



Self-control and fear of death in seafarers' wives: The role of laughter as a regulatory factor

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◆ **Abstract.** The study's relevance is justified by the increased indicators of existential anxiety and death fear amid global instability, military conflicts, and increasing professional risks. These are manifest especially in the families of seafarers, whose wives for a long time remain in a state of uncertainty and emotional tension. This study aimed to investigate the manifestations of death fear, the level of psychological self-control, and the role of laughter as a resource for emotional regulation in the wives of seafarers. The study employed theoretical methods of analysis, systematisation, and generalisation of approaches to the problems of death fear and self-control, as well as empirical tools, including the Self-Efficacy Scale, the Locus of Control Scale, the Death Attitude Scale, the Spielberger Anxiety Scale, the Purpose-in-Life Test, the Personal Death Fear Questionnaire, and the Differential Loneliness Experience Questionnaire. The data were processed by calculating the mean, median, and mode, as well as the Shapiro-Wilk and Spearman statistical tests. The results show that the overall level of death fear in the majority of the respondents ranges from low to moderate, and is accompanied by relatively preserved psychological self-control and a high level of self-efficacy. An elevated level of background anxiety caused by long waiting and uncertainty was detected; however, an intense fear becomes relevant only in the context of specific danger. The use of laughter has been found to correlate with low levels of affective tension, high emotional stability, and a high ability for self-regulation. Laughter not only performs a regulatory function, but also a sense-making one, contributing to the inclusion of death fear into the general context of life values and maintaining psychological resilience. At the same time, a group at increased psychological risk has been identified, characterised by a high level of anxiety and low self-control. The practical significance of the research lies in the possibility of using its results in the development of a system of psychological support and consulting services for the wives of seafarers, aimed at enhancing self-control, resilience, and adaptive mechanisms of emotional regulation using laughter therapy

◆ **Keywords:** coping strategies; self-efficacy; locus of control; meaning in life; existential anxiety

◆ Introduction

The global processes of the present, such as military conflicts, growth in the level of uncertainty, instability of the security environment, and socio-economic crises, have led to increased stress among the broad masses of the population. All this has an especially pronounced impact on the families of persons in dangerous professions, in particular

seafarers, whose professional activity is associated with long periods of separation from the family, a high level of professional risk, and constant danger to life, as noted by A. Khodabakhshi-Koolaei *et al.* (2022). The wives of seafarers most often experience a long period of uncertainty, which increases emotional tension, forms certain

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mechanisms of psychological adaptation, and requires research in the context of modern psychological knowledge. One of the most important components of adaptation to stressful, existential situations is psychological self-control. In research by H. Katolyk (2022) and K.A. Kosenko (2020), it is understood as an integrative system of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes, due to which a person can regulate their emotional reactions, restrain their impulsiveness, and realise actions according to their internal purposes. Self-control has been shown to be crucial in preserving mental health under conditions of prolonged uncertainty and stress, which is typical for families of maritime professionals. No less important is the phenomenon of fear of death, the acuteness of which increases during the period of the crisis. The data obtained by Ye.V. Stepura (2022) and G. Pallotta *et al.* (2022) testify to the significant strengthening of the existential concern in the conditions of informational uncertainty, physical distance, and impossibility to control the situation. During the full-scale war in Ukraine, this anxiety becomes even more pronounced among civilians, especially women whose partners are exposed to dangerous conditions. According to M. Jezewska & I. Leszczynska (2023), fear of death in seafarers' wives may constitute a chronic background experience that affects both emotional state and mechanisms of self-regulation. Of particular scientific interest is the question of which psychological resources may mitigate the impact of fear of death on self-control mechanisms. P.T.P. Wong (2020) emphasises that positive emotions, including humour and laughter, promote cognitive flexibility, restoration of emotional balance, and a reduction in the effects of stress. Despite the extensive representation of fear of death and self-control in the international scientific literature, there is a notable lack of studies examining these phenomena specifically among seafarers' wives, that is, women who remain in a prolonged stress-inducing state due to their partners' professional activities. The problem of the potential influence of laughter on the effect of existential anxiety on the level of psychological self-control in this vulnerable group remains poorly understood. Another factor determining the relevance of the chosen topic is the complex of interrelated circumstances. Firstly, the topic is relevant due to the wartime situation in Ukraine, which dramatically aggravates the problems of experiencing mortality, increasing anxiety and psychological resilience among the civilian population (UNICEF, 2023). At the same time, a significant number of families of seafarers who traditionally live in the coastal regions of Ukraine, in particular, in the Odesa Region, form a specific social risk group that is exposed to increased psychological risk due to the long-term absence of partners and uncertainty about their safety. The relevance of the study is also caused by a relatively narrow range of scientific research focused on psychological resources contributing to coping with the consequences of prolonged uncertainty in the wives of seafarers. In addition, the contemporary psychological literature includes only a limited number of studies in which the

phenomena of self-control, fear of death, and laughter are considered within a single theoretical model, which further emphasises the scientific relevance of the chosen research direction. This study aimed to establish the relationship between the fear of death and the level of psychological self-control in the wives of seafarers, and to identify the role of laughter as a potential mechanism for regulating this relationship. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were formulated:

- 1) to analyse the modern theoretical ideas concerning the study of the fear of death, psychological self-control, and the role of laughter;
- 2) to study the level of manifestation of the above phenomena in the sample of wives of seafarers;
- 3) to evaluate the potential of laughter to overcome existential anxiety.

◆ Literature Review

Psychological self-control is a critical component of the individual's adaptive and regulatory resources, which provide the possibility of purposeful behaviour, emotional regulation, and behavioural conformity to social norms in critical and stressful situations. In the conditions of increased uncertainty and prolonged separation, which are inherent in the families of seafarers, self-control is of particular importance since it allows women to maintain inner balance, functional capacity, and behavioural consistency in the event that external conditions become threatening or unpredictable. Psychological self-control is viewed as a complex, multilevel construct integrating cognitive (awareness of one's emotions, planning one's actions), emotional (regulation of emotional states), and behavioural (control of impulsivity and formation of adaptive behavioural strategies) components. Due to its multilevel nature, it acts as an inner resource that enables the individual to reduce the negative impact of stressors, overcome increased anxiety, and process existentially significant experiences, including the fear of death. Well-developed self-control promotes psychological stability and translates destructive emotional energy into constructive behavioural forms aimed at achieving significant life goals. At the same time, the level of psychological self-control is directly related to the quality of self-attitude. L. Terletska & I. Kukhar (2020) emphasised that self-confidence and a positive self-perception are associated with a lower propensity towards fears and phobias. The emotional state of fear is produced by the instinct of self-preservation and is revealed in a sharp emotional experience caused by a real or imaginary threat. Fear is endowed with a negative emotional sign; the reasons for its occurrence may be subjective (motivational properties and features of emotional-volitional regulation) and objective (situational complexity and circumstances hindering activity). Within the theories of emotional regulation, fear is understood as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon distinguished by different degrees of intensity. The sequence "anxiety – alarm – apprehension – fear – terror – panic", proposed by

M.M. Movchan (2019), shows the complication of the assessment of the danger, the growth of the dynamics of emotional tension. Of particular importance is the need to distinguish fear from anxiety. Thus, R. Kindred *et al.* (2022) noted that anxiety is nonspecific, occurs when there is an indefinite threat, and is closely associated with imaginary interpretations of the future, while fear occurs in response to specific danger. For wives of seafarers, anxiety is often chronic, background, caused by the need for a long wait for news from their husbands and uncertainty about the real conditions of service. The occurrence of fear is caused by the arrival of threatening news – about a storm, an accident, a threat to the ship, or to the health of the crew members. Both states have an affective component, reduce the quality of self-regulation, and contribute to the exhaustion of internal resources.

The existential aspect of the fear of death is represented in the research of I.D. Yalom (1980) and V. Frankl (2023). According to V. Frankl, the ability to find meaning in life is the main mechanism for overcoming life's difficulties, especially in the conditions of limited experience. Death is comprehended not only as the end of biological life, but also as a threat of losing meaning, values, and one's own mission. Based on the results of empirical research, I.D. Yalom showed that the fear of death is not homogeneous, it consists of several components: fear of pain, the end of life plans, concern for loved ones, and uncertainty about what happens after death. For women whose husbands serve under conditions of increased risk, these components become especially relevant, since they are associated with a lack of control, the absence of direct influence on what is happening. In the context of identifying resources to overcome the fear of death and maintain self-control, the phenomenon of laughter is of particular relevance. Thus, O.S. Ivanova (2024) considers laughter as a reaction to a situation that contains elements of incongruity, absurdity, surprise, and as a mechanism for emotional recovery. From the psychophysiological perspective, laughter is associated with a change in facial expressions, muscle tension, posture, breathing and movement; from the psychological perspective, it is associated with the need for a change in the emotional state and a decrease in inner tension. The meanings of laughter at the personal level can be physiological (catharsis) or intellectual (reappraisal), which defines its regulatory nature. Laughter also has sociopsychological functions: it is a manifestation of openness, a way to communicate with others and to expose one's vulnerability. In uncertain and stressful situations, it strengthens the feeling of belonging and cooperation, contributes to the formation of a social support system, and decreases the feeling of psychological isolation. For wives of seafarers who, along with family obligations, experience ongoing concerns about the dangers encountered by their husbands, laughter can be a means to regain psychological energy, to relieve emotional strain and can be one of the mechanisms for coping with existential fear. From the cultural and psychological perspective, laughter is considered a universal reaction to the

world, which helps to unite contradictory experiences, to find a balance between the serious and the non-serious, to transcend everyday routine, and to maintain psychological integrity. According to O.S. Ivanova (2024), laughter can be a factor of making sense, a means of supporting inner freedom and a factor contributing to the development of spiritual openness. In the framework of this study, this presupposes the interpretation of laughter as a potential regulatory mechanism that weakens the influence of fear of death and promotes psychological self-control in wives of seafarers. In families of seafarers, laughter can have a special role:

- ✦ reduce levels of tension caused by prolonged uncertainty;
- ✦ maintain emotional contact between partners despite physical distance;
- ✦ mitigate the influence of fear of death and existential anxiety;
- ✦ contribute to shifting the focus of attention from threats to resources and opportunities;
- ✦ consolidate unity and mutual support in the family system.

From the perspective of making sense, laughter plays the role of an inner detonator that allows individuals to take a step back from interpretations of events that are saturated with threat, to restore a sense of inner freedom, and to resume contact with their inner values. This is particularly important for wives of seafarers who, in their daily lives, often combine a high sense of responsibility with emotional vulnerability due to the occupational hazards faced by their husbands. An analysis of the theoretical concepts presented above regarding psychological self-control, fear of death and the regulatory potential of laughter gives reason to state that these phenomena are systemically connected and influence the psychological functioning of wives of seafarers in a state of chronic uncertainty and high existential tension. Self-control serves as a basic mechanism for the regulation of emotions and behaviour, which enables the preservation of inner stability in conditions in which direct influence on dangerous or risky situations (related to the professional activities of the husband) is absent. Fear of death, as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, is intensified by an information vacuum, environmental instability, and a perceived lack of control, which are inherent to the lives of families of seafarers. The experiential structures of wives in this professional group include both actualised fear (e.g. fear of the loss of a loved one) and background existential anxiety (related to potential threats and decreased feeling of security (Kastenbaum & Moreman, 2018)). Laughter here also plays the role of a significant adaptive resource and coping strategy that facilitates a decrease in psychological tension, return of the feeling of subjective control, enhancement of social support and revaluation of existential experiences. The emotional-cognitive and socio-psychological potential of laughter contributes to the attenuation of the fear of death and an increase in the adaptive potential of the individual.

Thus, the theoretical analysis demonstrates that laughter can be considered a crucial factor for the preservation of psychological self-control and overcoming the existential anxiety of seafarers' wives. Its inclusion in the system of psychological support of these women could promote the development of resilience, emotional stability and optimisation of adaptive processes.

◆ Materials and Methods

The study of psychological self-control, fear of death and the role of laughter as a regulatory factor in the sample of seafarers' wives was carried out in the framework of a comprehensive scientific research that included theoretical analysis, empirical research and quantitative and qualitative processing of the obtained data. The methodological basis of the research was directed at providing validity, reliability and reproducibility of the results by other scientists. The research consisted of three main stages. The first stage had a theoretical and analytical character and was aimed at a comprehensive study of the problems of self-control, fear of death and laughter as a coping resource in modern psychological science. At this stage, theoretical methods of analysis, synthesis, systematisation and generalisation of philosophical, pedagogical, psychological and physiological concepts related to the phenomenon of fear of death and self-control were used, as well as analysis of the scientific literature. In particular, the articles by I.D. Yalom (1980), J.E. LeDoux (1996), and V. Frankl (2023) were analysed, which made it possible to form the conceptual framework of the research and to identify the main variables for the subsequent empirical study.

The second stage of the research involved the preparation of psychodiagnostic instruments, the coordination of the empirical data collection procedure, and the formation of the sample. At this stage, psychodiagnostic questionnaires in accordance with the goals of the study were also selected, and their internal consistency was checked. In particular, the General Self-Efficacy Scale by Schwarzer and Jerusalem was used to assess self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to organise and perform actions necessary to achieve the set goal. The scale consists of 10 items and allows for evaluating the beliefs of the respondents about their ability to act effectively in different life situations. The Rotter Locus of Control Scale (29 items) was used to assess the level of subjective control that individuals experience in different life situations. The Death Attitude Scale (32 items) was employed to assess individuals' beliefs about death: whether they believe in heaven and union with God after death, whether they are afraid of it, whether they consider it as an escape from the burdens of everyday, oppressive life, or as a natural inevitability. The Spielberger Anxiety Scale (40 paired statements) was used to assess situational and trait anxiety. Leontiev's Purpose-in-Life Test (PIL; 20 items) provided a comprehensive idea of how the individual perceives and evaluates the meaning of his life, which aspects are significant for him, and where are the possible difficulties or

discomforts that require attention and intervention. Osin and Leontiev's Differential Loneliness Experience Questionnaire (24 items) was employed by the authors to identify existential ideas about attitudes to loneliness. Since the PIL and the Differential Loneliness Experience Questionnaire have no normative standards for interpreting scores, they use a "high score – low score" scale to characterise the sample. For this study, the theoretical midpoint was used as a reference, calculated for each scale based on the maximum possible score a respondent could achieve:

- 1) overall PIL score – 70 points;
- 2) subscale 1 (goals) – 42 points;
- 3) subscale 2 (process) – 42 points;
- 4) subscale 2 (process) – 42 points;
- 5) subscale 2 (locus of control – self) – 28 points;
- 6) subscale 5 (locus of control – life) – 42 points;
- 7) overall loneliness experience – 16 points;
- 8) dependence on social interaction – 14 points;
- 9) positive loneliness – 18 points.

The overall score of the PIL indicates a relatively high level of life meaningfulness among the participants in the study (mean = 101, median = 105, mode = 110). The Personal Death Fear Questionnaire, consisting of 21 items, was used to identify different patterns of an individual's attitude towards death and to distinguish between positive, destructive, or neutral acceptance of death as an inevitability. The questionnaire was designed to assess fear of personal death and its structural components – cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal. The instrument measured the following indicators:

- 1) overall level of fear of death;
- 2) cognitive-existential fear:
 - a. consequences for the individual (loss of plans, integrity, or reasoning);
 - b. transcendental consequences (fear of the unknown or existence after death);
- 3) social and interpersonal fear:
 - a. fear of being forgotten (concern about being unnoticed or forgotten);
 - b. consequences for loved ones (how death would affect family and relatives);
- 4) bodily-physical fear (decay of the body, burial, etc.).

The third stage included the collection of empirical data, when its statistical processing and qualitative analysis of survey data, which supported quantitative data, allowed achieving a deeper understanding of the experiences of seafarers' wives. The study sample included 63 female respondents married to seafarers and living in the Odesa Region. The sample was formed using purposive convenience sampling, which is optimal for studying specific social groups with clearly defined inclusion criteria. Age distribution of the sample is provided in Figure 1.

The sample was predominantly composed of women aged 40 to 49 years. Fewer respondents were in the 31-39 age range, while the youngest group (18-27 years) and those aged 50-54 were least represented. The distribution of participants by educational level is presented in Figure 2.

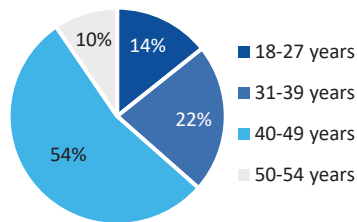


Figure 1. Age distribution of the sample

Source: developed by the authors

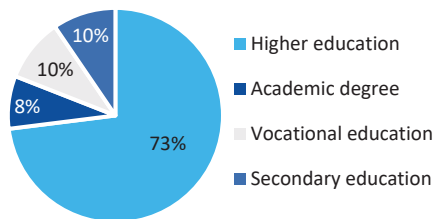


Figure 2. Educational level of respondents

Source: developed by the authors

With regard to education, the majority of participants held a higher education degree (73%). A small proportion (8%) had an academic degree, while women with secondary or vocational education were equally represented at 10% each. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents had children, and 71% were employed at the time of the study. To facilitate data collection, a specialised questionnaire was developed using the online tool Google Forms. The questionnaire incorporated items from all methods employed in this study, and participants were able to complete it at a time convenient to them, with strict adherence to confidentiality principles. Data were collected in 2025 at a psychological centre providing support to seafarers' families (details regarding its name and location are withheld for security reasons during the state of war in Ukraine). The research procedure complied with the ethical standards of the Helsinki Declaration, ensuring voluntary consent and the protection of participants (WMA, 2024). To minimise emotional strain, a brief psychological stabilisation session was conducted at the end of the procedure. The analysis of the obtained results was conducted using SPSS Statistics version 26.0 and the standard MS Excel package. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to establish the degree of correlation, since it is more accurate when many ranked variables are concerned. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient

was used for variables with a broader range of scores. Results were considered statistically significant at $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, and $***p < 0.001$. Confidence intervals were calculated using the "three-sigma" rule (Fig. 3).

The three-sigma (3σ) rule states that for values distrib-

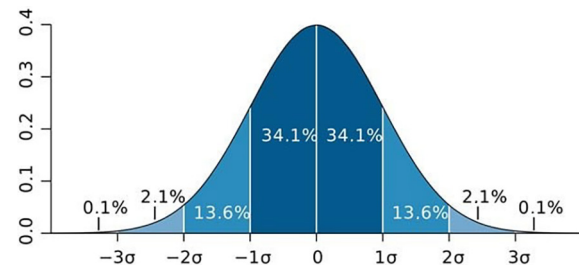


Figure 3. Visualisation of limits according to the "three-sigma" rule

Note: lower bound of the mean interval – $M - SD$; upper bound of the mean interval – $M + SD$

Source: developed by the authors

uted according to the normal (Gaussian) law, the majority of values (approximately 99.73%) fall within the interval from $\mu - 3\sigma$ to $\mu + 3\sigma$. For the interpretation of locus of control scores, normative intervals of empirical data were calculated. The normative intervals are as follows:

- 1) Externality: mean = 12.4, standard deviation = 3.79:
 - a. low level < 8.6;
 - b. average level 8.6-16.2;
 - c. high level > 16.2.
- 2) Internality: mean = 9.44, standard deviation = 3.47:
 - a. low level < 5.97;
 - b. average level 6-12.9;
 - c. high level > 13.

Results

Below are the results of the basic statistical processing of the scores obtained by the Self-Efficacy Scale by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (indicator: "self-efficacy"), by the Rotter Locus of Control Scale (indicators: "internality" and "externality") and by the Spielberger Anxiety Scale (indicators: "state anxiety" and "trait anxiety"). The assessment of the normality of the distribution of scores presented in Table 1 allowed for the conclusion that parametric methods could be used in subsequent analyses.

The distribution of scores of self-efficacy is symmetrical

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for self-efficacy, externality, internality, and anxiety

	Self-efficacy	Externality	Internality	State anxiety	Trait anxiety
N	63	63	63	63	63
Mean	30.9	12.4	9.44	45.5	45.3
Median	31	12	9	44	45
Mode	29.0	11.0	8.00	44.0	48.0
Standard deviation	4.43	3.79	3.47	8.09	8.38

Table 1. Continued

	Self-efficacy	Externality	Internality	State anxiety	Trait anxiety
Min	20	5	3	32	29
Max	40	20	17	72	70
Skewness	-0.124	-0.124	0.216	0.651	0.607
Standard error of skewness	0.302	0.302	0.302	0.302	0.302
Kurtosis	-0.352	-0.124	-0.215	0.653	0.999
Standard error of kurtosis	0.595	0.595	0.595	0.595	0.595
Shapiro-Wilk (W)	0.987	0.965	0.958	0.968	0.964
Shapiro-Wilk (p)	0.753	0.074	0.030	0.098	0.064

Source: developed by the authors

and lacks excessive skewness; the mean is 30.9, the median is 31, and the mode is 29; skewness is -0.124, and kurtosis is -0.352, which indicates a slight shift to the left and somewhat more “flat” distribution compared to a normal one. The result of the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W = 0.987$; $p = 0.753$) confirms that the distribution does not differ significantly from a normal distribution, and the variable is suitable for further parametric processing. Scores on externality are distributed approximately normally: the distribution is symmetrical (mean is 12.4, median is 12, and mode is 11); skewness is -0.0182, and kurtosis is -0.124. The result of the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W = 0.965$; $p = 0.074$) indicates that normality cannot be rejected, and the sample size ($N = 63$) supports the use of parametric processing. Scores of internality show signs of non-normality. Despite the proximity of mean (9.44), median (9), and mode (8), the distribution has multimodality. Skewness (0.216) indicates a slight positive shift. According to the normative intervals of the Schwarzer–Jerusalem Scale, mean and median testify that the “typical” respondent has above-average self-efficacy (Fig. 4).

As can be seen in Figure 4, the minimum value of

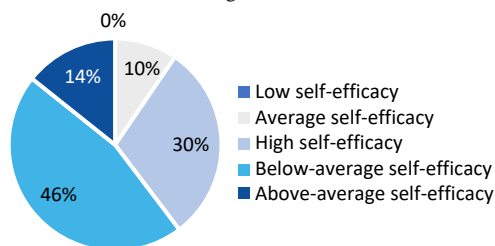


Figure 4. Percentage distribution of self-efficacy levels

Source: developed by the authors

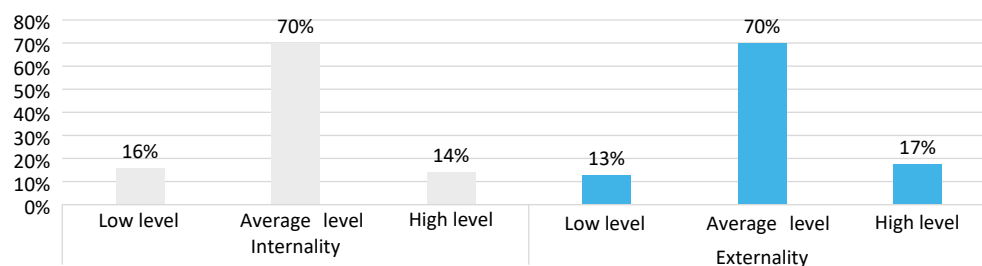


Figure 5. Percentage distribution of locus of control levels

Source: developed by the authors

the sample indicates the absence of respondents with low self-efficacy, but a small percentage (10%) may have some difficulties in trusting their own actions and a reduced belief in their ability to cope with difficult situations. Standard deviation is small, which indicates the stability of the measure. On the whole, respondents have a relatively high confidence in their own forces and a tendency to self-reliance in problemsolving. This points to good adaptive capacity, effective functioning in the conditions of stress, and predisposition to overcoming difficulties. Data from Table 1 and Figure 5 show that the majority of respondents have average levels of both internality and externality. This can be interpreted as a flexible locus of control: in situations where it is appropriate, individuals tend to take responsibility for them, but they also admit the role of chance or external factors. The equality of scale extent makes it possible to directly compare the average scores for externality and internality. The average score for externality is 12.4, and the average score for internality is 9.4, which indicates a greater tendency toward externality. This may indicate that the participants are more likely to attribute the most significant events of their lives to external factors – chance, actions of other people, or coincidence. The distribution of low and high values is relatively equal on both scales, also suggesting the rarity of extremely high scores among most respondents. However, a cluster with high externality might need some extra attention: sometimes a tendency to perceive control as external is related to low self-efficacy and the evasion of responsibility. The distribution of anxiety scores is presented in Figure 6.

As can be seen in Figure 6, the absolute majority of

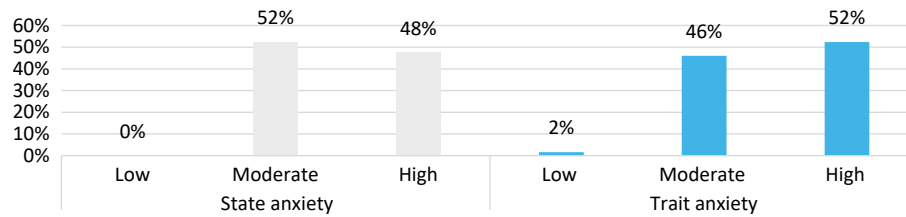


Figure 6. Percentage distribution of anxiety levels

Source: developed by the authors

the respondents demonstrate moderate or high levels of both state and trait anxiety. The mean values of the two types of anxiety are very similar: state anxiety = 45.5, trait anxiety = 45.3. These values lie at the lowest border of the high level. Dispersion for both scales is relatively small, which suggests that the sample tends to possess high anxiety levels both as a personality trait (trait anxiety) and as a situational reaction (state anxiety). This is not surprising, given the long-term character of the war. High levels of trait anxiety, combined with high levels of state anxiety, can be interpreted as fatigue of the nervous

system and increased sensitivity to stress.

Table 2 presents the results of the initial statistical processing of scores obtained using Leontiev's PIL (indicators: "overall score", "Subscale 1 – goals", "Subscale 2 – process", "Subscale 3 – result", "Subscale 4 – internal locus of control", "Subscale 5 – life locus of control") and Osin & D.A. Leontiev's Differential Loneliness Experience Questionnaire (indicators: "overall experience of loneliness", "dependence on communication", "positive loneliness").

Subscale 1 (goals; mean = 31.7), Subscale 2 (process;

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for life meaning orientations and loneliness experience

	Life meaning orientations						Loneliness experience		
	Overall score	Subscale 1 (goals)	Subscale 2 (process)	Subscale 3 (result)	Subscale 4 (internal locus of control)	Subscale 5 (life locus of control)	Overall loneliness experience	Dependence on communication	Positive loneliness
N	63	63	63	63	63	63	63	63	63
Mean	101	31.7	29.9	26.1	19.6	29.3	13.1	10.3	27.8
Median	105	32	31	27	20	30	12	10	28
Mode	110	39.0	33.0	24.0	19.0	33.0	10.0	8.00	27.0
Standard deviation	17.0	6.69	6.19	5.26	4.37	6.50	3.88	2.49	5.22
Min	52	12	12	10	5	15	8	6	13
Max	134	42	40	34	26	39	24	16	36
Skewness	-0.72	-0.59	-0.91	-0.97	-1.17	-0.60	0.77	0.29	-0.89
Standard error of skewness	0.302	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30	0.30
Kurtosis	0.50	-0.01	0.96	1.02	1.87	-0.56	0.09	-0.62	0.55
Standard error of kurtosis	0.59	0.59	0.59	0.59	0.59	0.59	0.59	0.59	0.59
Shapiro-Wilk (W)	0.95	0.95	0.93	0.92	0.91	0.93	0.93	0.96	0.93
Shapiro-Wilk (p)	0.02	0.02	0.003	0.001	<0.001	0.003	0.002	0.048	0.001

Source: developed by the authors

mean = 29.9), and Subscale 3 (result; mean = 31.7), although slightly below the theoretical middle of the scales, the empirical distribution is shifted towards the upper part of the scales. This suggests that generally the respondents do experience life goals, are satisfied with the process of life, and evaluate the results of life as relatively high, which indicates a rather positive attitude towards one's own life. The situation is similar with Subscale 4 (internal locus of control; mean = 19.6) and Subscale 5 (life locus of control; mean = 29.3), suggesting that respondents feel rather confident about their ability to control events, and they trust the controllability of life. Statistically, this is supported by the values of skewness (Table 2), all of which are signifi-

cant and indicate the clustering of scores in the upper part of the scale. Scores on the overall experience of loneliness suggest that most of the scores are concentrated in the lower part of the scale. This means that the majority of the respondents do not feel excessive emotional discomfort from experiencing loneliness (Table 2). The distribution of scores on dependence on communication is multimodal, but the majority of the scores are concentrated below the middle of the scale (<14 points), which means that the respondents do not demonstrate an excessive need for communication. "Positive loneliness", understood as an ability to use loneliness as a resource for reflection, self-searching, and personal growth, is characterised by the highest scores

(>18 points). These conclusions are supported by the results of the calculations of skewness: the values of skewness for the overall experience of loneliness and dependence on communication are positive, while the skewness for positive loneliness is negative.

The evaluation of the level of fear of death was also calculated. Because the diagnostic tools do not offer normative intervals, the strategy of evaluation and interpretation was similar to that used for the previous tools. To evaluate individual attitudes toward death, the Death Atti-

tude Scale was applied. This includes the following scales: fear of death, avoidance of the topic of death, neutral attitude, acceptance of death, and acceptance as escape. As seen from the obtained data in Table 3, it is not distributed normally (Shapiro-Wilk test, $p < 0.05$). The spread of scores points to the fact that the sample is mostly concentrated at the lower values. This fact is also confirmed by maximum scores, which are lower than the mean values of the scales described.

In general, the level of fear of death in the sample

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for fear of death assessed using the Death Attitude Scale

	Fear of death	Avoidance of the topic of death	Neutral attitude	Acceptance of death	Acceptance as escape
N	63	63	63	63	63
Mean	3.76	3.82	5.72	3.88	3.81
Median	3.29	3.80	5.80	3.90	3.80
Mode	3.29	4.80	5.80	3.80 ^a	4.00 ^a
Standard deviation	1.44	1.71	0.756	1.05	1.43
Min	1.14	1.00	4.00	1.60	1.00
Max	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.30	6.60
Skewness	0.428	0.0676	-0.545	-0.263	0.179
Standard error of skewness	0.302	0.302	0.302	0.302	0.302
Kurtosis	-0.740	-1.13	-0.0167	-0.301	-0.757
Standard error of kurtosis	0.595	0.595	0.595	0.595	0.595
Shapiro-Wilk (W)	0.956	0.957	0.950	0.975	0.969
Shapiro-Wilk (p)	0.026	0.027	0.012	0.228	0.118

Note: ^a – presence of multiple modes

Source: developed by the authors

is low. Respondents are not significantly afraid of their own death and do not possess defensive mechanisms such as repression of death-related thoughts. They consider death as something natural and unavoidable, which does not cause either anxiety or excessive romanticisation. At the same time, some of the respondents believe in an afterlife or possess religious and existential acceptance

of death; however, these are not leading factors. There is also no tendency to treat death as a release from hardships or sufferings, which points to the absence of risk of suicidal or euthanasia-related attitudes. The data of descriptive statistics of the mentioned indices are presented in Table 4.

According to Table 4, measurements of fear of death

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for fear of death assessed using the Personal Death Fear Questionnaire

	Personal Death Fear – Overall	Cognitive-existential fear	Consequences of death for the self	Transcendent consequences of death	Social and interpersonal fear of death	Fear of being forgotten	Consequences of death for close others	Bodily-physical fear of death
N	63	63	63	63	63	63	63	63
Mean	41.9	21.7	13.9	7.87	14.8	4.71	10.0	5.40
Median	38	20	13	7	14	4	10	5
Mode	21.0 ^a	11.0	7.00	4.00	7.00 ^a	3.00	13.0	3.00
Standard deviation	15.8	9.53	6.20	3.85	4.70	2.03	3.52	2.83
Min	21	11	7	4	7	3	4	3
Max	80	44	28	16	24	10	16	12
Skewness	0.502	0.502	0.419	0.655	0.131	1.02	-0.119	1.11
Standard error of skewness	0.302	0.302	0.302	0.302	0.302	0.302	0.302	0.302
Kurtosis	-0.776	-0.955	-1.00	-0.736	-0.731	-0.089	-1.06	0.272
Standard error of kurtosis	0.595	0.595	0.595	0.595	0.595	0.595	0.595	0.595
Shapiro-Wilk (W)	0.939	0.903	0.898	0.870	0.968	0.810	0.950	0.797
Shapiro-Wilk (p)	0.004	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.105	<0.001	0.013	<0.001

Source: developed by the authors

using this instrument also deviate from a normal distribution ($p < 0.05$). The general level of fear of death is in a low range (mean = 41.9; median = 38), which means that, in general, respondents have a low level of fear and certain acceptance of death as a fact. The distribution is slightly skewed to the right (skewness = 0.50), which points to the presence of some of the respondents with a higher level of fear. However, most of the sample is concentrated in the lower range. The balance between intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of fear of death was the following: cognitive-existential fear had a tendency to lower values. Scores slightly above the theoretical mean point to a moderate level of fear with a mild tendency to worry about the loss of meaning of life, plans, and control over one's own identity. This is also confirmed by the coincidence of mode and minimum. The subscales Consequences of death for the self (mean = 13.9) and Transcendent consequences of death (mean = 7.87) show a moderate (closer to low) level of fear of loss of one's own individuality and cognitive abilities, as well as fear of the unknown after death. The interpersonal (social and interpersonal fear) dimension is characterised by a mean = 14.8 (maximum possible = 49), median = 14, which points to relatively low levels: the respondents only slightly worry that death may influence the well-being or emotional condition of their significant others or that they may be forgotten. The subscale Fear of being forgotten (mean = 4.71) is the least pronounced compared to the other subscales. Fears of death's impact on significant others (mean = 10.0), that is, the possibility that death may hurt family and close people, are represented at a moderate level. Physical-bodily fear of death (mean = 5.40; maximum possible 21; median = 5) points to a low level of anxiety, which means that physical aspects of death (decomposition of the body, burial, etc.) are not the primary source of fear for most of the respondents. In general, the level of fear of death in the sample is relatively

low, which points to an adaptive attitude to the discussed topic. The major sources of human fears are cognitive-existential fears (loss of the meaning of life, uncertainty about what follows death) and interpersonal fears (importance for others), and the least manifested fears are bodily-physical fears. In brief, the sample is characterised by:

- ♦ a high level of life meaningfulness as an adaptive resource;
- ♦ a flexible locus of control, externally-oriented;
- ♦ elevated anxiety, reflecting both individual traits and specific socio-stress conditions (war, absence of the partner);
- ♦ a high level of life meaningfulness, serving as an adaptive resource;
- ♦ low distress from loneliness and the ability to use it as a resource;
- ♦ a relatively calm and accepting attitude towards death, without excessive fear or idealisation.

The sample specificity (wives of sailors) is the combination of high self-efficacy and life maturity with a heightened anxiety and partially external control attribution. It is a compromise between taking responsibility and realising the objectivity of uncontrollable situations. Thus, in the context of this study, it can be stated that the fear of death is not a leading destabilising factor for wives of sailors, and does not constitute a primary lever for self-control. It is present in a latent way through the cognitive-existential and interpersonal dimensions. Psychological self-control in this group is based more on a high self-efficacy, meaningful life orientations and ability to adapt to uncertain conditions rather than on the fear of death as such. Given that more than half of the variables had a non-normal distribution, the relationships between the variables were calculated using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (Table 5).

The analysis of the interrelations between the various

Table 5. Correlations between components of fear of death

	Fear of death	Avoidance of the topic of death	Neutral attitude	Acceptance of death	Acceptance as escape
Personal death fear – overall	0.695***	0.560***	-0.409***	0.189	0.009
Cognitive-existential fear	0.717***	0.576***	-0.385**	0.194	0.022
Consequences of death for the self	0.705***	0.556***	-0.343**	0.259*	0.075
Transcendent consequences of death	0.658***	0.590***	-0.437***	0.073	-0.099
Social and interpersonal fear of death	0.550***	0.438***	-0.267*	0.187	0.048
Fear of being forgotten	0.577***	0.388**	-0.134	0.272*	0.123
Consequences of death for close others	0.411***	0.371**	-0.228	0.145	0.045
Bodily-physical fear of death	0.561***	0.504***	-0.474***	0.077	0.042

Source: developed by the authors

fear of death dimensions showed that all types of it (general, cognitive-existential, bodily-physical, social-interpersonal and others) correlate positively and highly with the general fear of death index ($r = 0.41$ - 0.72 , $p = 0.001$), which testifies to the interconnectedness of fear-of-death dimensions and their contribution to an integral phenomenon. All the fear of death scales are associated with a desire to avoid the topic of death. The highest correlations

were found for the cognitive-existential fear ($r = 0.576$, $p < 0.001$) and transcendental consequences ($r = 0.590$, $p < 0.001$). Significant relationships with a desire to avoid the subject of death are also for the bodily-physical fear ($r = 0.504$, $p < 0.001$). This means that the stronger the respondents' fear of death of any type, the more they avoid conversations and reflections on the subject. A neutral attitude toward death is negatively correlated with all the

fear scales:

- ♦ bodily-physical fear ($r = -0.474$, $p < 0.001$);
- ♦ transcendental consequences ($r = -0.437$, $p < 0.001$);
- ♦ overall fear of death ($r = -0.409$, $p < 0.001$);
- ♦ cognitive-existential fear ($r = -0.385$, $p < 0.01$);
- ♦ consequences for the self ($r = -0.343$, $p < 0.01$);
- ♦ social and interpersonal fear ($r = -0.267$, $p < 0.05$).

It can be concluded on the basis of the obtained data that the more the fear of death is expressed, the less is the readiness to perceive death in a neutral way, as something natural and inevitable. Paradoxically, positive correlations were found between the acceptance-of-death scale and the subscales consequences for the self ($r = 0.259$, $p < 0.05$) and fear of being forgotten ($r = 0.272$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, the more the respondents fear the loss of individuality or oblivion, the more they show a tendency to accept death. It points to the ambivalence connected with the fear of death issue: on the one hand, death is recognised as a fact, and, on the other hand, there is anxiety about the meaning of life and the value of the self. It is worth mentioning that no significant relationships were found between the acceptance of escape and any of the fear of death variables. So, the awareness of death as a way of escape from difficulties and sufferings is not a characteristic coping strategy for the sample under study.

♦ Discussion

The results of the study provide an opportunity to compare the data on the psychological selfregulation, fear of death and related emotional conditions of the sailors' wives with empirical data obtained in other risk social groups. It is especially interesting that the combination of high anxiety and relatively low fear of death, which, apparently, reflects a certain adaptive strategy of behaviour developed under the conditions of constant uncertainty. The finding of a low overall level of fear of death is consistent with the conclusion of T. Pyszczynski *et al.* (2015; 2020), that prolonged exposure to the topic of death leads to adaptive desensitisation, as a result of which the fear of death is not the leading affect, but is transformed into more differentiated cognitive and interpersonal emotions. This is what was observed in the sample of the conducted study, in which the cognitive-existential and social components of fear of death appeared to be the most sensitive. Negative relationships, which were obtained between a neutral attitude towards death and various dimensions of fear of death, are in line with the results of the studies by R.A. Neimeyer *et al.* (2014), which show that acceptance of death is associated with lower affective reactivity and greater cognitive integration of the topic of death into the narrative of one's own life. This makes it possible to consider a neutral attitude towards death not as a defence, but as a sign of psychological maturity. In this sense, the fear of death can be regarded as an existential basis of self-regulation. Classical studies by E. Becker (1973) and V. Frankl (2023) show that fear of death is the most pow-

erful factor determining human behaviour. The realisation of this fear sets the individual to search for meaning, while its denial causes anxiety, emotional stress and inadequate behaviour. According to V. Frankl, acceptance of one's own mortality is a necessary condition for spiritual maturity, as only by recognising the finitude of life, a person begins to appreciate their existence and learn to manage it. For the wives of sailors and military personnel, fear of death is often mediated – not for themselves, but for the potential loss of their loved ones. This phenomenon can be described as secondary fear of death, which causes mechanisms of hyper-control, increased emotional involvement and at the same time reduced flexibility of self-regulation. As a result, there is an internal conflict between the need for control and the impossibility of controlling the situation, which leads to exhaustion. Research by R.E. Menzies *et al.* (2024) confirmed that prolonged anxiety arising from fear for the life of a close person diminishes the capacity for emotional self-control and cognitive focus. Loss of a sense of security, in turn, stimulates the search for new regulatory strategies – those capable of both relieving tension and restoring a sense of meaning.

One of the most ancient, but at the same time the least formalised way of returning to balance is laughter. R.A. Martin (2010), in his research, pointed out that laughter performs not only a social but also a cognitive-regulatory function, since it allows the individual to ironise the threat. As a result, the attention is shifted from the uncontrollable danger to the possibility of adequate and meaningful actions. O.S. Ivanova (2023) calls laughter a phenomenon of meaning-making, which helps a person cope with a traumatic event through the creation of new meaning. The research data show that laughter unites somatic, emotional and spiritual levels of functioning and launches the natural mechanisms of self-regulation. Compared to other techniques of cognitive restructuring, laughter provides a “reframing” of emotional experience without the denial of pain, but rather with its translation into a socially acceptable form. Laughter has a physiological and hormonal nature. From the physiological point of view, it is a complex process that begins in the cerebral cortex, frontal and motor lobes, brain stem and involves the hippocampus, thalamus and limbic system. It acts on the emotional sphere and the whole organism through the spastic response that occurs during laughter. This response relieves tension, and, as studies show, involves the same brain structures as cocaine and cannabis. Thus, a person can relax, sleep, and overcome physiological overstrain without any external chemical assistance (Ivanova, 2023). According to R. Schwarzer (2024), self-control can be considered an integrative criterion of psychological maturity. Psychological self-control is not the suppression of emotions, but the ability of a person to consciously control their emotional experiences and behaviour in accordance with the values chosen by them. In the definition of Bratus, self-control is positioned at the junction of volitional and meaningful regulation, the level of self-awareness of

the individual is considered a criterion for its quality. Research by A.C. Samson & J.J. Gross (2012) found in their research that positive humour increases the efficiency of emotional regulation, decreases cortisol levels, and affects the prefrontal brain structures responsible for cognitive control. This fact speaks in favour of the idea that laughter can serve as a neuropsychological criterion for restoring self-control after experiencing stress. The study of Ye. Potapchuk & O. Mishchenko (2023) conducted a study on a sample of women who have passed through the combat zone, showing that positive humour and laughter are associated with a decrease in the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. This suggests that laughter can be considered a criterion for psychological resilience, which helps to include the fear of death in the general semantics of life. Laughter as a resource for overcoming the fear of death in women of high-risk professions. For the wives of sailors and military personnel, laughter performs two functions:

1. Psychological (reducing tension, normalising physiological reactions of fear, decreasing the level of anxiety).
2. Social-communicative (restoring communication with loved ones, forming a supportive microenvironment).

Shared laughter in the family becomes a criterion for emotional recovery, since it testifies to trust, openness and readiness for cooperation. This is especially relevant for families whose spouse serves for a long time or is in a combat zone (Ivanova, 2023; Potapchuk & Mishchenko, 2023). Thus, therapy with laughter can be an effective way to restore psychological self-control through meaning, especially in extreme conditions when the fear of death enters the foreground of life experience. As J.E. LeDoux (1996) noted, the search for meaning is associated with the processes of neuroplasticity, i.e. the brain's ability to reorganise itself in response to new experience. When searching for meaning, neurotransmitters (i.e. chemicals that transmit signals from one neuron to another) are involved as well. Dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin and other chemicals affect mood, motivation and social behaviour. The high level of self-efficacy revealed in current research corresponds to the position of A. Bandura (1997) believes that faith in the effectiveness of one's actions is the key to self-regulation. Thus, the results of this research correspond to other scientific data and testify to the fact that the relationship between self-control, fear of death and laughter is of a systemic nature.

◆ Conclusions

The research data show that self-control is one of the key factors in emotional regulation of sailors' wives in terms of fear of death and existential anxiety. It was found that a high level of self-control is associated with effective coping with stress, minimisation of the effects of uncertainty, and coherence of behavioural and cognitive strategies in critical life situations. Fear of death, as shown in this study, is a multidimensional phenomenon and may manifest itself in the form of anxiety, panic, etc., depending on the intensity of the threat and individual psychological features. In the case of sailors' wives, the fear of death can be enhanced

due to the specifics of the husband's profession, duration of separation, risks, and loss of control over significant events in life. The second important conclusion is that laughter has a regulatory function. Using laughter as a coping behaviour allows reducing emotional tension, processing a negative experience, and maintaining social contacts that also serve as an additional resource for coping with existential fears. The results confirmed that laughter can be considered an effective psychological mechanism that mediates the relationship between self-control and fear of death. Thus, the combination of high self-control and the ability to use laughter creates an important adaptive potential of sailors' wives that provides psychological resilience and minimises the effect of existential anxiety. The level of fear of death in the research participants was low, which testifies to the ability to existentially accept the loss without creating a destructive anxiety, and thus points to a relatively mature attitude toward death. However, a tendency toward increased anxiety was revealed, which is typical of families of persons in high-risk professions associated with prolonged stress and uncertainty. The data on self-efficacy and locus of control testify to the general adaptability of the sample: the girls preserved the confidence in their abilities and control over the events of their lives, and at the same time recognised the importance of the external factors. High indicators of life-meaning orientations testify to the preservation of life goals and satisfaction with the lived experience and confidence in the manageability of one's own life, even in conditions of increased stress and existential threat. The majority of research participants did not demonstrate the tendency toward destructive loneliness, which means preservation of social contacts and the ability to use positive solitude as a resource for compensation and reflection. The data confirm that laughter performs a regulatory function within the structure of psychological functioning and contributes to the reduction of emotional tension, restoration of cognitive flexibility, and internal control and integration of fear and anxiety into the system of life meanings. These results confirm the idea that laughter therapy is an effective method of psychological support for sailors' wives, military wives, and other social groups that experience chronic stress and existential threat. Perspectives for further research may include the study of laughter as a mechanism of overcoming the fear of death and restoration of self-regulation, and the effectiveness of this mechanism within the framework of a complex of psychological support of families of persons in high-risk professions.

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Самоконтроль і страх смерті у дружин моряків: роль сміху як регулятивного чинника

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♦ **Анотація.** Актуальність дослідження зумовлена зростанням рівня екзистенційної тривоги та страху смерті в умовах глобальної нестабільності, воєнного контексту та підвищених професійних ризиків, що особливо гостро проявляється у сім'ях моряків, де дружини тривалий час перебувають у стані невизначеності та емоційного напруження. Метою дослідження було вивчення особливостей страху смерті, рівня психологічного самоконтролю та ролі сміху як ресурсу емоційної регуляції у дружин моряків. У дослідженні використано теоретичні методи аналізу, систематизації та узагальнення підходів до проблем страху смерті та самоконтролю; емпіричні методики: «Шкала самоефективності», «Шкала локус-контролю», «Ставлення до смерті», шкала тривоги Спілбергера, тест сенсожиттєвих орієнтацій, опитувальник «Страх особистої смерті» та диференційний опитувальник переживання самотності. Для обробки даних застосовано розрахунок середнього, медіани, моди та критерії Шاپіро-Уїлка і Спірмена. Результати дослідження засвідчили, що загальний рівень страху смерті у більшості респонденток перебуває в межах низьких і помірних значень, що поєднується з відносно збереженим психологічним самоконтролем та високими показниками самоефективності. Виявлено підвищений рівень фонові тривожності, пов'язаний із тривалим очікуванням та невизначеністю, тоді як інтенсивний страх актуалізується у відповідь на конкретні загрозливі події. Отримані дані свідчать, що використання сміху корелює зі зниженням афективної напруги, покращенням емоційної стабільності та підвищенням здатності до саморегуляції. Сміх виконує не лише регулятивну, а й сенсотворчу функцію, сприяючи інтеграції страху смерті у ширший контекст життєвих цінностей і підтриманню психологічної стійкості. Разом із тим встановлено наявність групи підвищеного психологічного ризику, для якої характерні високі показники тривожності та знижений самоконтроль. Практична цінність дослідження полягає у можливості використання результатів для розробки програм психологічної підтримки та консультування дружин моряків, спрямованих на розвиток самоконтролю, резилієнтності та адаптивних стратегій емоційної регуляції за допомогою сміхотерапії

♦ **Ключові слова:** копінг-стратегії; самоефективність; локус контролю; сенс життя; екзистенційна тривога