

Success Story

UKRAINE / COMMUNITY-LED EMERGENCY ACTION AND RESPONSE (CLEAR) 2 PROGRAM



Creating Safe Spaces: How Art Therapy Offers Emotional Refuge for War-Affected Women in Ukraine

“I do not understand what is going on with me” is the most frequent response psychologists hear from women who, during the war, are forced to manage their household and raise children alone while their husbands are on the front line or killed in action.

Being face-to-face with the bulk of responsibilities, trying to fit them in all in a 24-hour day and serving as the primary support system for children and elderly family members, Ukrainian women are struggling to manage emotions that have come up during this yearslong conflict — exhaustion, apathy and overwhelm being at the top of the list.

“Uncertainty, the impossibility of planning, lack of support, drop in economic living standards, not to mention permanent unsafety and worries about the life and health of a husband who is on the front line, in captivity or missing in action... all these circumstances have an extremely negative influence on women’s ability to deal with everyday chores,” says Olena, a psychologist.

She and Eugenia, another psychologist, were hired by Civic Initiatives of Ukraine (CIU) to provide training in art therapy techniques for working with this specific population. CIU is a local civil society organization that partnered with Global Communities to implement the Community-Led Emergency Action and Response (CLEAR) 2 program funded by the United States Agency for International Development’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA) in Chernihiv oblast. A total of 40 psychologists and teachers from Ivanivka, Koriukivka and Sosnytsia

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territorial communities participated in the training. In 2023, under the CLEAR 1 program, some of them **were trained by CIU as children's art therapists** and showed **successful results**. Now, they are preparing to work with women in newly created art spaces.

"Development of emotional competency and guidance in finding new coping strategies is the main task of art therapy for women," Olena explains. "... During the training, we equip future art therapists with strong theory fundamentals and a range of exercises they could use. Additionally, the trainer will guide their practice with intervision sessions."

Eugenia adds that besides art therapy specifically, women who participate gain a community where they feel heard, understood and supported and not like misfits. Often, especially in rural villages, there are more stereotypes and stigma about having a right to show your grief and weakness.

"A woman whose husband is missing in action could be in confrontation with a woman whose husband is on the front line but alive," Eugenia says. "Misunderstanding could happen even between a wife and a mother of a military serviceman or veteran since they have different needs regarding a male family member. Often, women end up in social exclusion, one-to-one with their anxiety, fears, hypersensitivity and following psychosomatic disorders."

Also, the absence or death of a husband forces women to take on male roles and responsibilities, which results in an inability to solely focus on being mothers for their children. Psychological support for children of different ages and overcoming stereotypical behavior are additional topics covered by the training for art therapists.

Since the art therapy approach is not intended for serious disorders, art therapists are also taught to strictly determine the limits of their competency and how to recognize when a woman needs professional intervention.

*Over two years of CLEAR program implementation, CIU equipped **20 safe spaces** in the targeted communities of Chernihiv oblast and trained **80 art therapists** to work with children and women in difficult life circumstances.*

*In 2024, **730 art therapy sessions** were conducted, covering **1,305 people**.*

