



BRAIN. Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience

e-ISSN: 2067-3957 | p-ISSN: 2068-0473

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2025, Volume 16, Issue 3, pages: 307-316

Submitted: April 24th, 2025 | Accepted for publication: August 21st, 2025

Teaching Staff's Metacognitive Beliefs in Coping With War-Related Stress and Searching for Internal Resources

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Abstract: Life in the conditions of war causes a number of psycho-traumatic situations, which often acquire an acute and permanent character. In such situations, a person cannot fully think objectively, because in stressful conditions, the rational sphere of the personality is obscured, and emotions take over. In the crisis and rapidly changing situations of wartime, a person relies on past experience and a system of worldview and value beliefs that are not always consistent with reality and, as a result, cause him/her emotional anxiety and nervous tension. The purpose of the study is to determine the level of influence of a number of stress factors caused by wartime realities on a person using the example of a professional group of teachers. In situations of danger, the teacher realises his human and professional vocation to help, advise, and support. Actually, this circumstance testifies not only to the need for the viability of this professional group and the need to be a resource, but also to the desire to encourage and promote the acquisition of resilience in their students, the ability to establish effective interaction, taking into account their experience of acute stress and psycho-traumatisation. The analysis of empirical data proved a moderate level of personal anxiety among teachers against the background of a high level of situational anxiety of teachers in wartime conditions. Quite often, the emotions and feelings experienced by teachers in stressful situations are devalued by them, they are not sufficiently understood, and ultimately have no way out. The analysis of teachers' metacognitive beliefs made it possible to determine the level of development of reflective competence, and to illustrate the range of individual differences in the choice of metacognitive judgments and beliefs, and ultimately to outline certain strategies for the influence of stressful events on the psyche of people of this professional category. The indicated results of the study actualise the need for the development of psychological support measures for specialists of this professional category in psycho-traumatic situations of wartime. A productive conceptual idea in the implementation of these measures is the resource approach. In each specific situation, the teacher uses and develops his/her individual set of internal resources.

Keywords: metacognitive beliefs; psycho-traumatic situations; war; teachers; psychological support; anxiety; resource approach; emotions; stressful situations; internal resources.

How to cite: Bloshchynskyi, I., Hanaba, S., Kovalska, I., & Mostovyi, A. (2025). Teaching staff's metacognitive beliefs in overcoming stressful situations under war and searching for internal resources. *BRAIN. Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience*, 16(3), 307-316. <https://doi.org/10.70594/brain/16.3/22>

1. Introduction

The realities of war change the conventional image of society and its institutions. They cause anxiety, fear, nervous tension, and sometimes a state of alert and despair, destroying the stable existential framework and depriving people of the opportunity to meet their basic needs. In general, war causes a person to experience several psycho-traumatic situations, which are often acute and chronic, and do not allow them to look at different life situations adequately. In such situations, a person cannot think objectively because the rational sphere of personality is overshadowed under stressful conditions, and emotional reactivity predominates.

In the face of chaotic, crisis, and destructive events that can jeopardise a person's existence, they seek support within themselves. Against the backdrop of danger to life and health, they mobilise available and hidden resources to survive, live, and overcome adverse existential conditions. In crisis and rapidly changing wartime situations, a person relies on experience, pre-existing cognitive schemas that are not always in tune with reality, which, as a result, causes emotional anxiety and nervous tension (Cicchetti, 1991).

It is worth noting that the situation outlined above is particularly relevant to teaching staff, given the specific nature of their professional activities. From the first days of Russia's large-scale offensive, teachers have faced many dangerous socio-cultural challenges that are becoming more complex and characterised by uncertainty and are threatening the life and health of participants in educational interaction (Kuznietsova, 2023). In situations of danger, the teaching staff realises their human and professional vocation to help, advise, and support. This circumstance indicates not only the imperative for the resilience of this professional group and the need to be a resource but also the desire to encourage and promote the acquisition of resilience of their students, and the ability to establish effective interaction, taking into account their experience of acute stress and psycho-traumatisation.

2. Analysis of the Latest Research

The interaction of a human being and the world implies a state of creative inspiration. In the educational domain, this activity is increasingly focused upon developing learning capacity, which is considered a process of self-knowledge, self-creation, co-constructing the self and environment (Hanaba et al., 2022). Various aspects of trust and mutual assistance as moral and ethical values in maintaining mental health are revealed in the scientific research of Bloshchynskiy et al. (2021). Some scholars considered different lifestyles, worldviews, cultural values, and approaches to human development through the lens of intersubjectivity in describing educational strategies (Hanaba et al., 2019, 2020a; Hanaba, Mysechko, & Bloshchynskiy, 2020b). Social issues and organisational dynamics of students' self-realisation and creative identity formation are presented in the works of Polovnikov et al. (2020), Miroshnichenko et al. (2019), and other scientists.

These circumstances underscore the need to develop targeted psychological interventions for teaching staff in wartime traumatic situations. A productive conceptual idea in the implementation of these measures is the resource approach. The resource is understood as "everything that a person has in psychological terms," which is a latent reserve that can be used if necessary (Lukomska, 2020). These refer to the internal, personal resources of an individual, which O. Shtepa interprets as "the basis of a person's interpretation of the comprehension gained in his existential experience, necessary for the transfer of the potentials of his essence into a personal form and the realisation of the possibility of realisation of the truth" (Shtepa, 2017). The fundamental idea of the resource approach, according to D. Lapin, is the recognition of exchange relations between a person and the world around him, which are observed both at the external, adequate level of activity and the internal level associated with all levels of mental phenomena, from sensations and perception to intellectual, emotional, volitional, and personal qualities of the subject of activity, as well as at the level of socio-psychological phenomena" (Lapin, 2019). It should be noted that contemporary researchers have developed many conceptual approaches and theoretical foundations that are productive in the practical and semiological plane of psycho-correction and psycho-education. In

particular, the founders of the concept of posttraumatic growth, R. Tedeschi and L. Calhoun, believe that an internally strong, free, and spiritually developed personality can overcome life's obstacles and develop oneself (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The author of the self-help approach, A. Antonovsky, argues that even a very sick or traumatised person is not helpless. Their recovery and post-traumatic healing are due to the person's openness to new experiences and knowledge, faith and strength of mind, positive thinking, and optimism (Antonovsky, 1979). The restoration and development of internal resources contribute to the development of life awareness, according to Mouli Lahad, the creator of the BASIC Ph. model. The researcher presents it as an imaginary "bridge over the abyss" that helps a person overcome a crisis through personal growth (Lahad, Shacham, & Ayalon, 2012).

The heuristic potential of difficult life situations for personal development, according to O. Fedchuk, "is possible with appropriate awareness of contradictions and the need for change" (Fedchuk, 2023). Awareness of the need for change encourages teaching staff to independently address, overcome difficulties and social issues, productively survive crises, etc.

The purpose of the article is to determine the level of influence of a number of stress factors caused by the realities of wartime on the reflective competence of teachers and to outline strategies for emotional regulation.

3. Methodology

Research methods. A set of theoretical and empirical methods was used to address the outlined research objectives.

Theoretical: literature review, conceptual synthesis, and generalisation of the collected data. Empirical: to determine the psychometric evaluation of stressful wartime events on adults, the following methods were used: "Scale for Assessing Levels of Situational and Personal Anxiety," developed by Ch. D. Spielberg; "Metacognition Questionnaire (MCQ-30)" developed by A. Wells and S. Cartwright-Hatton (Wells & Cartwright-Hatton, 2019).

Teachers of secondary schools in Khmelnytskyi and Tiachiv (Zakarpattia oblast) were involved in the empirical study of mature adults. The selection criteria were teachers who perform their professional functions in "relatively calm" areas of wartime, but faced problems with psycho-emotional stress due to constant missile attacks and disrupted work schedules, increased workload, the aggravated psycho-emotional state of students, including a significant part of those who lost their homes and family members. The sample comprised 129 participants (105 women and 24 men), who completed the survey. The age range of those surveyed was 35-50 years. This circumstance indicates not only the presence of professional experience and knowledge among the survey participants but also a tendency to professional burnout and decreased psychological vitality, which served as an additional factor in increasing the impact of stress factors and changing metacognitive beliefs. The respondents were interviewed using Google Forms.

4. Results

The level of anxiety is one of the indicators that characterise the impact of stressful events on the individual. This concept is considered by researchers in two dimensions: as a trait-like psychological disposition, a property of the human psyche that persists for a long time and has stable forms of realisation in human behaviour (Ivanova, 2020), and as a person's feeling or experience of certain discomfort caused by the expectation of ill-being or a sense of threat (Shebanova & Didenko, 2017). This refers to personal and situational (reactive) anxiety. Quantitative indicators obtained from the "Scale for Assessing Levels of Situational and Personal Anxiety" by Ch. D. Spielberg showed that teachers have a moderate level of personal anxiety (total score – 44 points) against the background of a high level of situational anxiety (total score – 58 points). We believe that a high level of situational anxiety indicates a state of nervous tension in situations of crisis and uncertainty, teachers' tendency to anxiety and concern, which tends to increase in the conditions of tragic wartime events and against the background of perfectionism as a

professional trait of teachers (Koltunovych & Chuiko, 2022). Situational anxiety is generated by a specific stressful situation that causes certain emotional reactions in a person. A qualitative analysis of empirical data showed that more than half of the respondents (57 %) gave a negative answer to the following statement: “I feel rested,” more than a third of the respondents (36.5 %) to the statement: “You do not feel stiff and tense” and 31.7 % to the statement: “You feel happy,” almost every fourth (27.8 %) to the statement: “I am not in danger,” etc. We assume that such testimonies of the survey participants may indicate the permanent nature of situational anxiety, which generally leads to a deterioration in mental health and the development of personal anxiety.

It should be noted that personal anxiety is a natural property of the human psyche. It determines the tendency to experience a neutral situation as dangerous and, as a result, triggers the need for a person to find appropriate coping or avoidance strategies. This type of anxiety is not related to the specifics of the situation in which the individual finds themselves. At the same time, researchers point out that the repetition of crises and life-threatening situations leads to a sustained anxious state and, as a result, increases the level of personal anxiety. Therefore, situational anxiety acquires tendencies and outlines of independent formation and follows its own developmental trajectory (prompting action or inaction, causing a different range of emotions, determining specific considerations and decisions, etc.) (Yakovlieva, Kalamazh, & Hilman, 2022; Kostrubska, 2020). The level of personal anxiety is a stable psychological trait. However, this individual characteristic is not constant. As situational anxiety becomes more frequent and intense, personal anxiety may intensify (or decrease as a result of avoidance and distraction). It is an indicator for predicting the development or intensification of anxiety in the future. Even though the respondents have a moderate level of anxiety, specific trends are worrisome, indicating a tendency in the emotional state of mature teachers to nervousness, rumination on minor issues, psycho-emotional exhaustion, and burnout. A qualitative analysis of the level of personal anxiety showed that almost half of the respondents (47.5 %) reported frequent fatigue, more than a third of the survey participants (36.5 %) believe that they expressed excessive concern over minor matters, almost a third of the respondents (32.5 %) admit that they are worried about the difficulties expected in the future, etc. (see Figure 1).

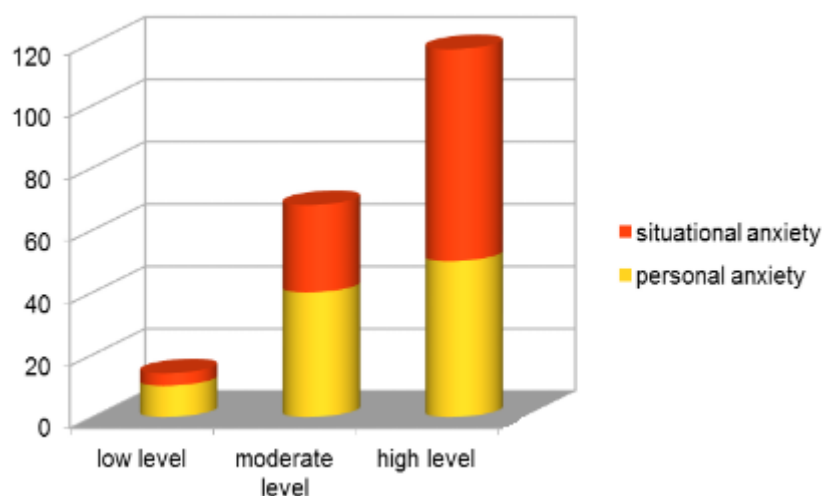


Figure 1. Quantitative indicators of teaching staff's situational and personal anxiety

Thus, many emotions are released when a person experiences a stressful situation, which can acquire a positive or negative valence. The latter may indicate the individual's psychological state. It should be noted that stress has a significant impact on brain function, including cognitive function, emotional regulation, and decision-making. Researchers in the fields of cognitive science and neurobiology suggest that stress can alter the neural mechanisms responsible for these

processes. These changes involve neurostructural adaptation. Stress can cause the hippocampus to shrink, which plays a key role in learning and memory processes. Chronic stress can negatively affect neurogenesis (the formation of new neurons) within the hippocampus. Stress can reduce the activity of the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for higher cognitive functions such as planning, decision-making, and impulse control. During stress, hormones, such as cortisol, are released, which can affect neural activity and the interaction between different parts of the brain. High levels of cortisol are associated with memory impairment and reduced learning ability.

For example, affective dispositions not supported by clear ideas and knowledge can lead to disappointment, diminish positive self- and world-appraisal, and form personal existential anxiety in general (Voitenko, 2018). Particularly relevant is the identification of factors that cause a teacher to experience a prolonged stressful situation (excessive professional workload, emotional overstrain, peculiarities of interaction with other participants in the educational process), peculiarities of the organisation, and the level of social support that teachers receive from the administration and colleagues. Analysis of anxiety among educators can significantly improve their psycho-emotional well-being and increase work efficiency by developing and implementing targeted psychological support programs (organising trainings on stress and anxiety management, creating groups for sharing experience and emotional support, implementing mentoring programs for young teachers), implementing measures aimed at preventing professional burnout, constant monitoring of the level of anxiety and the mental health of teachers, creating educational programs to raise awareness of anxiety among participants in the educational process, etc. The internal resources of teachers are important in reducing the level of anxiety: developing emotional resilience (learning to manage emotions, developing positive thinking, etc.); acquiring and improving psychological skills (developing self-regulation skills, awareness, self-relaxation techniques), etc.

The development of the regulatory and metacognitive spheres allows a person to manage mental processes effectively. Using a person's metacognitive strategies makes them more autonomous and self-directed in overcoming life difficulties and psychologically traumatic experiences (Clearly & Kitsantas, 2017). Metacognitive strategies involve producing a person's knowledge about themselves and others through self-assessment and self-management of the cognitive sphere.

Metacognitive strategies allow one to gain knowledge about metacognitive processes, which involve awareness of one's thinking and the ability to regulate one's thinking and readiness to apply this ability, evaluate one's reflective actions, and form an image of the expected result of reflection (White & Keeves, 1988). Reflection appears as an open, dynamic system within which the problem is posed, and solved by mobilising the reflective potential of the individual, and actualising and implementing various forms of reflective activity (Seligman, 2002).

The analysis of the teaching staff's metacognitive beliefs allowed us to determine the level of development of reflective competence, illustrate the range of individual differences in the choice of metacognitive judgments and beliefs, and, as a result, outline specific strategies for the impact of stressful events on the psyche of people of this age group. It should be noted that metacognition is a person's awareness and control of their own cognitive processes.

The empirical data obtained using the "Metacognition Questionnaire" developed by Wells & Cartwright-Hutton (2004) showed that the highest indicator (according to the statements: generally, agree, and strongly agree) is the self-awareness factor, 38.62 %. This factor indicates the level of a person's emotional-evaluative stance towards the self. It refers to many ethical assessments of the person about themselves based on the peculiarities of their behaviour and experiences. It should be noted that it has an ambivalent meaning. On the one hand, self-awareness is expressed as a person's sympathy for themselves through self-respect, self-esteem, and self-worth; on the other hand, it can indicate antipathy through feelings of inferiority, condemnation, and acts of self-reproach. A qualitative analysis of this factor showed that for some respondents, self-respect contains the semantic content of antipathy and self-judgment. Thus, the highest level of positive responses was given to the following statements: "I am aware of how I think when I understand problems" – 70 %

(generally and strongly agree); “I control my thoughts” – 53 % (generally and strongly agree); “Anxious thoughts do not disappear despite trying to avoid them” – 44 % (generally and strongly agree) (see Figure 2).

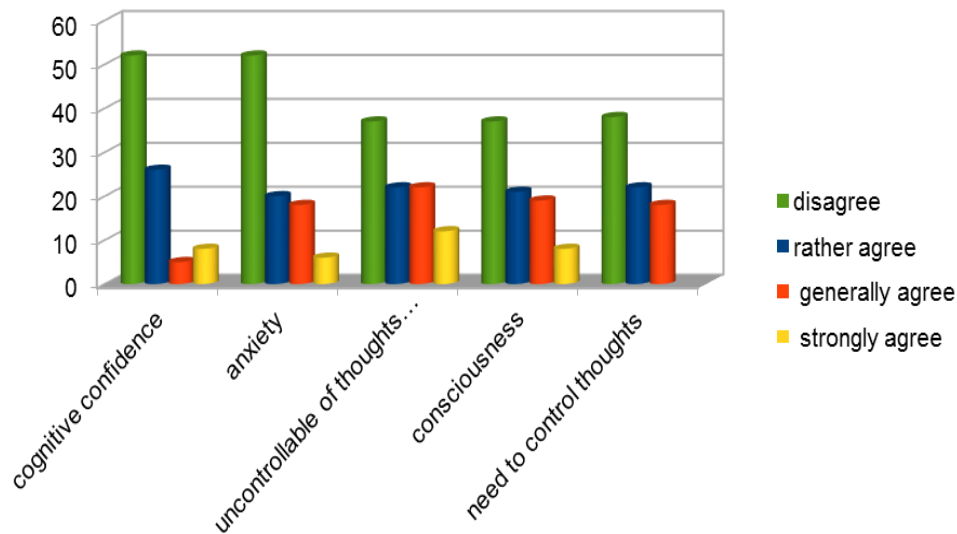


Figure. 2. Metacognitive beliefs of teaching staff

The indicators of agreement for the uncontrollability of thoughts and danger are high. The total result for the agreement and strong agreement indicators is 36.08 % (see Figure 2).

Thus, more than a third of the respondents indicated that they attempt to regulate their negative experiences, which include the themes of prohibition, punishment, and recognition. This also refers to the subjective belief of the survey participants in the need to bear responsibility for the harm caused. A qualitative analysis of this factor showed that almost half of the respondents (49.5 %) have negative experiences of how stressful situations can cause many diseases, 44 % of the survey participants expressed general and strong agreement that anxiety and worry are dangerous for them, 38 % say they cannot distract themselves from disturbing thoughts, and 31 % consider the inability to control their thoughts a sign of weakness (see Figure 2). A person's inability, and sometimes unwillingness, to control their thoughts indicates that they have high expectations of themselves in a crisis, an inability to relax or switch their attention to another activity, etc. As a result, this leads to neurophysiological fatigue, increased nervous tension, and anxiety (see Figure 1). Overall, these findings reflect traits of socially prescribed perfectionism (a person's desire to be perfect in the eyes of other people and constant concern about what other people think about them and their actions).

The total index of the danger factor and the belief in the need to control thoughts amounted to 30.22 %. It shows that almost a third of the survey participants believe that their perceived control over emotional distress significantly affect the quality and speed of solving problematic situations. Thus, 34.3 % of the respondents expressed general and strong agreement that they cannot control their thoughts and struggle to function in daily life, 41 % of the respondents admit that they are too focused on their thoughts and feelings, whereas 52.3 % of the respondents believe that some thoughts are too bad to keep in mind. These findings reflect a tendency to engage in self-critical internal dialogue as motivation and recognising that people need to be demanding of themselves to succeed.

The indicators of this factor correlate with the empirical data of the positive metacognitive beliefs about anxiety, which indicates the level of a person's tendency to maintain a biased self-other appraisal towards themselves and others. It is a tendency to ignore one's positive qualities and achievements and, against this background, exaggerate the merits and qualities of others and

negatively evaluate oneself and one's activities in various forms of social interaction. The total number of people who generally and strongly agree with the statements is 26.29 %. Thus, more than a quarter of the survey participants have a biased attitude towards themselves and their beliefs, depend on the assessment and preferences of others, and tend to make choices based on fear and avoidance, rather than their preferences, ambitions, and desires; 26.1 % of the respondents generally and strongly agree that worrying helps them overcome problems, and 25.6 % of the survey participants are convinced that worrying helps them stay focused (see Figure 2). Excessive demandingness and judgment of oneself reduce productivity (see Figure 1). Persistent self-reproach leads to anxiety and low self-esteem, and a personal perception of things.

The factor of cognitive confidence has the lowest total agreement index – 13.22 %. This indicates that a significantly small percentage of respondents tend to be overconfident in their judgments and beliefs. Overestimation of the situation, the illusion of its control, timeframe for resolution, and wishful thinking hinder an objective assessment of the situation and practical solutions to the problem. At the same time, researchers Taylor & Brown (1988) noted that sometimes overestimated positive illusions give a person the strength and motivation to cope with difficulties, increasing their confidence in achieving success (Wells & Cartwright-Hatton, 2019). A qualitative analysis of empirical data showed that 85.9 % of the respondents partially or strongly disagree that they have, for example, a poor memory (85.8 % disagree with poor memory of events). In comparison, 90.8 % tend to trust their memory.

Thus, the analysis of empirical data showed a moderate level of personal anxiety in contrast with a high level of situational anxiety of teaching staff in wartime (see Figure 1). We believe that a high level of situational anxiety indicates a state of nervous tension in situations of crisis and uncertainty, teachers' tendency to worry and anxiety, which tends to increase in the context of tragic wartime events, and exacerbated by professional perfectionism, as a professional trait of teachers. The "Metacognition Questionnaire" method allowed us to analyse the level of teachers' emotional and value attitudes towards themselves, the peculiarities of their behaviour, and their thoughts and beliefs. The empirical data obtained indicate that almost a third of the respondents demonstrate high expectations of themselves in crises and cannot switch their attention to other activities. The habit of chronic self-devaluation leads to anxiety, and affects the psycho-emotional and physiological state of a person. As a result, it leads to neurophysiological depletion, increased anxiety and restlessness, and negatively affects professional activities and life in general. Often, the emotions and feelings experienced by teaching staff in stressful situations are devalued, not sufficiently realised, and ultimately remain unprocessed or unresolved.. Experiencing a prolonged deprivation situation by teachers releases a significant amount of emotions that can unreasonably receive both positive and negative modalities, and eventually form personal existential anxiety in general. Stress and anxiety have a complex effect on the brain, altering the structure and functions responsible for cognitive processes. For example, stress can make emotional regulation more difficult, because activity in the amygdala (a structure responsible for processing emotions) increases during stress. This can ultimately lead to increased emotional reactions and a reduced ability to control one's emotions. Increased anxiety activates the same neural mechanisms as stress. This can lead to impaired metacognitive processes, including self-monitoring and learning regulation. Educators may lose the ability to adequately evaluate their knowledge and abilities during stressful situations. It should be noted that during stress, people often rely on automatic or impulsive decisions, as the prefrontal cortex cannot effectively perform its functions due to reduced activity. As a result, this can lead to decision-making based on emotional reactions rather than rational analysis. Metacognition plays an important role in how people cope with stress and make decisions. Overall, understanding these mechanisms may help develop strategies to improve emotional regulation and decision-making during stressful situations. This fact demonstrates the importance of prioritising psycho-emotional health for effective learning and work of teachers and other professionals. In the context of war, teachers need to develop vital capacity and resilience and identify productive coping strategies in their work.

5. Conclusions

These research results actualise the need to develop measures of psychological support for specialists of this professional category in wartime psycho-traumatic situations. An effective conceptual framework in the implementation of these measures is the resource approach, including the BASIC Ph. model of coping. Restoration and development of internal resources contribute to the development of life awareness. This involves developing teachers' skills of self-regulation, awareness, relaxation techniques, increasing emotional resilience, and cultivating positive thinking through training and support groups. It is relevant to work with negative beliefs and attitudes that exclude anxiety using cognitive-behavioural techniques. Using visualisation to imagine successful situations in the classroom also helps reduce anxiety levels. Practicing relaxation techniques (yoga, meditation), including physical exercises in daily practice to improve overall physical condition, will help develop emotional stability and resilience.

Resources are not spontaneously generated from anywhere. They appear and are replenished based on previous successful experiences from solving a difficult life situation or gaining new knowledge, successful social communication, and the ability to use the knowledge gained in practical and creative activities. In each situation, teachers use their set of internal resources (which differ in scope and degree of development and accessibility), how much it is expressed in a particular person, and how effectively they use it in life practices.

Particularly constructive within this perspective is the desire and need to develop sanogenic thinking, which is the basis for the development and use of sanogenic coping by teaching staff, which is focused on maintaining the psychological health of a person, facilitating the establishment of social contacts, and a positive reassessment of the situation, controlling and regulating the emotional state of a person, and the ability to comprehend and overcome a traumatic situation constructively. In practical terms, the development of sanogenic thinking and the use of sanogenic coping allows "a person to evaluate and find the right solutions in difficult circumstances, to identify, analyse and correlate their qualities and actions to the subject-social situation" (Shtepa, 2016). Awareness of the actual state of affairs, analysis, and critical reflection on events will help normalise a person's emotional state and eliminate the adverse effects of emotional stress.

A constructive element within this framework is the desire and need to develop self-worth. This means a person's self-respect for themselves, the experience of appreciation, and the realisation that regardless of setbacks or life's troubles, a person always remains valuable and significant. Its formation is based on a person's internal work on themselves, self-growth, and inner fulfilment, rather than dependence on the judgements and evaluations of the external environment. Self-value implies adequate self-esteem but is not identified with it, as it demonstrates the internal dimension of oneself, unlike self-esteem, which is derived from external factors and assessments.

Artificial intelligence tools, such as cognitive-behavioural chatbots and mobile applications for increasing resilience, can play an important role in reducing the level of anxiety of educators by providing anytime, personalised (thanks to machine learning algorithms, chatbots can adapt their recommendations according to the needs and condition of the user) and effective support. They contribute to the development of stress management skills and emotional resilience (through structured modules and guided practices on stress management, mindfulness, and positive thinking). A number of applications allow users to track their condition and progress. As a result, this will help educators to be aware of their fluctuations in mood and stress levels, contributing to more effective regulation of their psycho-emotional state. Some mobile applications enable peer-to-peer communication with other users, which allows them to share experiences, receive support, and reduce feelings of isolation etc.

What is relevant for a person in solving complex problems is creating situations of success and striving for wisdom. As a psychological resource, this orientation implies developing and using situations that contribute to personal self-discovery. Success in the individual self-affirmation framework focuses on activity and responsibility, self-acceptance, and acceptance of others. The

primary indicator of a person's readiness to overcome difficult situations is their mental and physiological maturity, ability to solve their life problems independently, and to effectively survive crisis periods and various losses. Coping should be based on a proactive attitude and openness to new experiences, forming a positive self-image and constructive life perspective, providing feedback, and mobilising adaptive coping mechanisms, based on individual strategies and characteristics.

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