



How to handle the trauma of war from afar

Psychologists offer advice on managing stress around the conflict.

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Since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, the media have been flooded with broadcasts and images of a country under siege. Stress and concern about the conflict is widespread, especially for those with loved ones in Ukraine. Warnings about potential cyberattacks and images of the conflict have put many on high alert, even those without a personal connection to the country.

“Feeling overwhelmed, anxious, sad—even though it’s uncomfortable—is to be expected in a situation like this,” said psychologist Dana Rose Garfin, PhD, of the University of

California, Irvine, who studies collective trauma during crises. “It’s a very heartbreaking situation, and part of the experience of being human is feeling empathy for others.”

Ukraine is a Western democracy that borders our NATO allies, she said, so it’s normal to feel distressed about what’s going on and to closely follow the conflict. While staying informed is important, research shows that overexposure to media during a crisis is linked with worse mental and physical health down the line (*Health Psychology* (<https://doi.apa.org/fulltext/2020-20168-001.html>), Vol. 39, No. 5, 2020).

Here’s evidence-based advice from psychologists on how to manage the trauma of war from afar.

Keep things in perspective

Understanding the history of Russia’s attempts to seize Ukraine, which began in the 18th century and escalated in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, can provide helpful context for recent events.

This conflict is also happening amid a series of other crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and plenty of political turmoil closer to home.

“There’s change happening in our lives and a lot of it is involuntary,” said Laura S. Brown, PhD, a clinical psychologist and trauma expert based in Seattle. “When people experience involuntary change, it feels like they’re out of control.”

Exert control where you can

One of the best ways to cope is to find small ways to exercise control throughout your day. Go for a walk; take a nap; call, text, or email someone you love; eat something you enjoy; or listen to music that enlivens or calms you.

“Look around your life. Where do you have control or choice, even in the smallest way? Exercise that,” said Brown.

Limit your media exposure

“The greater the amount of exposure people have to media about a tragedy, the more likely they are to report distress,” said Roxane Cohen Silver, PhD, a professor of psychology who studies stress and coping at the University of California, Irvine. Her research has shown that repeated news exposure in the week following the 9/11 attacks predicted acute stress, prolonged symptoms of posttraumatic stress, and even physical health problems 2 to 3 years later (*Psychological Science* (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956797612460406>), Vol. 24, No. 9, 2013). She, Garfin, and their colleagues have found similar patterns around the Boston Marathon bombing, the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limiting the amount and kinds of content you access can help protect against the psychological costs of media exposure, she said. Decide how often you will check the news and what types of media you will engage with.

For some, it may be less distressing to read or listen to reports about Ukraine rather than watch disturbing images on TV. Consider turning off push notifications on your phone so you can control when you see news.

Avoid graphic images, which research has linked to psychological reactivity and mental health consequences. These tend to proliferate on social media, where posts may not be moderated.

Seek news from credible sources

News on social media may be unreliable, politically motivated, or sensationalized, warns Graham Davey, PhD, an emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Sussex in England and author of the forthcoming book *The Catastrophic Worrier* (https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Catastrophic_Worrier.html?id=Tt3czgEACAAJ).

“News is increasingly harnessed for the purposes of spectacle and entertainment,” he said. “One effect of this is that the events being witnessed on breaking news [on TV] can be shocking enough to create symptoms of acute stress and even post-traumatic stress disorder.”

He recommends avoiding 24-hour news channels and instead accessing longer-form journalism, such as in-depth commentaries or documentaries that provide additional context for current events.

Support the people of Ukraine

If there is a large Ukrainian community near you, reach out to find out what they need. Depending on how long the war lasts, they may be organizing to accept refugees or to send supplies.

If you want to contribute money, seek recognized humanitarian agencies, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, said Brown. Don't fall for fake humanitarian agencies, which may crop up on social media.

Supporting others, caring for yourself, and monitoring media use can help reduce psychological distress, but Garfin emphasizes that it's also healthy to feel concerned right now. "Remember that to some degree, these feelings are normative and adaptive," she said.

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