

Dealing with the horror of the war in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has unleashed dismay and bewilderment around the world. Many people following the news coverage are speechless and upset. Feelings related to these events can include sadness, fear for oneself and others, anger, and powerlessness. Concern for the future of Europe and the world can also be involved. People who have acquaintances, friends or family in the war zone are even more affected and may wonder what they can do to help. These are all normal reactions to such a crisis and many people are affected in these ways.

The climate crisis, the Covid pandemic and now war in Europe – (emotional) energy reserves are depleted. It is therefore important to take especially good care of yourself during these days, and to keep up your hope and courage, even if it is difficult. Typical thoughts you may have noticed in yourself are thoughts of guilt, such as "I should not do anything enjoyable." or "I should not feel good when my family or others feel bad." At the same time, you can only be a support to others if you take care of your own reserves of strength. The situation will not change if you deny yourself activities that provide balance and regeneration. The point is to take good care of yourself and stay mentally stable so that you can, in turn, provide help.

In this fact sheet, we address a few points that can provide support during this difficult time.

1. Typical reactions to acute crises

The body reacts automatically to a crisis situation and is on constant alert, also referred to as a psychovegetative alert or stress reaction. This is perfectly normal. The following responses may occur:

- nervousness, tension, agitation, heart palpitations, tightness in the chest area
- sleep-related problems: difficulty falling or staying asleep, nightmares, waking up earlier in the morning, little restful sleep
- loss of appetite, digestive difficulties
- difficulty concentrating, erratic thought processes, difficulty thinking logically, headaches
- lack of energy, exhaustion
- irritability, mood swings, crying
- emotional numbness, a sense of standing "beside oneself"
- intrusive images of past experiences

After this initial shock reaction, the processing phase of the experience begins. Here, too, an altered sense of experience may continue to occur, accompanied by, for example, tension, nervousness, anxiety, irritability. After the processing phase, it becomes clear whether an adaptation to the changed situation can succeed and whether it is possible for you to manage your everyday life again to some extent. If this is not the case, we recommend accepting additional offers of support. You will find a list of possible resources below.

2. Remaining mentally stable in an ongoing crisis

Prolonged stressful situations may be accompanied by emotional numbness or by extreme emotional states. There may be wide variations in expression and intensity. Fear, helplessness, powerlessness, anger or guilt can occur, for example. Feelings are an important indicator of underlying needs. They can motivate us to take action and make a difference. However, when feelings become very pronounced, they can also block or paralyze us. Knowing that acquaintances, friends or family have been affected by the war is an additional emotional burden. Nevertheless, taking good care of yourself is by no means selfish or wrong. Self-care is important so that we don't burn out quickly, but are instead able to persevere in a crisis situation:

- Try to see your feelings as a normal reaction to an exceptional situation. It's okay to feel this way. Take the pressure off: you do not have to be "functional" at all times. Take your time and consider which tasks and obligations you might be able to put on the back burner for the time being.

- Maintain routines and a similar daily structure as before. Or build a new one if the old one is not possible. Always get up at the same time and go to bed at the same time. Eat regular, healthy and balanced meals.
- Pay attention to exercise, sports and fresh air (both airing rooms and going outside): these are the best ways to counteract physical tension.
- Get enough sleep and stay hydrated.
- Avoid drugs and the excessive consumption of alcohol and medication.
- Try to avoid dealing with stressful issues at least two hours before bedtime.
- Schedule positive and enjoyable activities every day. And make sure you have enough relaxing balance.

3. News Consumption

A permanent preoccupation with the topic of war leads to an increased stress level and can trigger or intensify fear, worry and feelings of helplessness. To remain able to act, it is important to reduce stress by setting boundaries and critically examining your media consumption:

- Only use reputable sources for information about the war in Ukraine (e.g. "Tagesschau" or "heute" if you are watching from Germany).
- Set fixed times to read or watch news. Limit how often you check the news (e.g. only twice a day), even if events are developing rapidly. Too much information can trigger insecurities and be overwhelming.
- Read articles instead of looking at photos and videos, because visual material can trigger stronger emotions.
- Refrain from scrolling through news feeds or social media on the side. In some cases, articles are matched with especially lurid headlines (so-called "clickbait") that deliberately trigger emotions to encourage readers to visit the page. The news content of these articles is usually minimal. Instead, actively take time to catch up on the latest news.

4. Finding the right level of activism for you

Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness can be paralyzing. It may make sense to become active yourself to counteract these feelings. However, figure out in advance what is within your control and how you are able to and want to engage to make a positive contribution and feel empowered to act again. This could include the following:

- donating money or necessary items (e.g. [Germany's Relief Coalition](#))
- going to demonstrations (e.g. [#StandWithUkraine](#))
- signing petitions
- getting involved, e.g. sorting donated items
- being there for (affected) friends
- with children: doing a craft project, painting or lighting a candle, as a symbol of peace

Make sure you don't burn out because of your commitments. Generally speaking, if the aim is to provide support over a longer period of time, a moderate level of activism is particularly sustainable.

5. Sharing with others

To sort out your own thoughts, it can be helpful to talk to other people about your own worries. If you don't have anyone to talk to at the moment: a free German-language telephone counselling service is available 24/7 at 0800 111 0 111 or 0800 111 0 222 (for callers from Germany). For other languages and international callers, [click here](#). Pay attention to when exchanges about the current situation are good for you and provide relief. If you notice that sharing is stressing you out, provide this feedback in the conversation and either suggest a change of topic or withdraw from the discussion.

6. Talking about the war with children

Children sense the fears and concerns of adults. They pick up on conversations about war, read about it on social media, and see it on TV. Children worry about things themselves; they are curious and will ask questions. There are a few things you can pay attention to when talking to children about current events:

- Only address the issue if the child asks questions. Be mindful of their reaction and further questions in your responses so that you do not overwhelm them. With older children, you can actively initiate conversations.
- Always use language and words that are appropriate to the developmental level of the child. Stay factual and clear in your descriptions.
- Answer the child's questions honestly but avoid going into too much detail so as not to cause additional anxiety.
- Explain to the child that being afraid is a natural reaction to protect us from danger. And that it is also okay to feel overwhelmed. Help the child regulate feelings that arise.
- Make it clear to the child that they are currently safe here in Germany. Younger children in particular cannot separate an abstract idea of other, distant countries from reality. Also tell the child that many people are currently trying to resolve the conflict and help the people who are there.
- Stay authentic. You can state your own concerns, but save your own strong feelings for conversations with adults so as not to burden the child.
- For older children, check on their access to social media and agree on specific media times; also stay informed about the sources the child reads, and make sure they have an awareness for "fake news."
- Related links (German-language):
 - child-friendly news (watch them together with the child so you can answer questions): [Logo news](#) and [Sendung mit der Maus](#)
 - Child-friendly search engine: "[Blinde Kuh](#)"
 - What to do if the news scares you: [ZDF-Logo](#)

7. Further contact points and information

- **JGU International:** This website lists the offers of the JGU for people from Ukraine and for people who want to help. The page is updated continuously. A functional mailbox has also been set up for Ukrainian students and staff to contact to say if and how the JGU can support them: kontakt@international.uni-mainz.de. You can also contact this address if you want to offer concrete help yourself.
- **Polish Department FB06:** On this website, you will find up-to-date information and reliable background reports on the situation in Ukraine as well as donation opportunities to support the people in Ukraine.
- The **AStA of the JGU** has compiled a list of possibilities for support.
- The scholarship foundation **Stipendienstiftung Rheinland-Pfalz** is supporting students who find themselves in financial distress as a result of the war in Ukraine. The offer addresses students who are already enrolled at universities and colleges in Rheinland-Pfalz, but also those who have fled and would like to continue their studies here. You can get more information [here](#).
- **Financial counseling** from Studierendenwerk Mainz.
- **Emergency financial assistance from the AStA of the JGU.**
- Translation of documents: the Germersheim-based association "Translators without Borders" helps refugees translate documents and papers required for Germany and other European countries. Contact: Olga Gleiser (email: olga_gleiser@hotmail.com; WhatsApp: +491798121402).

8. If you are under more severe psychological stress

Over time, the current situation can lead to an increase in depressive moods, anxiety and other psychological problems. Especially if you were already psychologically stressed before the start of the war in Ukraine, you

may experience a worsening of your symptoms. If you feel that our advice alone has been insufficient, you may need professional support.

Mental Health Services at JGU:

- As a JGU student, you can contact us for [individual counseling sessions](#): We are currently available by phone and video chat.
- [Group for people affected by the Ukraine war](#): In this course, you will receive help in sorting out your thoughts and feelings and giving them space. You will also receive support in developing coping skills. The course can be joined at any time and meets on Wednesdays from 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.
- On our homepage, you will find a number of [papers with advice](#) on common psychological stresses in students (e.g. depressive moods, brooding, sleep disorders).
- JGU students have free access to the [online services](#) of the Mental Health Services with helpful tips and exercises on various topics, such as “enhancing relaxation” or “improving sleep”.

Offers outside the JGU Mental Health Services:

You can get information about psychotherapy [here](#) or [here](#). You can also find contact addresses of psychotherapists on [this page](#).

Ongoing treatment:

If you are currently receiving psychotherapeutic and/or psychiatric treatment and notice a worsening of your symptoms due to the current situation or for other reasons, please contact your therapist or primary care physician.

In case of emergency:

In urgent cases, you should contact your local psychiatric clinic (for Mainz: Untere Zahlbacher Str. 8, Tel: +49 6131 172920).