

The impact of the conflict in Ukraine

Key Points

- 1. Multinational Connections.** Multinational military deployments, training exercises and courses mean that many members of the AF&V community have served alongside Central and Eastern European colleagues, who may currently feel threatened by the conflict in Ukraine. Some may also have served on training exercises or courses alongside Ukrainian colleagues, who are now currently involved in the conflict.
- 2. Current Deployments in Eastern Europe.** Serving personnel from the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, Army and Royal Air Force are currently being deployed to bolster existing troop numbers in Poland and Estonia, as well as Cyprus and the Mediterranean. There are also some serving personnel in countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, Bosnia and Kosovo.
- 3. Past Deployments in Eastern Europe.** Some serving personnel and many veterans will have served in Bosnia and Kosovo. UK troops served in Bosnia in peacekeeping and stabilisation roles from October 1992 to recent times, albeit in increasingly smaller numbers. UK troops also served in Kosovo in peacekeeping and stabilisation roles, and on training exercises from June 1999 to recent times, albeit in increasingly smaller numbers.

For the AF&V community, the conflict in Ukraine may bring back re-traumatising memories of a brutal conflict, harsh winters, extreme civilian suffering, especially for women and children, and military strikes on civilian targets.

- 4. Military Third Sector.** Feedback from both Combat Stress and Help for Heroes suggests that they anticipate the potential for a spike in the number of veterans needing their services as a result of the conflict in Ukraine.

There have already been reports of an increase in conversations about the conflict during support sessions with many reporting anger, helplessness, general anxiety and sadness. Some veterans are reporting that they are finding the images and footage difficult, particularly those who served in Bosnia and Kosovo, where the terrain and situation are creating a familiarity. Other veterans are reporting a marked increase in nightmares, anxiety, stress and tension, especially as a result of being drawn back into military circles and conversations about military tactics and involvements.

- 5. Common reactions and experiences.** (List not exhaustive)

- **Re-experiencing** – unwanted or upsetting memories, nightmares, flashbacks, physical reactions such as sweating or a racing heart.
- **Avoidance** – trying to avoid memories, thoughts or feelings related to the trauma(s), trying to avoid people, places, or situations linked to the trauma(s), keeping very busy all the time, using alcohol or drugs to forget, self-harm.
- **Sense of Threat** – being very alert or on guard/watchful, feeling like you have to watch for dangers or threats, being easily startled or 'jumpy', hyper-vigilance.
- **Emotion Regulation** - your feelings being easily hurt, difficulty experiencing positive emotions, feeling the world is unreal as if you're living in a dream, feeling angry or irritable, deliberately trying to hurt yourself or put yourself in dangerous situations.
- **Negative Sense of Self** - feeling worthless or defeated, thinking you're 'bad', or that there's something wrong with you, blaming yourself for the traumatic event(s) or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that were not your fault, feeling overly responsible for events that were outside of your control.
- **Relationship Disturbance** - feeling distant or cut off from other people, feeling isolated from other people, struggling to maintain relationships with other people.
- **Feelings** - fear and anxiety, anger, guilt, shame, regret, embarrassment, emotional numbness, hopelessness.

6. Coping Tips.

- **Try some breathing exercises**

Sit or lie down somewhere comfortable and safe. Place one hand on your tummy and one on your chest. Breathe in deeply through your nose and slowly out through your mouth for 5-10 minutes. Focus on the simple sensation of air coming into your lungs and leaving your lungs. If your mind wanders, bring the focus of your attention back to your breath. This will help you to remain in the present.

- **Try something physical**

Running, cycling, surfing and climbing have been found to help – activities where you are fully absorbed in the sport. Get out of your mind and focus on what is going on around you, rather than ruminating about the past or worrying about the future.

- **Ground yourself in the here and now, rather than focus on past events**

Remind yourself that you are not in the past by comparing what is different now – sights, sounds, smells, the people you are with, the place you are, your ability to choose and control what you do.

Say coping statements to yourself – I'm safe now. I did the best that I could, given what I (we) knew at the time.

Consider the good things that were achieved at the time and what you value about yourself. Seek a variety of opinions to develop a balanced view of the facts.

Carry something that smells or feels nice – a photo, a smooth stone, an essential oil like mint or lavender.

Run cool water over your hands and notice how it feels.

Walk slowly and notice each footstep.

Think of things that you are looking forward to this month.

7. Signposting.

Headfit (Self-help app)

<https://headfit.org/>

Combat Stress

<https://combatstress.org.uk/>

Crisis

www.crisiscounselling.co.uk/

Help for Heroes

www.helpforheroes.org.uk/

Poppyscotland

www.poppyscotland.org.uk/

SSAFA

www.ssafa.org.uk/

8. **Your experiences can help NHS Highland's AF&V Project.** If you have experience of supporting the AF&V community, issues to raise or questions to ask, please get in touch at Kari.Magee@nhs.scot. The aim will be to compile toolkits to support healthcare professionals to support the AF&V community and your advice, guidance and experience is invaluable.

Many thanks.

KM

AF&V Project Manager

Elements of this information note have been adapted from resources developed by the US Department for Veterans Affairs, the Canadian Centre for Excellence – PTSD and NHS Inform as well as advice from Combat Stress and Help for Heroes.