

Impact of Art Therapy

DTCare's Psychological Trauma Response in Ukraine



DTCare

Introduction to DTCare

Built on more than three decades of field expertise in disaster and conflict conditions, DTCare specializes in international humanitarian relief distribution and implementation of accessible education and medical programs within the communities affected. With operations on four continents within one year of its founding, DTCare delivers critical support to civilians, military, and first responders in regions beset by disaster and conflict to alleviate suffering and instill a sense of stability and hope.

DTCare works with the logistics-based shipping company DTGruelle, which specializes in international freight forwarding, to critically provide essential humanitarian aid in some of the most austere and conflict-ridden regions globally. DTCare launched our Ukrainian Crisis Relief Campaign one day after Russia's advance in Ukraine began by leveraging already-established partnerships and building new alliances. DTCare and its partners work closely with urban and isolated communities throughout Ukraine, sometimes being the only source of support because of the many barriers in delivering aid. There is almost no place in Ukraine where DTCare cannot positively impact.

To date, 25 air-freight shipments and eight 40' shipping containers have been sent containing over 30,000 meal packs, 15,000 feminine hygiene products, 1,500 children's winter shoes and holiday kits, and 10,000 emergency medical supplies and hospital equipment.

What sets DTCare apart from other humanitarian NGOs is its ability and dedication to building long-term, high-impact programs from these interpersonal networks. Being registered as an official non-profit in the US and Ukraine, DTCare combines foundational expertise in pushing forward with the long-term program of Art Therapy to restructure accessible and efficient mental health education and mentality as the country begins to think about life after the war.

Program Timeline

July - 2022

- DTCare partnered with Związek Harcerstwa Polskiego Scouts and supported their Summer Art Therapy Camps for over 5,000 Ukrainian refugees.
- Initiated a Pittsburgh-wide art materials collection drive with 17 Ukrainian churches, schools, and community groups to send \$8,000 worth of art supplies to Poland in aiding psychological support for Ukrainian refugees.

October - 2022

- DTCare partnered with the Charity Fund for the Development and Support of the Ukrainian Navy for 4-month pilot period to work with Ukrainian veterans suffering from PTSD and their families in Odesa, averaging 75 individual and group sessions a month.
- Began working alongside American art therapy specialists from New York University, Florida State University, and Seton Hill University to provide weekly specialized clinical development for DTCare's Ukrainian art therapists.

November - 2022

- DTCare organized with the International Humanitarian University of Odesa (IHU) and the American nonprofit organization, The Emerald Sketch, to facilitate a free workshop titled "How Art Therapy Heals Trauma" for approximately 150 Ukrainian psychologist students and community art therapists.

February - 2023

- DTCare, The Emerald Sketch, and IHU begin a free 14-week long art therapy introduction course entitled "Art Therapy Approaches for Safety in Active War"
- DTCare opened Open Studio art therapy sessions in Odesa to work with Regional Children's Hospital, IHU, Jewish Community Center, Norwegian Hostels, and Odesa Fine Art Museum working with 80 children and refugees on average per week

March - 2023

- DTCare partnered with the Pittsburgh Ukrainian Relief Coalition to design art therapy programs for children and families living in foster care in Lviv. Hired 6 part-time therapist actively working with 14 different orphanages, foster homes, and IDP centers

Ukraine Crisis In Numbers

Provided by UNICEF and UNHCR

An estimated 41% of Ukrainians population will need humanitarian assistance in 2023⁽¹⁾. Particularly vulnerable groups include older people and people with disabilities who may be unable to flee from high-risk areas. Women and children, who make up approximately 90 percent of people fleeing the crisis, are at risk of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse.

Prior to Russian invasion, the rate of suicide was particularly high among Ukrainian men (56.7 per 100,000 vs. 8.4 per 100,000 among women). Men also have a higher estimated prevalence of alcohol use disorders than women (11.5% vs 1.4%). Women have a higher estimated prevalence of depression (3.9% vs 2.7%).⁽¹⁾ Now, with active war from previous aggressor, Russia, those numbers are likely to double.

The UN Refugee Agency saw a \$700 million funding gap in the first year of the war in Ukraine, putting great strain on operations in surrounding European countries and other countries needing humanitarian relief.

1:Ukraine Emergency: Aid, Statistics and News | USA for UNHCR (unrefugees.org)

2:who-special-initiative-country-report---ukraine---2020.pdf

At Risk Populations:

17.7 million people in need inside Ukraine

8.2 million Ukraine refugees across Europe

3.3 million children in need inside Ukraine

5.9 million people internally displaced

UN estimates about 7.2K Ukrainian civilian deaths, 11.8K injured



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



unicef

Current challenges of Mental Health in Ukraine

“The war in Ukraine has placed additional pressure on an already strained mental health system, disrupting much needed mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services for people in need. However, vital work is already ongoing to strengthen the emergency response system and build up primary and community mental health care provision”. -WHO

Prior Ukrainian mentality of mental health importance:

In comparison with other European countries, Ukraine bore a great deal of mental illness, particularly with high prevalence of depression, alcohol abuse, and suicide, prior to the Russian invasion. Mental health disorders were the country’s second leading cause of disability burden and affected up to 30% of the population.

Psychiatry was used as a tool of repression during the Soviet era, leading to those who opposed the Soviet regime being deemed ‘mentally ill’ and imprisoned in psychiatric hospitals. Current barriers to mental health care in Ukraine include diminished trust in the psychiatry system, stigma, and lack of awareness and understanding. High stigma and shame prevent people from seeking care, or force them to do so anonymously, as they fear being negatively labeled by their communities, and thus reduce their chances of employment opportunities.⁽¹⁾

**Now, add
in active
war**

Current Overabundance of patients with with various degrees of trauma:

In a study done by the WHO, one in five individuals who experience war will develop depression, anxiety, PTSD, bi-polar disorder, or schizophrenia within 10 years after; an estimated 9.6 million in Ukraine. Those with previous mental health disorders will experience a magnification of symptoms, often causing complex trauma. People seeking help for many traumas, often overlapping with each other: displacement, unfamiliarity with new surroundings, personal loss, sexual abuse, isolation, and direct experiences of violence and devastation, do not have the resources or the knowledge to know where to start getting help during active war. Mental health care gets pushed aside to focus on current physical threats that ultimately add to continual layered mental harm. Relationships cracking under the stress of mothers taking children out of the country while fathers stayed behind to fight and families being forced to leave their elderly, homes, pets, etc. in face of the threat of Russian advancement.

1: Before the Toils of War: Mental Health in Ukraine (psychiatrictimes.com)

What trauma does to the brain:

When a person experiences trauma, such as combat, sexual assault or violence, the ability to verbally communicate experiences becomes limited. Trauma elicits a sympathetic nervous system response that is part of our evolutionary heritage of fight, flight or freeze. The response to danger is healthy and adaptive, however, when a person is faced ongoing enduring traumatic stress, often with combat experiences, these adaptive responses that promote survival in the stressful environment can persist after the experience is over, thus becoming maladaptive and problematic. This manifests as intrusive memories, emotional numbing, avoidance, irritable behavior, emotional dysregulation and an overall sense of isolation and disconnectedness. In other words, what is at first a common and healthy reaction to stress impacts the lens within which people can view themselves and the world around them. In a state of ongoing emotional overstimulation, the language areas of the brain are compromised. This makes already difficult memories and experiences even more challenging to process verbally and emotionally.

Trauma causes the cerebral cortex, which is responsible for language and communication, to reduce activity while the amygdala, responsible for humans' danger response, remains highly stimulated. People experience a sensation or mental image prior to attaching language to verbally articulate its meaning. This imagery is the language of memory and holds rich information within which to communicate our experiences. Traumatic events are often “**re-lived**” rather than remembered through these imagery; stored in the brain as a nonverbal experience.

Up to 80% of people who have PTSD will also develop other difficulties, such as anxiety disorders, depression, substance abuse and in worst case scenarios, death by suicide.⁽¹⁾

1:Ukraine: PTSD may be a huge problem after the war – but thankfully science can help
(theconversation.com)

How Art Therapy Changes Trauma Responses

Symbols emerge naturally before language:

People experience a sensation or mental image prior to attaching language to verbally articulate its meaning. This imagery is the language of memory and holds rich information within which to communicate patients' experiences. Art therapy has the potential to address traumatic experiences by creating links to nonverbal memories so that dissociated memories may be organized and processed in a meaningful way. ⁽¹⁾

In the process of creating art and discussing the art in the context of the therapeutic relationship, the patient can see themselves again. This neuroaesthetic perspective lends acceptance to the value of art-making that offers engagement, even enjoyment, by reawakening positive emotions and offering healthier coping mechanisms through the arts. Art therapy offers a way to circumvent defenses and essentially 'say' what words cannot. ⁽²⁾

It is the art therapist who becomes the fundamental link in helping the patient learn how their mind and body react to trauma and how they can obtain healthier, more manageable ways of coping with their mental health. Each art therapist is medically and psychologically trained to provide tailored care for their patients, working towards designing individualized approaches to healing.



1:(Gantt & Tinnin, 2009); 2:Howard, M. (2019, June 19). *International Arts + Mind Lab*. International Arts + Mind Lab: The Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics. Retrieved April 13, 2023, from <https://www.artsandmindlab.org/your-brain-on-art-a-new-path-to-healing-war-trauma/>

Russia's war is not just a war of physical aggression, but also on Ukraine's mental health.

- Ilya Timatchenko, BBC

According to the Bogomolets National Medical University of Kyiv, after a trauma, there is a window known as the "**golden hours**", which is a critical period to take action for support people's mental health can limit long-term damage, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression. Evidence suggests that even small acts of support, sometimes as simple as reminding someone that they are not alone reduces the risk of developing conditions that linger for years.⁽¹⁾

It's similar with any medical condition: the earlier you treat the condition the less likely that it will become complex in the future.

– Agatha Abboud (mental health and psychosocial support manager for the International Committee of the Red Cross Kyiv.)

Another factor in whether people develop long-term problems is whether their community shares the trauma. War is that type of shared experience, particularly when the nation unifies against a common enemy, as Ukraine has against Russia. It is a particularly challenging to reach those who need early interventions the most – isolated communities on the conflict's front lines and in still occupied areas. When an entire country is under siege, infrastructure being targeted, and movement in the open is dangerous or impossible, how do victims receive that essential information before the golden hours are up?⁽¹⁾

1: The mental health first aiders fighting back in Ukraine - BBC Future

Using Art Therapy to Combat PTSD

“Art therapy is uniquely positioned to address the psycho-social challenges of military service members affected by deployment related trauma. The visual externalization helps to unlock blocks to verbal expression and relational connection which in turn helps service members better understand their interpersonal experiences and better integrate and manage triggers related to trauma.”⁽¹⁾

- Dr. Girija Kaimal; American Art Therapy Association President

For victims of PTSD, the central issue is a feeling of disconnect and dissociation from their bodies while experiencing a lack of safety within themselves. Essentially, they must relearn how to trust their body. Traumatic experiences create a “perceptual bias” that severely impacts how future experiences are processed, so much so that it leads to a distortion in the ability to accurately access and respond to what the body and mind are doing. This can cause added depression, anxiety, and difficulty participating in normal life functions.⁽³⁾

Art therapy, especially in communal settings, create a safe environment to stimulate multiple senses at once, helping to reconnect mentally and physically a sense of self within the patient that is not always accessible with traditional one-on-one talk therapy. This includes understanding and acknowledging a deeper sense of previously avoidant feelings, memories, and unconscious thoughts. This result allows the patient to be open to advancing their exposure to increased mental health care and additionally grow acceptance of the healing process. Art Therapy is then used as an accessible tool and bridge for increasing public awareness about mental health and is recognized to reduce the stigma of seeking psychological help.

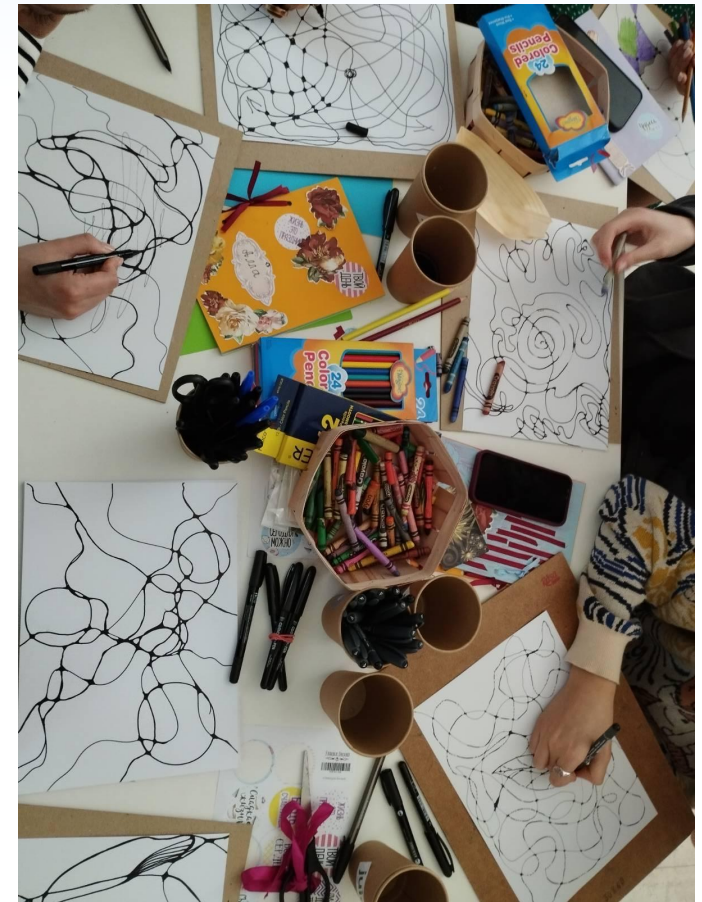
1:Howard, M. (2019, June 19). *International Arts + Mind Lab*. International Arts + Mind Lab: The Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics. Retrieved April 13, 2023, from <https://www.artsandmindlab.org/your-brain-on-art-a-new-path-to-healing-war-trauma/>
2:Fabian, Renée. “How Art Therapy Can Heal PTSD.” *Healthline*, Healthline Media, 13 Aug. 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health/art-therapy-for-ptsd#How-art-therapy-can-help-with-PTSD>. 3:Perryman, Kristi, et al. “Using Creative Arts in Trauma Therapy: The Neuroscience of Healing.” *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2019, pp. 80–94., <https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.41.1.07>. 4:Moeenrad, Arman, et al. “Art and Psyche Festival’: Utilizing the Power of Art against the Stigma around Mental Illness.” *Frontiers*, Frontiers, 30 Dec. 2022, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2022.1027316/full#:~:text=Art%20can%20also%20be%20addressed%20as%20a%20tool,approaches%20to%20improve%20reliability%2C%20interactivity%2C%20and%20engagement%20%2813%29.>

Using Art Therapy to Heal Sexual Abuse

Some kinds of trauma are more isolating. “When you’re raped, you’re raped alone,” referring to both the typical circumstance of the crime and the stigma that follows.

- Patricia Resick, Professor of Psychiatry, Duke University⁽³⁾

Art Therapy enables profound healing, especially for people who have experienced past sexual abuse and sexual assault. Working physically with art materials has an affirmative effect on the overstimulated symptoms of PTSD. Studies have found that in child trauma survivors, becoming aware of different parts of the body in motion during the manipulation of art materials, also known as kinesthetic activity, releases tension, facilitates relaxation, and increases the ability to tolerate stress. In particular, the use of clay and being able to manipulate it connects survivors to the haptic sense (the sense of touch) and sensations of moving joints and muscles from working with the art materials activate emotions due to the amygdala, where emotions are processed, connects directly with how the body feels sensations and processes visual information.



1: <http://www.arttherapyblog.com/sexual-abuse/benefits-for-sexually-abused-adult-survivors/#.ZDWHI3bML3H>
 2: <https://www.thepalmeirapractice.org.uk/expertise/2018/2/22/working-with-sexual-abuse-in-art-therapy>
 3: The Mental Toll of the War in Ukraine - The New York Times (nytimes.com)

Methods of Facilitation

DTCare recognizes that while every individual in Ukraine has been impacted by this invasion, each person experiences and processes trauma in a manner unique to them. Accordingly, DTCare's therapy programs offer a variety of art therapy models and methods, which each offer distinct benefits.

Open Studio:

Invites a large group from one community to engage in a therapeutic art experience simultaneously.

Feels more approachable than traditional therapy settings for reluctant clients.

Attendees can share and relate to other individuals who may be processing similar experiences.

Sessions are deliberately longer than individual sessions, allowing for deeper engagement with peers and art processes.

Small Groups:

Allows for an art therapist to work with a small, intimate group who are processing a shared or similar experience.

Group can focus on individual and team healing, such as for a family.

Group members serve as peer to peer support and points of connection to combat patient isolation.

Each individual gains perspective of from individual experiences in context of how others are coping with similar situations.

One on One:

Provides direct individualized support between an individual and a mental health professional.

May be more comfortable for clients who have experienced traumatic events that are causing feelings of shame to give a sense of privacy.

The appointment is scheduled with client's convenience in mind.

Easier for art therapists to gain the trust of the client they are working with while working on long-term processing of trauma.

What DTCare Art Therapy Offers:

Small Group

DTCare’s small group art therapy sessions are customized to give art therapist overseeing the sessions to work with a small, intimate group of individuals with shared experiences. These groups are initiated particularly for children and youth residing at IDP centers, family-style orphanages, hospitals, and hostels. Dedicated sessions help contextualize one’s traumatic experiences within a social context of how others are coping with similar situations and provides reassurance that they are not alone.

Open Studio

DTCare’s use of an open studio greatly focuses on cultivating a safe and playful environment to help patients build confidence, encourage creativity, and develop a sense of community during extreme tragedy. This method has been proven to be helpful in processing grief, encourage emotional expression, and better cope with crisis, especially when working with children.⁽¹⁾ These sessions are easily accessible to fit the needs of participants. Similar projects and materials, for example using colored paper, scissors, and glue, are good for both children in orphanages as well as injured soldiers.

1: Frontiers | The Open Studio Approach to Art Therapy: A Systematic Scoping Review (frontiersin.org)

One on One

DTCare’s one on one therapy sessions work to encourage direct growth between therapist and patient by building an individualized path of healing for patient’s trauma while also cultivating trust and respecting their privacy. These sessions allow the patient’s experiences and perspective to be the primary focal point while also giving room for the therapist to introduce new methods and practices of restorative healing.



A young patient at a children’s hospital in Odesa enjoys himself during a small group art therapy session. Under the supervision of our esteemed therapist Polina Berezyuk, the group discussed the change of seasons and what they are looking forward to in 2023.

DTCare Open Studios In Action

Open studios offer children skills of reflective abilities, empowerment, and an increase in their sense of self-efficacy. In one particular Open Studio, some attendees shared that though they only attended so their children could come, they were found to be enjoying themselves with the beneficial skilled demonstrated to help process their own trauma.



(Top) Peers work together to create artwork during an Open Studio session at the International Humanitarian University of Odesa.

(Bottom) Displaced families living together in a community center attend a group session at the Odesa Fine Arts Museum.

DTCare's Future in Art Therapy

Though DTCare's current programs are making great strides in accessible war-focus trauma care, the need for additional psychological support across the country continues to grow as the conflict persists. More than ever, Ukrainians are in need of psychological support and DTCare wants to ensure the education and intervention of Art Therapy is bigger than DTCare's impact alone. DTCare pledges to work towards:

- Funding DTCare art therapy programs in Lviv and Odesa and expand the number of individual, group, and open studio sessions offered in those areas.
- Opening additional DTCare art therapy programs in cities reporting high levels of mental health fatigue and PTSD symptoms in the populace, especially in the eastern regions of Ukraine including Kharkiv, Kherson, Dnipro, and Mykolayiv.
- Advancing art therapy curriculum with an intentional focus on war trauma, PTSD, sexual abuse, and specialized art therapy practices for children for the improvement of the Ukrainian educational system to be more accessible and match with global Art Therapy standards.
- Increasing highly sensitive training for art therapists working with victims of sexual abuse, torture, and individuals recovering from limb loss, vision loss, and other physical injuries while also providing mental health support for therapists to prevent vicarious trauma.
- Facilitating collaboration and clinical supervision between licensed art therapists in Ukraine and international experts for the betterment of international relations in the Art Therapy profession and the importance of connection during ongoing trauma.



DTCare

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