

LEARNING BY SERVING: A MENTAL HEALTH DAY INITIATIVE IN A UKRAINIAN REAR COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The ongoing war in Ukraine has profoundly affected the psychological well-being of communities in rear areas generating unprecedented levels of stress and pressure. Considering the enormous negative impact on mental health, it is crucial to provide people with adequate support, educate about coping strategies, promote mental well-being through community initiatives and reduce stigma associated with psychological health problems. In response to these challenges, service-learning has emerged as an innovative pedagogical approach which allows students to engage their knowledge and skills while contributing to the community.

A group of first-year Master's students in Clinical Psychology chose to organize a Mental Health Day (MHD) for the course of "Scientific and Psychoeducational Practice". The event was arranged for the community of Kozova, as part of cooperation between this community and Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU) on 10 October 2025. This initiative was implemented as part of the ServU project – "Service-Learning in Higher Education for Ukraine's Recovery," supported by Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education which is coordinated by the UCU and implemented in cooperation with Ukrainian and international partners.

The goals of the practice were to raise public awareness and educate about mental health; provide psychological support; reduce stigma associated with seeking mental health assistance;

contribute to community resilience, and enable students to develop practical skills and civic competencies. The workshop engaged 15 university students supervised by academic staff, alongside community members, local practitioners, and representatives of vulnerable groups, including veterans and children.

The event was co-designed by the students and community partners, and structured as a four-step process, with student self-reflection after each part. As the first preparatory step students visited the Kozova community to interview the representatives about their needs, identify key participants and preferred workshop format. In the second phase, the Mental Health Day activities were planned and finalized. In the third phase, students facilitated the Mental Health Day event. The workshop was structured around interactive formats, including discussions, a range of psychoeducational activities for children and adults, initiatives for veterans and hospital personnel working with them, and a community social evening. The majority of activities took place at a local school, involving 299 children, 25 teachers, and 16 other members of school staff. The final fourth phase focused on results evaluation and structured self-reflection. Several feedback sessions with community representatives were conducted. Students completed a final reflection on their own professional and personal growth throughout the practice.

Feedback collected from participants indicated that the event increased awareness of mental health well-being, highlighted key stigma points, prompted calls to action and fostered a broader culture of psychological safety within the local community. The interdisciplinary discussions generated new models of cooperation and became cornerstones of future mental health support projects. All participating students found conducting MHD a valuable opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in a real-world setting and develop a deeper understanding of how they can assess the community's needs. The activity served as an applied learning environment in which theoretical knowledge was transferred into practical action. Reflection sessions held before, during and after the event allowed students to critically examine their experiences, connect practice to academic content, and analyse their role in the process. Students' self-reflections highlighted not only professional development but also significant personal transformation.

Evaluating, examining, and responding to real community needs allowed students to reassess their values, motivations, and sense of what it means to be a psychologist in times of crisis. This experience increased their sense of empathy, broadened their perspective on professional self-awareness, and strengthened their sense of civic responsibility as future mental health professionals. As some students reflected, the experience allowed them to create change, be part of change, and change from within.

This experience confirms that community-based service-learning practices focused on mental health can serve as meaningful educational and social interventions in contexts of crisis. These outcomes align with the broader goals of the ServU project– to embed service-learning as a sustainable pedagogical model within Ukrainian higher education and develop active citizenship competences among students through service-learning courses.