



Existential challenges of war: The role of spirituality, meaning of life and value orientations in the psychological recovery of military personnel who have participated in combat operations

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◆ **Abstract.** The relevance of the study is determined by the growing psychological challenges associated with combat trauma among military personnel and the complexity of their post-war adaptation. The aim of the study was to determine the role of spirituality, awareness of the meaning of life and value orientations in the psychological recovery of military personnel who have participated in combat operations, as well as to substantiate practical recommendations for integrating existential factors into psychological support programmes. The methodological basis of the study was the provisions of existential and humanistic psychology, concepts of spiritual development of the individual, and modern models of post-traumatic adaptation. The study used theoretical analysis and generalisation of sources, content analysis, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and statistical data processing. The empirical part included standardised psychodiagnostic methods for assessing spirituality – the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES), meaning in life – the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), value orientations – Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ), psychological recovery and stress resistance – Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), and post-traumatic manifestations – PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5). The results of the study showed that spirituality, awareness of the meaning of life, and stability of value orientations have a significant impact on the effectiveness of psychological recovery of military personnel. Positive correlations were found between the level of spirituality and overall psychological well-being, as well as between the formation of value orientations and the ability to adapt socially. Awareness of the meaning of life proved to be a significant predictor of post-traumatic growth and the formation of adaptive strategies for coping with stress. The data obtained confirmed the synergistic effect of combining spiritual and value-meaning resources in the process of psychological recovery after combat experience. The practical value of the study lies in the possibility of using its results in the development of comprehensive psychological support programmes for military personnel, aimed at restoring internal resources, increasing resilience and successful social reintegration in the post-war period

◆ **Keywords:** life meaning orientations; self-regulation; combat stress; post-traumatic adaptation; war veterans

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♦ Introduction

The modern world order is characterised by high dynamism, uncertainty and constant socio-economic challenges, which exert significant pressure on an individual's mental health. In the context of military service and participation in combat operations, these factors are significantly exacerbated by extreme situations, constant threats to life, the loss of comrades and chronic stress. In this regard, the issue of psychological recovery of military personnel after participating in combat operations has become a matter of global importance and the subject of active interdisciplinary research. One of the key components of psychological resilience is the value-meaning sphere of the individual, which encompasses a system of life values, awareness of the meaning of life, and spiritual guidelines. As noted by I.C. Fischer *et al.* (2020), it is these components that ensure a person's ability to self-regulate, form internal resources and adapt positively in the context of traumatic experiences. It is emphasised that the loss or transformation of the meaning of life after combat can act as a factor of psychological maladjustment, while its restoration can act as an important resource for post-traumatic growth. I. Kira *et al.* (2021) found that spirituality and a sense of purpose in life correlate with a reduction in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety.

Positive spiritual strategies, such as reinterpreting traumatic experiences, religious or existential support, and the ability to forgive and accept, are associated with better mental health and quality of life indicators among veterans. At the same time, negative spiritual coping, manifested in feelings of abandonment, loss of faith, or deep value conflicts, is associated with a higher risk of depressive disorders and suicidal behaviour (Sukharieva *et al.*, 2025). In this context, the concept of moral trauma, which describes deep internal conflicts associated with the violation of basic moral beliefs during war, becomes particularly relevant. An important area of contemporary research is also the study of post-traumatic growth, which is seen as a positive psychological transformation that can occur as a result of overcoming extreme experiences. N. Kucherenko & I. Prykhodko (2025) emphasised that spiritual and value-meaning changes are central components of this process and contribute to the formation of new life priorities, the strengthening of personal power and the deepening of social ties. The publication by V. Aleshchenko & O. Kokun (2025) emphasises the need to assess psychological functioning both before participation in combat operations and after returning from the combat zone, which allows for the timely identification of risks of developing acute stress reactions and post-traumatic disorders. An important aspect of psychological support is also maintaining mental health, preventing maladaptive reactions, and building resilience to prolonged combat stress. A summary of the above approaches has demonstrated the advisability of integrating spiritual and existential components into psychological support programmes for military personnel. N. Ennis *et al.* (2021) believed that the most effective models of assistance are

multidisciplinary ones that combine psychotherapeutic, social, and spiritually oriented interventions aimed at restoring meaning to life, overcoming moral trauma, and developing post-traumatic growth. Despite numerous studies, the problem of systemic integration of value-meaning factors into the process of psychological recovery of military personnel remains insufficiently studied. Previous works are mostly fragmentary or focus on individual aspects of spirituality, without taking into account the holistic structure of personality, and most studies concerned military personnel who performed tasks on the territory of other states. Ukrainian military personnel, on the contrary, defend their own independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty in response to an unprovoked attack, which forms a specific psychological and emotional reaction that can be defined as the "Ukrainian syndrome", combining traditional manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder with the unique existential and spiritual challenges of war on their own territory (Shykovets & Karamushka, 2024). This necessitates further theoretical reflection and empirical study of the role of spirituality, meaning of life, and value orientations in post-war adaptation. The aim of the study was to analyse the significance of spirituality, meaning of life and value orientations in the psychological recovery of military personnel who have participated in combat operations. The objectives of the study included analysing contemporary theoretical and empirical approaches, assessing the impact of value-meaning factors on mental health and developing practical recommendations for specialists.

♦ Materials and Methods

The theoretical research was conducted in several stages and was based on a comprehensive approach that combined systemic, existential-humanistic, and axiological approaches. At the first stage of the research, an analysis and generalisation of contemporary scientific publications on the problems of the psychology of war, post-traumatic stress disorder, existential psychology and psychological recovery of military personnel was carried out. The source base included, in particular, the works of S. Tomek *et al.* (2015), C.L. Park *et al.* (2017) and K.A. Krotiuk (2024). The criteria for selecting sources were their scientific validity, relevance to the research topic, clearly defined methodology, and indexing in the international scientometric databases Scopus and Web of Science. The literature review was conducted using methods of theoretical analysis, synthesis, comparative analysis, content analysis and conceptual modelling, which made it possible to identify the key factors of psychological recovery, the role of spirituality, meaning of life and value orientations in the formation of military personnel resilience, as well as to form the methodological basis for the empirical stage of the study.

The empirical study was conducted between March and October 2024. The sample consisted of 60 individuals aged 20 to 50 who had direct experience of combat operations and gave their voluntary informed consent to participate

in the study. The sample included 40 military personnel on active duty and 20 veterans after demobilisation; among the participants were 52 men and 8 women. The sample was stratified, which ensured representativeness in terms of age, service status and length of combat experience. A set of standardised psychodiagnostic techniques was used to operationalise key concepts: spirituality was assessed using the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES), meaning in life was assessed using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), value orientations were assessed using the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ), and psychological recovery and stress resistance were assessed using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC). The PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5) was used to assess post-traumatic manifestations. In addition to quantitative methods, semi-structured interviews were used, based on the methodological approaches of O. Gulbs & A. Kobets (2021) and adapted to the objectives of this study. The interviews were conducted in an individual format (online or offline, based on participants' preferences) following a standardized protocol and included blocks of questions aimed at exploring the subjective experience of the meaning of life, spiritual resources, value orientations, and processes of psychological recovery. The survey was conducted at a military unit (the unit number and address are confidential); prior to the testing, a conversation was held to identify the most vulnerable category of individuals for the purpose of screening them out. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring semantic categories and interpretative patterns. Quantitative data processing included descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation analysis, and regression analysis ($p < 0.01$; $p < 0.05$). To ensure the reliability and reproducibility of the results, standardised methods with proven psychometric indicators were used, as well as inter-expert agreement in the analysis of interviews. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of psychological science in accordance with the provisions of the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki (WMA, 2024).

◆ Results and Discussion

The psychological recovery of military personnel after participating in combat operations is a complex multidimensional process that encompasses emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and existential aspects of personality functioning. In modern psychological science, increasing attention is being paid not only to a symptom-oriented approach to overcoming post-traumatic disorders, but also to the study of internal resources that ensure adaptation, resilience and post-traumatic growth. Among these resources, spirituality, awareness of the meaning of life, and a system of value orientations occupy a special place. Within existential and humanistic psychology, spirituality is viewed as an integrative phenomenon that includes experiences of meaning, inner integrity, connection to transcendent or supra-personal values, and the ability of the individual to transcend traumatic experiences (Park *et al.*, 2017). The

work of H.G. Koenig *et al.* (2020) showed that spirituality contributes to the formation of adaptive cognitive patterns, increased tolerance to uncertainty, and reduced intensity of destructive emotional reactions in situations of extreme stress. For military personnel, spirituality can serve as an internal stabiliser, helping to integrate traumatic experiences into a broader life context. Closely related to spirituality is the concept of meaning in life, which in existential psychology is considered a basic condition for psychological well-being. According to the concept of meaning-making, awareness of meaning allows individuals to interpret traumatic events not only as a source of suffering, but also as an experience that has the potential for personal growth. Empirical research by R.G. Tedeschi & L.G. Calhoun (2009) has shown that a high level of meaning in life is associated with lower levels of post-traumatic stress, depressive and anxiety symptoms, as well as increased psychological resilience and motivation for social reintegration.

Value orientations are another key factor in psychological recovery, as they determine life priorities, moral guidelines and ways of making decisions in difficult situations. In the context of military experience, values can undergo significant transformation due to experiences of loss, moral dilemmas and existential crises. A stable and integrated value system contributes to the preservation of identity, the restoration of a sense of control over life, and the formation of constructive adaptation strategies (Kira *et al.*, 2021; Krotiuk, 2024). The interaction between spirituality, meaning of life, and value orientations is synergistic. Spirituality creates a basis for rethinking life experiences, meaning in life provides direction and motivation for further activity, and value orientations regulate specific behavioural and social manifestations of adaptation. Together, these factors can act as a buffer between traumatic experiences and the development of psychopathological symptoms, reducing the risk of chronic post-traumatic stress and promoting post-traumatic growth (Tomek *et al.*, 2015). Particular attention should be paid to the cultural context within which the content of spirituality and values is formed. For Ukrainian military personnel, spirituality often takes on non-religious, individualised forms and is associated with the concepts of dignity, responsibility, freedom and defence of the homeland. This specificity necessitates a culturally sensitive approach to psychological support that takes into account the national, historical, and social characteristics of military experience, as noted by I. Prykhodko *et al.* (2023). Thus, theoretical analysis has provided grounds for considering spirituality, meaning of life, and value orientations as interrelated psychological resources that play a leading role in the psychological recovery of military personnel. This position became the conceptual basis for further empirical research. The level of spirituality, awareness of the meaning of life, and stability of value orientations significantly influence the psychological recovery of military personnel who have participated in combat operations. Questionnaires and interviews showed that respondents with a high level of spirituality had

significantly lower levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms and more effective adaptive behavioural strategies. The level of awareness of the meaning of life correlated with the ability to self-regulate, optimistic cognitive patterns, and

positive motivation for social integration after demobilisation. The results are summarised in Table 1, which shows the average values for spirituality, value orientations, awareness of the meaning of life, and post-traumatic stress levels.

Table 1. Main indicators of psychological recovery and existential resources of the study participants

Indicator	Mean $\pm$ SE	Minimum	Maximum
Spirituality	4.28 $\pm$ 0.12	2.1	5.0
Meaning in life	4.15 $\pm$ 0.15	1.9	5.0
Value orientations	4.02 $\pm$ 0.10	2.0	5.0
Post-traumatic stress	2.35 $\pm$ 0.14	1.0	4.8

Note: SE – standard error

Source: developed by the authors

Analysis of the data presented in Table 1 showed a high level of existential resources in the sample of respondents. In particular, the spirituality indicator has the highest average value ($M = 4.28 \pm 0.12$), which indicates its significant role in the structure of psychological recovery of military personnel. At the same time, the minimum value of 2.1 indicates interindividual variability and uneven actualisation of spiritual resources among different participants. The level of awareness of the meaning of life is also elevated ($M = 4.15 \pm 0.15$), but is characterised by a slightly higher standard error, which may reflect a wider range of individual differences in life orientations caused by combat experience and the process of adaptation after it. The minimum values of this indicator (1.9) indicate the presence of a group of respondents with a significantly reduced sense of life prospects, which potentially increases the risk of psychological maladjustment. Value orientations show relatively stable indicators ($M = 4.02 \pm 0.10$) with the smallest standard error among existential variables, which allows to be interpreted as a more structured and stable component of psychological personality organisation even in conditions of traumatic experience. Unlike existential resources, the level of post-traumatic stress is moderate ($M = 2.35 \pm 0.14$), but is characterised by a wide range of values (from 1.0 to 4.8), indicating significant heterogeneity in the manifestations of post-traumatic symptoms in the sample. The combination of a moderate average level of post-traumatic stress with high levels of spirituality, meaning of life and value orientations confirms the assumption about their buffering function with regard to the psychological consequences of combat experience. Overall, the results in Table 1 confirmed that existential resources are important factors in the psychological recovery of military personnel, reducing the intensity of post-traumatic manifestations and contributing to the formation of adaptive coping strategies. The study confirmed that the level of spirituality, awareness of the meaning of life, and stability of value orientations have a significant impact on the psychological recovery of military personnel who have participated in combat operations. The results showed that respondents with higher levels of spirituality were characterised by less intense symptoms of post-traumatic stress and more effective adaptive coping strategies.

The study also identified a strong positive correlation between spirituality, awareness of the meaning of life, and the level of psychological recovery, confirming the importance of integrating existential resources into the practice of psychological support for military personnel. At the same time, it was found that Ukrainian military personnel exhibit culturally specific forms of spiritual development and rethinking of values that differ from Western models, emphasising the need to adapt psychological support programmes to take into account national characteristics. This is consistent with the concept of spirituality as an internal resource for self-regulation and psychological resilience. Correlation analysis confirmed a strong positive relationship between spirituality and the overall level of psychological recovery ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$), as well as between the stability of value orientations and the ability to adapt to the social environment ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, awareness of the meaning of life proved to be a significant predictor of post-traumatic growth ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$), indicating the key role of existential factors in the process of adaptation after combat experience. These results confirm the propositions of existential psychology, according to which meaningful orientations enable individuals to integrate traumatic experiences into a coherent life story.

The data obtained are consistent with the results of V. Sukharieva *et al.* (2025). The authors showed that a high level of spiritual engagement and reflection on life experiences is associated with a reduction in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and an increase in psychological resilience in combat veterans. Similar conclusions are presented in the study by A.V. Shvets *et al.* (2023), where meaning in life is considered a mediator between traumatic experience and psychological well-being. The researchers also emphasised the positive impact of value-meaning strategies on the social adaptation and reintegration of veterans into civilian life. Religious faith can also be a powerful resource for support, but the results of the study and conclusions of N.R. Nugent *et al.* (2014) pointed to the possible risks of its uncritical integration. An excessive focus on fatalistic attitudes or an internal conflict between religious beliefs and military duty can complicate the adaptation process, as noted by M.S. Kopacz *et al.* (2016). In the context of the war in Ukraine, this issue

has become particularly relevant, as military personnel are forced to combine existential experiences with the realities of combat operations. The provisions regarding the influence of spirituality and religious faith on mental health (in particular, military personnel participating in combat operations) are consistent with the conclusions of K.I. Pargament *et al.* (2000). This study confirmed that spirituality, awareness of the meaning of life, and stability of value orientations play a key role in the psychological recovery of military personnel participating in combat operations. O. Prokofieva *et al.* (2024) found that a high level of spirituality correlates with a reduction in post-traumatic stress symptoms, while awareness of the meaning of life and established value orientations increase the effectiveness of adaptation strategies and promote post-traumatic growth. Thus, the results of the study showed that the integration of existential resources into psychological support programmes for military personnel increases the effectiveness of their psychological recovery and contributes to the formation of sustainable strategies for overcoming the consequences of combat operations.

◆ Conclusions

The study found that the psychological state of military personnel after participating in combat operations is characterised by significant variability, which depends on the level of development of internal personal resources. Analysis of the data obtained showed that spirituality, which is an integrative characteristic of personality, is closely related to psychological recovery and the ability to overcome the consequences of traumatic experiences. People with a high level of spirituality tend to demonstrate greater emotional stability, better adaptability, and a greater ability to rethink past events, which allows them to cope more effectively with stressful situations. The study also showed that awareness of the meaning of life plays an important role in the formation of constructive strategies for coping with stress. Military personnel who maintain

or restore a sense of meaning and purpose in life show lower levels of maladaptive behaviour and a greater capacity for post-traumatic growth. The study found that higher levels of spirituality and awareness of the meaning of life are associated with lower intensity of post-traumatic stress symptoms and more effective adaptive strategies for coping with stress. At the same time, it was found that Ukrainian military personnel demonstrate culturally specific forms of spiritual development and rethinking of values, which emphasises the need to adapt psychological support programmes to national characteristics. The stability of value orientations is an additional factor in psychological resilience, providing internal support in conditions of extreme experience. The results obtained emphasised the need for a more in-depth study of these aspects and their impact on the adaptation process of military personnel. Further research may focus on long-term observation of changes in the level of spirituality, awareness of the meaning of life and value orientations in the process of adaptation to civilian life. In addition, an important area of focus is the evaluation of the effectiveness of psychological interventions that integrate existential components into veteran rehabilitation programmes, which will help to create more personalised and effective psychological support strategies.

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◆ Conflict of Interest

None.

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Екзистенційні виклики війни: роль духовності, сенсу життя та ціннісних орієнтацій у процесі психологічного відновлення військовослужбовців – учасників бойових дій

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♦ **Анотація.** Актуальність дослідження зумовлена зростанням психологічних викликів, пов'язаних із бойовою травматизацією військовослужбовців та складністю їх післявоєнної адаптації. Метою дослідження було визначення ролі духовності, усвідомлення сенсу життя та ціннісних орієнтацій у процесі психологічного відновлення військовослужбовців – учасників бойових дій, а також обґрунтування практичних рекомендацій щодо інтеграції екзистенційних чинників у програми психологічної підтримки. Методологічну основу дослідження становили положення екзистенційної та гуманістичної психології, концепції духовного розвитку особистості та сучасні моделі посттравматичної адаптації. У дослідженні застосовано теоретичний аналіз та узагальнення джерел, контент-аналіз, анкетування, напівструктуровані інтерв'ю та статистичну обробку даних. Емпірична частина включала стандартизовані психодіагностичні методики для оцінки духовності – Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES), сенсу життя – Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), ціннісних орієнтацій – Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ), психологічного відновлення та стресостійкості – Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) і посттравматичних проявів – PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5). Результати дослідження засвідчили, що духовність, усвідомлення сенсу життя та стабільність ціннісних орієнтацій мають істотний вплив на ефективність психологічного відновлення військовослужбовців. Встановлено наявність позитивних кореляцій між рівнем духовності та загальним психологічним благополуччям, а також між сформованістю ціннісних орієнтацій і здатністю до соціальної адаптації. Усвідомлення сенсу життя виявилось значущим предиктором післятравматичного зростання та формування адаптивних стратегій подолання стресу. Отримані дані підтвердили синергетичний ефект поєднання духовних і ціннісно-сміслових ресурсів у процесі психологічного відновлення після бойового досвіду. Практична цінність дослідження полягає у можливості використання його результатів під час розробки комплексних програм психологічного супроводу військовослужбовців, орієнтованих на відновлення внутрішніх ресурсів, підвищення стійкості та успішну соціальну реінтеграцію у післявоєнний період

♦ **Ключові слова:** смисложиттєві орієнтації; саморегуляція; бойовий стрес; посттравматична адаптація; ветерани війни