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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Short-Term Interventions for Overcoming Emotional Confusion: What to Do When Having Many Problems Is Yet Another Problem?

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Abstract

Background and Aim of Study: *The full-scale war in Ukraine causes the population to experience numerous stressors that are layered on top of each other (forced displacement, losses, constant threats and existing traumas). This leads to emotional confusion (a state of reduced control of one's own emotions), fatigue, narrowing of attention and impaired self-validation, which complicates self-understanding and self-care. All this poses numerous problems for the psychotherapist. This is because standard psychotherapeutic programmes may not be effective enough when clients are overwhelmed by the intensity of their problems. At the same time, assistance has to be provided within an extremely limited time frame.*
The aim of the study: to propose an integrated short-term intervention strategy for psychological counseling and psychotherapy to address emotional confusion in clients who have experienced multiple crises during wartime, utilizing the strengths of trauma-sensitive mindfulness, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), and self-compassion-based approaches.

Conclusions: *The integrative approach allows therapists and clients to create a snapshot of current difficulties. It involves the sequential application of elements from different modalities: grounding techniques (EMDR/Mindfulness), internal state description (DBT), external stressor inventory, identification of key maladaptive beliefs (EMDR), and the use of stabilization or reprocessing techniques. This structured, brief intervention helps clients describe their condition, understand the sources of emotional confusion, practice self-compassion, and prioritize problems. Implemented over 1–2 sessions, this approach helps clients move beyond emotional confusion and motivates adaptive change, thereby instilling hope.*

Keywords: *emotional confusion, short-term intervention, dialectical behavioral therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, mindfulness, multiple stressors, war trauma*

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Dear Editor,

When a person is dealing with a recent stressful event, they are usually aware of why they feel unwell, and they can understand how their thoughts, emotions and impulses relate to the event. The ability to self-compassion serves as a way to regulate emotions, helping you to maintain balance and clarity of mind.

However, the situation changes dramatically when the number of adverse events rapidly accumulates. These events usually cause traumatic and post-traumatic stress reactions (Melnyk et al., 2020).

Consider a collective, impersonal case common in psychotherapy practice: a woman is experiencing sleepless nights due to rocket attacks, her daughter died six months ago while trying to leave the occupied territories, her husband has lost his job, she is having problems at her own job, she is caring for her bedridden father, has diabetes, and experienced neglect and abuse as a child. At some point, the accumulation and cross-influence of these problems create a new wave of them, and the overall ability to act effectively and regulate emotions drops significantly. Research confirms that multiple traumatic events tend to cause a more severe course of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, primarily through the formation of dysfunctional beliefs and negative expectations (Brewin et al., 2017).

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, such cases have become increasingly frequent in the practices of psychologists, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists (Mykhaylyshyn et al., 2024; Stadnik et al., 2023). This state of being overwhelmed can be termed "emotional confusion". Due to exhaustion and high levels of stress, attention narrows and the capacity for self-validation diminishes, making it difficult to clearly understand one's own feelings and needs. Prolonged chronic stress biologically undermines cognitive functions, impairing attention, memory, and cognitive flexibility (McEwen, 2017). Critically, assistance must often be provided within very limited timeframes, sometimes in just one or two counseling sessions.

When faced with emotional confusion stemming from numerous problems, therapists must navigate the client's limited cognitive capacity to help them describe their state and understand which "mountain streams" led to the "flood in the valley". The adage "Divide and conquer!" offers a clue: we must help to disentangle the web of problems.

There are robust approaches available, including dialectical behaviour therapy (Linehan, 2015), trauma-sensitive mindfulness programmes (Treleaven, 2018), self-compassion approaches (Neff, 2023) and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing therapy (Shapiro, 2018).

We propose integrating conceptual elements from these approaches to create a momentary "snapshot" of the client's current difficulties. This allows them to describe their state, explore the causal origins of their emotional confusion, practice self-compassion, prioritize problems, and instill hope by choosing effective immediate actions. The proposed framework integrates several key steps that can be realized within one to two sessions.

Step 1: Describing the Current State and Grounding

We adapt the DBT skill of describing and acknowledging emotions (Linehan, 2015). In a state of emotional confusion, isolating a single emotion is difficult. Instead of requiring precise labels, we ask the client to use any available words and associations to describe their state (e.g., "horrible", "despair", "my head hurts"). This process of "affect labeling" is proven to reduce an emotion's disruptive impact by downregulating amygdala activity and engaging prefrontal regulatory regions (Lieberman et al., 2007). Brief grounding practices, such as the "4 Elements" procedure from EMDR protocols, are used before and after this step to maintain stability (Shapiro, 2018).

Step 2: Identifying External Stressors and Contextual Validation

Following DBT logic, we then ask the client to list the external, factual events they believe contributed to their state. This provides crucial contextual validation, helping the client recognize that their intense reaction is an understandable response to overwhelming circumstances, thereby reducing self-blame. Safety is maintained through a "STOP" rule, allowing the client to pause at any time.

Step 3: Identifying Core Maladaptive Beliefs

The next step is to identify the blocking negative belief that impedes adaptability. Using an approach inspired by the EMDR protocol (Shapiro, 2018), the "target" becomes the entire picture – the feelings and the events. We ask, "When you look at this entire picture, what negative belief about yourself fits best?" Common responses like "I am hopeless" or "I am at my limit" reveal the perceptual lens that obstructs adaptive action.

Step 4: Intervention and Adaptive Shifts

Once a key belief has been identified, several interventions are possible. An EMDR-certified therapist may proceed to work through the whole picture or a key memory (Shapiro, 2018). If EMDR is not available, the DPT skill "Effective Thought Review and Couple Relaxation" offers a simple but effective alternative (Linehan, 2015). It involves combining adaptive thoughts (e.g., "I am strong") with calming breathing. This process is supported by the development of self-compassion, which serves as a powerful psychological buffer against distress and despair (Neff, 2023).

Step 5: Instilling Hope through Action

Finally, the session concludes by collaboratively planning one or two small, achievable actions. This final step is designed to restore a sense of control and self-efficacy. By focusing on concrete, immediate steps, we activate the core components of hope – agency, and pathway thinking – which is a powerful predictor of psychological recovery (Snyder, 2002).

Conclusions

The integrative approach allows therapists and clients to create a snapshot of current difficulties. It involves the sequential application of elements from different modalities: grounding techniques (EMDR/Mindfulness), internal state description (DBT), external stressor inventory, identification of key maladaptive beliefs (EMDR), and the use of stabilization or reprocessing techniques. This structured, brief intervention helps clients describe their condition, understand the sources of emotional confusion, practice self-compassion, and prioritize problems. Implemented over 1–2 sessions, this approach helps clients move beyond emotional confusion and motivates adaptive change, thereby instilling hope.

Ethical Approval

The study protocol was consistent with the ethical guidelines of the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki as reflected in a prior approval by the Institution's Human Research Committee.

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Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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