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## Fairy tale therapy for children of war

### Казкотерапія для дітей війни

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#### Abstract

The article highlights the possibilities of using fairy-tale therapy by parents, legal guardians, socionomic sphere specialists in the process of providing support and assistance to children during the war. The purpose of the article is to define the content of fairy-tale therapy and create an author's fairy tale, which is focused on pedagogical and psychological assistance to children affected by military operations. To achieve the goal, mainly theoretical research methods were applied: study, analysis and generalization of special psychological and pedagogical literature in order to identify the investigated problem. It is emphasized that a therapeutic fairy tale heals a person's soul, as it carries out powerful psychological work at the subconscious level. In order for the fairy-tale narrative to acquire a therapeutic character, it must reflect the child's problem. The process of creating an author's therapeutic fairy tale helps relieve tension in stressful situations, contributes to the constructive experience of emotions, develops communication skills, imagination, and distracts from difficult feelings. It was concluded that fairy-tale therapy is a unique method of treatment of mental health disorders caused by military actions, as children find echoes of inner experiences from their own lives in fairy tales.

#### Анотація

У статті акцентовано увагу на можливостях використання казкотерапії батьками, опікунами, фахівцями соціономічних спеціальностей у процесі надання підтримки й допомоги дітям під час війни. Мета статті – визначення змісту казкотерапії та створення авторської казки, яка орієнтована на педагогічну і психологічну допомогу дітям, які постраждали під час військових дій. Для досягнення поставленої мети застосовувалися переважно теоретичні методи дослідження: вивчення, аналіз й узагальнення спеціальної психолого-педагогічної літератури з метою виявлення стану досліджуваної проблеми. Підкреслено, що терапевтична казка лікує душу людини, оскільки вона здійснює потужну психологічну роботу на підсвідомому рівні. Для того, щоб казковий наратив набув терапевтичного характеру, казка повинна відображати проблему дитини. Процес створення авторської терапевтичної казки допомагає зняти напругу у стресових ситуаціях, сприяє конструктивному переживанню емоцій, розвиває комунікативні навички, фантазію, відволікає від тяжких переживань. Зроблено висновок, що казкотерапія є унікальним методом лікування психічних травм, спричинених військовими

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**Key words:** fairy-tale therapy, traumatic war experience, author's fairy tale, fairy tale narrative.

## Introduction

War is a complex socio-political phenomenon that causes irreparable harm to the life and health of the population of a certain country. People lose their homes, relatives and loved ones, are forced to leave their homes and go abroad or acquire the status of internally displaced persons. The most painful thing is that children suffer the most during war. It is difficult for them to understand why their safe environment has changed so dramatically. In particular, in cities, the air raid siren sounds, indicating the threat of missile and air strikes, and therefore, instead of a cozy home, children are forced to run and spend several hours in shelters (often ill-equipped and uncomfortable), evacuation under shelling, loss of home, separation from relatives – all these factors leave a deep mark in the child's soul.

During wartime, the primary task of parents, legal guardians, socionomic sphere specialists (social pedagogues, social workers, practical psychologists) is to master effective methods of providing support and assistance to children in order to preserve their physical and mental health. Among the range of means identified by researchers (Berezan, 2020), fairy-tale therapy is worth to be highlighted. A fairy tale helps an individual to overcome mental trauma caused by war. It is a deep source of folk wisdom that soothes, provides comfort and support. In the conditions of war, it is not important whether an adult reads a book to a child or tells a fairy tale. The most important thing is that a child hears the gentle voice of a loved person. Fairy tales teach a child to find a way out of difficult situations, to believe in the power of goodness, love, justice, and beauty. Children love fairy tales because they compensate for the lack of actions in real life, and it becomes possible to realize children's creative potential (Leshchenko, 2003). When listening to fairy tales, a child unconsciously assimilates them, and then uses in everyday life to fight against anxiety, insecurity, fear, etc. Fairy tales give a child hope and show a new perspective of the situation (Kuciapiński, 2014).

We are convinced that fairy-tale therapy as a component of art therapy, will have a powerful therapeutic effect even after the end of the war,

діями, оскільки діти знаходять у казках відголоски внутрішніх переживань зі свого власного життя.

**Ключові слова:** казкотерапія, травматичний досвід війни, авторська казка, казковий наратив.

when people will also need both psychological and pedagogical support. A fairy tale makes a person stronger and helps to believe in a miracle, the victory of good over evil.

The *purpose of the article* is to define the content of fairy-tale therapy and create an author's fairy tale, which is focused on pedagogical and psychological assistance to children affected by military operations.

## Literature review

The analysis of pedagogical and psychological literature shows that scientists are actively researching the peculiarities of pedagogical and psychological assistance to children of war. Thus, I. Kobzieva's scientific work is focused on psychological support to children who experienced crisis and traumatic events in Ukraine. The scientist claims that one of the most effective means of preventing and overcoming emotional or psychological trauma is the use of art therapy methods, among which fairy-tale therapy plays an important role (Kobzieva, 2022). The scientific work by L. Tymchuk, M. Stolarczyk and L. Ruban reveals the peculiarities of using digital narrative technologies in the training of teachers to support children affected by military operations. Researchers note that to help children overcome the consequences of trauma, methods of narrative interaction, narrative-therapeutic strategies and their combination with digital technologies can be useful in the work of teachers (Tymchuk, Stolarczyk & Ruban, 2021). The practical manual by O. Voznesenska and M. Sydorkina contains theoretical provisions and practical recommendations aimed at specialists who provide support to people affected by military operations. The authors single out art therapy as a method of helping an individual in a crisis period (Voznesenska & Sydorkina, 2016). Methodical manual *Psychological assistance to victims of crisis and traumatic events* by scientists of H.S. Kostyuk Institute of Psychology of the NAES of Ukraine, is based on understanding and generalization of their own experience of psychological support to victims of

traumatic events in Ukraine. In the context of our research, psychological assistance to children by means of art therapy calls for special attention (Kisarchuk et al., 2015). At the same time, scientific works did not pay enough attention to fairy-tale therapy for children of war.

### Methodology

To achieve the goal, mainly theoretical research methods were used: *study, analysis and generalization* of special psychological and pedagogical literature in order to identify the state of the researched problem; *content analysis* of Ukrainian and foreign researchers' papers to find out the ways of effective fairy tale creation; *netnography* to analyze the therapeutic potential of digital platforms for providing assistance to children in an online educational environment; *typological method* for outlining the sources and approaches to development of therapeutic storytelling skills; *method of transforming* theoretical provisions into the practice of creating author's therapeutic fairy tales.

### Results and Discussion

In all of human history, fairy tales have been a key tool in teaching and educating children. Fairy tales reveal the essence of concepts: good, evil, honesty, betrayal, loyalty, treachery, friendship, etc. As a rule, a fairy tale contains certain negative images, human qualities, which, in the end, turn into positive ones thanks to the actions of the heroes. Working with children who have survived the traumatic experience of war, the therapeutic fairy tale occupies an important place (Haase, 2000). Such a fairy tale helps children overcome fear, anxiety, tension, uncertainty, fills them with moral resources and strengthens faith in a bright future, the victory of good over evil. A fairy tale narrative becomes a therapeutic one only if a child can draw a parallel between the plot, the actions of the main character and his/her own life and receives a certain lesson after working with the fairy tale. We are convinced that a therapeutic fairy tale heals a child's soul, as it carries out powerful psychological work on a subconscious level. A fairy tale lives in a person's subconscious, and the subconscious remembers any past experience. It is worth noting that the subconscious mind focuses not only on traumatic experiences, but also options for overcoming such experiences. J. Korczak, an outstanding Polish teacher, psychologist, doctor, children's writer, believed that a fairy tale can heal a child crippled by poverty or orphanhood, war or any other misfortune (Stepula, 2006).

The Polish experience of training future teachers to use pedagogical and therapeutic functions of fairy tales in order to help children (including children of Ukrainian refugees), is worth being highlighted. Pedagogical and therapeutic approaches are based on mastering the techniques of fairy-tale therapy developed by Doris Brett, the famous American psychologist, and presented in her books, which are popular throughout the world and translated into Polish (Brett, 2002). They are addressed to psychotherapists, teachers, parents and guardians of children. At the same time, the school of fairy-tale therapy is actively developing in Poland, the emergence of which was marked by the publication of a number of books by Maria Molicka, a psychologist and author of therapeutic narratives for children (Molicka, 2002). Scientific research by Polish and Ukrainian scientists revealed the possibilities of teaching teachers to create a therapeutic fairy-tale reality with the help of digital narratives (Leshchenko, Tymchuk, & Tokaruk, 2020).

Children who have survived the traumatic experience of war are easily recognizable among others. Such children often have a number of fears: some are afraid of night or darkness; others are afraid of being separated from their mother even for a short period of time. Nicole Porter Willcox, a psychotherapist from the USA, the founder and director of an art therapy center, who conducted educational trainings for Ukrainian colleagues from the Voices of Children Foundation, notes that the negative experience of war lives in the body a person. She underlines that we can't change what happened, but therapeutic support and warm human communication can change the way a child experiences war and restore a sense of security (Wiley, 2023).

Since the beginning of the full-scale war, a number of Ukrainian online platforms have been created, which are aimed at providing psychological and pedagogical assistance to children of war. Thus, the primary task for the founders of *Pavlusha and Java*, a Telegram channel with fairy tales and lullabies, was to preserve children's feeling of home comfort and security. Fairy tales on *Pavlusha and Java* are recorded in Ukrainian, the name of the fairy tale, the author and the translator are indicated. The founders of the channel also indicate the age at which the fairy tale is aimed. The channel publishes very bright illustrations for fairy tales, which allows children to immerse themselves more deeply in the fairy tale story and distract themselves from the difficult experiences caused

by war. The channel publishes a number of fairy-tale stories and creative wishes for young listeners during the day. The founders of *Pavlusha and Java* emphasize that if a fairy tale becomes a consolation for at least thirty minutes, it is already a success (Pavlusha & Java, 2022).

The *NUMO* online kindergarten from UNICEF and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine is worth to be highlighted. This is a modern platform for education of preschoolers aged 3 to 6 years. Everyone can join the Internet page of the kindergarten and skim all the releases of video classes aimed at upbringing and education of preschoolers. Moreover, *Numo\_bot* functions in Viber and Telegram messaging apps. Kindergarten video materials allow teachers, parents and legal guardians to organize training and educational games for preschoolers in remote learning conditions, which makes it possible to ensure the continuity of preschool education during wartime. Interesting interactive activities, educational cartoons, fairy tales, etc., based on the ECERS-3 (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale), are posted on the Internet page. The ECERS-3 method is focused on the development of preschoolers in the following aspects: subject-spatial environment, care for children, speech and literacy, types of cognitive activity, interaction of staff with children, structuring of the program. The method will help adults not only to ensure the development and education of children, but also to distract them from the war. The founders of the *NUMO* platform note that they are developing methodological materials, videos and advice also for the development of children with disabilities (Numo, 2022). We are convinced that such materials will become a main helper for adults who take care of children with disabilities, because there are more and more such children every day of the war.

During wartime, people are often forced to change their place of residence, stay in shelters, on the road, not be able to charge their phone or tablet, not have access to the Internet. Under such conditions, children do not have the opportunity to work online, watch cartoons, listen to audio tasks or fairy tales, etc. In this case, you can use oral work with a fairy tale, which has a healing, therapeutic effect and helps relieve tension, reduce stress, and distract from difficult experiences. Working with a fairy tale can be turned into an interesting and exciting adventure. We offer several methods of working with a fairy tale. Firstly, adults can tell a child any fairy tale and ask them to analyze a situation, positive or negative personality traits of the main character.

This technique helps a child to develop imagination, thinking, to raise deep philosophical topics. Secondly, after listening to or reading a fairy tale, you can stage a puppet theater based on the script of the fairy tale. The effect of this fairy-tale therapy is that a child develops his/her acting and speaking skills, gets rid of shyness, reduces internal tension, and turns attention away from difficult thoughts and feelings. Thirdly, you can create an author's fairy tale, which will help reveal internal problems, fears, etc. and find a way out of a difficult situation.

Fairy-tale therapy performs the following functions: *diagnostic* – helps determine the child's psychological state and outline ways to solve the problem; *prognostic* – aims at predicting the future actions of the child and the peculiarities of his/her behavior in certain situations; *educational* – based on correcting the child's behavior on the example of the main characters; *corrective* – shows the final result of training with a fairy tale (Ruban, 2016). The fairy-tale narratives that a person tells are a reflection of situations that take place in his/her life. In other words, these are events that a person consciously or unconsciously experiences in his/her life (Hohr, 2000).

In our research, we will focus on the techniques of creating an author's fairy tale in order to provide psychological and pedagogical assistance to children who have survived the traumatic experience of war in Ukraine.

Creating an author's fairy tale does not require special skills, the main requirement is to free your imagination. Fairy tales have no place for dry reports. In order to create your own fairy tale, you need to dive deep into the realm of possibilities hidden in the imagination (Donnchaidh, 2023). Such a fairy tale arises from anything that surrounds a person: animals, insects, natural phenomena, transport, pets, etc. The main characters can be both ordinary people and fictional characters – a prince, a princess, a witch, etc.

In order for a fairy tale narrative to acquire a therapeutic character, it must reflect the child's problem, because listening to the therapeutic fairy tale, a child subconsciously finds options for its solution (Danyliuk & Zolnikova, 2019). It is worth emphasizing that the plot of a therapeutic narrative needs to have a clear structure: the beginning, which enchants the listeners, transporting them to the magical world of the fairy tale (at this stage, a child gets to know the heroes of the fairy tale); the central conflict

or problem that the heroes of the fairy tale face (consonant with the problem of a child); the situation that offers options for solving a problem and that has a positive outcome (usually a happy ending); the moral of the fairy tale, when the characters learn a certain lesson from their actions (Ruban, 2016).

As an example, let's cite the author's therapeutic fairy tale, which tells about a lion who courageously defended his territory from enemies.

*In a fairyland there lived a brave lion with his strong family – a beautiful wife and three lion cubs. Beautiful nature surrounded the friendly family – endless fields were covered with rye and wheat, fertile land and gardens gave their generous fruits, gentle seas washed the territory, majestic mountains proudly protected them from winds and bad weather. Good, sincere animals inhabited these lands. A very angry and envious tiger lived in the neighboring territory though.*

*His subjects were hyenas and jackals who faithfully obeyed all his orders. The tiger was jealous of the lion's well-being and decided to wage war on him to take away his fertile lands. Thus, one day the tiger sent his hyenas and jackals to the lion's territory and declared war. The lion was forced to leave his family and rush into battle to protect his and. The lion cubs cried bitterly, the lion's wife could barely contain her despair, but there was nothing she could do. The lion gathered a strong army and stood on the borders of his territory. The battle was fierce, the enemies fled in fear, then returned again. There were so many hyenas and jackals that they began to take over a part of the lion's territory.*

*It so happened that to the west of the lion's lands there was a wonderful forest in which kind-hearted animals lived. A big white elephant reigned there. The lion sent his assistant to this forest to arrange for help. The elephant listened to the assistant's story and said: 'You are good neighbors who were born on your fertile, beautiful land and want to protect it from the enemy with all your heart. You helped us when we did not have a bountiful harvest, you shared vegetables, fruits, grain with us. Therefore, I will help you defend your land.'*

*An army of white elephants went to help the lion. The enemies did not expect that the lion would get such strong support. They got scared and, tails up, ran away as far as their eyes could see. The lion raised the flag over his territory, expressing gratitude to his army for their*

*courage and strength, to his friendly neighbors for their support and help, to his family for their faith and love. From that time, peace reigned in the land of the lion, and no enemy encroached on the fertile and generous lands.*

The proposed fairy tale has several purposes. First, to show a child an example of a strong and loyal family, loyalty to one's native land. Second, to show the beauty of one's own territory, one's country, focusing on the epithets, e.g. *beautiful nature, endless fields, fertile land, gentle seas, majestic mountains, etc.* Third, to demonstrate that the world is not perfect and there are envious enemies who can encroach on what is dearest to a person. Fourth, to instill in a child the faith that, in the end, good triumphs over evil and after the darkest night always comes the incredible beauty of the dawn.

The author's fairy tale contributes to the fact that children will be able to draw a parallel between the fictional plot and the events that take place in their own lives. A fairy tale will help distract children from their personal traumatic experiences and give them faith in a bright future (Saxby, 2022; Silverman, 2020). It should be noted that, in addition to the therapeutic goals set by the author, the fairy tale showed another positive result, namely that after listening to this fairy tale, several children showed interest and desire to write their own fairy tales.

In addition, it is worth emphasizing that art therapy can be one of the therapeutic means, e.g. making a puppet theater by children based on the proposed or their own author's fairy tale (Kazachiner, Boychuk & Hali, 2022). Parents, guardians, teachers can help children make dolls from the proposed material, which will serve as a powerful impetus to the development of their artistic abilities.

The process of creating an author's therapeutic fairy tale helps relieve tension in stressful situations, contributes to the constructive experience of emotions, develops communication skills, imagination, and distracts from difficult feelings.

It is worth emphasizing that when children create a fairy tale and tell it aloud, they identify themselves with the main character, acquire the positive qualities of this character (Moskalenko, 2023). As a result, the range of their psychological resource expands, and they become stronger for their traumatic experience (Wiley, 2023).

Fairy-tale therapy is aimed not only at children, but adults who also believe in miracles. A fairy tale accompanies a person in his/her everyday life. These can be any stories from routine life – news articles, stories heard in a coffee shop, work experience that a person shares at the dinner table. People communicate in the language of stories. By telling a story, people express their inner selves. Stories have great power (Bushnell, 2018).

### Conclusions

Thus, fairy-tale therapy is a unique method of treating mental trauma caused by military actions, as children find echoes of inner experiences from their own lives in fairy tales. The fairy tale helps to overcome problems, because children use the example of the main character in the fight against their own fears, difficulties, and experiences. The fairy tale gives faith in a miracle, a bright future, the victory of good over evil. The fairy tale helps not to abandon hope. If hope is lost, the fight is lost.

We have highlighted the main advantages of the therapeutic fairy tale narrative:

1. It helps children connect with their past experiences through metaphor, which is the core of the story. Using a metaphor while creating a therapeutic fairy tale, the author goes beyond his/her consciousness.
2. Acts as a 'mirror' of a child's trauma. A fairy tale reflects the inner world of a person and allows you to delve deeper into the problem and find the solutions.
3. Contributes to the normalization of children's feelings in case when children feel lonely.
4. Focuses on the identification of a child's range of feelings and behavior that arise in a challenging situation; helps children discover new internal resources and qualities.
5. Helps children become aware of the feelings and needs that they can block, to strengthen their confidence in expressing complex emotions.
6. Promotes the development of a child's imagination, fantasy to express their own thoughts, needs and feelings; improves their communication skills (Jones & Pimenta, 2020).

The prognostic potential of the conducted research is due to the possibility of using its materials and conclusions to carry out further scientific research in psychology, pedagogy and

psychotherapy; development of effective narrative methods of fairy tale treatment for children and adults who have undergone a traumatic experience of war.

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