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THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION STRESS ON CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE WAR

ВПЛИВ ІНФОРМАЦІЙНОГО СТРЕСУ НА ПСИХІЧНЕ ЗДОРОВ'Я ДІТЕЙ ПІД ЧАС ВІЙНИ

Hodlevska V. Yu. **Годлевська В. Ю.**

*PhD, DSc, доктор історичних наук, професор,
Prof. of the University of Gdansk, Poland Гданський університет, Польща*

Hodlevska M. O. **Годлевська М. О.**

*student of Khmura Lyceum, Warsaw, учениця ліцею «Хмура», Варшава,
Poland Польща*

War has profound and far-reaching impacts on all individuals involved, particularly on children, who are among the most vulnerable. During times of conflict, children are exposed to numerous stressors, not only through direct experiences but also through the information they receive about the war. This information, often alarming and graphic, can cause significant psychological stress, a phenomenon known as information stress. Information stress refers to the psychological strain experienced when exposed to an overwhelming or distressing flow of information. In the context of war, this stress can have serious implications for children's psychological development and well-being.

Children are among the most vulnerable populations during military conflicts, not only because of the direct threats to their physical safety but also due to the psychological toll that these conflicts can exert. One of the lesser-studied but increasingly recognized contributors to this psychological toll is information stress—the anxiety and psychological strain experienced as a result of exposure to intense, often graphic media coverage of military conflicts. Unlike adults, children are less equipped to process such information critically, which makes them more susceptible to the negative effects of information stress.

A significant contribution to the study of the problem of the impact of information on the human psyche is the work of the American scientist E. Tofler, who identified the main forms of adaptation to information influences [5].

The essence of stress, its stages and the impact of stress on a child's health have been studied by the following researchers: Bevans K., Gardner W., Pajer

K., Becker B., Carle A., Tucker C., Forrest C., Catani C., Caffo E., Belaise C., and others [1–4].

In pre-school and school age, basic ideas about the world are formed, and primary ethical and aesthetic imperatives, as well as attitudes towards oneself and others, are developed. Without having a formed personal core through which adults filter, analyze, and critically evaluate and comprehend the surrounding reality, children cannot navigate the semantic field of information. They are more susceptible to various kinds of manipulation, are gullible and naive, do not distinguish a veiled lie from the truth, and do not have formed ideals and standards for making appropriate comparisons. All of this makes it dangerous for a child to navigate an uncontrolled information field without the help of adults.

A child's exposure to military conflicts, where the role of information is of paramount importance, causes information stress and can lead to physiological maladjustment and mental disorders. Adaptation to unfavorable factors is accompanied by the restructuring of many functional systems and the mobilization of biological and social mechanisms. Stereotypical changes that develop in the body after strong influences are described as a stress response. The study of stress has shown that this reaction proceeds in stages, is characterized by a certain set of changes in the nervous system, and affects the level of nonspecific resistance of the organism.

The behaviour of children who have experienced information stress can be characterised by seclusion, denial of generally accepted rules and standards of behaviour, radical changes in appearance, increased impulsivity, irritability, and conflict. In the personal context, children's perception of themselves, the world, and other people may change; their sense of trust and security in their environment may disappear, and a sense of helplessness may emerge. However, the most devastating impact is caused by emotional consequences, which manifest in the form of anger, hostility, anxiety, helplessness, powerlessness, emotional instability, apathy, etc.[3]

Children's psychological reactions to stress can vary widely but generally include the following:

- Emotional Reactions: Common emotional responses include fear, sadness, anger, and helplessness. Children may experience heightened anxiety, have nightmares, or develop new fears related to the content they are exposed to, such as loud noises or sudden movements reminiscent of war scenes.

- Behavioral Changes: Information stress can lead to notable changes in behavior. Some children may become withdrawn and exhibit signs of depression, while others may act out aggressively or show heightened irritability and impulsivity. Changes in sleep patterns, appetite, and interest in previously enjoyed activities are also common.

- Cognitive Impacts: The cognitive effects of information stress can manifest as difficulties with concentration, memory lapses, and impaired

problem-solving abilities. Children might struggle with schoolwork or daily tasks due to the intrusive thoughts and worries caused by their exposure to distressing information [4].

The prolonged exposure to stress can have significant long-term implications for children's development:

- Emotional and Psychological Development: Chronic exposure to distressing information can contribute to the development of anxiety disorders, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These conditions can affect children's emotional regulation and coping mechanisms, potentially persisting into adulthood.

- Social Development: Information stress can impair children's ability to engage socially, leading to isolation or difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships. Mistrust and heightened sensitivity to perceived threats can hinder normal social interactions and development.

- Cognitive Development: The cognitive strain from continuous exposure to distressing information can affect learning and academic performance. Children may have trouble focusing on studies, retaining new information, or applying critical thinking skills, all of which are crucial for academic success and overall cognitive development [1; 2].

Information stress is a significant factor shaping the psychological reactions of children to military conflicts, particularly in Ukraine. Understanding the mechanisms of information stress and its effects on children is crucial for developing effective strategies to protect their mental health. By fostering resilience through education, support, and proper mediation, we can mitigate the impact of information stress and help children navigate the challenges posed by military conflicts.

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