

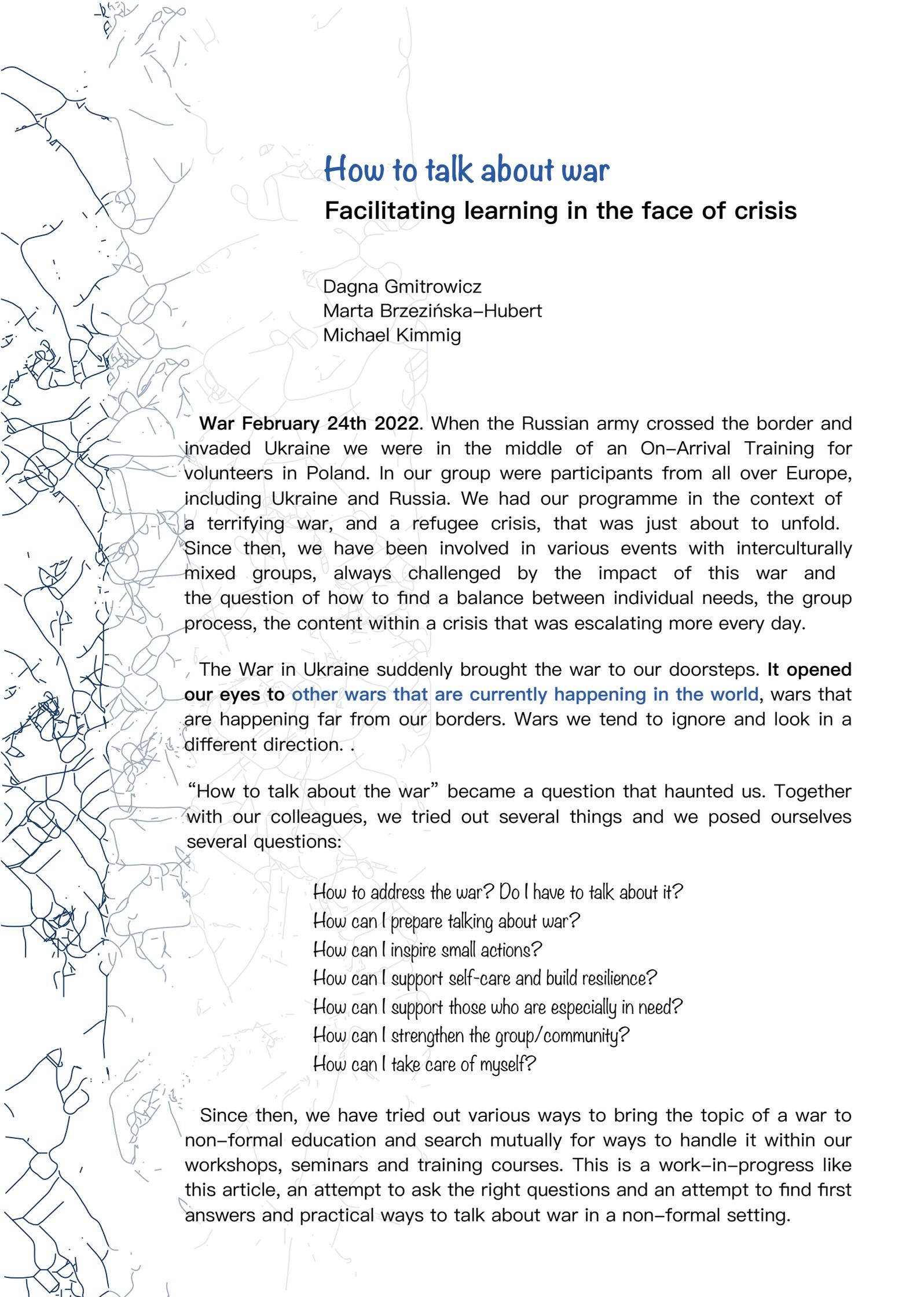
# How to talk about war

Facilitating learning in the face of crisis

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## Facilitating learning in the face of crisis

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**War February 24th 2022.** When the Russian army crossed the border and invaded Ukraine we were in the middle of an On–Arrival Training for volunteers in Poland. In our group were participants from all over Europe, including Ukraine and Russia. We had our programme in the context of a terrifying war, and a refugee crisis, that was just about to unfold. Since then, we have been involved in various events with interculturally mixed groups, always challenged by the impact of this war and the question of how to find a balance between individual needs, the group process, the content within a crisis that was escalating more every day.

The War in Ukraine suddenly brought the war to our doorsteps. It opened our eyes to **other wars that are currently happening in the world**, wars that are happening far from our borders. Wars we tend to ignore and look in a different direction. .

“How to talk about the war” became a question that haunted us. Together with our colleagues, we tried out several things and we posed ourselves several questions:

- How to address the war? Do I have to talk about it?
- How can I prepare talking about war?
- How can I inspire small actions?
- How can I support self-care and build resilience?
- How can I support those who are especially in need?
- How can I strengthen the group/community?
- How can I take care of myself?

Since then, we have tried out various ways to bring the topic of a war to non–formal education and search mutually for ways to handle it within our workshops, seminars and training courses. This is a work–in–progress like this article, an attempt to ask the right questions and an attempt to find first answers and practical ways to talk about war in a non–formal setting.

**“Connection is the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”**

Brené Brown

## **How do I address the war? Do I have to talk about it?**

The war is a crisis.. According to experts, it is a crisis causing collective trauma.

A non-formal event, a workshop, seminar, training, hosts for a short period of time a group of people that form a micro-community. Within this community there are people who are personally affected by the war in various ways and therefore are responding to it in very different ways. What is more, they probably have different understanding of what is happening especially if you work within a transcultural cooperation.

We are dealing with a very complex issue that is affecting individuals and the group to a different extent in the areas of knowledge, skills and attitudes. In addition, the purpose of our event is not explicitly to work for peace or to deal with crisis situations. Most probably our workshop or training initially is dedicated to a completely different topic and follows a different educational goal.

## **So, do I, being a trainer, have to talk about the war at all?**

Following the basic principle of the facilitation “the distraction takes priority over the agenda” the answer would be – Yes. It certainly depends how much time you need or want to spend on it and how deep you would like to go, whether you focus on facts and/or emotions. A crisis situation like the military attack in Ukraine definitely takes in most cases emotions hostage and occupies the mind. Most participants are distracted and their energy and concentration is not available to focus on the content nor the programme. In short, they are not ready to learn.

In such a situation we would recommend that you reveal the undefined monster and thus make it smaller and more definable by simply addressing this issue directly, even just saying:



**“We know, there is a war in Ukraine and it may affect us and makes it a challenge to continue with the programme.**

**However, we assume, the programme is why you came here in the first place and we should find a way together to continue with it.”**

With this you are expressing two things: first, you are aware of the crisis and its possible impact on each individual and the learning process. Second, you set a clear signal that, once the crisis is addressed, you would like to go on with the workshop, seminar or training.

From simply addressing the crisis, there are many options to start talking about the war: you might ask for impressions and comments, open a space where participants can share their feelings, etc. You might want to offer a space in the whole group, or give some time and space in smaller groups. Sometimes a time-out and walk in pairs is helpful. If people need some time for themselves, give it to them, however we would encourage that participants help one another. Talking about the war can be done right at the spot or you can agree on a certain time and place together with the group.

Whether you do it or not, to what extent and how address a crisis and open a space to talk about the war set a clear example and message for your participants. In the worst case, participants realise: “Oh, this is not a safe place to talk about it. And this facilitator is probably not the right person, if I need support.” In the best case, participants experience this situation as an invitation to share and connect on a deeper level with others, they build trust among one another and are able to develop a strong community that can support one another. And they perceive the facilitator as someone that they can come to, if they are in need.

## Practical tips, if you want to address the war

Once you address the war and offer some space to talk and share, participants are able to redirect their energy towards the content and programme. Some of them are faster, some might need more time.

There are a few additional things that you might find helpful:

- ☺ Emotions might be overwhelming, however it is important to take this space and try to understand one's own feelings and accept them as they convey an important message about our needs and limits. Think of some ways that help participants identify and name their feelings and needs, for example with these sets of cards. You may want to suggest trying out self-care techniques to strengthen resilience in the group.
- ☺ You may let participants decide about their participation in sessions, how much do they engage with the content or take part in exercises. One person might need a "time-out" alone, another participant needs a walk-and-talk. For others it might be good to keep their minds busy with the programme.
- ☺ At the same time, offer some "time-in": You can schedule a time for individual talks if needed, for example each day at 17:00 at the coffee table or in a separate breakout room in case of distant learning.

Those simple steps are strengthening self-awareness of participants. In a nutshell, it supports participants to overcome the feeling of helplessness and take charge over simple things like how much time do I need for myself and how much do I engage with others. It empowers them and gives back the ownership.

## One more thought to ponder over...

As facilitators and trainers in the field of International Youth Work and Transnational Cooperation Activities working with European Programmes like Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps this war makes us aware, why we are doing this work, why we engage in intercultural youth projects and why we bring people from different countries and cultures together. In that sense, talking about war is always talking about peace. What's your why?

## How can I prepare talking about war?

**Can I prepare for that? – Yes, definitely!** Before you address and open up this topic with your group, you might want to ask yourself first and give space to explore your own feelings. The crisis may also affect you as a person: If you are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, too engaged and/or helpless you might want to ask yourself: How do I feel about the war? Am I ready to talk about it? What would I need to handle this topic during the training from myself, from my colleagues, from the participants?

Ideally, you want to do this first step together with your co-trainer or your team. If you don't work with a team, reach out to a colleague and share your feelings with him/her. Once you gain clarity about yourself you will be less stressed and feel stronger to face a conversation about war.

Together with your colleague you can prepare and figure out how to proceed. The steps you take very much depend on the individuals and group you are working with.

If you don't want to address this topic head on, remember that you can always work on underlying intentions and reasons of International and European Programs that bring young people together in order to meet, learn, build relationships across borders while engaging in meaningful actions.

### How to talk about war

If you go through various articles, interviews or videos you find a lot of recommendations on how to talk about war with children and youth, but not so many if you work with adults.

#### If you are working with children and kids...

If you are working with children under 10 years, it is rather not you who is addressing the war, but the child. They might be very straightforward with a question or something they picked up in the kindergarten or in school. Be attentive for those signals and respond:

- ☺ Make time and listen when a child wants to talk
- ☺ Tailor the conversation to the child
- ☺ Validate their feelings
- ☺ Reassure them that adults all over the world are working hard to resolve this
- ☺ Give them a practical way to help

Source: [How to Talk with Children About the Conflict in Ukraine](#) via [savethechildren.org](#)

## If you are working with youth...

With young people, it is also you who can/should proactively address the crisis.

- ☺ Listen and don't avoid difficult conversations.
- ☺ Explain why it is important to pay attention to such events.
- ☺ Be prepared to answer questions, give information and context that helps their understanding.
- ☺ Be aware of young people at risk who experienced trauma or loss. Check-in with them regularly.
- ☺ Develop with them small specific things they can do about this situation.

Source: [Teachers can offer a safe space for students to talk about the war in Ukraine](#) and help them take action via [theconversation.com](#) .

## How can I inspire small actions?.

Crisis situations like armed conflicts terrify us. We often feel overwhelmed and helpless in such situations. A way to channel these strong emotions is to develop and **create small actions**.

So, a next step that might be helpful is **to explore**: What do I have influence on? What small things can I do for myself, for others in our group? How can I show solidarity? How can I help refugees? etc. In this context, participants can share their personal coping strategies. They can share ideas on how to show solidarity, think of possibilities to help and support refugees as well as create small acts of solidarity together with the group.

One part of turning towards action is **getting informed and checking facts**. Nowadays, there is no shortage of information – it's quite the opposite. There is way too much information out there. The challenge is finding reliable and accurate information. It already starts with the wording: are we talking of an invasion in or an attack of Ukraine, the Ukrainian war or the war in Ukraine, the Russian-Ukrainian war or Putin's war, ... The choice of our words already reveals a certain connotation and perspective. And so is information about the war.

**Cross-check the news**, use different media channels from different countries. Check the facts and sources for example with [fact-checking web services](#) before you repost information. Teaching about Ukraine has lots of tips on how to deal with this topic.



Talking about the war brings various war-related topics on the table, such as the role of media, unconscious bias, stereotypes, etc. If there is enough time in the program and willingness of participants to explore those topics, they may bring diverse perspectives and provide an inspiration for small proactive actions.

There are plenty of ways to do something in this situation. Remember that supporting one another with the micro-community of your event is already a big thing. Staying informed is another step. From there, you can think of ways to show symbolically and practically your solidarity, join a local initiative and volunteer.

At the same time, be careful not to jump in pure activism. Some people might just have enough capacity to manage their everyday life (especially if you work like us with participants who are volunteering abroad). They feel already overwhelmed with their situation, and the additional activities might exhaust them. At this point, it is important to acknowledge that it is an individual decision whether and how much to engage, as each person differs in their ability and possibility. Acknowledge and appreciate what has already been done and underline that sometimes taking time for self-care and those close among us is the best possible step towards a positive change.

### **How can I support self-care and build resilience?**

Our reaction to a crisis situation is first of all a stress-related response. Stress triggers our adrenaline and cortisol levels and sets in motion a fight-or-flight-reaction: glucose level rises, the heart rate speeds up and blood flow to the muscles increases. Our body is ready to respond to a threat. Our system returns to normal, when the danger is gone.

In a constant crisis, our system stays in this mode all the time. Stress becomes chronic. The same hormones that enacted the fight-or-flight response can lead to digestive issues, sleeping difficulties, and a weakened immune system. In the long term, stress can affect our whole body, our mental health and well-being.

## **Self-care and building resilience can help dealing with stress.**

In a very broad sense, you may understand self-care as an approach to establish well-being or physical, mental and spiritual health. Its techniques are for the body, the mind and the spirit. Anything that gets you in touch with your body and mind, starting from stretching exercises, workouts, yoga, Tai Chi, practising self-defence, walking or hiking in nature, running, and many more things can help you to release stress and increase your awareness of your own body. Some small tapping or breathing exercises can help release stress and anxiety.

You can try out a couple of things during your seminar or training event and help participants find out what they enjoy most for themselves.

### **Here are a couple of possibilities to strengthen self-care:**

**Relaxation** – Invite participants to prepare in smaller teams short activities (5 min long) to relax or empower other participants. Each small team can use just one of the following mediums: body movement or words or music or visuals. After one hour of preparation the activity will be introduced by a team to the rest of the group over the next days of the training.

**Cards of feelings and needs** – With the help of 256 cards in four different painting styles you are able to support participants in acquiring and developing the ability to identify, express, interpret and reflect upon their own feelings and needs.

**EmotionAid** is a set of five exercises for managing emotions and reactions during times of crisis. This practical toolkit aims at self-regulation and emotional first aid. The exercises help strengthen resilience and ability to overcome daily challenges, as well as to relieve tension during crises and particularly stressful times. It's available in the following languages: English, French, German, Hebrew, Arabic, Polish, Chinese, Farsi, Turkish, Russian, Spanish, Italian.

**My safe space** – Everyone of us has a place where s/he feels safe and protected. That's usually home. If we are in a seminar or training, if we are volunteering abroad, we don't have this space (yet). What you can do is to invite participants to find this place at the venue or in its surroundings. It can be a special place inside or outside, a bench, a place under a tree, next to a river, a meadow, a place with a view, ... whatever gives the impression of comfort and allows participants to relax. Such places can be easily found or with small things created.



**Airing/Ventilation** (“Odwentylowanie”) – Our colleagues Anna Szlęk and Zuzanna Reimer chose an indirect approach to address participants' emotions, bring them “out in the air” and initiate a discussion on possible actions. In small groups participants are talking about ‘emotions’, ‘thoughts’ and ‘actions’ (each headline on one flipchart paper). They note down important points and switch to the next flipchart. First of all, this exercise provides an opportunity to share emotions, acknowledge them and to discover that others are feeling the same. Second, it allows us to show the connection between thoughts and emotions and to name those actions which can help us to channel our energy and turn the more difficult emotions into small actions.

**Journaling and art work** can help cope with stress and anxiety. It helps you process emotions and distancing yourself from what happens to you.

In the context of reducing stress, you should also be aware about the impact of news about the war. **Limiting the intake of information** (especially social media) can help to give your mind and body a break from being constantly under fire.

### **How can I support those who are especially in need?**

Who are those especially in need? There might be those, who were directly exposed to the war and had to flee the country, those who were exposed to other wars, those who come from one or both sides of the armed conflict, those who have family, friends or colleagues there and maybe also those who were traumatised by any incidents of violence. If you work with transnational groups, it might happen that among your participants are people coming from two sides of the conflict. In our case we had participants both from Russia and Ukraine.

**How to introduce the topic then?**

**Would it not be better to avoid it and pretend it doesn't exist hoping that participants themselves would cope with it?**

**Maybe it would be better to open the topic and confront them risking the escalation of the conflict also during our training?**

**Or would there be a middle path?**

There is no perfect answer to this. Every facilitator or trainer has to find his/her own way to cope and deal with this. However, from our experience we would encourage the following:

- ☪ **Acknowledge the topic of the war at the beginning of your event** as well as embrace the people who are coming from countries directly involved in the conflict.
- ☪ **Express your empathy** and underline how difficult it might be for those participants to take part in the training at such challenging times.
- ☪ **Create an agreement** with your participants, a “contract” with a whole group, in which you make sure:
  - ☪ Defining your meeting is a “**neutral zone**”, where judgements and political opinions are left behind the doors for the sake of learning from one another and community building.
  - ☪ **Avoiding generalisation** and looking from the perspective of nations. Instead we propose to see all participants as one community of participants, sharing their learning journeys across chosen topics, where the rule of “I” is respected and any feedback is referring only to actions happening during our training.
  - ☪ **Encouraging ownership** in a sense that we as facilitators take care that throughout the event everyone may choose any time with whom they work in pairs or smaller groups.

You may want to think over and introduce certain structural steamouts:

- ☪ Offering individual and optional conversations with facilitators/trainers or an external person (within the training and support cycle of European Solidarity Corps with have troubleshooter),
- ☪ Sharing a list of resources with information and exercises that support self-care and resilience.
- ☪ Providing a list of contacts to professionals in psychological support in crisis situation and help participants to get in touch with them,
- ☪ Providing a list of institutions and organisations helping in coping with crisis situations (ideally in the language of the participants).



And last but not least: The importance of reading stress reactions and knowing when to reach out for professional help is crucial. Unicef provides a list of [common reactions to stress in childrens](#). Clear signs that participants need professional support immediately are: people who are so upset that they cannot care for themselves, people who may hurt themselves and/or hurt others.

## How can I strengthen the group/community?

How can participants help one another, how can the group be a space that provides safety and mutual support? – Our micro–community during the non–formal event is not just a group of random people, it is a network of relations and growing trust, a connection. Sharing your emotions about a crisis situation is also an opportunity to go deeper and build stronger relations. It allows participants to create a strong feeling of belonging. The group turns into a community, a space where its members feel accepted and supported.

A community provides many elements that are critical to mental balance, and at the same time those elements might be stimulated / introduced during our training. One of the most significant are:

- ☺ **sense of belonging,**
- ☺ **mutual support / peer support, and**
- ☺ **having a strong purpose.**

There are many approaches and tools that can help us strengthen and empower each of those elements:

- ☺ The mere fact that your group is a space, where people can express and share their opinions and feelings about the war openly and safely is creating a strong bond among its members. Just listening to one another's doubts, fears, disappointment, sadness, anger may deepen the relationships and trust among participants.
- ☺ Deep conversations are also cherished because they reveal how much people have in common, rather than how they differ from one another. Facilitating such conversations mayn strengthen the sense of belonging and community.

- ◌ Besides talking with one another, doing something together, like creating a contract together, playing together, going through team building activities and experiential learning exercises can strengthen individuals and groups. and in teams. Sense of belonging and purpose might be strengthened by underlining things that participants have in common.

## How can I take care of myself?

We started with you as a facilitator or trainer, and we would like to end this article with you. Like our participants, the war affects us as human beings, it scares and terrifies us, makes us sad, depressed or angry and furious. We all have colleagues, dear friends or even family who are more or less directly affected by the war. And the stories of our participants also touch our hearts.

All this takes also a toll on us as trainers, facilitators, educators. So, how can we keep our energy high, recharge our batteries and strengthen our own resilience?

As everything, it starts with your own awareness:

**How much are you affected by this? How do you feel?**

**What is your stress level? How are you coping with your own stress?**

**Are you working even more now? Drowning in activities, supporting others?**

**Are you taking enough care of yourself? Are you taking some time-out for yourself to recharge your batteries? Are you practising self-care?**

**Are you reaching out, if you need help?**

**Are you keeping in touch with your own support network? etc.**

The simple truth is that we can only help others, if you can help yourself. You can only be there for your participants, if you are in touch with yourself.

**We are all vulnerable these days, but vulnerability is also our strength.**

Berlin, Poznan, Warsaw, March 2022

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