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«LIVED EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE OFFICE WORKERS IN KYIV
DURING RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE»

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of female office workers in Kyiv who maintained their professional lives during Russia's war against Ukraine. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants. The analysis identified four superordinate themes: normalization of war, exhaustion as a condition of everyday functioning, work as a support mechanism, and maintaining a sense of agency. The findings reveal that participants viewed wartime conditions as a background of their daily working lives, while experiencing exhaustion that, in their own perception, affected their safety behaviors and interactions with others. The workplace emerged as a significant psychological resource, providing structure, social grounding, and a space for collective emotional regulation. Participants also actively maintained a sense of agency and professional identity, drawing on humor and reframing to manage the psychological demands of wartime conditions. The study contributes to the literature on Continuous Traumatic Stress, civilian functioning under prolonged threat, and the psychological significance of work during crisis.

Keywords: interpretative phenomenological analysis, continuous traumatic stress, wartime civilian functioning, normalization of threat, chronic exhaustion, work as coping, sense of agency, workplace support, Russia's war against Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

The full-scale Russian war against Ukraine, which has been going on for over 4 years as of April 2026, has had a transformative effect on the lives of civilians around Ukraine.

Female office workers in Kyiv are one of the groups of people in Ukraine whose daily lives have been affected by Russia's full-scale invasion. These women have to maintain their everyday work responsibilities and schedules amid the war. The circumstances brought in by the war include air alerts, the threat of missile and drone attacks, as well as the load of disturbing information from other regions of the country. Such a context can be characterized as living under threat, which changes everyday routines of commuting and working.

The present study focuses on the experience of the working day as a whole – from nights disrupted by alerts or aerial attacks, through the morning commute, to

navigating air raid alerts and work responsibilities during office hours. This includes both the experience of responding to actual and anticipated threats during the working day and the broader condition of carrying the psychological effects of the nighttime attacks into the next day's professional activities. Rather than focusing on discrete traumatic events, this research explores the peculiarities of an experience of an ordinary workday as it is lived under the persistent background of war-induced threats.

There has been extensive research on various aspects of civilians' experiences during wars and crises. However, less attention has been paid to the experiences of civilians maintaining a sense of normality and their everyday work schedules amid constant threats. Understanding such experiences can play an important role in understanding the peculiarities of experiencing wars and conflicts far from combat zones.

Scientific Problem

Despite the duration of the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine, there is still limited empirical data on the experience of civilians maintaining daily lives far from combat zones, but with the presence of the constant threat.

This includes a lack of records focused on how civilians themselves make sense of their experience, or on the workspace context that includes the concepts of responsibility and productivity, as well as maintaining a sense of relative safety despite the persistent threat, however imminent it may be or feel.

Research question: How do female office workers in Kyiv make sense of their experience of working in the context of Russia's aerial attacks?

Research aim: To explore the lived experiences and meaning-making of female office workers in Kyiv under the constant threat shaped by Russia's war against Ukraine.

Research objectives:

1. To describe how female office workers in Kyiv make sense of their experience of their everyday work life in wartime conditions.
2. To explore how these women make sense of threat, safety, and normality during Russia's war against Ukraine.
3. To discuss how understanding of these lived experiences aligns with and contributes to the broader body of research on civilian life during wartime.

Object of the research: The experience of female office workers living and working in Kyiv during the Russian war.

Subject of the research: The subjective sense-making through which female office workers interpret their everyday work lives in times of war.

Overview of research methods

This study relies on a qualitative research design based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)—a qualitative methodology that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their lived experience. IPA is grounded in a double hermeneutic process: the participant makes sense of their experience, and the researcher, in turn, makes sense of how the participant makes sense (Smith et al., 2009). This interpretative orientation makes IPA particularly appropriate for the present study, which focuses on understanding how female office workers themselves make sense of their work during the war.

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. While within the IPA framework, analysis will be interpretative and will involve the researcher engaging with and making sense of how the participants make sense of their experience; this study's interpretation will be informed by relevant psychological perspectives.

Practical Significance

The findings of the present study have practical implications for several groups. For employers and organizations operating in war-affected settings, the study offers an empirically grounded basis for developing or refining workplace policies. For mental health practitioners, the findings highlight the importance of frameworks suited to ongoing rather than post-traumatic stress, and point to the psychological significance of agency, professional identity, and everyday routine as resources. For policymakers and support organizations, the study highlights the importance of infrastructure availability and the value of workplace-based interventions for the mental health of civilian populations during prolonged crises.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter reviews existing research and other psychological literature relevant to the experiences of civilians living and working in situations of prolonged war or armed conflict. This section will examine war as a context of chronic stress and prolonged exposure to threat; analyze the psychological responses associated with continuous stress and the coping strategies individuals use to maintain daily functioning; outline the social and identity-related aspects of life in times of ongoing war. Altogether, this literature overview will provide the conceptual foundation for the empirical part of this research in the following chapter.

1.1 War as a context of chronic stress

In terms of psychological research, armed conflicts such as Russia's war against Ukraine bring in specific contexts that affect various aspects of daily life for the civilians living in the war zone. Such a socio-psychological context includes living under conditions of persistent danger, a high level of uncertainty, and disrupted pre-war routines.

Unlike a one-time acute threat, such as a natural disaster or a life-threatening event, war creates an environment in which the threat is continuous and embedded in the background of everyday life. For the civilian population living in war conditions, this can mean that the experience of a possible threat becomes integrated into everyday experience, shaping how such civilians perceive reality, organize their daily activities, and react to events, including both non-threatening activities and instances of danger.

In order to further examine the effects of prolonged exposure to threat, it is appropriate to conceptualize war as a context of chronic stress. Within the framework of this research, chronic stress is understood as a condition that arises from prolonged exposure to and adaptation to recurring or sustained stressors, however minor they may be (McEwen, 1998; Harwood-Gross et al., 2025; Monroe, 2008). This is highly relevant to the conditions of Russia's war against Ukraine, which has an unclear end date and resolution at the moment of this research, and which leads the civilians to continuously deal with the constant background threat, such as the possibility of an attack, as well as recurring stressors such as air raids, missile and drone strikes, and more.

In such conditions, an individual cannot fully process the combination of stressors as a past event, as the threat remains present for a prolonged period of time,

which requires civilians in war zones to continuously prepare themselves for the possible future dangers, instead of attempting to overcome the events of a stress response (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013). For example, this may mean that an individual cannot fully focus on recovering their mental state after a missile attack at a nearby site, as they continue to maintain a certain level of alertness in preparation for a possible future attack (whether it will happen or not).

This may have important implications for understanding the stress-related response patterns evident within the Ukrainian civilian population, whose daily functioning, including work-related responsibilities, has, to some extent, become tied to war-induced stressors.

1.2. Russia's war against Ukraine as a condition of continuous traumatic stress

In such contexts of ongoing threat, it may not always be enough to apply the post-traumatic stress frameworks (Eshel et al., 2023), as they rely on the assumption that the traumatic event has already occurred and can be processed in retrospect.

In contrast, for individuals living under continuous threat, such as civilians in Ukraine, the distinction between "during the stressful event" and "after the threat" can feel unclear, as a certain level of background threat remains, making it challenging to define a clear post-traumatic phase (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013; Avramchuk et al., 2026). At the same time, post-traumatic stress responses may still assist in understanding specific acute incidents, such as a nearby missile strike or a drone attack. In such cases, the event is experienced as having a clear temporal boundary, and mechanisms associated with post-traumatic stress may become relevant. However, even these acute experiences in Ukraine occur within a broader context of ongoing danger, where background stress remains present and affects one's psychological functioning.

Therefore, although research on post-traumatic stress disorder has been conducted in the context of war and armed conflict, including Russia's war against Ukraine (Lushchak et al., 2023), such studies may not fully capture the patterns of psychological experience observed among civilians functioning under prolonged and continuous threat.

For this reason, the concept of continuous traumatic stress may be particularly relevant for the purposes of this research. Unlike post-traumatic stress models, which are related to the assumption that the threatening event has already passed

(Harwood-Gross et al., 2025), the framework of continuous traumatic stress (CTS) is focused on ongoing and recurring exposure to danger in alternation between periods of relatively normal daily life and moments of active threat, such as violence or war.

This dynamic is especially relevant for civilians living in Ukrainian cities such as Kyiv, who continue to fulfill their work and everyday responsibilities while navigating the background presence of danger, including airstrikes and air raid alerts. This way, the threat is not limited to the past and remains embedded in the present life, shaping everyday experiences and the person's psychological responses.

1.3 War-induced and daily stressors

It is undeniable that war and armed conflict introduce specific stressors that are rarely present in other contexts. These include direct threats such as exposure to violence, life-threatening conditions, air raids, missile and drone attacks, and other forms of immediate physical danger. Such stressors shape the experiences of both civilian and military populations, potentially becoming a dominant feature of everyday life in wartime.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that stressors not directly linked to war do not disappear. Instead, individuals continue to navigate a range of everyday demands and difficulties, which may contribute to the overall stress load they experience as they manage their daily lives and work responsibilities (McEwen, 1998). These stressors may coexist with war-related threats and interact with them, shaping the overall experience of living and working in times of war.

During Russia's war against Ukraine, chronic stress can be viewed as a consequence of the exposure to a combination of war-related stressors, such as missile attacks, and daily stressors, such as social or financial hardship (Miller & Rasmussen, 2009). This dynamic is relevant across different population groups, including internally displaced persons, refugees, individuals living near the front lines, as well as those living in areas that are not directly affected by combat on a daily basis, such as Kyiv. While the intensity and specific forms of stressors may vary, they influence everyday functioning and shape lived experience for civilians.

According to the report by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (NAS) (2023), the daily stressors Ukrainian civilians face include a range of social, material, and relational conditions that influence one's everyday life alongside direct war-induced threats. Several everyday stressors can

be viewed as especially relevant to a significant share of the Ukrainian population, including social factors, such as forced separation from loved ones (Irkhin et al., 2024), which was marked as relevant by 80,8% of respondents. It is important to note that a forced separation does not always mean that the civilian person themselves was forced to move to a different location, but can sometimes mean having relatives in the temporarily occupied territories, as internally displaced people (IDP) or as refugees, to name some.

Additionally, around 60% of the National Academy of Sciences' 2023 survey participants indicated that blackouts, water cuts, insufficient heating, and income reduction are the stressors relevant to their circumstances. These might be linked to employment-related stressors, such as issues maintaining work processes without adequate rest (29,3%) or outright unemployment during times of war (22,7%). While it is clear that such stressors are present in the lives of a significant portion of the Ukrainian civilian population, the existing research does not fully capture how these stressors shape everyday experience from the perspective of the individuals living through them, as well as how they are interpreted, navigated, and integrated into everyday life under conditions of war.

While certain stressors are persistent directly in the daily lives of Ukrainian civilians, others involve the anticipation of possible negative events (McEwen, 1998). For example, according to the same 2023 NAS survey, over 30% of Ukrainians experience prolonged stress periodically or constantly due to the fear of a possible nuclear strike, as well as distressing reactions to air raid alerts and concerns about potential blackouts. More than 50% of respondents reported feeling worried occasionally or constantly about possible enemy advances aimed at capturing additional territories, as well as tension related to the anticipation of missile strikes.

It is also worth noting that, alongside other research, the NAS 2023 survey examines the stressors affecting civilians in Ukraine across regions. That is why it may be reasonable to assume that certain stressors have a greater impact on civilians in areas close to active combat, such as the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, as well as areas near the borders with Belarus. For example, on such territories, the possible consequences of the enemy's territorial advances are more immediate, and the instances of missile strikes are more frequent. At the same time, many of these stressors would remain relevant for civilians living further from the frontline, including in Kyiv. Therefore, it is important to examine how different stressors affect

the everyday life and work conditions of civilians in Kyiv. The present research aims to explore the context of prolonged stress and identify which stressors civilians themselves perceive as most relevant.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that, while for the purpose of categorization, some events may be viewed as more or less traumatic, wartime conditions often introduce circumstances that blur the boundary between traumatic events and everyday life. In such contexts, disruptive and potentially threatening experiences become embedded in daily routines. To provide an example, this may mean adapting to life after the loss of housing and the resulting difficulties in accessing basic resources; facing lasting threat to one's own life or the lives of friends and relatives while continuing to deal with work challenges; as well as recurring interruptions to everyday activities caused by air raid sirens, which illustrate how threat becomes integrated into daily life (e.g. Melnyk et al., 2024;)

1.4. Existing research on the experiences of civilians during Russia's war against Ukraine

Since 2014, Russia's war against Ukraine has triggered a growing body of research conducted by Ukrainian and foreign researchers. Since 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, researchers worldwide have begun to pay significantly more attention to the Ukrainian context, as the war has affected a large share of the population and influenced different groups of Ukrainian people, including civilians and military personnel, across gender, age, and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as generating diverse circumstances. For example, some individuals in Ukraine have joined the military after having been civilians for most of their adult lives. Others have become internally displaced persons (IDPs), moved to safer regions of Ukraine, or become refugees living abroad (e.g., Abbas et al., 2026; Palace et al., 2025). Many Ukrainians have had to deal with traumatic events, including experiencing or witnessing missile or drone attacks, losing loved ones or family members, being injured, or losing their homes.

A significant number of quantitative and qualitative studies have examined the mental health of the Ukrainian civilian population since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, with a particularly strong increase in the number of such studies following the full-scale invasion in 2022. These studies have primarily focused on identifying mental health outcomes and tracking the prevalence and severity of symptoms within the population (Xu W, 2023). Common areas of focus

include anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, perceived stress levels, and life satisfaction (e.g., Johnson et al., 2022; Haletska et al., 2022; Reznik et al., 2025; Shkvarok et al., 2025). Many studies examined differences between pre-war and wartime levels of severity or symptoms, assessed how common a certain condition is, and examined differences across demographic groups (e.g., comparing indicators for men and women) (e.g., Palace et al., 2025).

In terms of sampling, a large share of these studies has been conducted at the national level, aiming to identify general patterns across the population or within specific demographic categories (Lushchak et al., 2023). At the same time, certain groups have received particular attention; for example, university students are frequently studied due to their accessibility as a sample. Other research focuses on populations considered especially vulnerable. These include children, IDPs, refugees living abroad, and individuals living in regions close to active combat zones (Lebedieva et al., 2026; Kordel et al., 2024). Such groups are of particular interest to researchers because of their increased exposure to war-related stressors. That is why an important factor shaping research samples within the topic is exposure to war-induced events. Many studies examine how experiences such as missile attacks, displacement, loss of home, or the death of relatives are associated with behavioral and mental health outcomes (e.g., Dvornyk & Sliusarevskyi, 2025).

In addition to direct war-related stressors, some research has examined the role of broader environmental and social factors. These include financial hardship, infrastructure disruptions (such as blackouts or limited access to basic resources), and social isolation. Some studies also explore how exposure to different stressors affects everyday functioning, including sleep, physical activity, academic performance, and work (Hozak et al., 2023; Pinchuk et al., 2025). Additionally, certain researchers have investigated coping strategies, resilience, and the role of social support, as well as the effectiveness of targeted psychological interventions (e.g., Vus et al., 2024; Tucker et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

However, most of these studies rely on standardized quantitative measures, using structured scales and predefined response options. This approach undeniably provides valuable insight into the prevalence and distribution of psychological outcomes, aiding in identifying the key groups or circumstances for possible interventions. However, such research may not fully capture how people interpret their own everyday lives at times of war.

It is also important to note that psychological research often prioritizes populations with the highest levels of exposure to war-related stressors. These include individuals who have experienced displacement, direct exposure to violence, or significant life disruption, such as the loss of home, separation from family, or the need to adapt to entirely new social and cultural environments (Anjum et al., 2023). Such groups are of particular interest due to the intensity of stressors they face and the extent to which their everyday lives have been fundamentally altered since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

At the same time, comparatively less attention has been given to civilians who continue to live in urban environments further from the front lines, where war-related stressors remain present but do not necessarily result in complete disruption of daily life. In cities such as Kyiv, many individuals continue to work, maintain social relationships, and preserve elements of their pre-war routines despite ongoing exposure to air-raid alerts, infrastructure disruptions, and a persistent background threat.

This creates a distinct context in which individuals are required not only to cope with stress, but to sustain everyday functioning under conditions of ongoing uncertainty. Unlike populations whose lives have been entirely restructured by displacement or direct trauma, these individuals navigate a tension between ordinary routines and recurring threat. Understanding how such individuals experience and interpret their everyday lives is therefore essential for capturing the broader psychological impact of war beyond the most extreme cases of exposure.

CHAPTER 2: EMPIRICAL STUDY OF LIVED EXPERIENCE OF WORK UNDER WARTIME CONDITIONS

This chapter presents the empirical component of the study, which explores how individuals experience and interpret their everyday work lives amid the ongoing wartime threat. Building on the theoretical framework outlined in the theoretical chapter, the study employs a qualitative approach to examine participants' lived experiences. The following subsections describe the research design, data collection procedure, and analytical approach.

2.1 Methodology and research design

This research employs a qualitative research design based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA focuses on studying lived experience and sense-making processes through which people make sense of and interpret their own experience. This approach combines a phenomenological perspective focused on the experience itself and an interpretation conducted with awareness of the role and perspective the researcher brings to the analysis. IPA is suitable for researching how individuals make sense of significant and complex life experiences, as it prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth, and treats individual perspective as the primary object of inquiry. The experience of maintaining everyday work life amid Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine exemplifies this, making IPA an appropriate methodological choice for the present study. IPA analysis employs an iterative process in which the researcher seeks to make sense of how respondents make sense of their experience (double hermeneutic). That said, this particular study does not use hermeneutics as a theoretical framework. Instead, the interpretative analysis is rooted in relevant psychological theoretical frameworks while remaining close to respondents' narratives of their experiences.

The research uses a theoretical sample of respondents who meet selection criteria. The sample is designed to be highly homogeneous to enable deeper analysis of the experience shared by all participants. The total number of respondents is five. For the inclusion criteria, the researcher outlined that the prospective participants had to be between 20 and 35 years old, working offline at an office in Kyiv at least during a part of their work days, had worked at an office in Kyiv during the Russian full-scale war against Ukraine, and could be described as office workers at the time of the interview.

As a result, all research participants are aged 22-28 years and meet the remaining inclusion criteria. While none of the participants were partners of active-duty combatants or retired veterans, all had some form of connection to more direct involvement in war contexts, such as having close relatives serving in the military or living in regions near the front lines. For reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, and to support the readability of this thesis, all participants have been assigned pseudonyms rather than their real names during the coding stage of analysis. The participants were all alumni of an informal educational program for youth and were therefore recruited through the researcher's personal connection or through the shared community chat. The program in question is aimed at developing civic responsibility among youth, which may have influenced the participants' interpretations of their experiences, a point the researcher will elaborate on in subsequent chapters.

The collection of the participants' accounts was conducted through semi-structured interviews. It was intended that the common overall structure of the interviews would allow the data to be comparable while leaving room for individual peculiarities in the experiences. The interviews were conducted individually, either online via Zoom or in person, depending on each participant's preference. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes and was conducted in Ukrainian. With the participants' permissions, the interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

The interview guide was developed in line with IPA principles, focusing on lived experience and the sense-making process. With the questions covering different areas of how the respondents experience and interpret their office worklife in times of war, the guide covered the following topic areas:

1. The overall understanding of the experience of working at an office during the war;
2. How the respondents make sense of the threat;
3. The experience of maintaining normality under constant threat;
4. What is the role that the respondents assign to work in times of war.

The guide consisted of six core open-ended questions intended to elicit in-depth responses about the respondents' personal experiences. Taking into account the guide's flexibility, the researcher could adjust the questions or their order based on participants' answers, and ask clarifying questions to address unclear details or

probing questions to prompt respondents to further elaborate on the experience or concept they mentioned.

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the National Psychological Association of Ukraine prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent before the interview, and a verbal consent procedure was conducted at the beginning of each interview, during which the researcher outlined the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the conditions under which data would be stored and used. Participants were explicitly informed that the interview would be audio recorded with their permission, that the recording would remain accessible only to the researcher, and that it would be deleted upon completion of the study. They were also informed that any identifying details would be removed from the transcript and would not appear in the final thesis. A debriefing procedure was conducted at the end of each interview, during which the researcher checked in on the participant's emotional state and provided information about available psychological support resources, including crisis helplines, in the event that distressing emotions arose following the conversation.

For the data analysis, the researcher used an idiographic, iterative approach appropriate for an IPA study, so that the interpretations could remain close to the participants' accounts of their lived experiences. The process started with a detailed transcription of each interview's audio recordings and proceeded to an in-depth reading of the transcripts. The researcher conducted the initial line-by-line coding to note the content of each phrase or sentence, as well as the direct or implied meanings conveyed through tone, nonverbal communication, and cultural contexts. Based on the initial notes, the researcher outlined themes that would illustrate each participant's experience. Afterward, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify common patterns and differences in the experiences.

In the preparation of this thesis, AI-based tools were used in accordance with the guidelines of the Kyiv School of Economics. Specifically, AI was used to support the search for relevant literature, improve the phrasing of text written by the researcher, and refine the phrasing of the quotes that were translated from Ukrainian to English, to ensure the closest possible translation with the meaning preserved. All analytical decisions, as well as interpretations and conclusions, were made by the researcher.

2.2 Themes emerging from the analysis of participants' accounts

Themes identified through the analysis of participants' accounts

№	Theme	Presence Across Cases
a	Normalization of war	
a1	War as a routine	Most participants (4/5)
a2	Adaptation to absurdity	All participants
a3	Regulation of threat perception	All participants
a4	Prioritizing work commitments under threat	Most participants (4/5)
b	Exhaustion as a condition of everyday functioning	
b1	Living with exhaustion under an ongoing threat	All participants
b2	Disruption of everyday routines	Most participants (4/5)
b3	Persistent anticipation of threat	All participants
c	Work as a support mechanism	
c1	Work provides a sense of stability	Most participants (4/5)
c2	Co-regulation through workplace relationships	Most participants (4/5)
c3	Space for emotional vulnerability	All participants
d	Maintaining a sense of agency	
d1	Humor and reframing for coping	Most participants (4/5)
d2	Maintaining professional identity	All participants
d3	Preserving personal autonomy	All participants

Note: Based on analysis of semi-structured interviews with this study's participants.

a. Normalization of war

a1. War as a routine

The experience of working in an office during wartime seemed usual and unremarkable for some of the interviewees. When asked to reflect on what it is like

to work in an office under wartime conditions, some participants initially struggled to identify anything that clearly distinguished this experience from ordinary working life. Hanna shared: "It's just that my work background is mostly office work. And overall, during the full-scale invasion, I've had experience working in three different offices. So for me, working in an office during the war is basically my routine." For Lina, working in an office during war was the only office experience she had ever had: "And also, considering that I'm, what, 23, and I basically started working, and the war was already going on, I don't really know what it was like before."

Even when a night was disrupted by shelling or air alerts, the participants often saw the following day unfold much the same as any other. Lina described this:

So, if there's been some shelling, or if, for example, the whole day we're being told that there's something terrible going to happen overnight, get prepared, then usually... like, things still go the same. Like, you go to work, maybe you wake up a bit later... or at your usual time. It's just that throughout the day you have this feeling that you didn't get enough sleep, that something was happening.

For Mariia, this transition of the war into the background routine is evident, and she named it directly: "And now it's just because of this overall exhaustion, because of this general difficult state, and that it's already become routine. I mean, in a way, the war itself has become a routine. Unfortunately."

This normalization applies to how participants interpret their own experience and to the expectations of their employer or clients. Participants reported that, over the years since the full-scale invasion, workplace accommodations for war-induced disruptions have shifted toward a milder response, redefining what counts as an appropriate reason to be absent or late to work. Lina elaborated:

Even if there was shelling or no shelling, you still have to go to work, cause you have to, cause nobody's waiting, neither clients nor your boss isn't making any allowance anymore for the fact that people are living in a war. So it's very different from the first or second year.

Lina also said: "Like if this experience has become habitual, and people... Like, well, okay, shelling, well, okay, give it 20 minutes, the subway will start running, and like, be at the office." Kateryna illustrated what this experience looks like for her at an individual level on a separate day:

But on that particular day, I slept for like two or three hours, got ready, took a shower, and was like, okay, I have to live this life, life goes on. No matter

what happens, I'll keep living, I'll keep moving forward. There's really no other option. These are the conditions we live in. So I just accept it, get ready, go to the meeting, work creatively.

a2. Adaptation to absurdity

The interviewees describe moments they perceived as absurd contradictions between events of danger, such as drone attacks or consequences of such attacks, and the muted reaction they or people around them had regarding those events. Olha shared:

For me, it's sometimes upsetting to admit that it's [the war] horrible, it's deadly, it's dangerous, but at the same time, it's perceived more like, well, an inconvenience. Like, oh, I won't arrive there – it's absurd, but somehow that's how it feels during the day now, mostly.

While Lina described an interaction with a person from a safer city during an air raid in Kyiv:

We were out with a group of people living in Kyiv and one girl from Lviv. An air raid alert started. And there was a Shahed [drone] flying, and we could hear it. And she was like, 'Should we get down? We need to run, let's find some kind of shelter!' And we were like... 'Oh, it's just a Shahed, I mean, what? It's flying over there, a street away from us'.

It is likely that, for Lina herself, the interaction with someone from a safer part of the country highlighted the emotional distance the interviewee and her companions felt from the danger.

Some of the interviewees were aware of the absurdity and reflected on it. Hanna elaborated on an experience of going to a shelter during an air alert during a workday, highlighting the contrast between the circumstances of the possible danger and the normal work-related worries she had at the time:

It's [the air raids] already normal, but it still interrupts your flow. You go to the shelter, and you're still thinking, like, I need to finish that contract by that time and send it, and then [the client] will call, I need to discuss some details with them. So you're kind of here mentally, but also not really here. It's absurd, we're living in an absurd world.

For Lina, the contrast of the danger and the reaction became evident during a drone attack in the evening after the workday ended:

It felt as if it was above us, but somewhere in the sky, and we see this firework [an explosion] – boom, well, we looked at each other, like, wow... Wow... And that's it. No one even ducked. And I thought like, [obscene], this is so stupid – we didn't even react. But it was happening right above us, and the debris could have fallen [on us].

Mariia articulated this directly, while adding a moral evaluation of the experience: "For example, with that Oreshnik [Russian ballistic missile attack] incident, in things like this, it's... not normal to go to work when Russia was trying to kill you at night," she said: "I guess that's the absurd part. The fact that we kind of get used to things that, really... we shouldn't get used to. That's not right to get used to them."

Some of the participants indicated an inability to fully comprehend the war as part of reality. Hanna described a general disbelief: "You still can't fully, I mean, okay, I can only speak for myself, but I still can't completely believe that this is really happening." Kateryna described a similar experience in more detail: "The brain can't understand how these two realities can coexist. ... And you can't tell anymore what is a dream and what is real. Is this creative and cool job of yours real? Or what happened at night – that's real, and I'm living in a dream right now?"

a3. Regulation of threat perception

The official guidance at the start of any air raid alert is identical: seek the nearest shelter and stay there until the alert is lifted. However, the duration of the war, as well as the quantity and frequency of air raids of different kinds and scales, seem to have altered behavior and led to different perceptions of air-raid threats. Participants indicated that they take the type of threat into account when deciding how to respond to air raid alerts. Hanna explained that she sees the type of threat that has been located and has triggered the air alert as something that influences her decisions during the workday: "So you look at what's coming. If it's not critical, in your opinion, you stay and keep working where you are." And Olha shared a similar opinion, saying that some threats do not lead to people at her workplace interrupting their activities: "Someone also kind of monitors what the situation is, what exactly this air raid alert is about, and then it's like, well, we'll just continue [working]."

One of the distinctions the interviewees made was a different reaction they experienced or observed in others to ballistic missiles and drones. In some cases, participants also mentioned newer types of weapons, primarily the Oreshnik missile,

which was used for the first time more recently, and is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, and may therefore be perceived as less familiar and more dangerous. Mariia said: "We go down [to a shelter], let's say, quite rarely, like when it's Oreshnik, probably, or when there's ballistic missiles heading to Kyiv—"two walls," all that—and we understand that something is definitely about to come flying somewhere." Mariia also explained that the types of threats that feel more familiar can feel less scary: "Especially since we're used to drones. I guess we've gotten used to ballistic missiles more or less as well. We understand how it works, so it's not as scary." While Mariia noted that both Shahed drones and ballistic missiles seem quite familiar, other participants' accounts made it clearer that a ballistic threat is perceived as more dangerous. For example, Kateryna said: When Shaheds are flying, you kind of understand, I have time, I have something, some time to think of something, to take some kind of action."

Besides the type of threat, the interviewees shared that they considered other aspects of the situation when deciding what to do. For example, the person's location within a building and the building's type seemed to matter. Olha: "But when it's like, hmm, there's a Shahed flying somewhere between the buildings right now—should we go down [to a shelter] or we shouldn't? Well, we'll just keep working, sit it out. We're far from the windows!" Lina:

And when the air raid alerts started, like, in the first year of the war, I worked in a small office, there were a couple of floors, and... I could hear it, and I just didn't have anywhere to go. So I just stayed. We would go out into the corridor and sit there. And then, in the following years, it kind of, not disappeared, but decreased, decreased, decreased.

And Hanna: "Well, I'm sure this is the wrong behavior, and you shouldn't do this, but most of the time I stay at my workplace or just move away from the window."

The interviewees mentioned being near a window or in a corridor as important factors. This is likely related to official safety recommendations, which suggest that if it is not possible to go to a shelter, individuals should position themselves so that there are at least two walls between them and the outside. The idea is that these walls can help reduce or block the impact in case of a strike. That is why the type of walls is important as well, as many office buildings have full-height windows, such as Olha's workplace:

At home, I live in a private house, and I feel a greater sense of safety there because I have solid walls, a strong foundation. ... At the same time, at work,

everything is basically glass; it's a typical business center, so there's a high level of risk there.

Another important factor mentioned by the interviewees is how high their office is located in the building. Official safety recommendations in Ukraine do not explicitly identify height as a specific risk factor, and there are documented cases of injuries and fatalities both in apartments on higher floors and in lower-level or single-story buildings. However, participants tend to perceive being located on a higher floor as riskier during an air raid. Mariia said that her office is located on a high floor: "I guess today was a very vivid example, when there was an Oreshnik threat, and my office is located, well, it's a high-rise, and it's one of the upper floors of a residential building." She shared a recent situation during an air alert: "Management comes in ... and says, 'we're all going down from the 18th floor now because it's an Oreshnik threat.' And this 'shelter' situation was literally us standing near the building and smoking." The experience seems to be similar for Lina: "We were on the 17th floor, people kind of... There were some who resisted and didn't go [to a shelter], but mostly it was just small talk, like, 'well, we're on the 17th floor'."

Most participants also mentioned that their location within the city affects how they perceive the level of threat. For example, Mariia shared: "Kyiv is a very big city. And when something is heading toward Kyiv, we more or less understand which district it's going to." From Olha's account, it seems that individuals tend to evaluate whether there are any nearby locations that could be deliberately targeted: "It's kind of like, well, it's just one [drone], and there's nothing important around us here, so it'll probably fly somewhere far away. If there is any danger, it's not about us, not coming our way." Similarly, Lina noted that in some situations, a direct attack may be perceived as less likely due to the proximity of the locations that Russia would probably avoid targeting, such as international embassies: "Basically, I wasn't afraid, because it was near an embassy, and you understand that they [the Russians] probably aren't going to, aren't going to target this place." This appears to align with Hanna's perception:

In a year and a half of working at [a state institution], I went to the shelter... twice. That's when things were already falling right overhead. Maybe two more times we went out into the corridor from the offices. That's it. I work in what's basically the historic center of Kyiv.

The interviewees also reported perceiving daytime threats as less dangerous. As a result, when an air raid alert occurs while they are at the office, they tend to feel safer compared to airstrikes at night. Hanna said:

At home, I perceive this threat as a real threat, but at work, for some reason... not really. It's more like part of the day. There's also this pattern: most attacks happen at night, and at night you're at home. During the day, it's quite rare, though it does happen. But actually hearing attacks from the office is very rare.

Kateryna also explains that her colleagues and she don't always go to a shelter during a daytime air alert:

No, when we're at the office, we don't always go to the shelter, because there hasn't really been that kind of... You know, you feel the level of danger, like when a MiG takes off in the middle of the day. If a MiG takes off, it's unlikely that something will actually happen. So not always.

For Hanna, it seems to have more relation to the perceived likelihood of the drone or missile being shot down before it enters the city: "And also, I think because it's daytime, any missiles or Shaheds are better visible while they're approaching Kyiv, not when they're already in the city. ... So maybe that's why you don't hear them much during the day."

Hanna's threat appraisal also seems to be related to her broader confidence in the protective infrastructure of Kyiv, such as the city's air defense system and the availability of the subway stations as shelter: "because Kyiv has the subway, Kyiv has air defense. Good, cool, tested [air defense], which has been protecting us for years already." She elaborated: "Because Kyiv is attacked often, the guys/girls working in air defense—they are professionals of the highest level. Somehow, I don't know, subconsciously or consciously, I trust these people."

a4. Prioritizing work commitments under threat

Several participants described the experience of having to perform professionally in the workday immediately following a difficult night. They believe that in such circumstances, they sometimes have to set aside their worry, fatigue, or distress in order to fulfill their work responsibilities. Olha: "Of course, it depends on what stage of work we're at. If there's an event in the morning, we load up on coffee, wait for the energy, put our emotions aside separately, our professionalism separately, and we work." She elaborated on the emotions involved:

Well, it's generally some anxiety, worry. If you need to work right now and work with people, then the fact that I'm, say, already irritated because I had a hard commute, traffic jams, and all that—that needs to go to the background. Because client-oriented communication and things like that don't allow for it, even if I'm exhausted inside, I have a headache, people want something else from me, and I don't even understand why they need it—we smile, we nod, [we say] 'we'll figure it out somehow,' and so on.

Kateryna illustrated this experience with a specific situation:

I'm walking home from the shelter after all that shelling, I come home and remember that I have a meeting where I need to show my absolute best: how great we are, how much I can do. And it's this, you know, enormous dissonance. Because here it's a question of survival, and then it's already a question of giving everything you've got just four to six hours after your survival mode.

Some of the interviewees' accounts suggest that the decision to continue working during air raid alerts reflects civilians' belief that stopping work every time an alert sounds is unsustainable. Hanna explained: "People who have been living in central Ukraine, and further east and south, for years already, understand that you can't interrupt the work process every time there's an alert, because there are so many alerts." She said: "So the work has to be done on time... So often, when it's just one Shahed over Kyiv, you look at which direction it's flying from, and you can stay at your workstation at your own responsibility."

At the same time, the degree to which professional obligations could be set aside is not always a matter of personal choice. Several participants described the expectations of their employers, managers, and clients as a factor shaping their workday experience after a hard night. Hanna shared the difference in opinions between her immediate manager and the organization's top management: "Management saw it a bit differently there: like, we're all worried about how you'll get here, but you have to be at work and do your job, because it's a government institution and everything depends on you." Lina seems to share a similar experience, reflecting on the changes she noticed over the years of the full-scale Russian invasion:

In the first year, the manager would be like, 'Oh my God, how are you? Are you okay? You don't have to come.' And often it, well, it happened that the manager would come [to the office] and tell us, well, to stay [at home]. This

doesn't happen anymore, and I think that's all, that everyone understands that, like, work just won't get done if we keep complaining this much about life.

This study's data suggest that a decision to continue working during an air raid reflects the level of importance participants assign to their work responsibilities, even in the face of a threat. Lina described a particular case:

There was a situation at my previous job where I decided I wouldn't take my laptop home on Friday. And then, like the whole night from Sunday into Monday, there was a shelling. Like, in the morning, around eight, [I hear that] something explodes in the street, and I have my laptop at the office and a meeting at 9:30 [a.m.]. I mean, I understand that everyone else is also in Kyiv, but no one's writing anything, so I have to connect. So I go get my laptop, get to my floor, the security guard kicks me out, I grab the laptop and connect from the lobby, there was a spot there.

She also talked about what the experience looks like when an air raid interrupts a work process:

So, when there was an alert, like, I'd go reluctantly, cause you have a meeting, you have to interrupt, but it's like, everyone else is somewhere in Ukraine too, but they understand that if we keep rescheduling everything, we won't be able to do anything, we won't be able to get any work done. So you just say 'two seconds' and run to the [underground] parking and work from there.

This may be related to the participants prioritizing the commitments they made to other people. What Hanna shared seems to indicate that work is both a distraction (which we will go into in a separate section) and a priority during the air alerts:

But, you know, I pay attention, when I'm working from home, to the location, where it's flying, what sounds I can hear from the window. When it's office work, honestly, I don't really get into all that. Like, I have a contract that needs to be done, the budget needs to be written, and that's it.

Hanna's account seems to highlight that the experience of having nighttime air alerts has completely merged into the background of a normal work life in Kyiv:

But now, in 2026, if there was one alert overnight, and you didn't wake up from the sounds, overall, well, that's not, sorry, something critical. You still understand that you have an obligation to go to work, you understand that, well, the shelling will continue – potentially tomorrow, the day after, it was there yesterday, the day before, and, well, you somehow...

However, the interviewee herself seems unable to clearly articulate the consequences of shelling becoming an ordinary experience.

b.Exhaustion as a condition of everyday functioning

b1. Living with exhaustion under an ongoing threat

One of the aspects of the experience that appears across all participants' accounts is the experience of living with exhaustion under ongoing threat. This exhaustion forms a background for safety-related behaviors, as participants often describe being too tired to act in ways they know they should, such as going to a shelter during air raid alerts. Mariia: "And it's just, well, it's objectively an unpleasant physical thing to do, running down the stairs in winter. It's like, fifteen, sixteen floors." Lina illustrated this experience with a recent situation when the person responsible for forcing the employees to leave the office during an alert was not at work: "Our director was not at the office, at the space, and it [the atmosphere] was just like, phew, thank God, no need to go anywhere. And I was like, well, overall, I agree with you." Lina also mentioned a different situation:

Those who wanted to could go down the stairs [instead of taking the elevator]. But come on, from the 17th floor, five times a day, nobody was going down this way. We were hoping that by the time we waited in the elevator queue, the alert would be over. And that only happened a couple of times. You stand there for fifteen minutes, and that's it, the alert is already over. Some, some people would deliberately stand last in the queue so they wouldn't have to go down.

She also summarized the experience: "I understand that if there's, like, a direct hit, those in the shelter will probably survive, and I won't. But I just can't be bothered to go down [meaning she feels too tired]."

This exhaustion is frequently expressed as irritation or anger, sometimes directed toward those responsible for the attacks. Participants describe frustration with the fact that missile and drone strikes repeatedly force them to interrupt their activities, seek shelter, or deal with everyday disruptions such as blackouts, which will be discussed further below. Mariia describes her reaction to another air raid triggered by Russian drones: "During the day, wherever I am, it's kind of the same. Can I swear? It's just like 'oh, for [obscene] sake, you again.' That's the emotion, and that's it. That's just how it is." She shared that the conversations with her colleagues also touch upon the irritation sometimes: "Partly it's conversations like, 'God, how exhausting they are,

it's them again! I'd be doing something, and they're interrupting me again'." She elaborated: "We all obviously understand what our attitude is toward Russia, Russians, and what they are doing." And talking about the everyday disruptions and inconveniences caused by Russia's attacks, she mentioned: "I think this age-old hatred is very well nurtured by everyday harm," and "The absence of electricity, of course. Because we all understand [smirks] what's the cause behind the absence of electricity." Lina shares a similar experience: "Now we don't go down anymore [to a shelter], but usually it was like '[obscene], this is so annoying, how much longer, like, how much time am I wasting on this!'" She described a conversation with her colleagues during an air alert on a workday: "And we'd be saying that these Russians have [obscene] worn us down, and now we have to crowd into the elevator."

The participants' accounts suggest that not only are people irritated after a night of attacks, but there is also general exhaustion that manifests in everyday conflicts, such as minor quarrels with colleagues, negative interactions on the subway, and workplace errors. Lina:

You leave the house already, like, in a bad mood, and everyone around you is the same, but everyone's going to work anyway. And there, well, I often notice conflicts, I don't know, after shelling people are just unhappy with life, which is understandable. They're, like, pushing past each other, rushing somewhere, not wanting to go anywhere.

Mariia said:

We all are, I think, as a nation, we are angry, exhausted, wound up, and we're starting to snap at each other like dogs. And no matter how much I say that I have great colleagues and I love them, there are so many of these everyday moments and everyday arguments about someone not putting a pen back somewhere. And of course, exhaustion plays into that. I mean, when you think about it, we understand that the underlying reason is simply that we are all very tired.

Hanna describes a morning after a challenging night:

Zombie morning. I call it a zombie morning. It's especially interesting to observe, not only in, well, in the office, it's undeniable, you're all like cooked flies. Management is droopy; you're droopy; colleagues are droopy; everyone is droopy. And everyone more or less understands.

"Cooked flies" seems to be a combination of two Ukrainian idioms, both describing exhaustion. To be boiled means to be droopy, exhausted, or sleepy. And "sleepy flies" are people who are tired, unmotivated, or do something slowly.

Hanna also points to this general exhaustion as something that shapes a shared understanding of each other's experiences:

But it's also interesting to observe the dynamic of the city. When you're commuting, you look at people in the subway, or when you're, for example, buying coffee before work, you look at the barista—the barista who gave you the wrong change, and she goes, 'oh, sorry, [there was] a night like this,' and you're like, 'I completely understand, cause... [we're all after] a night like this'—so there's this sense of unity among people in these states, and a lot gets forgiven without a word. But sometimes it goes the other way, actually, because people haven't slept enough, they react more aggressively to some morning irritants. I think it depends on the person. But mostly what I observe is this unity of sleepy flies and a complete shared understanding of what happened and what the consequences are.

Lina's accounts add important context that, in her perception, the fatigue from exhausting nights has a compounding effect, and when combined with tiring work responsibilities, can deplete an individual's resources: Lina:

Because maybe there's just no energy left anymore. Like, 'Oh God, what a thing has happened.' And then on top of that, there's so much to do at work, things to worry about. And I also work with people, and they often pull something else. There's really no other word for it. Yeah. And there are so many tasks. In short. So yeah, there's no energy left to endure this hellish suffering [ironic].

"There's no energy left to endure this hellish suffering" is a rough translation of a Ukrainian idiom that emerged during the full-scale invasion. It is used as an ironic remark and originates from an incorrect translation by Russians from Russian into Ukrainian, which resulted in a distorted version resembling: "there is no more urine to endure these infernal flours,"—a phrase that appeared in multiple posts or comments online by accounts posing as Ukrainians.

Lina also said: "Because both the war and work often take your resources, and give nothing back in return."

b2. Disruption of everyday routines

This section will outline the subcategory of the experience that arises from the disruption of everyday routines. Mariia reflected on this directly: "Apart from the global adversity of war, which is about the deaths, the demise, the destruction, all of that... there's a large layer of everyday harm that nobody talks about, because people are actually ashamed to talk about it."

One of the most concrete everyday disruptions participants described was the difficulty of getting to work during air raid alerts. When an alert is declared, the Kyiv subway operates only through underground stations, and because the subway bridges are closed, it becomes impossible to cross the Dnipro River via the subway. There have been instances of the subway halting operations during especially massive attacks or blackouts, either because the subway was being used as a shelter by too many people or because there was too much damage to the electrical systems to power the trains. The issue seems particularly critical for those traveling between the city's left and right banks (from residential areas toward the city center), a pattern that aligns with participants' experiences. Hanna shared: "My office is on the right bank, and I live on the left bank. And when there's an air raid alert, the subway, the [subway] bridges are shut down, which also causes delays getting to work." Mariia also mentioned this issue, as well as the fact that sometimes during air raids, the navigation systems do not work, so neither the commuters nor taxi drivers can reliably see their location in the city, or the right way to reach a new location that they are unfamiliar with: "For example, there's an air raid alert, the subway isn't running, I can't get there. There's no electricity, the ECM [electronic countermeasures] is active, and I don't understand where I am on the map."

Olha's account seems to highlight that not only is it an inconvenience, but it is also an issue that adds to the mental load Kyiv residents are dealing with:

In general, these are always important things to keep in mind, that if you need to get to the other bank of Kyiv, an air raid alert can get in the way. ... Switching [from subway] to some kind of ground transport or a taxi sometimes doesn't make sense, because you either end up in a very long queue with no idea when it will move, or you get stuck in traffic if you take a taxi, and the same thing happens.

Olha also outlined that such circumstances are moments of uncertainty, as you do not know how long the air alert will last, or what the exact situation is with other types of transport:

The biggest thing is this moment of uncertainty. I can say that when you get stuck in the subway, it becomes a big question: should I just sit and wait until it's over, and then continue by subway? Or will I actually get there faster if I leave, go outside, switch transport? Or maybe I should have done something differently in the first place so I wouldn't end up in this situation?

Lina's account also addresses the uncertainty and the loss of control as a consequence of Russia's attacks:

Yeah, so, it's this feeling that you don't really have control over what's happening, and you, like, have to adjust to everything, and that's really exhausting. Like, you wake up, there's no electricity.... And it feels like none of this is really up to you, what's happening.

Beyond the disruption to commuting, the interviewees described other layers of everyday inconvenience that are linked to blackouts and absence of heating. Because of Russia's attacks on the civilian infrastructure, over the years of the full-scale Russian invasion, Ukraine has experienced numerous blackouts, damage to the central heating infrastructure, in addition to the already usual planned power outages that last for hours almost every day throughout the colder months, and occasionally during summer. Olha: "I haven't really touched on the topic of power outages, but they actually make the work process much more difficult." She also said:

So there was also about a week when we almost didn't go to the office, because it was cold there. We were told that if the situation with electricity and heating is better at home, then stay at home. But otherwise, you sit in jackets, trying to keep warm just with tea, because those are the circumstances we have, that's the only way it works. This kind of creates this overall picture.

Mariia also mentioned the smaller inconveniences formed by the absence of electricity: "And I understand that when I get to the office, I won't be able to make... well, I will be able to make coffee, but it'll still be using the last charges of the EcoFlow [a portable power station]." She also said: "And these are very small, kind of insignificant things that we've gotten used to and don't really pay attention to. But overall, they are actually quite significant."

It is worth noting that daily routines are often linked to the usual availability of technology and electricity in general. That is why the absence of electricity disrupts work routines and forces the office workers to navigate the uncertainty and develop different ways to deal with work responsibilities. Here is what Lina said about this: "In general, my electricity situation was okay, but when it was out, it felt like that's it,

I didn't know what to do with myself... like, there's no electricity, but you still have to work." She also mentioned the blurred perception of the passage of time during a 2022 blackout: "And back in 2022, during the blackout, honestly... maybe the brain just doesn't want to remember, but it's like all the days blended into one. I don't really remember what was happening."

b3. Persistent anticipation of threat

The interviewees interpret the exhaustion under wartime conditions as not only a product of disrupted sleep or accumulated daily demands, but they also view it as something linked to a state of alertness that persists even in moments of relative safety. Olha described a specific circumstance of her workplace that illustrates this aspect of the experience:

I actually have one specific thing related to my work, because above us, above our office, one floor up, there's a gym. And when people suddenly start dropping weights on the floor, the whole office is just like this [she shrugs rapidly] Jumps. Cause it's just, like, there's no air raid alert, but something just bangs like that! And you never really get used to it.

She also said: "Time passes, but your nerves are still, like, in this very tense state when it comes to any kind of danger." Kateryna shares a similar experience: "...we're living in a country where there is a war right now, we never feel safe. At any moment, an air raid alert can go off, a ballistic missile can strike." Lina: "Well, [obscenity], I think everyone just got a little [obscene phrase for mentally unstable] when all of this started."

c. Work as a support mechanism

c1. Work provides a sense of stability

Several participants described work not only as an obligation but also as an active means to support psychological stability in times of war. Mariia reflected on how she sees the predictability of a working day as a form of relief: "On the one hand, it really pulls you out of reality. I mean, out of this unpleasant routine, because I have a predictable scenario of what I'm going to do today, where I'm going to go." She described this as particularly valuable on days following nighttime attacks: "And it really pulls you out, especially when there's been shelling at night, like today, when everyone runs out into the corridor in panic because of ballistic missiles..." She elaborated that predictability seems to be very important in times of war and overall

uncertainty: "There's this kind of routine, this basic rituality we're living in chaos, and it's kind of like training animals. Right now, for me, predictability is very important, so that I more or less understand [what to expect]."

Kateryna described being able to work at the office as a helpful resource she could use when the pressure of being at home became too overwhelming:

If you feel like, let's be honest, you're kind of losing it at home, and you need some extra space to work, having an office actually really saves me. When I feel like I'm too stuck within four walls, when I feel like I need, you know, a second place where I can feel comfortable and work, and focus on my tasks.

She also said:

It means having a point of resilience, like this kind of resilience hub that exists, that you can come to at any moment if you don't have heating at home, no electricity. Or if you want somehow to support your mental state, see people, see your colleagues.

Lina also mentions the office as a source of support; she focuses on the practical aspects: "At my office, there was electricity, so I would go there, and that kind of solved it."

Alongside the perceived background effect of work as a distraction, the interviewees described intentionally using work to direct their thoughts and attention away from the war's adversities. Hanna described a piece of advice she had received from her manager and had found to be helpful that involved the idea of intentionally distracting oneself by focusing on work-related issues:

Well, actually, this is where my manager's advice works, it [your work] distracts you: when you have work, your mind is completely somewhere else. On the other hand, when I work from home, I have more time to check the news, pick up my phone, or if someone sends me a notification. So when it's an online process, you interact more with devices and the internet, so you end up reading more and thinking about it more. And it seems to me that it kind of pulls you deeper into all of it.

She said, "You can't get stuck on it. No matter how hard it is, you have to keep moving. You have to work."

c2. Co-regulation through workplace relationships

Another aspect of the workplace that the interviewees seem to perceive as supportive is the interactions with colleagues who share a similar experience due to

living in the same city. For example, such interactions include morning conversations after a nighttime shelling or during the daytime alerts. Mariia described such morning conversations as a ritual:

Every morning after attacks, we gather for morning coffee, and it's like, 'What did you hear? Where were you? How was it?' And we talk through these night events. It's kind of a morning ritual whenever something happens at night.

Hanna described a similar situation as a part of how a normal work day begins: "So, a normal day. Well then, what? Work starts. First, you talk with your colleagues about how the night went. How did everyone arrive? Is everything okay?" Mariia highlighted how she perceives these interactions as important: "Plus, I'm a person who needs this office socialization, and I have really great colleagues who I'm interested in being around, and, well, for me it's not torture to have to go somewhere."

The interviewees also described how they reference others' reactions in the office to calibrate their own perception of threat during air alerts. Olha, whose office has an open plan, describes how she perceives the link between her own emotional reaction and the reactions of other people in the office: "I work in an open space, so basically you can see everyone, you can hear everyone. There are certain peculiarities of an office like this," she elaborated:

At the same time it also depends, if we're talking about the office, it really depends on the attitude of the people around you. You know, if people around are overall calm, I'm kind of like la-la-la [calm, carefree]. But when there's someone who starts sounding the alarm, like, no, this is some kind of dangerous missile, we need to run downstairs and hide. We're like, well, maybe we'll just stand behind a wall or something.

For Kateryna, the mere presence of other people nearby in the office seems to support her sense of safety: "But on the other hand, sometimes I feel calmer in the office than at home. Because I understand that there are other people around me who support me, who give me a sense of safety and calm."

c3. Space for emotional vulnerability

A subcategory of the experience that emerged across several interviewees' accounts was the flexibility, support, and implicit acknowledgment of the exhaustion or the challenges introduced by Russia's war. The interviewees described how their employers allowed for flexibility around schedules, commitments, or locations on workdays following the intense nighttime attacks. For example, Mariia phrased this

directly: "But we don't have this invincibility template [at work], cause we have a rule that if there are large attacks, you can take a remote day, or if I'm supposed to come at 9, I can come later." This also surfaces in other interviews. For example, Kateryna shared: "Very often, when we have meetings at the office after nights like that, of course, they get moved by an hour or two." Lina also described a situation in one of the workplaces she had over the course of the full-scale Russian invasion: "I would often just stay, connect to the EcoFlow they gave us at work, and work from home," and "You could literally just say, 'I didn't get enough sleep, I won't be in today,' or work from home."

While the interviewees seem to value the lesser strictness of workplace requirements following nighttime attacks, another angle surfaces regarding the possibility of reacting according to one's own risk tolerance, which was highlighted by Mariia:

Because, well, again, for example, when it comes to air raids, it's a super voluntary thing. If I'm okay and... I feel comfortable. During an air raid, I stay in the office, for example, nobody is forcing me out or anything. Well, and if I'm not okay, if I'm scared, I can go to the shelter and even sit in the shelter the whole day, or say, 'sorry, I'm taking my laptop and going home because my child is there.' Well, and that would be perceived normally. That's it.

Several participants suggested that any accommodation was not part of a formal workplace policy but rather an implicit norm shaped by the shared experience of employees, management, and sometimes the employer. Olha described it this way:

It's a completely normal situation that I'll be late, and that's okay. Or I won't come [to the office] because I didn't sleep all night, and that's okay. So, fortunately, my department's team lead is extremely understanding about all of this. Because she lives in the same conditions, sometimes she's even the one who initiates it, like those who didn't sleep enough, don't force yourself, don't suffer, have a rest.

Mariia illustrated how a morning call to work can look like:

'Hello, I won't be present today because there's an air raid alert till noon.' And again, people reacted completely okay to that. But I think this is generally, probably, part of the Ukrainians' experience, and these are things we've gotten used to.

Hanna also highlighted how the common experience for the employees, the clients, and the management may affect the workplace interactions: "We try to do the

work to the maximum that we can offer, but nobody is going to demand anything extra, because everyone lives here and is dealing with the same things." She also said:

At work it's the same too, it can be like, 'oh, sorry, we didn't attach some document to the contract', 'ah, well, with a night like that, totally understandable'. Or if you have, like, a weekly meeting, well, it begins: a colleague asks how you are, whether everything's okay, 'we have these and these tasks, but we understand that if you didn't get enough sleep, then that's okay'. You can leave work earlier, for example, if you have such a need. So there is understanding present absolutely completely and fully. Or, like, some task, postponing a deadline, because everyone is living in these circumstances.

The interviewees also described the effort their colleagues and they made to support comfort during the working day. Mariia described this as a deliberate effort to create comfortable conditions: "So overall, of course, it's surreal [absurd] and terrible, but we've gotten used to it, and we look for these points of comfort even in these conditions, just to make things more comfortable." Kateryna:

But then I come to the office, and there's some pie, and the tea is ready. People try to make these meetings as comfortable as possible after air raid alerts, long nights, attacks, and it really helps bring your mental state back to normal after difficult nights.

This could be linked to the broader context of maintaining pre-war daily routines as deliberate rituals used to regulate emotional states and restore the sense of normality in wartime conditions. For example, Mariia reflected on the role of drinking a morning cup of coffee:

I think it's a ritual thing. For office workers, it's very much a ritual. That's it. Well, it's like a gathering point. Before [before the full-scale war], we would meet with colleagues, cause we, like, I come to work, we make coffee and go to the chill zone, spend about 15 minutes talking about life. Same at lunch. There's a café near my office with a really great barista. We go there. I mean, we mostly go to visit her, but you can't really come and not get anything, that's not really... plus you want something tasty. So yeah, it's a ritual thing.

Hanna suggested an interpretation of how this morning coffee ritual has become intertwined with the perceptions of the war-induced conditions:

Well, probably it's not always three cups of coffee, but it's a cool symbolism, I'd really keep it. There's just the cup of coffee that at first was being brewed, like, on a camping stove, and accordingly, we understand that there's no

electricity; well, there were very major blackouts, we all lived through that. Then the second cup, for example, later on, like, the coffee was already being brewed from an EcoFlow [a portable power station], because I have a good job. And they gave me an EcoFlow But overall, for some reason, coffee just became this kind of symbol for me, that the workday starts with coffee. No matter what happened, you start work, you start it with coffee. So maybe it's already some kind of ritual even. Like I'm saying, shelling or no shelling, something happened or didn't happen, you wake up, you go make yourself coffee. And that's also about grounding, about consistency. No matter what really happens, everything keeps moving forward.

d.Maintaining a sense of agency

d1. Humor and reframing for coping

In addition to the perceived supportive function of work, the interviewees discussed several additional ways to manage the psychological load of the war, such as humor or reframing. For example, Mariia described how she applies this approach to her workday, as well as the war-induced circumstances:

So even if I go to the office and I have a really boring and uninteresting day, like when there's a lot of work in a Word document, for example, which is not interesting and not cool, I still try to, well, imagine that I'm in the Adventure Time series. And kind of turn it into, well, gamify it somehow.

And I guess I also try to gamify these Oreshnik situations [Oreshnik missile attacks], because I understand that... well, for example, I'm telling you about it today, and I'm like, oh, what happened today? We drank coffee today. We drank coffee because we went downstairs because of a missile. We were giggling about the missile. Then there was this cool barista, we talked to her today. Like, well, I just treat it as an adventure. Something interesting happened. Unusual. That's it.

Lina described a similar emotional response she had to an instance of hearing explosions in the sky while standing outside her workplace building in the evening:

Wow, I saw an explosion. I don't know, for me it was like, wow! I even remember telling my boyfriend that I just saw it over there, and then I recorded a video message where you could see these lines, like from, I don't know, air defense, well, overall, from missiles. Cause it was also the beginning, maybe

the year 2023, and there were these lines across the sky, and I was like, wow, it's like fear mixed with some, I don't know, you could even call it excitement. Like, it's very mixed feelings, and if you think about it, it's kind of stupid, well, you're supposed to feel only fear.

This seems to be in line with the experiences of other interviewees. Olha shared: "And there's this feeling of some kind of triumph if an alert starts right when you've just crossed over [the subway bridge], it's like some emotional swings, of course." Hanna: "But actually, when something like this happens at work, it feels like something different, something weird, it kind of stands out from some [pauses] routine." She elaborated:

For example, you're studying at school, you have some kind of structured learning process, a lesson, and you know that at this hour this lesson will end, and then breaks go like this, and that, and then something comes in and shifts the whole learning process. Let me give a positive example instead of a negative one, for example, I don't know, someone comes in to advertise some excursion, or they're going to photograph you for graduation albums. So it throws you off track, it's something unusual, something strange. It disrupts the whole process.

Hanna provided an example of a situation she perceived as an adventurous moment:

When you're driving in a taxi across the bridge, and above you they're shooting down Shaheds, you feel like you're in some kind of, I don't know, intergalactic movie. Sci-fi, those sounds, spaceships. Somehow, it doesn't feel like reality. Really, you watch it, and you're like, well, I'm going home, I always make it home anyway. So it kind of, how to say it, shakes you up a little, but not critically.

This sort of excitement, a sense of something unusual, or a feeling of curiosity also appears in the interviewees' accounts of interactions they have with colleagues. Mariia: "Very often, yeah, probably very often these kinds of conversations happen, like today with Oreshnik: 'I wonder if it will land somewhere here?' 'Will I be able to see it flying?'" She provided an example of a situation:

It was evening, and at that time something—either Shaheds, no, not Shaheds, but some kind of Orlan, some UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle]—was flying over Kyiv and they just couldn't shoot it down. And we literally all went out onto the balcony, it was also, like, the 18th or 19th floor, and it was an open

balcony, not glazed in, this big balcony... And we're standing there looking, and like, okay, where, where is this drone? I want to look at it.

Lina shared a similar experience:

'Interesting. So, like, where is it going to fly to? Well, if it were ballistic, we probably would've already seen it. It should've already flown over while we were going down and all that. Well, yeah.' And we're just standing there like that. Then they write that there were explosions in Rusanivka [district]. And then we hear that, like, something exploded, it was not far from the Dnipro [river] area. And we're like, 'hmm, nothing's visible.' And, like, we were standing there almost waiting for when we would finally see it.

Jokes and humorous interpretations of events also have a place in the participants' accounts of their experiences. Mariia said:

These kinds of conversations, like, when we try to turn it into jokes, and, well, I guess it's a defense reaction, probably a way to relax. It's just become so basic that we, like, we as a team don't even think about it anymore.

It seems to be similar for Hanna:

And she [her manager, who is a foreigner and lives abroad] was really impressed by it, and she would always ask me how I was, whether everything was fine, everything was okay. And I caught myself thinking that I couldn't really answer her seriously. For some reason, everything came out as jokes. For example, after she messaged me, 'Oh, what a night, how are you?' I replied, 'Thanks for caring, everything's fine. Three cups of coffee and I'm back to the work process'."

People understand me, and my jokes too, let's say, people who work in the office, and even if these are some of my colleagues who live abroad, and I tell them things like, let's say, that today I'm making coffee on a camping stove.

The camping stove has never seen an actual camping trip, only my kitchen.

Olha reflected on how she sees the possible causes behind the detached reactions to threat: "Maybe this sense of anxiety has even become somewhat atrophied, because if you are anxious all the time, you just won't be able to handle it." Mariia also interprets the muted reaction as an adaptive response to the prolonged exposure to threat: "I'm trying to think about what guides me when... [pause] probably more curiosity. If you live constantly in fear, that's not okay. Your brain starts to kind of

melt a little, and we all understand that." This reflects on the previously mentioned state of exhaustion, which includes depleted emotional resources.

The humor and reframing mentioned in the interviews serve as means of emotional self-regulation that enable everyday functioning amidst the wartime conditions. Mariia outlined that from an uninvolved perspective, such behavior and reaction might seem peculiar: "We're living in a pretty surreal [absurd] world, cause there's literally a threat of a nuclear ballistic missile, and we're like, well, let's go smoke and drink coffee outside, we're not going to just sit in the office." She illustrated a sequence of events that is ordinary for a wartime workday in Ukraine: "I come to the office and read the updates, like summary, military news roundup, and then during the day there are alerts, and we go drink coffee." This links back to how normal war-induced threats have become in the interviewees' perception, and how little they stand out within other events of a day. Lina shared that she had only had office work experience during the full-scale war, and her remark captures how the objective threats are perceived as an interruption of an otherwise ordinary, normal workday: "Maybe it would be boring otherwise. I mean, now, well, what now? An alert—it's a break. Before that, what? You just sit at the computer for eight hours? Okay, this was a joke, it's a joke."

d2. Maintaining professional identity

The interviewees seem to assign significant importance to fulfilling work responsibilities as a way to maintain professional identity. Olha elaborated on the role of work in her life:

At the same time, for me it's continuous learning, it's a kind of challenge, because there's an opportunity to gain different-different kinds of experience, become more professional not only in event management itself, but also in terms of general knowledge through the preparation process. So, kind of, I would want things to be different, but for now, work is a major part of my life, and I feel I need to invest in it. Even as a line on a CV, so that I can have broader opportunities in the future.

Kateryna also mentioned prioritizing her professional ambition even in times of war: "I could just shut down ... and do nothing. But also, I understand that I still have a life, it's still going on, I have goals, and I have my creative self-realization, which is my top priority."

Hanna said:

I've realized that work, it's not a burden for me, but the opposite. Meaning, when I work, I feel like I'm gaining some kind of expertise, I feel better about myself because I become more confident in myself, in what I do, and connections get built. Accordingly, work is pretty important for me. If we leave aside the fact that everyone needs money, of course, because you can't get anywhere without it, and you can't earn it without work, accordingly.

Then, let's be honest, I place professional activity above my mental health. Then, probably, professional activity, and I really enjoy it when my work brings something positive, or when the team notices that some idea or suggestion of mine makes some meaningful contribution to the work, leading to some improvements afterward, and discussions happen because of it. I genuinely feel some kind of self-realization from that, even. Not for long, but I do feel it.

At the same time, the war seems to have changed the vector of professional ambition for some of the interviewees. Kateryna said:

So yes, the war and the whole situation, of course, have significantly changed the direction of my professional activity already. And now, for example, when I think about my future path, it will most likely involve larger formats in video production: films about the consequences of the war, films about communities. So after all, more, how to say, focused on showing what is happening now, rather than creating entertainment content.

Mariia said:

And I understand, like, this is kind of a controversial point, it needs to be understood correctly: if there hadn't been a war, I wouldn't have ended up where I am now, and partly I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. Of course, it would be better if none of us had ended up here at all. I mean, obviously. But if we're already here, at this point of the war, and it's basically already the fifth year, then I'd rather be here and doing what I'm doing than anywhere else. Maybe it would be better to be in the Defense Forces [of Ukraine], but so far, I'm not ready for mobilization. Yeah. Although that's also, like, it's actually constantly in the back of my mind.

Mariia's quote highlights not only that the vector of her professional activity had changed, but also that she was considering joining the military in Ukraine, which also surfaces in Kateryna's interview. Kateryna said:

But now I understand that I'm exactly where I want to be, I'm exactly where I'm needed, because this is exactly the field. If not the military, then the second choice is charity work, reconstruction, working with wounded people, or something along those lines.

Mariia summarized how the perceived personal contribution may affect her mental state:

I understand that at the same time, It's a drop in the ocean, and all these thoughts that there are people doing more important things and so on, but I'm also doing something important, and I also have some competencies that other people don't have. Yeah. And that really helps me, somehow keep it together.

d3. Preserving personal autonomy

Participants describe various ways of preserving a sense of personal autonomy, as well as limiting or rejecting different manifestations of victimhood. Hanna described how she felt uncomfortable being pitied or offered too much support by her manager, who is a foreigner living outside of Ukraine:

I don't know, maybe I sound strange to foreigners, but she kept looking for these lyrical topics and sympathy in our conversation, and I didn't want to engage in that kind of sad vibe of the messages. So I kind of deflect it. I don't know if it's a coping strategy or if it's just how my psyche adapted, but when, after the next attacks, I would get messages like 'How are you?', I would keep that same tone, like, 'Thanks, my workplace gave us an EcoFlow, it's basically a member of the family now, that's great, I can charge my laptop, I'm back to work, everything's fine.' And I feel like for foreigners it sounds a bit strange, because I sense this empathy, this pity from them. But I don't want to be pitied, I don't want to be, I don't know, I probably just don't want to be pitied.

This unwillingness to accept pity from others seems to be related to the overall assessment of the situation in Ukrainian society. The participants mentioned how they compared their own circumstances to the conditions other groups have to deal with. Hanna: "It makes me very uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. I already mentioned why. Because I think there are people who have it worse. And I think that, let's say, verbal or material support is better directed toward those people." She said:

Because I, you know, living in Kyiv, I understand that I have water, okay, there's no electricity, but at work I have an EcoFlow. Okay, there's no heating,

but I have a camping stove, I can heat something up for myself. Meaning, there are people who have it much worse.

Hanna also shared how she compares her own situation with those of the people in the military:

And this is us only talking about civilians, I'm not even mentioning the guys and girls who are defending us. That's not even comparable at all. The level of hardship, well, excuse me, we might have two or three nights without sleep, while they permanently don't get sleep. So really, I'm just uncomfortable with this.

Olha said:

Maybe sometimes I have this inner fear of not abusing the opportunity to stay at home. There's this kind of inner voice that's like, well, I mean, I'm probably not that tired after all. Someone else had it worse. And not allowing myself to give in to some kind of laziness.... And I'm like, well, okay, I'll go [to the office] after all. Then I arrive, and there are three people sitting in the office.

Mariia describes her decision not to go to the shelter as a response to the source of the threat, which is Russia. In this framing, taking protective action as a reaction to the threat would mean complying with the intention of the aggressor, which she is unwilling to do. Mariia:

And usually it's, like ... unpleasant ... This is a very toxic and very bad take ... but Russia is not going to make me take that much action, like walking up and down to the 15th floor without electricity. That's too much honor for them.

She also elaborates how even the physical effort of going downstairs to the shelter becomes perceived as something that would benefit the aggressor, that is why she contrasts it with what she chooses to do instead:

And when I see that it's definitely not flying toward my district, but somewhere else, like, let's say, toward Bortnychi or something, I'm like, well, they don't deserve for me to do this many things because of their stupid Shaheds, to even do any kind of physical activity at all. I have more interesting things to do here. I'd rather sit on my phone and collect crystals [in a game] because I want to, not because of them.

One of such deliberate decisions that goes against the idea of prioritizing personal safety seems to be the very decision to remain in Ukraine during the war. Kateryna:

You feel unsafe, but you love the place where you were born so much, you love your country so much, you love your people so much, that you don't leave. And you simply decide for yourself, I decide for myself, to exist in these conditions and to live as much as it's possible.

Most likely, all of us have some kind of trauma because of this, PTSD or something like that, but we make this choice for ourselves to stay here, to work here, to work so that this country keeps developing, so that, in my case, the consequences of the war are minimized, and people can continue living. Yeah, it's dangerous, yeah, it's unpleasant, but it's our choice. And it's exactly this choice that helps us be who we want to be and helps us do what we want to do. That's probably how I'd describe it.

2.3 THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS IN THE CONTEXT OF EXISTING RESEARCH

The present study explored how young office workers in Kyiv experience, interpret, and navigate everyday working life under conditions of persistent threat of Russian aerial strikes at night and during the working day. While a growing body of research has examined the psychological impact of Russia's war against Ukraine, much of this literature has focused on populations whose exposure to threat is most acute and immediate, including those living near the frontlines, internally displaced persons, refugees, and other groups whose pre-war routines have been fundamentally disrupted. Considerably less attention has been paid to civilians who continue to maintain pre-war patterns of daily life, such as going to work, sustaining professional roles, and engaging in social routines normal for an outside-of-war context. The findings of the present study address this gap, offering insight into the psychological work involved in maintaining everyday work-related functioning under conditions that are threatening, but also not totally disruptive.

The findings of this study offer a phenomenological account of how female office workers in Kyiv experience living and working during an ongoing armed conflict. The four superordinate themes outlined are as follows: normalization of war, exhaustion as a condition of everyday functioning, work as a support mechanism, and maintaining a sense of agency. This suggests that the interviewees perceive their experience as a complex combination of processes involving adaptation to the ongoing threat and exhaustion from living in unsafe circumstances. The interviewees describe their experience as neither ordinary nor catastrophic, but rather as circumstances of ongoing attempts to maintain everyday functioning, including work responsibilities, during Russia's war against Ukraine. The following section discusses each superordinate theme in turn, drawing connections among this study's findings, relevant theoretical frameworks, and other studies conducted in Ukraine and other contexts.

Normalization of war as an adaptive process

The first superordinate theme, normalization of war, represents the interviewees' perception of wartime circumstances as having gradually become absorbed into normal everyday life events. Across the four subordinate themes (war as a routine, adaptation to absurdity, regulation of threat perception, and prioritizing work commitments under threat), the participants described a slow, progressive

adjustment of what is perceived as normal in wartime Kyiv: participants continued to work, commute, prioritize deadlines, and fulfill professional obligations, pushing wartime threat and disruptions into the background conditions of normal life. The normalization of war involved both deliberate coping strategies and an often unintentional process of becoming accustomed to new circumstances.

For most participants, working during wartime had stopped feeling unusual. Some struggled to identify anything that clearly distinguished their current working life from ordinary professional experience. Even nighttime aerial attacks or alerts were described as an ordinary part of the experience, resulting in physical tiredness and emotional exhaustion. Participants noted that the scale of workplace accommodations for war-related disruptions had lowered over the years of the full-scale invasion, as employers and clients, along with the employees themselves, stopped treating alerts or shelling as significant reasons for being absent or late to work.

This process of routinization is theoretically consistent with the framework of Continuous Traumatic Stress (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013), which describes the experience of living through ongoing danger and adapting to maintain daily functioning in such conditions. Within the CTS framework, the gradual merging of threat into routine is not a pathological but a functional adaptation to a dangerous environment. Heightened alertness in such circumstances is viewed as a rational, appropriate response to threat (as opposed to being viewed as dysfunctional in post-traumatic stress). The routinization of wartime work can therefore be understood as a behavioral expression of this adaptation: a reorganization of daily life around the persistent threat.

This finding aligns with qualitative and ethnographic research on civilian life under prolonged conflict. Borell's (2008) qualitative study of Beirut residents after the 2005 terrorist attacks and Maček's (2009) ethnographic account of Sarajevo under siege describe a cognitive reorganization of everyday life that allowed people to continue functioning. Stein et al. (2018), who tracked Israeli civilians across four waves of rocket fire exposure, discovered that what may appear as habituation is not necessarily reflected in any reduction in distress, as the tolerance the civilians developed seemed to coexist with persistent psychological load. This aligns with the present study's findings within the categories of normalization of threat and exhaustion as a condition of everyday functioning.

The present findings extend the existing literature in the institutional angle of normalization. Prior studies focus primarily on individual and community-level

processes of adaptation. The present data reveal that normalization also has a place within occupational structures: the employers are gradually withdrawing accommodations, and near-normal attendance and productivity become expected. This suggests that normalization during wartime is not only a psychological process occurring within individuals but is also socially produced through workplace norms.

Alongside the overall normalization, participants described a feeling of discrepancy between the perceived level of threat and the muted emotional response they and those around them had. This was described as a reflective awareness of the gap between what participants felt and what they believed they had to feel. Participants described hearing nearby explosions without ducking and going to a shelter while thinking about work tasks. Several interviewees articulated unease about this adaptation, with one participant (Mariia) describing this as getting used to events one “shouldn’t get used to”. Some described moments of derealization, such as an inability to determine which of two coexisting realities (the workday or the war) was “real.”

Detachment and dissociation align with the CTS framework (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013). At the same time, the reflexive awareness of one's own detachment can be understood through Lazarus and Folkman's (1986) transactional model as a form of secondary appraisal: participants view their own lack of reaction as a potential threat, and in the process of secondary appraisal, they find themselves lacking the psychological resources necessary to react in accordance with the perceived level of threat (e.g., Lina’s account of how not reacting to a nearby explosion in the sky gets perceived as a potentially “stupid” behavior). The interviewees are not only appraising external threats but also evaluating their own responses, which they find troubling.

These findings resonate with the broader body of literature (e.g., Fatima et al., 2025; Eagle & Kaminer, 2013; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2016) and with Mezheritska's (2024) concept of Ukrainians living through the full-scale war as “living in two realities.” However, most existing accounts treat normalization as something that happens to people rather than something they observe happening to themselves. The present study introduces what may be described as meta-normalization – a reflexive awareness of one's own adaptation, such as participants watching themselves adapt to an ongoing threat and find this disturbing. The ongoing effort required to monitor and evaluate one's own emotional responses may itself constitute a source of psychological strain, which may require further research.

Participants also described evaluating threats and adjusting their behavior accordingly. Rather than following official guidance to seek shelter at all times,

participants described drawing distinctions between types of threats (Shahed drones, ballistic missiles, the Oreshnik), considering their own location within the building, the characteristics of the building, the location within Kyiv, the time of day, and the proximity of sites that they perceive as likely or unlikely to be targeted. The scope and evaluation of these aspects were described as evolving over the course of the war, resulting in fewer exemplary behaviors over time. Participants were generally aware when their behavior deviated from official recommendations and framed such choices as a consequence of the recommendations being unsustainable across numerous alerts, as well as of general habituation and tiredness.

This process is a direct illustration of Lazarus and Folkman's (1986) transactional model of stress and coping, in which primary appraisal (assessing the nature and severity of a threat) and secondary appraisal (assessing available coping resources and options) are described as dynamic, continuous cognitive processes. The participants have accumulated knowledge about the characteristics of different weapons, attack patterns, and the relative safety of different locations, and they use this knowledge in real time to decide when to seek shelter and when to continue working.

This finding is consistent with Borell's (2008) Beirut study, which describes residents' construction of mental maps of safe and unsafe routes and times, as well as Baum's (2012) concept of emergency routine. The present findings expand the idea that threat regulation is also a collective and social process, as participants described colleagues making collective decisions about whether to seek shelter. It is also worth highlighting the normative complexity of threat regulation: participants are simultaneously managing their own threat perception, their employers' expectations, and their own awareness that their calibrated response is, in Hanna's words, "the wrong behavior."

Several participants described having to perform professionally during the workday immediately after a difficult night or during alerts: connecting to work calls from building lobbies during active alerts and hiding visible distress when dealing with clients. The prioritization of work commitments under threat can be understood from a Conservation of Resources (COR) theory perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), as maintaining work represents an effort to preserve important resources: professional role, income, social contact, and sense of purpose, at a time when these and other resources are under threat. The perceived role of work as a support mechanism will be highlighted later in this section.

Exhaustion under ongoing threat

The second superordinate theme, exhaustion as a condition of everyday functioning, includes three subordinate themes: living with exhaustion under ongoing threat, disruption of everyday routines, and persistent anticipation of threat. The experience of exhaustion is described as common in society, but the social norm is to continue functioning regardless.

All participants described a chronic exhaustion that affected their everyday behavior. This exhaustion was frequently cited as a reason for not following safety protocols: participants described being too tired to seek shelter. Exhaustion also manifested as irritability and anger, often directed at Russia as the source of the disruptions, and as interpersonal friction, such as minor quarrels with colleagues. At the same time, participants described this shared exhaustion as a source of social cohesion: in Hanna's words, a "unity of sleepy flies," a collective state of mutual understanding and forgiveness among people who had all endured the same nighttime attack. The exhaustion described by participants is consistent with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which explains that stress and burnout arise from the ongoing depletion of resources, including sleep. During wartime, resource loss is not a single event but a continuous process. Kalfon Hakhmigari and Diamant (2025) apply this framework directly to wartime burnout, highlighting routine disruptions and sleep disturbances among other variables. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) provides a complementary lens: during wartime conditions, job demands are elevated while resources, such as organizational support, predictable schedules, and physical safety, are limited, creating the conditions for accelerated burnout. The CTS framework (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013; Zasiiekina & Martyniuk, 2025) adds that, in contexts of ongoing stress, exhaustion reflects the physiological and psychological costs of sustained hyperarousal. This study's IPA data align with empirical evidence on exhaustion among wartime working populations (e.g., Tsybuliak et al., 2023; Hakhmigari & Diamant, 2025) and provide a phenomenological account of how participants experience it. Participants described exhaustion as a factor that affected their decisions about whether to seek shelter in ways that they themselves recognized as potentially dangerous. This suggests that the psychological cost of chronic exhaustion under wartime conditions extends beyond well-being and professional functioning into the domain of physical safety. The accounts also highlight the social and collective dimension of exhaustion: the "unity of sleepy flies" described by participants suggests that shared exhaustion functions not

only as a source of interpersonal friction but also as a source of social cohesion, generating mutual recognition and solidarity among people navigating the same conditions.

Participants described routine disruptions that they perceived as a significant source of daily strain. The most concrete disruption was to commuting, which led to uncertainty and additional planning. Beyond commuting, participants described the disruption caused by blackouts and the absence of heating: working in jackets or relying on the charge of portable power stations. Several participants noted that these disruptions were individually small but cumulatively significant, and that the loss of control over basic daily conditions was itself a source of distress. Mariia's observation that "there is a very large layer of everyday harm that nobody talks about, because people are actually ashamed to talk about it" points to a social norm of minimizing these disruptions in the face of larger collective suffering.

The psychological significance of routine disruption is well established in the stress and coping literature. Kalfon Hakhmigari and Diamant (2025) describe daily routine as a functional and psychological resource that provides psychobiological cues for everyday actions. Within a COR framework (Hobfoll, 1989), the loss of routine constitutes a loss of a resource. Liu et al.'s (2024) study covering 0.9 million individuals across 32 countries confirms that routine disruption is associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and general psychological distress. Miller & Rasmussen (2010, 2024) provide the theoretical framework that most directly captures the participants' experience: their ecological model of mental health in conflict settings identifies daily stressors, including disrupted routines and infrastructural instability, contributing to psychological distress. The experience of uncertainty described by participants involves not knowing how long an alert will last, whether to wait or switch transport. This experience seems consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1986) secondary appraisal of one's available coping resources and options in a constantly changing situation. The findings also align with Tsybuliak et al.'s (2025) qualitative study of Ukrainian researchers, who described working amid air raids, blackouts, and infrastructure damage as a defining feature of their wartime professional experience. Kessler et al. (2024), in their qualitative study of COVID-19 lockdown disruptions, similarly found that the loss of routine contributed to a sense of disconnection and that constructing new habits required significant cognitive and emotional effort.

The present findings contribute to the literature by providing a phenomenological account of how infrastructural and logistical disruptions are

experienced from the inside, not as abstract resource losses but as specific moments of uncertainty. They also highlight the social norm of minimizing everyday disruptions in the context of larger collective suffering. Mariia's observation that people are "ashamed to talk about" the everyday harm of the war because it seems trivial compared to deaths and destruction points to a form of self-silencing that may itself contribute to the cumulative psychological burden. An explicit social permission to acknowledge and process the smaller disruptions of wartime life may be an important dimension of psychological support in conflict settings.

Participants also described a state of chronic alertness that remained even in moments of relative safety, such as at work and in the absence of any active alert. They shared that their perceived state of psychological readiness did not switch off between alerts. Several articulated this directly, such as in Olha's words, "you never really get used to it," or Kateryna's "we never feel safe." This is a direct expression of the hypervigilance that the CTS framework (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013) identifies as an adaptive response to an environment in which threat is genuinely present and ongoing. The nervous system remains in a state of preparedness because the threat has not ended. The concept of allostatic load (McEwen, 1998; Faraji, 2026) provides a complementary framework for understanding the physiological dimension of this persistent alertness. Under conditions of ongoing threat, the stress response is never fully deactivated, and the resulting allostatic load—the physiological cost of maintaining preparedness—contributes to the chronic exhaustion described in the previous sub-theme. The finding is consistent with other research on hypervigilance and chronic threat exposure (e.g., Stein et al., 2018; Kurapov et al., 2024; Borell, 2008). The present study provides a phenomenological account of what chronic hypervigilance feels like as a background condition of everyday working life.

Work and the workplace as psychological resources

The third superordinate theme, work as a support mechanism, describes a set of experiences in which the workplace and work function as means of supporting psychological well-being. Across three subordinate themes (work provides a sense of stability, co-regulation through workplace relationships, and space for emotional vulnerability), participants described the workplace as a source of predictability, social grounding, and implicit permission to feel affected by wartime conditions.

Several participants described work as a source of psychological stability that was particularly valuable on days following nighttime attacks. The predictability of

a working day (e.g., knowing where the participant needs to go and what the schedule would look like) was described as a foundation to tread on amidst general uncertainty. Participants described work as something that, as Mariia said, "pulls you out" of the unpleasant wartime routine, providing a "predictable scenario" in a context where not much feels predictable. The office was also described as a set of practical resources: a place with electricity during blackouts, a "resilience hub" (in Kateryna's words) that could be accessed when being at home felt too overwhelming. Participants also shared that they intentionally used work as a cognitive distraction, directing attention toward tasks and away from news feeds and the war's mental load. Working from the office, even when a remote option is available, was noted as particularly effective for this purpose.

The experiences described by participants directly illustrate the latent psychological functions that Jahoda (1982) identified as the core of employment's contribution to well-being: time structure, social contact, collective purpose, status, and regular activity. In Jahoda's model, these functions are described as latent, meaning they are not the primary reason people go to work. In times of war, when many other sources of structure and meaning are disrupted, these latent functions become especially important. Tulk and Mantler's research (2025) highlighted that a sense of normalcy derived from working significantly was associated with lower psychological distress during a crisis. The findings align with Tsybuliak et al.'s (2025) qualitative study of Ukrainian researchers, which documented how continuing professional engagement provided a sense of purpose and structure that helped maintain functioning amid air raids and blackouts. The Emergency Routine concept (Nuttman-Shwartz & Baum, 2012) highlighted that professionals in shared traumatic realities rely on their work roles and routines to maintain order and purpose when the broader environment is chaotic. Beyond the existing literature, this study's participants described not only passively benefiting from the structure of work but also actively using work as a tool to redirect attention away from the war as a form of deliberate coping. Hanna's account of her manager's advice to focus on work-related tasks rather than the wartime reality frames it as an explicit strategy. The finding also highlights the infrastructural dimension of the workplace as a source of stability. The office, as a place with electricity, heating, and internet access, represents a form of practical support specific to the wartime context.

Additionally, participants described their interactions with colleagues as a significant source of psychological support, particularly in the form of morning

conversations following nighttime attacks. These conversations were described as rituals that allowed participants to process the night's events in the company of others who had shared the same experience. Beyond verbal processing, participants described using the visible emotional reactions of colleagues in the open-plan office as a reference point for calibrating their own threat perception during air alerts: if colleagues were calm, the participant felt calmer; if a colleague expressed nervousness, the participant's own worry was amplified. The mere physical presence of colleagues in the office was also described as a source of comfort, independent of any specific interaction. For some participants, the office was experienced as safer than home precisely because other people were there.

The experiences described by participants are consistent with the concept of co-regulation, the interpersonal regulation of emotional and physiological states through social interaction (Coan & Maresh, 2014). Co-regulation theory proposes that humans are social beings whose stress response systems are calibrated not only by individual appraisal but by the presence and emotional state of other people around them. Under conditions of ongoing threat, the presence of calm, familiar others can help downregulate the stress response. Drury et al.'s (2022) qualitative study of Manchester Arena bombing survivors found that informal support was most helpful when it came from people with shared experience of the same event, as it enabled social validation, the confirmation that the survivor's emotional responses were appropriate and understandable. The participants in the present study describe a similar process: the morning coffee conversation after a nighttime attack can be viewed as a ritual of mutual validation among people who have all endured the same night. The finding is consistent with a substantial body of research on social support as a protective resource under threat (e.g., Zannbar et al., 2018; Hobfoll et al., 2007). Tsybuliak et al.'s (2025) qualitative study of Ukrainian researchers similarly highlights the importance of collegial relationships as a source of resilience, even as institutional support eroded.

All participants described a workplace culture that, to varying degrees, implicitly permitted them to acknowledge the impact of the war on their functioning. The interviewees noted that this manifested in the flexibility around schedules and attendance following intense nighttime attacks; the freedom to work from home or arrive late without formal justification; the ability to choose whether to seek any type of shelter during alerts without pressure or judgment; and a general norm of understanding and accommodation among colleagues, managers, and clients.

Participants described this accommodation not as a formal policy but as an informal norm shaped by the fact that everyone, from employees to managers, and clients were living in the same conditions. The shared experience of the war was itself the source of flexibility, as Hanna put it: "nobody is going to demand anything extra, because everyone lives here and is dealing with the same things."

The implicit permission to acknowledge vulnerability that participants describe can be understood through the lens of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) as a shared belief that the workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, including the expression of distress, uncertainty, and limitation. Under ordinary conditions, psychological safety is primarily a feature of organizational culture, but in times of war, it appears to emerge from the shared experience of threat rather than from any formal policy. Alongside the flexibility, participants described deliberate acts of comfort-making in the workplace, such as pies brought in after difficult nights, and the morning coffee ritual maintained regardless of what had happened the previous night. These can be viewed as forms of collective emotional support that helped restore a sense of normalcy. The deliberate acts of comfort-making described by participants can be understood through the lens of behavioral activation and positive affect regulation: intentional acts that introduce positive sensory and social experiences into a context dominated by threat. Mariia's description of "looking for points of comfort even in these conditions, just to make things more comfortable" reflects a form of problem-focused coping that is oriented toward managing emotional impact through the deliberate cultivation of positive micro-experiences. This also seems evident from Hanna's account of the coffee ritual as "grounding" and "consistency", "no matter what really happens, everything keeps moving forward" – she conveys this as a daily assertion that ordinary life continues despite the war. The findings resonate with Drury et al.'s (2022) observation that support is most effective when it comes from people with shared experience, because shared experience enables social validation. The present findings extend this account by providing a phenomenological description of how these norms manifest in practice during Russia's war against Ukraine.

Autonomy and identity under conditions of ongoing threat

The fourth and final superordinate theme, maintaining a sense of agency, describes a set of processes for asserting psychological autonomy in a context involving a high degree of perceived loss of control. The theme includes three

subordinate themes: humor and reframing for coping, maintaining professional identity, and preserving personal autonomy. Interviewees describe efforts to remain agents of their own experience rather than passive recipients of the war's impact.

Participants described a range of humor-based and reframing strategies that they used to manage the psychological load of the war. Interviewees described using jokes and dark humor in workplace interactions. Several participants explicitly reflected on the adaptive function of this humor, e.g., Mariia described it as a "defense reaction" and a way to relax, while also noting that from an outside perspective, such behavior might seem strange or inappropriate. The participants also noted the deliberate cognitive reframing of wartime events (e.g., treating daily events as an adventure narrative or watching a drone being shot down from an office balcony with a mixture of fear and curiosity), with one such approach being the gamification of the experience.

Steinfeld et al. (2025), in their study of Israeli TikTok humor following the October 7 attacks, identified that humor allows individuals to restore self-esteem damaged by the experience of vulnerability; it provides a means of exerting symbolic control over uncontrollable circumstances; and it functions as a psychological buffer against the heightened mortality salience that characterizes life under ongoing threat. The participants' accounts, such as Mariia's "giggling about the missile," align with these mechanisms. The gamification of threat is a form of cognitive reframing that can be understood through Lazarus and Folkman's (1986) model as a form of primary appraisal: a reinterpretation of a threatening situation as something unusual or even exciting, instead of purely dangerous. This reappraisal changes the emotional load of the threat, reducing perceived helplessness and restoring a degree of psychological agency. The finding aligns with the existing literature on humor as a coping mechanism in conflict and collective trauma (e.g., Steinfeld et al., 2025; Yehorova et al., 2023). The finding also resonates with Maček's (2009) ethnographic account of Sarajevo under siege, in which residents developed a characteristic ironic stance toward the absurdities of wartime life.

The present findings highlight the reflexive self-awareness regarding the humor and reframing described by participants. The humor described by participants is accompanied by explicit self-reflection: participants believe that treating an air alert as a break or joking about an attack are inappropriate, or that some of these cases may be viewed as strange if mentioned to an audience outside of the war zone. The present study also highlights humor and gamification that are specific to the

current technological and cultural context. The participants' descriptions of treating attacks as movie scenes and imagining themselves in science fiction films represent a form of cognitive reframing that draws on the vocabulary of digital entertainment culture that was not available to participants in earlier studies of wartime humor. This gamification of threat points to the importance of cultural and generational context in shaping the specific forms that wartime coping takes.

All participants described maintaining professional identity as a significant source of psychological stability and self-worth. This manifested as: the experience of work as a source of competence; the importance of making meaningful contributions to one's team and seeing those contributions recognized; and the framing of professional activity as a form of self-realization. Several participants also described how the war had shifted the trajectory of their professional ambition, e.g., toward documentary filmmaking about the war's consequences. Also, for some participants, it was accompanied by an awareness of the gap between their own professional contributions and the sacrifices of those in the military.

The maintenance of professional identity under wartime conditions can be understood through several theoretical frameworks. Jahoda's (1982) latent functions model identifies status and identity as core psychological functions of employment, such as the sense of having a defined role and recognized competence that work provides. Under conditions of war, when many other sources of identity and status are disrupted or uncertain, the professional role becomes a particularly important anchor for the sense of self. The war-driven redirection of professional identity, as described by several participants, can be understood through the lens of meaning-seeking in the face of adversity (Frankl, 1984; Wong, 2014). When the war disrupts the pre-existing trajectory of professional life, participants reorient their professional identity toward purposes they feel are more meaningful in the current context, such as contributing to Ukraine's resilience. This resonates with Zusman and Andrews' (2026) hermeneutic phenomenological study of Israeli nurses during COVID-19 and wartime, which found that the choice to continue working in dangerous conditions was experienced as a morally meaningful and identity-affirming act. Participants framed their continued professional engagement not simply as an occupational obligation, but as an expression of core professional values and ethical self-understanding in the face of ongoing threat. The participants in the present study described a similar process, but professional identity was primarily mentioned not as a duty but as a source of satisfaction and self-worth.

This study's findings reveal the future-oriented dimension of professional identity maintenance under wartime conditions. Several participants described their continued professional engagement not only in terms of its present value but in terms of its future implications, such as building a CV and developing expertise.

Participants described a range of deliberate strategies for preserving a sense of personal autonomy. These included: the active rejection of pity and sympathy, framed as a refusal to be cast in the role of victim; the deliberate comparison of one's own circumstances to those of others who are perceived as having it worse, which seems to function as a form of self-regulation; the framing of shelter-avoidance as a refusal to comply with the aggressor's intentions, transforming a safety decision into a political and moral act; and the framing of the decision to remain in Ukraine as a freely chosen, identity-defining act. In Kateryna's words: "It's dangerous, yeah, it's unpleasant, but it's our choice. And it's exactly this choice that helps us be who we want to be and helps us do what we want to do."

The preservation of personal autonomy described by participants can be understood through several complementary frameworks. From a self-determination theory perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2000), autonomy is the experience of one's actions as self-determined and volitional, which is a fundamental psychological need. The active assertion of autonomy, e.g., whether to take shelter or whether to accept pity, becomes an important source of psychological stability. The rejection of pity and the refusal of the victim role can be understood through the lens of identity-protective coping (Breakwell, 1986). Accepting pity from foreigners would implicitly confirm a self-image as helpless, which is incompatible with the participants' sense of themselves as resilient. The finding resonates with Fatima et al.'s (2025) analysis of Pakistani civilian resilience, which found that the refusal of the victim role is an adaptive strategy that entails suppressing distress in the service of identity maintenance.

The present study highlights the political and moral dimensions of autonomy preservation specific to the wartime context. Unlike the autonomy-preserving strategies documented in studies of other crisis contexts (e.g., COVID-19), the strategies described by this study's participants are often explicitly framed in terms of the relationship between the individual and the aggressor. Accordingly, refusing to seek shelter is viewed as a refusal to comply with Russia's intentions, and remaining in Ukraine is a choice that asserts belonging to a national community under threat.

2.4 LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of the present study need acknowledgment. The sample was small and purposively selected, comprising five participants who shared not only demographic characteristics but also a common background in a civic education program focused on developing social responsibility. While this homogeneity supports the depth of analysis appropriate to IPA, it also means that the findings cannot be generalized beyond this specific group. It is possible that the strong emphasis on agency evident in participants' accounts reflects, at least in part, the values and orientations cultivated through this shared educational experience.

Additionally, the study captures participants' experience at a single point in time, at the end of the fourth year of the full-scale invasion. Coping strategies and meaning-making processes are dynamic and evolve as the situation persists; that is why what participants described may look different at an earlier or later stage of the war. Longitudinal research with this population would offer important insight into how adaptation changes over time.

A further limitation concerns the researcher's positionality. The researcher occupies a partially insider position in relation to the studied group, as a female office worker living within the same broader sociocultural context as the participants. This may have affected both the interpretation of the data and the aspects of experience that were emphasized during analysis. At the same time, this proximity to the studied context may have facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences, supporting rapport-building during interviews and enabling more nuanced interpretation of culturally specific references and expressions. To address the risks associated with this positionality, reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the research process.

Future research might also more directly address the peculiarities of the gender dimensions of wartime work experience, the differences between professional sectors, and the experiences of civilians in other Ukrainian cities with different threat circumstances. The workplace as a site of psychological significance for civilians in war conditions remains underresearched in the existing literature, and the present findings suggest it is a productive area for further inquiry.

2.5 CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study was intended to explore the psychological aspects of the lived experience of female office workers in Kyiv amidst the threat of Russian aerial attacks. The study was based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and examined the accounts of five female office workers, exploring the peculiarities of an ordinary workday against the backdrop of Russia's war against Ukraine.

The analysis revealed four superordinate themes: normalization of war, exhaustion as a condition of everyday functioning, work as a support mechanism, and the maintenance of a sense of agency.

The first theme, normalization of war, describes how participants gradually absorbed the conditions of war into the background of everyday working life. Participants noted that air raid alerts and disrupted nights became routine features of the working day and were no longer treated as exceptional events. This process was not simply a matter of individual psychological adaptation, but was also shaped by occupational structures, such as the gradual withdrawal of workplace accommodations and growing expectations of near-normal productivity. This institutional dimension of normalization (the way in which workplaces reinforce a standard of maintaining productivity) is a finding that extends beyond what existing studies of civilian adaptation to conflict have documented.

The second theme, exhaustion as a condition of everyday functioning, describes a state of continuous psychological depletion that shaped participants' behavior in sometimes dangerous ways. Participants described being too tired to follow official safety guidelines and to fully process what was happening. This exhaustion was experienced as a permanent background condition of everyday work life. Participants also described a collective dimension of this exhaustion, expressed as a shared state of depletion that fostered cohesion and solidarity among colleagues, alongside the expected interpersonal friction. The finding that exhaustion directly influenced safety behavior, leading participants to not seek shelter during alerts, is a practically significant contribution.

The third theme, work as a support mechanism, describes how the workplace functioned as a source of psychological stability and emotional regulation. Participants shared that work provided structure and predictability at a time when other aspects of daily life were significantly unreliable. Colleagues were viewed as a source of co-regulation, both through conversation and through the mere fact of being present

together in a shared space. The workplace also became a space where emotional vulnerability was permitted: participants described morning rituals following nighttime attacks and collective acknowledgment of difficult nights as practices that helped maintain a sense of normalcy. These practices can be understood as collective rituals in the psychological sense: structured, repeated, and shared acts that reduce anxiety, provide a sense of control, and strengthen connection to the group (Hobson et al., 2018). This finding highlights the workplace not only as a site of productivity but as a set of important psychological resources in its own right.

The fourth theme, maintaining a sense of agency, describes the strategies through which participants asserted psychological autonomy in a context characterized by perceived loss of control. These strategies included the use of humor and cognitive reframing to manage the emotional load of the war; the maintenance of professional identity as a source of competence, purpose, and self-worth; and the deliberate framing of some decisions (e.g., whether to seek shelter, whether to accept sympathy, and whether to remain in Ukraine) as meaningful, belief-driven choices. A particularly important finding was the political and moral dimension of these agency-preserving strategies: participants explicitly framed everyday decisions as acts of resistance against the aggressor's intentions. This assertion of agency as a moral and political stance, not only a psychological one, is this study's contribution to the literature on coping under threat.

This study was conducted in the fifth year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Its participants were people describing their lives as they lived them, under conditions that had not ended and showed no immediate sign of doing so. What they described was adaptation to wartime conditions as a daily practice. If this account contributes anything useful, it is a more honest picture of what functioning under prolonged conflict actually looks like from the inside.

The findings of the present study carry implications for several groups: employers and organizations operating in war-affected settings, mental health practitioners working with civilian populations, and policymakers responsible for supporting working populations during prolonged crises.

The study findings suggest that wartime exhaustion should be understood as a background condition of everyday functioning produced by the cumulative effect of disrupted nights, infrastructure failures, and sustained hypervigilance. Employers should avoid the implicit expectation that employees perform at pre-war levels of productivity, and should recognize reduced capacity as a rational response to an

objectively depleted environment. Participants noted the importance of workplace accommodations, such as flexible start times, permission to work remotely after difficult nights, and tolerance for late arrivals. Employers should treat wartime flexibility not as a temporary emergency measure but as a stable, long-term policy. Predictable and consistent flexibility reduces the cognitive burden of navigating competing demands and communicates to employees that their situation is seen and acknowledged. The study also found that access to electricity, heating, internet, and basic comfort in offices was a significant psychological resource for participants. Employers operating in war-affected cities should consider investing in maintaining the office as a functional, stable space, as this serves both psychological and practical purposes.

The findings of the present study are consistent with the framework of Continuous Traumatic Stress (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013), which describes a form of psychological experience fundamentally different from post-traumatic stress. Practitioners working with Ukrainian civilians should be familiar with this framework and should avoid applying post-traumatic models that assume the threat has already passed. Interventions focused on processing past events may be less relevant to individuals still living in active, ongoing danger. Participants described a process of normalizing wartime conditions that they themselves sometimes found troubling. This may itself be a source of strain, and practitioners can help civilians recognize this awareness as a sign of psychological complexity rather than a problem to be corrected. Finally, all participants described their professional identity as a significant source of psychological stability and self-worth. Practitioners working with Ukrainian civilians could attend to the role of professional identity and consider how therapeutic work can support this resource.

A lot of psychological support programs are designed for the acute phase of a war, the period immediately following a traumatic event. The situation in Ukraine is different, as Russia's war is ongoing, with a continuous threat, and a resolution is not in sight. Support programs should be designed for the long term, with the assumption that the need for support will persist and evolve over the years.

The study identified a social norm in which the cumulative psychological cost of wartime daily life goes unacknowledged and undiscussed, in part because public discourse tends to focus on military sacrifice and large-scale destruction, leaving little space to recognize smaller, everyday harm. Policymakers and public communicators could help by explicitly naming and validating this layer of experience, framing it as

a normal and expected consequence of living under prolonged threat. This kind of societal-level validation may reduce the self-silencing that participants described and lower the threshold for seeking support.

Finally, the study found that the workplace was an important psychological resource for participants, serving as a site of structure, co-regulation, social connection, and shared meaning. This suggests that workplace-based mental health initiatives may be particularly effective for this population.

Several directions for future research emerge from these findings. First, the institutional dimension of normalization: longitudinal studies could examine how workplace productivity expectations evolved across different phases of the war, and whether organizational norms that accelerate normalization have long-term effects on employee well-being and functioning. Second, the finding that exhaustion is associated with safety behavior suggests a need for research into the threshold effects of mental depletion in conflict-affected populations: specifically, at what point sustained fatigue begins to compromise safety compliance, decision-making, ethical judgment, and professional performance. Third, the moral and political framing of agency identified in the fourth theme opens a potentially important area of inquiry into how ideological and identity-based factors shape psychological resilience under threat. Finally, as this study used a relatively homogeneous sample in a single urban context, future research should examine how these processes operate across different occupational groups and regions.

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