

Rethinking forced migrants' well-being: lessons from Ukraine

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Five years after their initial displacement, Ukrainian IDPs show relatively high levels of posttraumatic growth; their experiences offer insights for practitioners seeking to promote psychosocial well-being among displaced populations.

The experience of forced displacement is often referred to as traumatic, and numerous case studies show that forced migrants are vulnerable to poor mental health and well-being. However, new research suggests that some forced migrants experience positive changes over the course of time despite their extremely difficult life experiences.¹

This article draws on our study examining levels of positive changes and their predictors among conflict-affected Ukrainian internally displaced persons (IDPs) in which we focused on 'post-traumatic growth' (PTG), a phenomenon described as "positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances".²

Study participants had undergone five years of internal displacement after fleeing from Donetsk (79 persons), Luhansk (53 persons) and Crimea (three persons) to other parts of Ukraine following the start of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. An online quantitative questionnaire was developed by the authors of this article and disseminated through the Ukrainian Red Cross to various locations in Ukraine. The questionnaire was completed by 15 men and 120 women. The first author of this article, Reo Morimitsu, conducted further in-depth qualitative interviews in Ukraine with three men and eight women, all aged between 18 and 65. All the data was collected between July and August 2019.

Common forms of growth

The people involved in this study had experienced extreme hardship during their displacement, such as multiple relocations, family separation, exposure to violence and loss of financial resources, and had suffered significant losses, including loss of loved

ones, jobs, property and a sense of normality. However, the findings from our study indicate that, after approximately five years, they commonly reported positive changes in themselves: 61% reported a small or moderate degree and 20% reported a high degree of post traumatic growth.

The most common forms of such changes – 86% of participant IDPs – were in worldview and priorities. For example, a 65-year-old female IDP from Luhansk said: "My perception of the world has changed. Now I have learned that everything in our life is so fragile." Others mentioned that children became their highest priority in life and some found themselves paying more attention to beauty in nature. This perception of the fragility of life is unsurprising given the intense conflict and sudden violence they experienced.

The experience of forced migration requires people to engage in continuous problem-solving. IDPs reported experiencing positive changes in their self-view through their individual coping and problem-solving experiences, which led to an increased sense of self-reliance and personal strength. A woman originally living near Donetsk airport had to flee with her young children; she described how hard it was to re-establish their lives but also highlighted her family's achievements:

"We have changed so much... Previously, I spent my life on spontaneous shopping and entertainment, but now I am down-to-earth. I use money in a planned manner. I have become a more practical person... We asked for help and we tried to communicate with local people and explained that we were normal and suffering... I am proud that we are maintaining a normal life despite the



A programme run by an NGO in the host community created a space for IDPs to engage in master class activities, including painting, 2017. Credit: Reo Morimitsu

extremely difficult circumstances, without ending up suicidal or alcoholic.”

Positive changes occurred on an interpersonal and spiritual level as well:

“My attitude toward children changed a lot. When I was living in comfortable circumstances [prior to the conflict], I did not pay much attention to my children. Here we have tried to create an atmosphere of love and caring for our children... It was a great help because it helped to understand each other well and such a warm atmosphere has helped us cope with the situation.” 45-year-old male IDP from Donetsk.

“I learned that praying and reading the Bible was helpful... I got to know many IDPs here in this community who have trust in God. With religious belief, I have been able to manage.” 33-year-old female IDP from Donetsk.

These narratives suggest that coping strategies, such as religious practice and establishing stronger family bonds, may reduce the impacts of stressful situations caused by displacement

and contribute to positive change. Religious practices also helped IDPs establish social networks in their new communities.

The power of meaning-making and social support

Two predictors for growth were found in this study: reframing of experience and social support during displacement. The study results highlighted that IDPs who could reinterpret their experiences – reflectively making sense of stressful situations – and who had access to social support were in the best position to develop positive changes following displacement.

Reframing³ (also known as positive reinterpretation) refers to the process of shifting attention to something good in a given situation. The following example illustrates this process:

“I miss my house in Donetsk. I used to have a comfortable house near a lake, where I didn’t have to think about issues and difficulties,

and where I could enjoy gardening... But now I don't have anything like that. I have tried to switch my attention to nature... Kyiv is a very beautiful city with parks, forests, lakes and rivers." 62-year-old female IDP who had lost both her parents.

IDPs frequently reported an awareness of the 'bright sides' of their displacement situation such as resources, opportunities, values, achievements and/or new life roles. When they highlighted these positive sides, we noticed they engaged in 'meaning-making': trying to make sense of and make something good come out of the challenging situation. For example, one woman mentioned that her children now had access to more resources and opportunities for growth:

"I had a lot of fear and concerns about resettlement. But I've noticed now there are more new opportunities for my children... [here] in a big city, children have public transportation such as a bus. They learn to use it by themselves and that makes children develop self-responsibility more." 34-year-old female IDP from Donetsk.

A young IDP who has just graduated from university explained that she has decided to work towards building a better society:

"I started to express my opinion more openly... [and] became more active... I joined a lot of initiatives as a volunteer. And now I'm looking for a job in civil society because I think it's very important for me now to do something which is valuable for society." 21-year-old female IDP from Donetsk.

Perceived social support was a significant predictor of PTG. We heard many stories about receiving kindness from others and how the experience of being supported by others not only contributes to emotional health but can also lead to positive shifts in attitudes. Kindness and wishing well for others can be contagious.

"I met lots of good people ... It impressed me very much. The kindness at the pharmacy was totally unexpected.... The owner of the pharmacy shop gave me everything we needed in advance without paying anything... I definitely think I have changed a lot before and after my displacement experience. I wasn't a bad person before, but I didn't appreciate people's help...

Now I do not wish any bad things for anyone." 31-year-old female IDP from Donetsk.

Lessons and recommendations

Post traumatic growth (PTG) is associated with well-being. This research highlights the potential positive aspects of displacement in contrast to studies focused on the negative psychological consequences of forced migration. PTG was commonly reported among the IDPs five years after their initial displacement, that is the time when the data was collected. This growth involved change across many different areas: their worldview, priorities in life, child-caring behaviour, perception of themselves, their interpersonal relationships, and religious belief and practice. The greater the degree of positive changes IDPs experience after displacement the better their sense of well-being. This could be a useful guide for humanitarian practitioners, particularly when developing aid programmes. By focusing on factors associated with PTG, humanitarian practice can better support the well-being of a displaced population.

Coping through problem-solving provides displaced people with an increased sense of self-reliance and an increased sense of personal capacity. Humanitarian assistance should prioritise providing forced migrants with practical support to help them to handle their situation. It is important to note that agency does matter. Practitioners need to keep in mind that people are empowered when supported to tackle their own issues in ways that contribute to their sense of self-efficacy. Another implication from the findings is that connecting IDPs with new resources, opportunities and social roles in the host community is likely to lead to greater long-term well-being. Being aware of new roles and opportunities can foster a meaning-making process that helps transform their mental picture of a given situation.

Social support and networks – experiencing kindness, concern, help and understanding of their situation – was a strong predictor of PTG. This seems to be extremely important, particularly from a humanitarian practitioner's point of view as it underpins mid or long-term

psychosocial support with a strong focus on strengthening social networks for forced migrants. Moreover, the role of the non-governmental humanitarian community or faith-based organisations seems to be critical in building social networks at community level, particularly when local government shows limited ability to support people in need on the ground. Lastly, the study suggests that it would be helpful if practitioners were able to create spaces for displaced individuals to promote reframing of their experiences, to reflect and find meaning, as well as providing practical support, to promote their psychosocial well-being.

We recognise that some of our study participants may now have undergone new displacements after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and their PTG experiences may have changed. We do not know what their current situations are. But, this research indicates that helping re-displaced people

remember how they coped previously, and that they already have relevant experience and knowledge, could support their psychological well-being.

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