scared so they could switch to their inner safe space,” he said. In addition, he taught them breathing and relaxation techniques.

The participants started communicating with each other and spending more time together. In addition, they started noticing and appreciating the beauty of nature. “I once asked the participants about their previous week, and they started talking about the wonderful time they spent outdoors,” says Kravchenko. “They described the birds and the smell of flowers and mentioned how bright the sunshine was. They even started reading books together.”

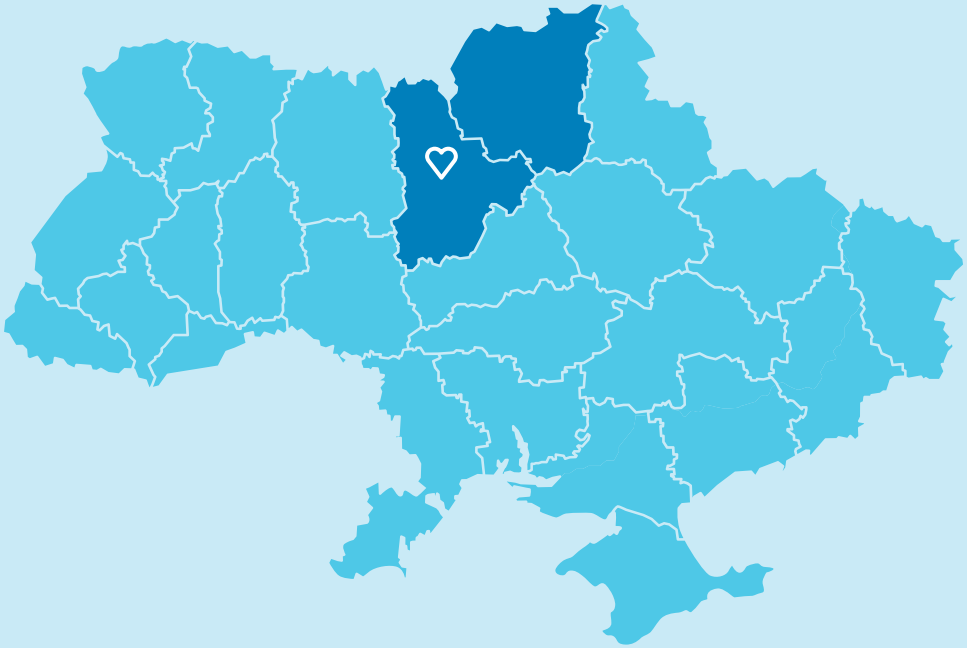
Yevhen now recites poems to other group members. Together with Mariia, he created an acting club where he and other talented residents perform plays regularly. The participants also play chess and indoor games with each other. “The most heartwarming thing is that they have finally started to smile,” Kravchenko adds.

By Mykola Kravchenko and Yuliia Kubai

Hostomel,
Kyivska Oblast

CASE MANAGEMENT HELPS HOSTOMEL MOTHER REDISCOVER JOY

October 2024



OVERVIEW

The Ukrainian town of Hostomel was previously best known as the location of Antonov International Airport, home of the Antonov—the world's largest cargo plane.

Located just 30 kilometers northwest of Kyiv, Hostomel and its airport were also among the first targets of invading Russian troops on February 24, 2022.



Olena attends a session with an International Medical Corps MHPSS case manager.

There was a fierce battle there, and Hostomel was occupied for about a month, until the end of March. The almost 20,000 residents witnessed many horrors during the occupation.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARY

One of those Hostomel residents is a 40-year-old woman named Olena, who has also experienced her share of discouragement, despair, grief and pain.

A teacher and a single mother to two boys, Olena works hard to support her family. In addition to working her full-time teaching job, she has also worked as a tutor in her free time. However, this meant she had less time to spend with her sons. Meanwhile, her eldest son, a teenager, was experiencing his own challenges. He became more closed off from his mother and less communicative. Then he began to have problems at school and even with the police.

Olena felt that life was not making sense; there was too much work and never enough money. The problems with her older son and the horrors of the Russian occupation and ongoing war still weighed heavily on her. She cried and felt exhausted all the time, and began to experience physical health problems, which made her work more challenging than before.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

Fortunately, a team of International Medical Corps mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) specialists—consisting of a psychologist, a MHPSS case manager and a MHPSS worker—began to work in Hostomel last year, thanks to funding from USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. When Olena heard about them from the local news and social media, she was intrigued. But she also had mixed feelings. Though she realized that the war was having a negative impact on her life, she was afraid to meet new people.

Eventually, in July, she decided to go to an individual consultation with the MHPSS case manager. Olena described feeling tired, depressed, tense and anxious, recalling her many problems and starting to cry. She had shown courage in reaching out and telling her story, but she was not confident that she would feel able to attend another session.

But a week later, Olena returned at the appointed time. She cried less during that second session. Trust became visible in her eyes, and she sounded more confident. A transformation was beginning.

Olena and her MHPSS case manager developed a regular schedule for their meetings—once a week for eight weeks—and created a schedule of her daily activities in accordance



I started to feel more confident, learned how to allocate time and take step-by-step actions to solve my problems. I learned how to organize myself and perform certain actions. And for that, I am very grateful.

– OLENA

with the rhythms of her life. She recalled what had brought her joy in the past and began to reinsert these things in her present. Movies had been a passion, for example—so she started to watch them again. She met up with her friends, including them in her life as an important form of social support.

"I started to feel more confident, learned how to allocate time and take step-by-step actions to solve my problems," Olena said. "I learned how to organize myself and perform certain actions—and for that, I am very grateful."

Olena even returned to eating better. She prepared new recipes and healthy meals for herself and her sons. She was spending more time with them, and her elder son also began meeting with the MHPSS team. He even showed signs of improvement in his relationship with his mother.

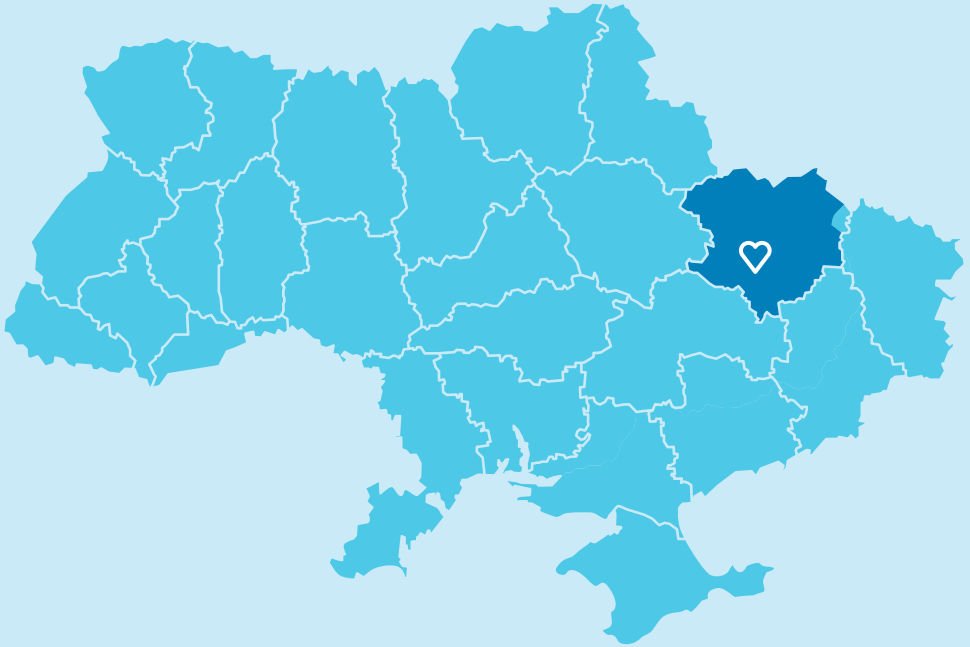
As Olena put it, bright colors had come back into her life, thanks to the MHPSS team's intervention. And she isn't going to let them go.

By Mykola Kravchenko and Yuliia Kubai

Zlatopil,
Kharkivska oblast

SUPPORTING LONGER-TERM IDPS IN KHARKIVSKA OBLAST

June 2024



Longer-term IDPs meet up in Zlatopil, where International Medical Corps is providing them with mental health and psychosocial support, and assistance with water, sanitation and hygiene.



OVERVIEW

The latest Russian offensive against Kharkivska oblast, which began on May 10, has displaced at least 25,000 people. Before the new offensive, thousands of Kharkivska residents had already been forced to flee their homes to escape the fighting and occupation caused by the Russian invasion of February 2022.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARIES

One of the places where such longer-term internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been hosted is the city of Zlatopil (formerly Pervomaiskyi)—some 70 kilometers south of Kharkiv city and further away from the Russian border and front lines.

Most of the IDPs in Zlatopil are older—from their mid-50s to their 70s. The fighting forced them to leave their homes and communities behind almost two-and-a-half years ago. Since then, they have endured a lot: their entire lives have been turned upside down, they have been separated from or lost loved ones to the conflict, and they have unmet needs related to their health and aging.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

International Medical Corps is providing IDPs in Kharkivska oblast with ongoing support. Following the occupation of their communities and the loss of their homes, their escape or evacuation from the attacks and fighting, their placement in temporary shelters and eventual resettlement, the displaced people have many additional needs. For example, while helping IDPs in Zlatopil, our Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) team received a request from them for hygiene kits.

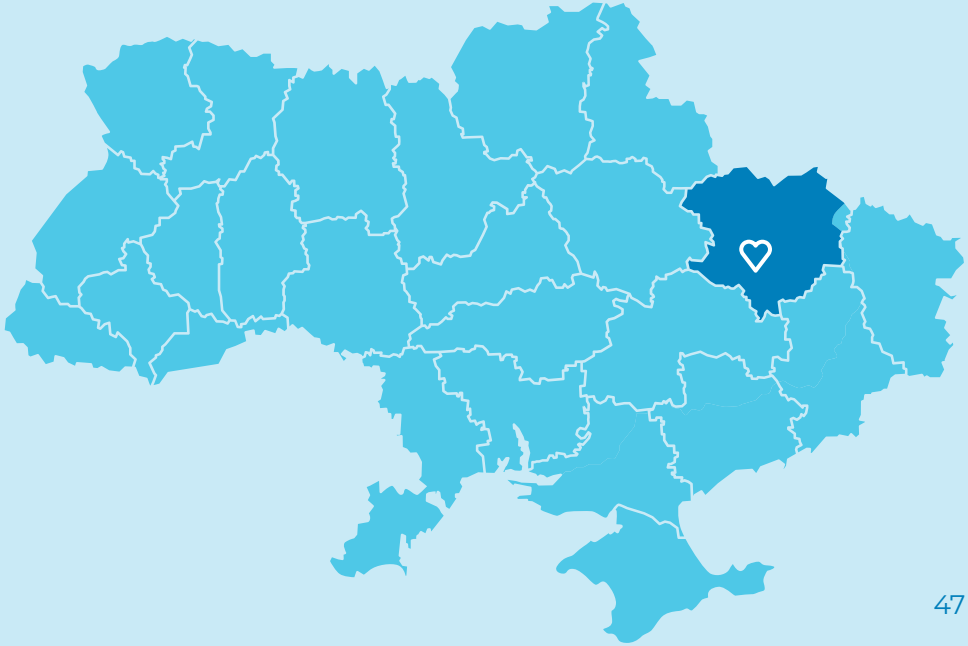
So, that is what our MHPSS team did. Supported by their Water, Sanitation and Hygiene colleagues and with funding from USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, they provided the IDPs with No. 4 hygiene kits—containing such things as soap, toilet paper and other essential items. The kits are designed to last a family of three for one month, or an individual for three months. The MHPSS team distributed 37 kits, reaching 56 people, and plans to continue assisting the IDPs in Zlatopil—and throughout Ukraine—with their needs.

By Olha Vasylieva

Zlatopil,
Kharkivska oblast

ELDERLY WOMEN OF ZLATOPIL FIND COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT

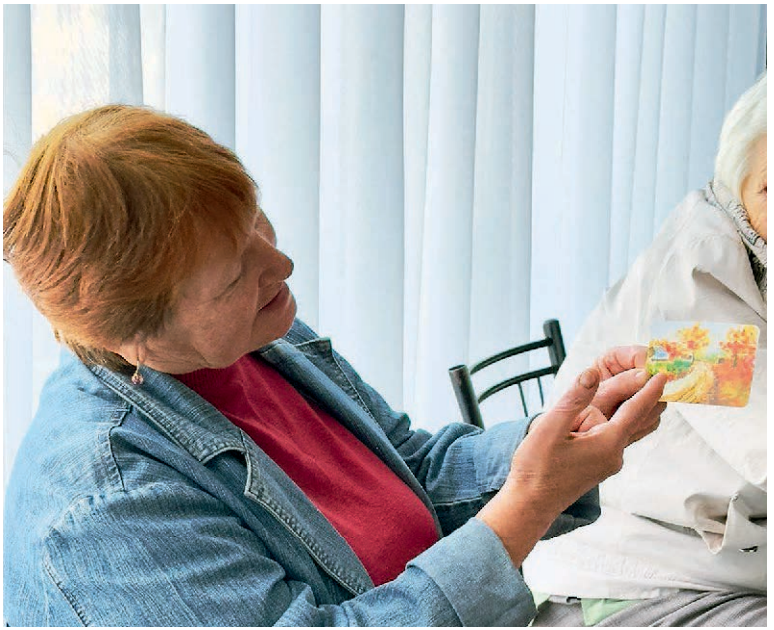
October 2024



OVERVIEW

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had devastating impacts on the country's population. 3.7 million people have been internally displaced by the conflict and millions more are living as refugees in other countries. The mental health impacts have also been severe: one study in found that 27% of Ukrainians felt depressed or very sad in 2023—an increase from 20% in 2021.

During the final Active Longevity session, a participant uses an illustrated card to reflect on the past, present and future.



INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARIES

Zlatopil, formerly named Pervomaiskyi, is a city in Lozova district of Kharkivska oblast in eastern Ukraine. It is the administrative center of the district and was home to almost 30,000 people in 2019. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian troops attacked and occupied parts of the oblast. This region, which had once provided shelter for people fleeing Russian-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk, was no longer safe. Many people, including some residents of Zlatopil, fled westward to escape the conflict.

Many of the people who remained in Zlatopil are elderly. With their relatives gone—either to fight on the front lines or to seek safety elsewhere—much of the elderly and widowed population of Zlatopil now lives and spends a lot of time alone.



The group of women from Zlatopil felt able to discuss their feelings with each other during the sessions.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

A local organization called Vilna runs a space in Zlatopil where elderly women can socialize and do activities together. With the support of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, International Medical Corps ran a series of activities for elderly women at the space—including 10 Active Longevity sessions, which help older adults maintain a healthy mind and body.

In the sessions, the group learned about and discussed a range of well-being topics, including the symptoms of stress and how to cope with them, how to increase self-confidence and resilience, the relationship between physical and psychological health, talking about emotions, and conflict prevention and resolution. In another session, the group learned first-aid skills for children and adults.

The most emotional session was the last one, during which the leader used illustrative cards to prompt the participants to share stories from their pasts, reflect on the present and discuss hopes for the future.

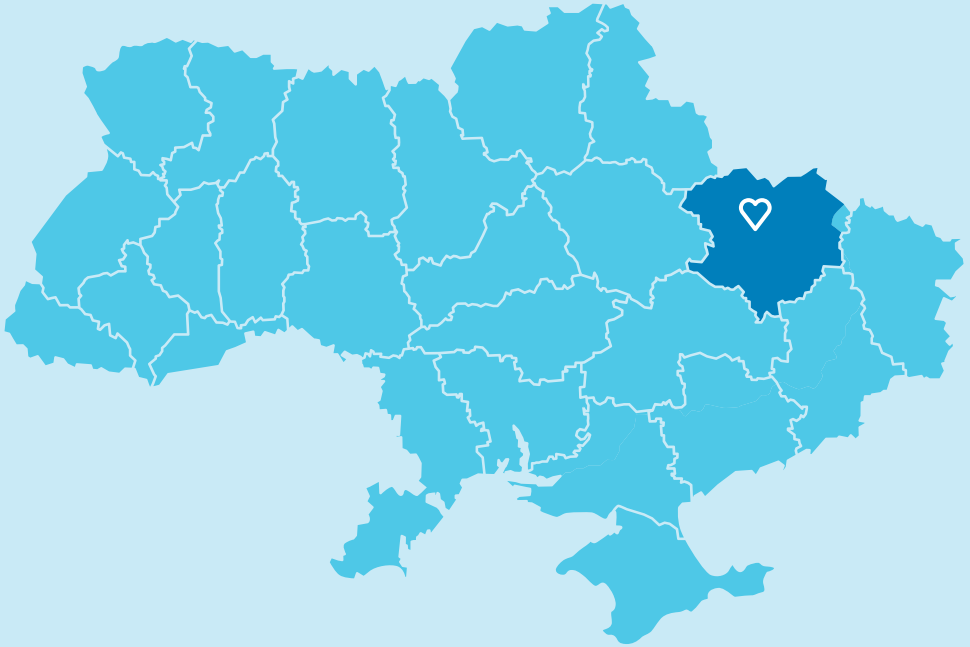
The sessions had a very positive impact on the group. Participants said that they enjoyed the sessions and appreciated that they were able to expand their knowledge and skills regarding their psychological health. Together, they felt that the sessions had given them new strength and resources with which to approach the future.

By Yuliia Ponomarova

Kharkiv,
Kharkivska oblast

HELPING CHILD IDPS FROM BAKHMUT FEEL MORE AT HOME IN KHARKIV

August 2024



OVERVIEW

Bakhmut is a city in Donetska oblast in eastern Ukraine. Or, more accurately, Bakhmut was a city. Once known for its salt industry, wine production and railway junction, the city was largely destroyed during the fighting after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and ongoing war. Today, Russian forces occupy what remains of the city, and most of the pre-war population—more than 70,000 people—has fled.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARIES

Amid the fighting in and around Bakhmut, some of the most vulnerable groups of residents were children, young mothers and older people. Many fled the conflict, with some 670 families of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Bakhmut settling in Kharkiv, the capital of neighboring Kharkivska oblast.



International Medical Corps hosts a special MHPSS session in Kharkiv for child IDPs from Bakhmut.

Compared to the shooting, shelling and destruction of their homes that they experienced in Bakhmut, life is safer in Kharkiv. However, it isn't easy. The city experiences regular air raid alarms and attacks, creating ongoing distress for its population and reminding the people of Bakhmut of the horrors they already experienced.

A humanitarian hub called “With Bakhmut in My Heart” has been established in Kharkiv to help these IDPs. United by the grief and trauma of losing their relatives, friends, homes, schools, jobs and city, the former residents of Bakhmut meet at the hub to socialize and access support.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS’ ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

With support from USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, International Medical Corps is helping the Bakhmut IDPs. Alongside other programming, the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) team offers a range of activities and services to help them stabilize their situations and conditions, regain the strength to move forward and solve still more challenges with renewed spirit.

When they received a request for MHPSS services for the children of the IDP community, our specialists stepped up to the task. The team organized a range of psychosocial activities for children between the ages of six and ten at the With Bakhmut in My Heart hub. The activities included painting, art projects and games.



The kids from Bakhmut enjoyed a fun time together, received vital MHPSS support and took away tote bags containing recreation kits and psychosocial support resources.



One of the children's activities involved decorating a map of Ukraine using blue and yellow flowers.

After the activities, which the children enjoyed, they were given tote bags containing MHPSS recreation kits, including coloring books, pencils, crayons, UNO card games, backpacks and copies of the book The Language of Emotions and Feelings to take home with them.

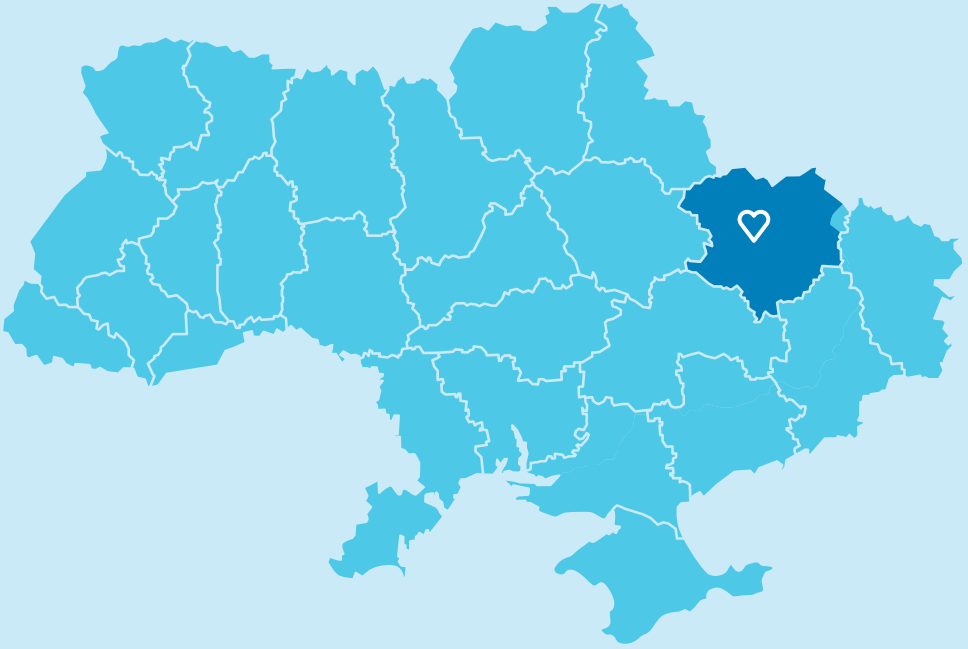
The activities were a success and left the children feeling happier and more supported in their new city.

By Olha Vasylieva

Novoselivka,
Kharkivska oblast

PROVIDING PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AFTER OCCUPATION

March 2024



OVERVIEW

Even before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the industrial Donbas region in the east of the country had seen significant conflict. Between 2014 and the end of 2021, more than 3,400 civilians were killed and more than 7,000 injured in conflict along the 450-kilometer "line of contact" between Russia and Ukraine.

Since February 2022, the violence has only escalated. Millions of people—especially those in the eastern oblasts—have left their homes to escape the conflict. Some have become refugees in other countries. Others have become displaced within Ukraine, traveling to other parts of the country where they hope to find safety. But for various reasons—finances, logistics, family or simply a preference for familiarity—others have stayed put.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARY

Novoselivka is a small village in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine. With a pre-war population of 1,200 people, the residents of this village suffered greatly when it came under Russian occupation in April 2022. Although the village was liberated by Ukrainian forces in September of that year, the experience took its toll on the residents.

For Nataliia, a 54-year-old woman who had lived in the village for a long time, the occupation was a horrific ordeal. But despite the abuse she suffered from the occupiers, she remained resilient—her unbreakable spirit kept her going. She and her husband found strength in each other as they lived through the ordeal. The whole time, she held out hope that the village would be liberated.

When the Russian forces were eventually driven out and Novoselivka was freed, Nataliia and her husband decided to stay



Nataliia speaks to an International Medical Corps MHPSS team member.

in the village. Like many other residents who had lived through the occupation, they had endured a lot of emotional strain. The immediate physical danger had withdrawn, but the danger to their mental health remained.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

International Medical Corps' Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) team was concerned about Novoselivka's residents, who lacked psychosocial support services to help them after the occupation.

To remedy this, the team launched the Basic Emotional Support program. Supported by funding from USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs, the program brings together groups of four to 15 people in group sessions who are experiencing emotional discomfort, helping them build support networks and psychosocial skills to help reduce stress, anxiety and depression. The group setting encourages people to express and reflect on their shared experiences so that they can support each other and strengthen social bonds. The program also offers practical support, such as helping participants access other services that they might need.

For Nataliia, the Basic Emotional Support program was extremely beneficial. She learned exercises to support her mental health, and soon started noticing improvements in her mood. She was smiling more often and feeling more positive. She even started engaging in light-hearted banter with other people.

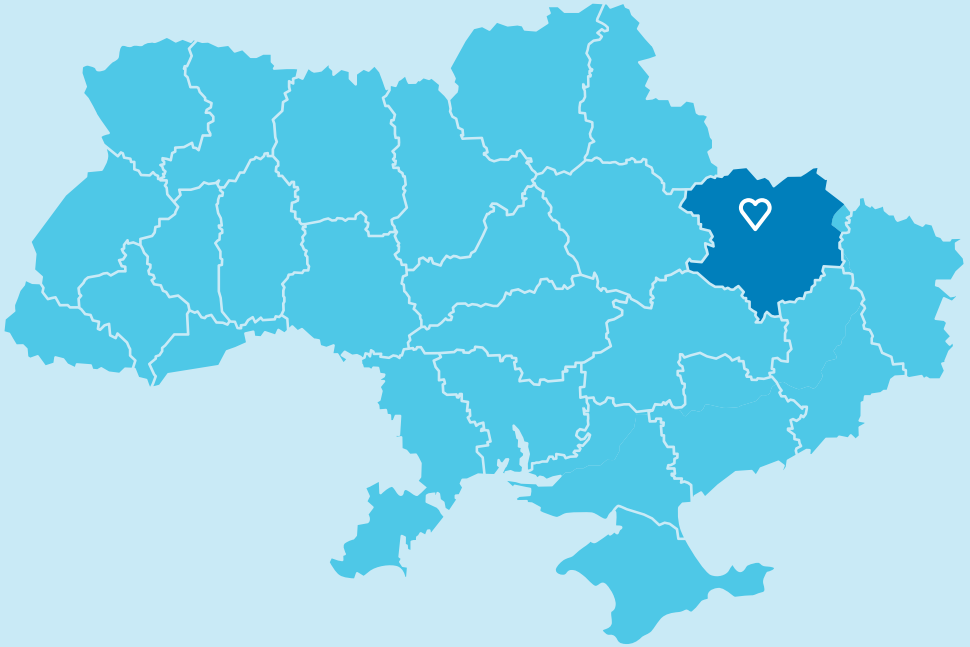
It was clear that the program had helped improve her overall well-being—despite the challenges of war and the memories of the ordeal she'd been through. Nataliia expressed her profound gratitude to the team for the assistance they provided through the program.

By Alina Pypina

Kharkiv,
Kharkivska oblast

WELLBEING ACTIVITIES— THROUGH A NEW LENS

October 2024



OVERVIEW

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Kharkivska oblast in the east of the country had become a place of refuge for Ukrainians fleeing the conflict near the border. However, after February 2022, Russia pushed into the oblast and has maintained its attacks on the region ever since. Russian forces captured some parts of the oblast in 2022 but failed to take Kharkiv, the oblast's capital. However, Ukrainian forces soon pushed them back, regaining most of the occupied territory.

International Medical Corps staff participate in one of the photography challenges during the workshop.



INFORMATION ABOUT THE BENEFICIARY

International Medical Corps' local staff in Kharkiv are used to helping others. A desire to support communities and do good in the world is what motivated many of them to take their jobs in the first place.

However, the daily struggles of living through a war have also taken a toll on the team. Russian air strikes on Kharkiv city are a constant threat and have already claimed many lives. The team working in the Khakiv office are at risk every day—this can have a very detrimental impact on their mental well-being.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CORPS' ASSISTANCE AND HOW IT HELPED

With the support of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, International Medical Corps ran a recreational photography event for the team. Facilitated by two members of staff and led by people with photography and journalism experience, the event covered the basics of photography (using both digital cameras and mobile phones), photo processing techniques and fun tasks and challenges. The team shared their own tips and tricks for taking great photos and ended the event with a fun pizza party.

The event was a success. Not only did the team get to take a break from their daily worries, bond with colleagues and learn a new skill, but now they will also be better able to document their work in the field. With their newfound photography skills, they can take photos with pride.



The Kharkiv office staff enjoyed taking turns roleplaying and photographing to practice their action photography skills.

"Now, I look at photos differently," said one participant. "It turns out it's harder than I thought to take photos while taking into account all the rules of shooting!" Other participants were impressed to learn that their phones had more powerful image-processing features than they'd ever realized.

"A good photo can have a lasting impact on the reader. An image can evoke joy, sadness, shock or myriad other emotions. Seeing a person's face, emotions and circumstances in this way can help bring a problem or crisis to life," said another of the participants, who is excited to use her new photography skills in her daily work.

By Yuliia Ponomarova

International Medical Corps

www.InternationalMedicalCorps.org

A pre-eminent first responder since 1984, International Medical Corps delivers emergency medical and related services to those affected by conflict, disaster and disease, no matter where they are, no matter what the conditions. We also train people in their communities, providing them with the skills they need to recover, chart their own path to self-reliance and become effective first responders themselves.

November 2024

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