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Psychological preservation of volunteers during the war: An empirical analysis

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Abstract. The article presents the results of an empirical study of the psychological self-preservation of volunteers with varying lengths of volunteer experience. The main structural components of psychological self-preservation, the level of subjective stress, and the psychological safety of the individual are identified. The presence of meaning in life and personal characteristics such as extraversion, friendliness, conscientiousness, and openness to new experiences were examined. The use of basic coping strategies in stressful situations was analysed. In order to study the psychological self-preservation of the personality of volunteers through structural components, including cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social, the following psychodiagnostic methods were used: Ukrainian adaptation of the short five-factor personality questionnaire (TIPI-UKR); "Express diagnostics of the psychological safety of the individual"; Questionnaire of the Perceived Stress Scale PSS-10; The Meaning of Life Questionnaire MLQ 2006, and the method of psychological diagnostics of coping mechanisms (E. Heim). Psychological self-preservation implies the ability of a person to effectively adapt to negative events and the ability to think positively and rationally assess the situation. This implies the ability to manage emotions, create a positive social environment, and have the resources to restore mental and physical health after difficult life events. It was found that in the subjects, with an increase in the duration of volunteer work, the level of subjective stress increases and the level of feeling of psychological safety decreases, which also indicates that volunteer work is a complex multifaceted process and requires resources and energy. However, with regard to the presence of meaning in life, it can be seen that with increasing experience of volunteering, there is a higher level of presence and search for meaning in life. It can be assumed that volunteer work and helping others gives a sense of self-realisation, significance, and personal importance. The search for meaning in life is relevant for all the subjects studied and reflects the current situation of self-realisation both professional and personal life and serves as a structural element of the psychological self-preservation framework, giving meaning and awareness to a person's activities. Further study of the structural components of psychological self-preservation requires the development and implementation of psychological training on the development of resistance to stressful situations, taking into account the presented results of empirical research

Keywords: psychological self-preservation; volunteering; stress; components of psychological self-preservation

INTRODUCTION

The events of recent years in Ukraine have witnessed a remarkable surge in the volunteer movement. The war has triggered a wave of people who consider it necessary to help those in difficult living conditions caused

by Russia's military aggression. This has led to a great demand and interest in describing the concept of volunteering and the psychological characteristics of this phenomenon.

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In psychology, volunteerism is conceptualised as a form of collective interaction and an effective mechanism for solving current social challenges. Volunteering is based on the desire to help, provide social support, advocacy, and protection to those in need through compassion. Freedom stands as a cornerstone of the volunteer movement's philosophy, as it would be impossible without goodwill. In other words, volunteerism can be characterised as a free-will activity for the benefit of society. Engaging in selfless volunteer work, a person is driven by the desire to be useful, as well as feelings of pride and self-sufficiency (Kolomiets *et al.*, 2017; Ome-lianska, 2021).

Volunteer activities contribute to the formation of social maturity in individuals and manifest as altruistic and prosocial behaviour. Five key components are identified within the structure of volunteer activity: the value component, the motivational component, the cognitive component, the emotional-volitional component, and the communicative component (Vainilovich, 2012). The personality of a volunteer is characterised by confidence, prosociality, high motivation and activity, a high level of functional capabilities of the nervous system, a readiness for professional cooperation, optimism, friendliness, and openness to new experiences (Klimanska & Haletska, 2019). Even under martial law, volunteer activities, although it does not require a high level of professional training, place certain demands on the psychological qualities of a person. This is related to the need to perform tasks in difficult or constrained conditions and in situations where time for decision-making is limited. Therefore, the development of psychological self-preservation in volunteers is essential.

A distinctive feature of the development of Ukrainian volunteerism is its activity during the military conflict. The intensive growth of the volunteer movement in Ukraine began in 2014 due to the military conflict in Donbas. From 2022 to 2024, volunteer initiatives related to resisting Russian aggression have gained significant recognition in Ukrainian society and at the state level.

The issue of stress has undoubtedly become a pressing concern for most Ukrainians during martial law. Therefore, for volunteers who face the consequences of war daily, the question of psychological self-preservation is crucial (Predko, 2021ab; Bondarenko & Vdovtsov, 2021). During wartime, people experience complex psycho-emotional states that significantly impact their psychological safety. Consequently, it is the responsibility of psychologists to study the structural components of the formation and development of psychological self-preservation, as well as to identify personal traits and coping strategies that help effectively address and overcome life's difficulties.

The situation of war is an emotional distress for every Ukrainian as it negatively impacts psychological, emotional, and physical well-being and carries negative consequences for the future. Psychological

self-preservation serves as a fundamental process for developing the stability and resilience of the individual through the lens of health and safety. Feelings of uncertainty, fear, and helplessness intensify the sense of internal anxiety (Lazorko, 2016; Yantsalovskyi, 2021).

Psychological self-preservation is a crucial factor in maintaining mental health and improving the quality of life. Understanding this process is essential for developing effective strategies of psychological support and psychotherapy in the face of negative external influences on the human psyche (Kashliuk, 2016; Pakhol, 2017). It is necessary to examine the psychological characteristics of the professional activities of volunteers in wartime conditions to identify aspects that impact their psychological self-preservation and facilitate the effective management of the consequences of stressful situations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research idea aims to explore the structural components of psychological self-preservation in volunteers, which help overcome life difficulties, increase stability in stressful situations, and develop resilience. To examine these structural components of psychological self-preservation, particularly the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social aspects, the following psychodiagnostic methods were used:

1. The five-factor questionnaire (Ukrainian adaptation of the short five-factor personality questionnaire (TIPI-UKR), was used to diagnose personality traits such as extraversion, friendliness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to new experiences.

2. "Express diagnostics of the psychological safety of the individual", which includes components such as moral-communicative, value-meaning, motivational-volitional, and internal comfort aspects (Prykhodko, 2013).

3. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), (Veldbrekht & Tavrovetska, 2022).

4. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, MLQ 2006.

5. Coping Mechanisms Diagnostic Technique (E. Heim), revealed patterns of behaviour used by individuals in complex life situations, particularly in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural spheres.

The research was conducted at the Ukraine YMCA, an international volunteer organisation, during September-October 2023 using Google Forms in an online format. It involved 90 respondents aged 18 to 35 years old.

The sample was graded according to the duration of volunteer experience. 1 year – 33%, up to 3 years – 33%, more than 5 years – 34% of respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Having analysed the results of the respondents according to their volunteer experience using the Five-Factor Personality Inventory (Fig. 1), it was found that the respondents with the least volunteer experience

exhibited slightly higher scores. The highest scores were found on the openness to experience scale ($X_{avg} = 11.8$), indicating a high interest in everything

that happens in life, and they also have a high level of creativity, an unconventional approach to tasks, and independence of judgment from others' opinions.

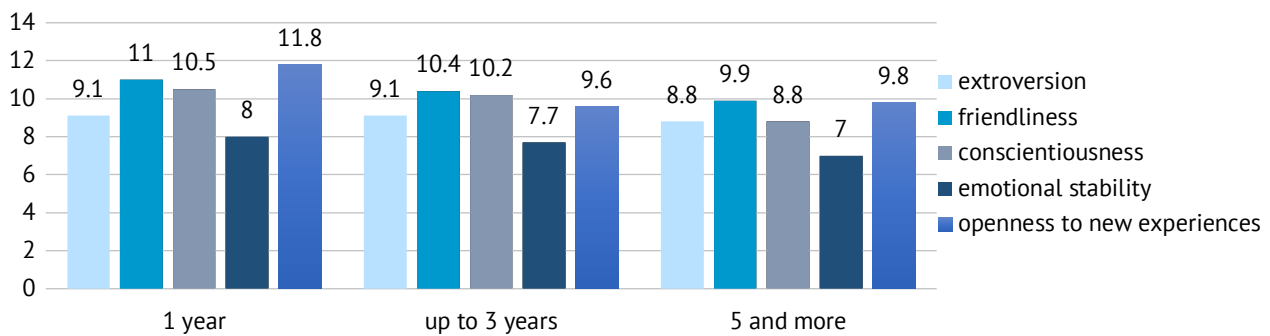


Figure 1. Average group scores of the Five-Factor Personality Inventory according to the duration of volunteering experience

Source: compiled by the author

High scores were also observed on the friendliness scale ($X_{avg} = 11$) and conscientiousness ($X_{avg} = 10.5$), indicating a high level of sociability and social interaction. The lowest scores were observed on the emotional stability scale in the group with the most extensive volunteer experience ($X_{avg} = 7$), indicating an average level of emotional resilience. This group may face difficulties in controlling emotional reactions and experiences. It is also worth noting that the decrease in emotional stability might be caused by professional deformations related to working with people, as volunteer activities require active engagement and energy, which may eventually lead to emotional disturbances and burnout.

However, all groups of respondents showed an average level on the "Emotional stability" scale compared to other scales, indicating that working with people and volunteer activities demands a lot of energy and can be emotionally exhausting.

Regarding the level of subjective stress in accordance with the duration of volunteer activity, it was found that the highest level of perceived stress ($X_{avg} = 21.8$) is observed in respondents with three years of volunteer experience (Fig. 2), which indicates the presence of a higher level of emotional vulnerability. Volunteer activity is aimed at working with people, their problems, and requires great effort, both emotional and physical.

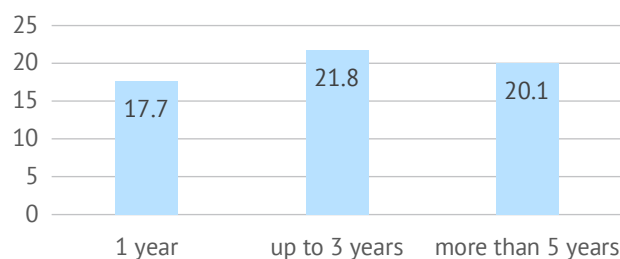


Figure 2. Average group indicators of subjective stress according to the duration of volunteering experience

Source: compiled by the author

The period of up to 3 years indicates that the respondents have not yet developed stability and resistance to the difficulties and challenges associated with volunteer activities, and they are not always able to critically and rationally analyse the situation and show emotional vulnerability to stressful situations, which is accompanied by experiencing negative emotional states. The lowest indicators are observed in the group with the shortest period of volunteer experience, 1 year ($X_{avg} = 17.7$), which can be explained by the fact that the activity is new and interesting, the adaptation and habituation process is ongoing, the respondents

are still actively interested in helping others, and feel a sense of belonging and satisfaction from understanding the importance of their activities (Heim, 1988). The average indicators are observed in the respondents with the longest period of volunteer experience, 5 years ($X_{avg} = 20.1$), which indicates that this group of people has actively developed stability and resistance to stressful situations, but in certain situations, they are prone to emotional vulnerability and negative experiences related to difficulties and conflicts, and they tend to take excessive responsibility in solving problematic situations. Analysing the results of the Meaning in Life

Questionnaire, it was found that the highest scores on the “presence of meaning in life” scale were observed

in participants with the longest volunteer experience (more than 5 years), ($X_{avg} = 17.4$) (Fig. 3).

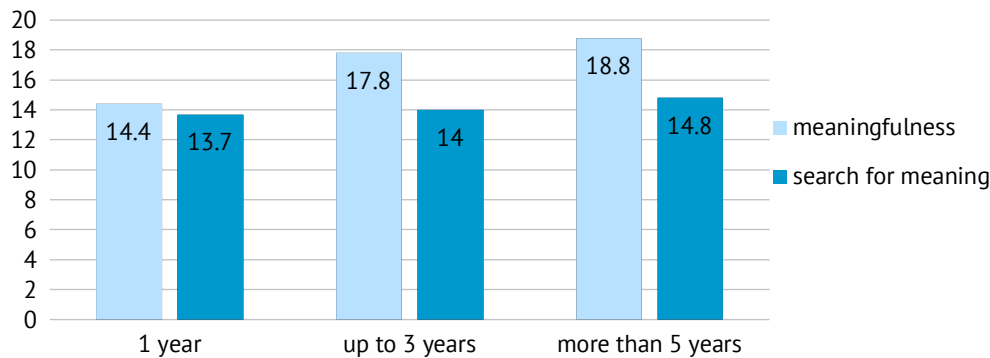


Figure 3. Average group indicators of the presence of meaning in life according to the duration of volunteering experience

Source: compiled by the author

This indicates that the respondents understand what they want in life, fill their activities, work, life with meaning and are satisfied with their self-esteem. They have a clearly formed self-concept that aligns with their self-perception. It can be assumed that volunteering and helping others gives a sense of self-realisation, significance and personal importance. The lowest indicators are observed in the respondents with the shortest period of volunteering (1 year) ($X_{avg} = 14.4$), which indicates that this group is in search of their own meaning in life, understanding themselves, their desires and needs for professional and personal self-realisation.

Analysing the results on the search for the meaning of life scale, it can be seen that the absence of significant differences in the three groups of respondents, indicates that the search for the meaning of life is relevant and is formed throughout life. Engaging in one or another activity, individuals are in the process of searching for meaning and the importance of those activities to them. Thus, it is possible to assume that the search for the meaning of life does not depend on the length of volunteer experience and is relevant for everyone. A slightly higher indicator is observed in the group of respondents with more than 5 years of volunteer experience ($X_{avg} = 14.8$), which confirms the opinion that the search for the meaning of life is relevant

for all respondents and reflects the current situation of self-realisation both professional and personal life and serves as a structural element of psychological self-preservation, providing meaning and awareness to a person's activities.

Regarding the indicators of psychological safety in accordance with the duration of volunteer activity, it was found that the highest indicators of psychological safety are observed in the group of respondents with one year of volunteer experience, which indicates that the respondents have a fairly high level of flexibility to different social conditions, are open to new relationships, are ready to help each other, know how to set goals, and are able to adapt to change. They actively use moral-communicative norms to maintain a comfortable level of social connections. In stressful situations, they tend to seek situations of psychological comfort, while maintaining a high level of self-confidence and belief in their abilities. There is a high level of goal setting to improve the quality of life. The highest indicator is observed on the “inner comfort” scale ($X_{avg} = 28.1$), (Fig. 4), which indicates a high level of self-confidence and attractiveness to others. The respondents are satisfied with life and relationships with others and strive to achieve their goals. They show a high level of altruism in interpersonal interaction and are ready to help each other.

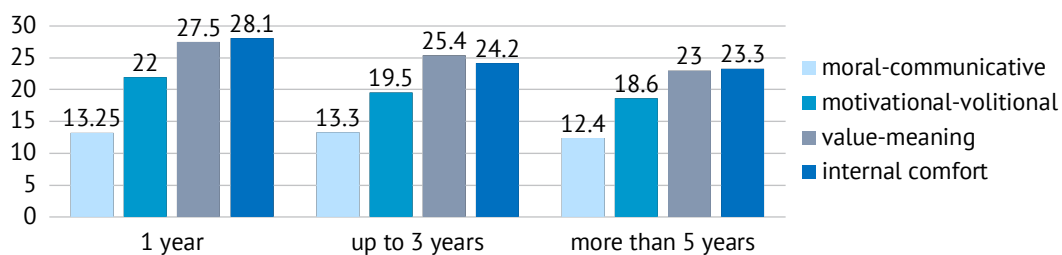


Figure 4. Average group indicators of psychological safety according to the duration of volunteering experience

Source: compiled by the author

Overall, the analysis shows that on the “value-meaning scale” high indicators are observed in the respondents with the shortest period of volunteer experience ($X_{avg} = 27.5$), which indicates a mature and conscious understanding of their own life, they are prone to invest meaning in their activities, which reflects a high level of involvement in their own social environment. They easily overcome difficulties using effective and efficient strategies to overcome stressful situations (Strack, 2007). The lowest indicator is observed on the “moral-communicative” scale ($X_{avg} = 12.4$), in the group of respondents with the longest period of volunteer

experience, which indicates the presence of certain difficulties in establishing communication with other people, difficulties with trust and excessive control. The respondents find it difficult to delegate duties and tasks, which has a negative impact on the creation of comfortable interpersonal communication connections. There may be a dependence on others, subordination, or conversely, fear related to loss of personal identity and manifestations of social isolation and loneliness. In general, there is a noticeable tendency towards a decrease in the level of psychological safety indicators (Fig. 5) with increasing volunteer experience.

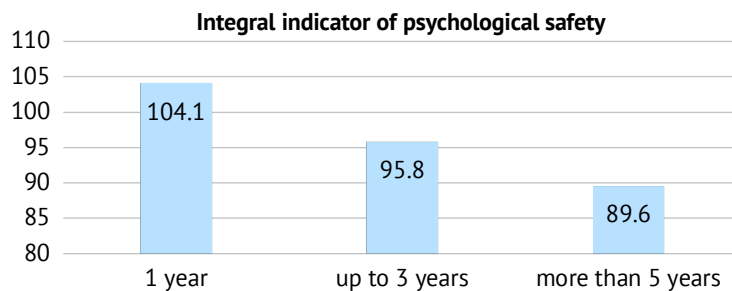


Figure 5. Average group indicators of the overall level of psychological safety according to the duration of volunteering experience

Source: compiled by the author

This also indicates that volunteering is filled with various events and requires active involvement and internal resources, which can be exhausting both psychologically and physically, and reduces the personality's psychological stability to external stressful situations. Constant stressful situations cause a feeling of inability to control one's own life and is accompanied by a feeling of uncertainty and fear for the future. There is a tendency to experience negative emotional states, emotional tension, self-control and

self-regulation in situations of uncertainty and stress. Analysing the quantitative ratios of coping strategies for resolving stressful situations, it was found that respondents with the longest volunteer experience (more than 5 years) use adaptive cognitive (80%), emotional (46%), and behavioural (45%), (Fig. 6) coping strategies. They analyse difficulties and look for ways to solve problems, objectively assess the situation without guilt, and have an optimistic attitude towards resolving any situation.

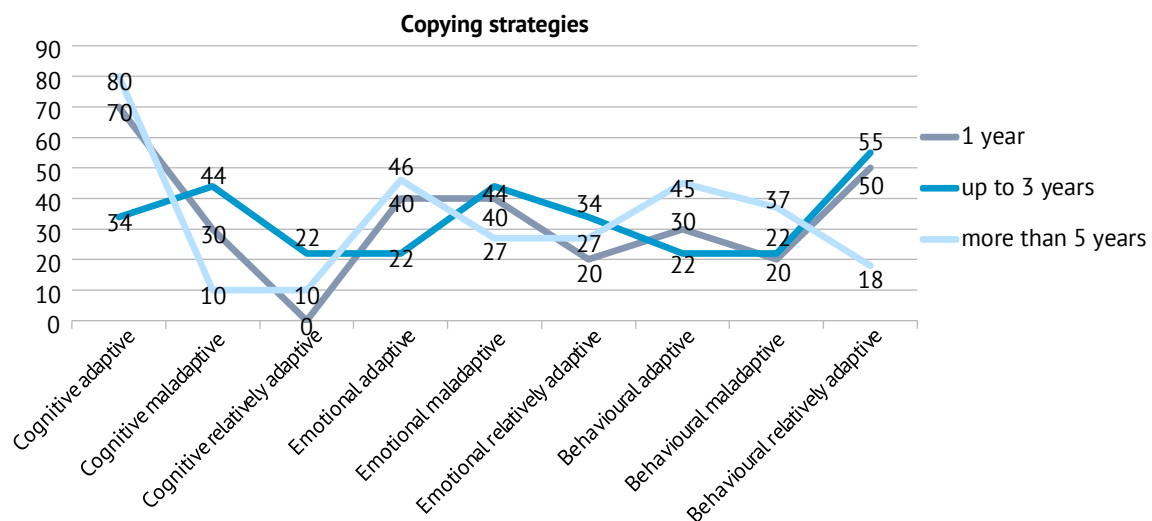


Figure 6. Quantitative indicators of coping strategies according to the duration of volunteering experience

Source: compiled by the author

Able to respond emotionally to situations, express emotions and maintain high self-esteem and confidence in their abilities. Social support from the community and immediate environment is important to respondents, and they are willing to cooperate with others to solve problems and difficulties.

Analysing the results of the group of respondents with average volunteer experience (3 years), it can be seen that in situations of stress and uncertainty, cognitive maladaptive (44%), emotional maladaptive (44%), and behavioural relatively adaptive (55%) coping strategies predominate. This indicates that this group of people is prone to dissimulation, concealment, and unwillingness to see real problems and negative situations, which may manifest as compensatory behaviour in stressful situations. The studied group tends to suppress emotional reactions, and as a result of the manifestation of negative emotions, they are prone to self-blame. In the behavioural sphere, they tend to be distracted by other activities that are pleasant and evoke positive emotions, thereby conditionally escaping from solving real problems and choosing other behavioural strategies. This compensation serves as a protective mechanism in dealing with imaginary or non-existent issues and displays constructive activity as maladaptive behaviour aimed at disrupting old reaction patterns without resolving problematic situations (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998).

For respondents with the least volunteer experience (1 year), it was found that in difficult life situations, cognitive adaptive (70%), emotionally adaptive (40%), emotionally maladaptive (40%), and behavioural relatively adaptive (50%) coping strategies predominate. This indicates that when experiencing difficult stressful situations, they attempt to objectively approach problem-solving while maintaining and understanding their resources and strengths to overcome all possible difficulties, understanding their own value and maintaining self-control. Depending on the situation, they are able to control emotional experiences by focusing on optimistic resolutions or, conversely, suppress emotions with a strong sense of self-blame. Their behaviour tends towards engaging in activities they enjoy to distract themselves, avoiding addressing and overcoming unpleasantness and difficulties, showing a reluctance to take responsibility and resolve real problems. As a result, a protective mechanism of compensation may manifest, or they may address imaginary, fabricated issues.

CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, the war situation in Ukraine has a negative impact on people's livelihoods, health, and self-realisation. Volunteering, as a social phenomenon, has become

a common activity for many Ukrainians and contributes to the formation of social maturity of the individual, however, it requires a lot of energy and resources, therefore it is important to provide proper support and assistance to those who help others and suffer from the negative consequences of the war.

This study demonstrated that the respondents with the least volunteer experience have higher scores on personality characteristics, indicating a high level of creativity, friendliness, conscientiousness, communication skills, and social interaction. There is a tendency to be unconventional in completing tasks and independent in judgment from the opinions of others. As the duration of volunteer experience increases, the level of subjective stress increases and the level of emotional stability and a sense of psychological security decreases. This also indicates that volunteering is a complex and multifaceted process that requires resources and energy. However, in terms of the presence of the meaning of life, it was observed that with increasing volunteer experience, there is a higher level of the presence and search for the meaning of life. It can be assumed that volunteering and helping others gives a sense of self-realisation and personal significance to others. The search for the meaning of life is relevant for all respondents and reflects the current situation of self-realisation both professional and serving as a structural element of psychological self-preservation and providing meaning and awareness to human activity. Respondents with the longest volunteer experience use adaptive cognitive, emotional, and behavioural strategies, choosing the best response option for themselves while maintaining their own values and confidence in their abilities.

Psychological self-preservation is especially important in times of war, danger, and uncertainty, as it helps to maintain mental and physical health and contributes to harmonious personal development. Further study of the structural components of psychological self-preservation requires the development and implementation of psychological training for the development of stability in stressful situations, taking into account the presented results.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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Психологічне збереження волонтерів під час війни: емпіричний аналіз

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Анотація. У статті представлено результати емпіричного дослідження психологічного самозбереження волонтерів з різним стажем волонтерської діяльності. Визначено основні структурні компоненти психологічного самозбереження, рівень суб'єктивного стресу, та психологічної безпеки особистості. Наявність сенсу в житті та особистісні характеристики, такі як екстраверсія, дружелюбність, добросовісність та відкритість до нового досвіду. Проаналізовано використання основних копінг-стратегії в стресових ситуаціях. З метою дослідження психологічного самозбереження особистості волонтерів через структурні компоненти зокрема когнітивний, емоційний, поведінковий та соціальний, було використано наступні психодіагностичні методики: Українську адаптацію короткого п'ятифакторного опитувальника особистості (TIPI-UKR); «Експрес-діагностика психологічної безпеки особистості»; Опитувальник рівня суб'єктивного стресу PSS-10; Опитувальник сенсу життя (The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, MLQ 2006), та методику психологічної діагностики копінг-механізмів (E. Heim). Психологічне самозбереження передбачає здатність людини до ефективної адаптації до негативних подій та здатність до позитивного мислення та раціонального оцінювання ситуації. Це передбачає вміння керувати емоціями, створювати позитивне соціальне середовище та мати ресурси для відновлення психічного і фізичного здоров'я після складних життєвих подій. Виявлено, що у досліджуваних зі збільшенням стажу волонтерської діяльності збільшується рівень суб'єктивного стресу та знижуються рівень відчуття психологічної безпеки, що також вказує на те, що волонтерська діяльність є складним багатогранним процесом та потребує ресурсів та енергії, проте щодо наявності сенсу життя, то ми бачимо що зі збільшенням стажу волонтерської діяльності спостерігається вищий рівень наявності та пошуку сенсу життя. Можна припустити, що волонтерська діяльність та допомога іншим надає відчуття самореалізації, значимості та особистої важливості. Пошук сенсу життя актуальний для усіх досліджуваних та відображає актуальну ситуацію самореалізації як в професійному житті так і особистому та виступає структурним елементом структури психологічного самозбереження та надає діяльності людини значення та усвідомленості. Подальше вивчення структурних компонентів психологічного самозбереження потребує розробки та проведення психологічного тренінгу розвитку стійкості до стресових ситуацій з урахуванням представлених результатів емпіричного дослідження

Ключові слова: психологічне самозбереження; волонтерська діяльність; стрес; компоненти психологічного самозбереження