

# WAR AFFECTS US ALL

## Managing Emotions and Feelings in a Crisis Situation

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**MARCH 2022**

# INTRODUCTION

For most of us, it's very hard not to feel disturbed and concerned about the war in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army, we have been confronted with images of resistance, but also of bombings, destroyed buildings (including those of assistance and support organisations for the people), wounded citizens, separated families and people trying to flee the country.

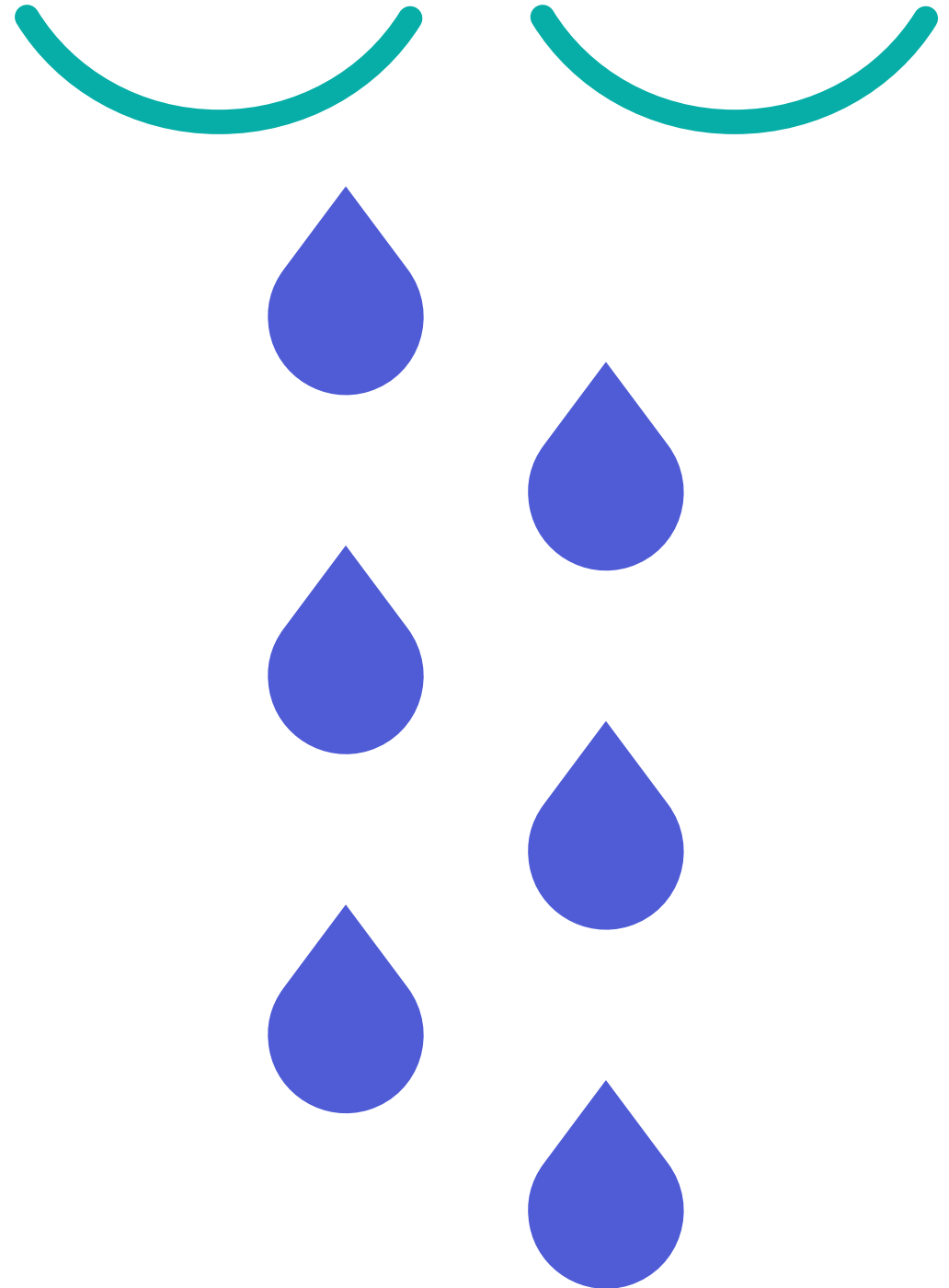
**Yes, this war is happening thousands of miles away from our homes**, but we are constantly watching news about it and **feel close and empathetic**, because **we share a sense of injustice and humanity** with all the people who are going through such a terrible experience.



# WHAT IS THE WAR'S EMOTIONAL IMPACT?

**War affects us all, directly or indirectly.** The horror of violence, disrespect for dignity and human rights, has a destructive impact on many lives and communities, causes suffering in families, **disrupts the psychological health and well-being of people** (of all ages) and society, and enables self-determination.

**It is very hard to understand the complexity of war.** Therefore, we can expect to experience **various emotions and feelings**, which are not easy to explain, “sort out” or express.

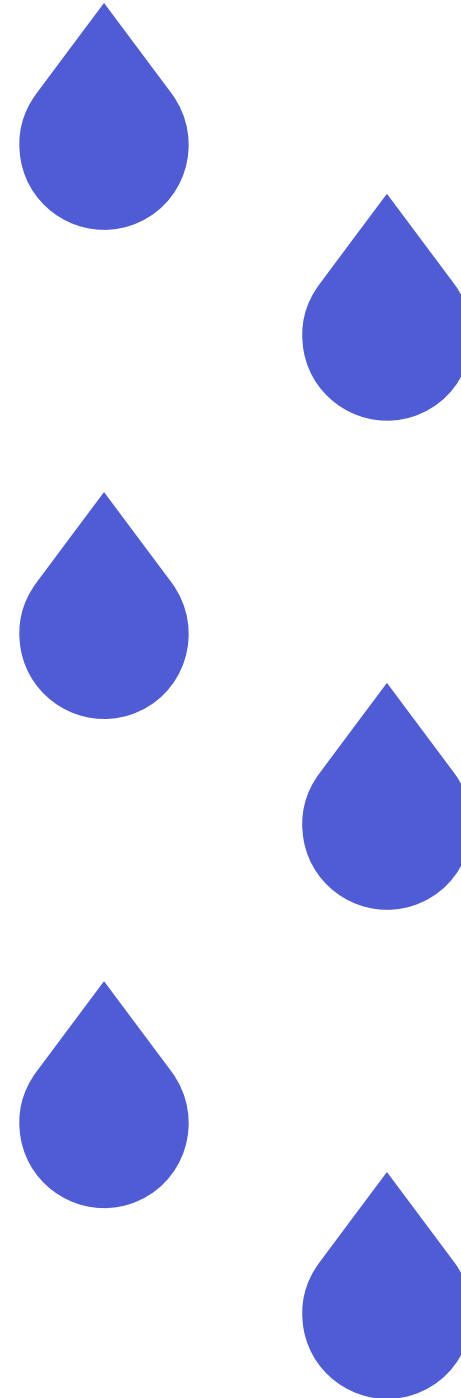


It is important to remember that **we all react differently to upsetting events**, and that each of us has different abilities and ways of dealing with unpleasant emotions and feelings. Some people will be able to take more control of their emotions more quickly, while others will take longer. Some people will be able to do it by themselves, while others will need help. Both reactions are common responses to the crisis we are experiencing.

➤ It is natural to still feel **“in shock”**, to have a sense of “disbelief” or “surreality” at what is happening. We can be apathetic and **“emotionally numb”** in face of these events.

➤ It is natural to feel **worried, anxious, stressed, scared, distressed, sad or afraid**. We may also feel **irritated, angry or powerless**. We may also experience difficulty concentrating, making decisions or sleeping.

➤ It is natural to have **fears and doubts about the future** (*How long will the war last? What will happen? What consequences will it have?*). We may feel overwhelmed by the possibility of another World War, the loss of a sense of predictability in the world as we know (or used to know) it, the constant changes we have seen, the lack of “control” over our circumstances and those of others, or simply the impact on socio-economic issues resulting from the situation we are experiencing.



Our sense of security and well-being was already badly shaken by two consecutive years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ensuing socio-economic crisis has also left us tired, weary and hopeless. When we were finally looking forward to the end of the pandemic, we are now confronted with a war and all its disastrous consequences. In crisis situations, in circumstances with unfathomable outcomes which persist over an extended period of time, **feelings of uncertainty can be more complex to manage.** This strain can **heighten our sense of vulnerability and threaten our psychological health and well-being.**

# IMPORTANT

People in a more vulnerable situation (e.g., poverty, unemployment, social exclusion), as well as families who have military personnel or friends and relatives in Ukraine or Russia, may feel an additional emotional impact. They are more likely to develop or see their psychological health difficulties and problems worsen (such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder).



# USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

The threat of nuclear weapons can naturally give us feelings of anxiety, fear and worry. The existence of nuclear weapons represents the potential destruction of life and of the world as we know it. It can eradicate cultures, territories, languages, and the future of people and animals in ways that are almost inconceivable to process. However, it is important to focus our thoughts on four facts:

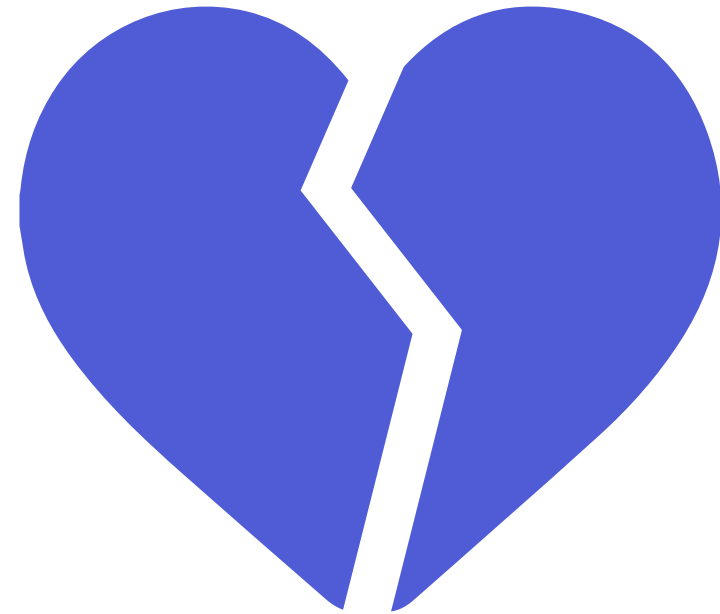
1. No nuclear weapons have been used in this war.
2. There have already been several wars in which nuclear-armed countries have taken part without them being used.
3. The use of nuclear weapons by any country carries potentially dire consequences for that country as well.
4. There are thousands of people, all over the world, working to ensure that nuclear weapons are not used.



# HOW CAN WE DEAL WITH WHAT WE ARE FEELING?

## IMPORTANT

We may feel that we don't deserve to think about ourselves and care for ourselves when there are civilians fighting or children separated from their parents and families fleeing Ukraine. But we are not being selfish when we take care of ourselves. We can practice self-care while caring about others and what is going on in the world. This is essential for resilience.





We cannot change geopolitical decisions or the course of world events, but we can choose how we react to (these) situations beyond our control.

**We can adapt, we can contribute with what's within our reach, and we can try to regulate our thoughts and feelings:**

› **Accept our emotions and feelings.** It is completely normal to feel many different emotions and feelings. It is perfectly reasonable to cry, if we feel like it (often, we even feel more relieved afterwards). We can experience all these feelings and know that it is okay to express them in some way. It is also normal for our mood and motivation to fluctuate.

› **Use anxiety and stress management strategies.** The feeling of “we can't take it anymore” is a “state of our mind”. We can use anxiety to our advantage to fight the negative, unpleasant feelings that it brings us. We can experiment with several ways to **manage anxiety**.

› **Limit our exposure to news.** We cannot control what is happening in Ukraine, so it doesn't help if we are constantly monitoring every detail of what is going on, at the risk of feeling overwhelmed and desperate in face of all the available information. Systematic research on the topic can increase anxiety and fear. We should limit our consumption of news on the subject by turning off the TV and cell phone notifications, and controlling the time we spend on social media. Checking the news once or twice a day is enough to keep ourselves informed on the subject.



› **Consult credible sources of information and combat misinformation.**

Too much information is not a synonym of useful or evenfactual and true information. It is important to consult only credible and up-to-date information sources, and not just read titles or (often sensationalist) news headlines. We can, for example, watch documentaries or find expert commentaries on the subject.

› **Avoid stereotypes.** Being offensive or making value judgments about Ukrainian or Russian communities and people are ways of increasing violence and fostering discrimination and social exclusion. When communicating with others, we can provide credible information, or educate our children about war and peace, without encouraging revenge or anger. We can limit ourselves to expressing what we think about the purpose of war, how we feel about war in general, and promote reflection on non-violent ways of resolving conflicts.

› **Avoid “catastrophic” thoughts.** Of course, we cannot just “stick our heads in the sand”. The situation in Ukraine is very serious. However, it also doesn’t help to constantly think about the “worst case scenario”. Much of what we read or hear on the subject focuses not only on what is happening right now, but also on what might (*or might not!*) happen, through speculation. It is better to **live in the present, one day at a time**. We must try to be flexible and creative, adapting, one day at a time, to the changes and challenges that this uncertain situation poses for us.

› **Talk to family and friends.** As the saying goes: “a problem shared is half the problem.” We are not the only ones concerned about the war. Sharing what we feel can lower our stress, make us feel supported and validated in our feelings and thoughts, and boost our sense of confidence and our energy.

**Talking helps.**

› **Strengthen our relationships.** Connecting with others is our “superpower”, because it makes us smarter, happier, more productive and more resilient. The closeness of others also helps us combat the impact of war on psychological health and well-being.



› **Continue to develop our resilience.** It is important to believe in our ability to deal with this challenging situation. What helped us overcome the adversities of the pandemic or other challenging times in our lives? Resilience is the ability to deal with and overcome our problems, adapt to change and transform negative experiences in our lives. We can watch this [video](#).

› **Keep a routine.** Our routines can help strengthen our feelings of security and predictability in times of uncertainty.

› **Do leisure activities.** Going for a run, talking on the phone with a friend, enjoying our favourite meal, looking out the window and observing the landscape... The world is still full of beauty and positive things that we can and should enjoy. You can learn more about the [importance of leisure activities](#).

› **Invest in self-care.** We already know that regular physical activity, a healthy diet and a healthy sleep routine are key parts of maintaining our psychological health and well-being. We can learn more about self-care and wellness in this [FactSheet](#) and this [video](#).

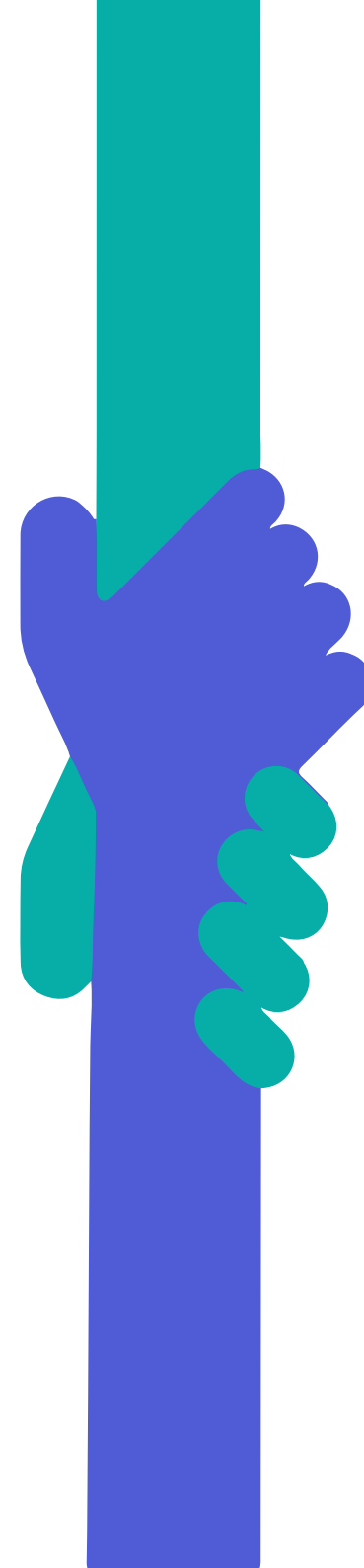
› **Feeding hope.** War not only brings destruction, but it also provokes pro-social behaviour, more civic engagement and participation, more gratitude for what we have, compassion and solidarity, greater defence of freedom and dignity and more respect for diversity and human rights. It provides greater awareness of how we are all connected and how we relate to each other, of the importance of life and the meaning we attach to it.

› **Support and contribute.** A sense of hope and purpose arises when we mobilise as a community to help and contribute towards the common good. Looking for a way to support (by donating goods or volunteering, donating blood or mobilising people in the community, for example) helps us and others, can help give purpose to what we are going through and by the mobilisation it enables, increasing our perception of control over the situation we are experiencing.



› **Monitor psychological health and well-being.** Being aware of small signs and changes in our behaviour and of those around us is important. We must trust in the feeling that “something is not right”. We can try filling out the **“How Do I Feel?” Checklist**, for example.

› **Seek help.** If our thoughts and feelings are significantly interfering with our ability to function on a daily basis, affecting our sleep, or overtaking our lives, we should seek help. But we can also get help if we think it is a good idea to talk to a professional who can support us regulate our thoughts and feelings. We can look up information on how to **Get help** and how a psychologist can help us. Asking for help is never a sign of weakness, but of courage and responsibility. We can also access [www.encontreumasaida.pt](http://www.encontreumasaida.pt) or, in a crisis situation, call the Psychological Counselling Service of the SNS24 Line.



**Finding peace** begins by accepting the different forms that the emotional impact of war and violence takes in our lives – in the lives of all citizens – Ukrainian, Portuguese, Russian or any other nationality.

It lies in the way we respect diversity and human rights, in the way we **take care of ourselves and others** in times of adversity, and in the way we engage and mobilise for the non-violent resolution of (potential) conflicts.

