HELPING PROFESSIONS IN A NEW WAR REALITY: EDUCATION TRENDS

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Abstract: Every crisis brings new challenges for the helping professionals: physicians, social workers, psychologists, as well as pedagogues and communication specialists. The new reality requires changes in the education system to help professionals by integrating new skills and competencies into their professiograms. Helping professionals have to be prepared to work in unusual physical conditions, threats and uncertainty, develop competence to act in emergencies to increase the safety of their beneficiaries. Lack of such skills not only makes the intervention complicated for helping professionals but also worsens the consequences of the crisis for society. This article examines the experience of helping professionals in Armenia, who were actively engaged in the processes of support and assistance to the people of concern throughout numerous crises that have happened in Armenian society since 2020: Covid-19 pandemic, the 44-day war in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), and the forcible displacement of Armenians from Artsakh to Armenia. The qualitative research unveiled the skill gaps that made the crisis response efforts more challenging for the helping professionals. Based on these findings the authors drafted the recommendations aimed at refining the education of helping professionals. Global crises have become a new normal, making crisis-management skills essential for helping professionals as the required support shifts across stages - from medical and social aid to social-psychological and then psychological assistance - demanding an intersectional, multidisciplinary response. Educating specialists for crisis-shaped environments requires updating professiograms to include rapid response, ethical and clear communication, trust-building, empathy, stress and trauma management, teamwork, volunteer engagement, and professional self-care. These suggestions entail adjustments and enhancements to their skill sets and competencies, as well as revisions to their professional frameworks.

Keywords: *crisis, helping professions, education, professiogram, crisis intervention*.

Introduction

The comprehensive word "crisis" (Greek: krisis - solution, judgment, decisive outcome) became prominent in 2020, featuring in search engines, citizen discussions, media and social networks. The Dictionary of Modern Concepts and Terms describes

the crisis as "a predicament, a difficult situation, an acute shortage, a lack of something; painful, transitional period; sharp, abrupt change" (Bakanov, Sherevet, 2007). The concept's pervasive usage has led to a certain devaluation, often replaced by the French-sounding term "Force Majeure."

Experts assert that crises exhibit variations in causes, consequences, essence, and content, prompting the need for a multi-level classification to account for diverse factors such as causes, forms of occurrence, forecasting possibilities, prevention methods, and means of management (Suder, 2008).

Literature, discussing anti-crisis management, defines it as the "extreme exacerbation of contradictions in the social-economic system, threatening its viability in the environment" (Barinov, 2007). A crisis is considered as a marginal exacerbation of destructive processes in individual or team activity, caused by hidden or obvious stagnation (degradation) or excessive growth (progress) (Chernozatonski, 1999).

A critical factor for any crisis is time. Prolonged crises, as a rule, are painful and difficult. The extended duration often results from management problems and an inadequate assessment of the situation's essence, nature, causes, and forecasted consequences. On the other hand, an adequate assessment of the crisis duration enables preparation for various scenarios, allowing the development of a solid action plan to neutralize dangerous consequences in a more effective way (Ontanu, 2023). This requires a new approach to the education of helping professionals and revision of their skills and competencies within the qualification framework.

UU Crisis

In 1982, British scientist Sam Black classified crises into "Known Unknowns" (KU) and "Unknown Unknowns" (UU). The first one refers to crises potentially faced due to an organization's activities, while the latter includes catastrophes, accidents, and natural disasters that cannot be predicted (Black, 2011). Since 2020, Armenia has undergone a series of UU crises that have significantly and, in some cases, completely transformed everyday perceptions, value systems, norms, activities, attitudes, and strategies across various sectors. In March 2020, Armenia plunged into a deep crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic. In September 2020, another crisis emerged - the 44-day war in Artsakh. The country faced two coexisting crisis realities, as the epidemic persisted (Kazaryan et al., 2020).

The period from 2020 to 2024 can be characterized as an incessant and predictably destructive crisis that ultimately culminated in disaster. On 12 December 2022, under the guise of environmental protests, the Azerbaijani government launched a blockade of the Republic of Artsakh (Górecki, Strachota, 2023) by blocking the Lachin humanitarian corridor which connected Artsakh to Armenia and the outside world. Azerbaijan also sabotaged the critical civilian infrastructure of Artsakh, crippling access to gas, electricity, and internet access (OC Media, 2023). On the 19th of September 2023, Azerbaijan embarked on a new, full-scale offensive against Artsakh, which was followed by the displacement of Armenians from Artsakh. According to the official information, the RA received 101,848 refugees from Artsakh (Sputnik, 2023), facing the third and perhaps the biggest crisis, when the people of Artsakh were forcibly displaced from their homeland. The reception, first aid, and primary assessment of the needs of Artsakh citizens took place in the Syunik region of

Armenia, where hundreds of helping professionals (physicians, social workers, psychologists, etc.) and volunteers worked tirelessly day and night.

Numerous crises happening in Armenia and all over the globe affected the professiograms of helping professionals, reshaping the demand for professional skills and abilities, and posing a new challenge for those, whose job involves assisting people in difficult life situations. These professionals hold roles in education, healthcare, psychology, social work, public health, public administration, and safety.

The following skills and abilities help the professionals to perform more effectively during the crisis:

1. **Timely response.** Time is a decisive factor in crisis management. It brings together the human ability to regulate the biological, social, cultural, and practical dimensions of everyday life. Every crisis is unique and possesses distinct characteristics. Nonetheless, a unified conceptual approach to a rapid response is crucial, involving the creation of backup scenarios and the calculation of potential risks and key decisions. Quick and prompt decision-making and communication are more than essential. Otherwise, it will be impossible to handle the consequences of delay and untimely decisions, as delay is equivalent to neglect and inattention. It is crucial to note that being operative does not mean acting hastily; it means timely.

2. **Feedback-oriented.** The primary task during a crisis for the state and organizations providing social services is to identify and assess the problems and needs precisely and systematically. Feedback from the target audience is essential to study and analyze their requirements, protocol those, and respond accordingly, especially when dealing with vulnerable groups. Responsiveness, targeted and constructive solutions are equally important.

3. **Ethical communications.** The need for information, the necessity to monitor updates about the crisis and to communicate with family members who found themselves in different locations is one of the specifics of any crisis. Today, digitization and the development of information technologies have had a significant impact on the transformation of communications. It is crucial to emphasize media literacy and adhere strictly to information security norms in light of these developments. False agendas from "opposing circles", news that induces panic, alarm, and fear in the audience, and unreliable information are rapidly disseminated through various channels in both social media and mass media. News and publications that foster division within society, spreading slanderous and hate speech, also find quick circulation. In this context, the primary task is to resist the influence of external propaganda tools, abstain from engaging in divisive communications, refrain from applying labels, avoid discrimination, and immediately prevent such development. During crises, building and strengthening trusting relationships between all parties involved in crisis communications is crucial. This includes fostering collaboration between the persons of concern and the organizations supporting them. In such situations, all parties become partners, sharing a common direction and goal. Today, it is essential to work comprehensively, involving the state, NGOs, local self-

government bodies, experts, opinion leaders, and influencers in the communication process.

4. **Positive thinking.** In crises, people develop negative attitudes towards social, cultural, spiritual, and even natural objects. Helping professionals help to transform this attitude into positive thinking. This varies from the positive perception of the new physiological body to the positive attitude toward new circumstances of the social, cultural and physical environment. This helps to develop a positive vision of the future.

5. **Building trust.** Amidst the overwhelming torrents of uncontrollable information flows, society always searches for heroes – people, faces, individuals, and figures capable of communicating trust and care. Such individuals not only gain attention but also become trustworthy in the eyes of the public.

6. **Care, Empathy, Sympathy.** In crises, societies grappling with humanitarian disasters find themselves in an uncontrollable state of anxiety and fear, as a result of which they become hypersensitive and vulnerable to the external environment. In such times, prioritizing careful, discreet, cautious, and empathic communication becomes essential in the constant noise of information and fake news streams. Carelessness and, more significantly, indifference have a detrimental impact on the psychology of individuals who have undergone suffering. This, in turn, complicates the process of fully integrating and adapting to society.

7. **Professional Self-care.** Helping professionals engage with individuals, families, and groups who have experienced significant trauma and recent crises; exposure to such clients and the suffering they experience may become emotionally demanding (Bloomquist; 2015). Incorporation of professional self-care into the courses for helping professionals is very important to prevent professional burnout and secondary traumatic stress, including the risk factors associated with crisis (Jason, 2014). Professional self-care contributes to wellness and stress reduction both of the professionals and the beneficiaries. Professional self-care is recognized among the five primary domains of self-care practice together with physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual self-care (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996).

8. **Internal Communications and Teamwork.** Equally important is not to overlook internal communications, especially considering the overstressed nature of the receiving party involved. The added stress can have a radical effect. Internal communication must maintain a unified messaging approach, with those related to the vulnerable party acting as its bearers. Communication should center around the same values and be conveyed with the same tone of voice.

9. **Engaging volunteers.** Crises stimulate spontaneous responses by individuals and voluntary groups from within and outside disaster-affected communities, as individuals and groups often become more unified, cohesive, and altruistic in such events. Volunteers can support authorities in building situational awareness and provide extra capacity when resources are scarce. They have

proven to be useful in many disaster cases. Volunteering comes with significant coordination, integration, communication, logistical, and health and safety challenges for the volunteers and disaster <u>management organizations</u>. Finding a right balance between volunteering and professionals is complicated. Lack of formal rules and procedures to guide volunteers can create tension. Volunteers should be considered as extra pairs of hands and guided by helping professionals to proceed and fasten the routine activities including: to build self-preparedness and support networks ahead of emergencies to reduce potential disruptions, dislocations, or damages. Social media is becoming an important source of information to better manage disasters, including the informal volunteer involvement (Nahkur et al., 2022).

10. **Stress management.** It is important to learn to realistically assess the situation and stimulate the development of stress resistance. Thanks to these qualities, the helping professionals are able to overcome emotional overload and, despite irritating factors, maintain inner balance and proceed their activities.

Research Methodology

The goal of this research is to understand the challenges that helping professionals have faced during the crises, to identify the essential competencies required by helping professionals in times of crisis, and to develop the professiogram of crisis response skills and abilities for them. The research seeks to understand how the prerequisites for professiogram (Dereka, Melnyk, 2021)[1] of these professionals have evolved, and how educational institutions should adapt to these changes. The research results will contribute to the improvement of the professiograms of helping professionals and development of the recommendations for educational institutions to adopt those changes.

To accomplish these objectives, the study addressed the following questions: what challenges posed by crises did the helping professionals face in Armenia? What competencies, including soft skills, are most sought after among helping professionals in the crisis context? How can educational institutions respond to these changes? What changes are needed to enhance the helping professionals' resilience in working during crises?

30 social workers, psychologists, physicians, and volunteers, who were assisting the people during the pandemic, war, post-war crises, and integration of forcibly displaced people from Artsakh in Armenia, were interviewed. The exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling method was used to reach out to the respondents. The sampling size was determined by the information saturation, the point at which relevant new codes and categories were found in the data (Hennink, Kaiser, 2021).

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[1] According to Markova (cited by Dyakova and Deryabina) a professiogram means scientifically grounded norms and special requirements for the professional activity and personal qualities of a specialist that allow him/her to do effective and productive work and to create conditions for the development of his/her own personality.

Research results

Crisis Intervention Activities

The geography and scale of crises caused by natural disasters, pandemics, and human interventions, such as war and armed conflicts, are expanding. Crisis always contains a threat to human life, their health, and property. All the crises result in unpredictability, unexpectedness, destructiveness of consequences, and instability of existence which infiltrates the person's sense of self (Sellnow, Seeger, 2020). Along with crisis the social environment changes, new reality enters our everyday lives transforming into a new normal.

When helping people affected by a crisis a specialist has to answer the following questions:

1. What's the point of the process between the person in the crisis situation and the helping professional?
2. What characteristics, attitudes, knowledge, and skills are needed to be able to help and support the client?
3. What inner strength of the client could be used in the process of help?
4. What challenges do people face in the crisis situation?
5. What techniques and approaches could be used by the helping professionals?

This communicative process between the people in difficult life situations and the helping professionals is important for the professional development and education of the specialist. It shapes the ability to honestly evaluate professional limitations and be responsible for crisis management. To be able to manage the crisis helping professionals should learn to design the alternatives for the future.

In the preliminary stage of crisis prevention and development of possible crisis scenarios, the crisis intervention plan should be developed, which includes building networks with different stakeholders. It is important to identify those who are most likely to be affected by the crisis. Different scenarios have to be considered by the helping professionals. The situation changes when the helping professionals are affected by the crisis themselves. Educating the helping professionals considering different scenarios, including stress and anger management is very important.

The next stage includes crisis intervention activities aiming at minimization of the direct consequences of the crisis: key personnel should train the volunteers, an intervention plan should be developed, potential threats should be discussed and the most vulnerable groups of the population should be identified. The general supervising body responsible for the crisis management should be confirmed. It should be noted, that the simultaneous work of different bodies issuing orders will prolong crisis and hinder the helping measures negatively affecting human subjects. Depending on the crisis intervention goals the supervising body should conclude when the intervention should be completed and/or transitioned to the organizations responsible for help and support in the routine situation and regular circumstances. This stage usually targets those mostly affected by the crisis, who need long-term intervention and post-crisis support.

The critical question about what would happen if there was no intervention should be asked as well to be able to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of crisis management. Only in this case the intervention can be evaluated as successful or failed.

Communication Management During the Crisis

A crisis intervention plan for helping professionals includes organizational issues (Who is generally responsible for crisis management? What helping professionals should be involved in each step of the crisis intervention? What resources are needed? What data should be gathered? The intervention methods (What is the action plan? What are the evaluation criteria?), and the resources (financial, material, and human resources) should also be taken into account.

The communication plan is one of the core logistical issues during the crisis intervention. It is extremely important to identify the target audiences for communication. The research results demonstrate that for Armenia the international community, donor community, professional communities, persons of concern, and citizens who are not affected by the crisis directly should also be considered. Media relations are also one of the core intervention activities. Each of these communication dimensions should include information about the crisis, its impact, and prospects. The measures taken by the government and other responsible bodies to manage the crisis and their justifications should be presented as well. Lessons learned are especially important for those who are not affected by the crisis directly; it is a "promise" to be more prepared for the next crisis. Massages providing instructions on mandatory and possible steps for those directly affected by the crisis are of key importance. Crisis communication should contain messages properly interpreting the crisis and building the attitude towards the crisis situation and its consequences to manage the stress and anger of the citizens. Another challenge for communication specialists is gossip control since gossips have to be managed to prevent panic and uncontrolled actions. All the members of the professional helping team should be regularly updated about the action plan and their further activities, localities, and timing.

Professional Challenges Identified by Helping Professionals in Times of Crises

In times of crisis, helping professionals face numerous challenges that test their skills, resilience, and adaptability. During their day-to-day responsibilities, they are tasked with the following responsibilities (Maddocks, 2018):
- Identifying individuals in need
- Need assessment
- Situation analysis
- Determination of clients' objectives
- Researching, recommending, and advocating for community resources
- Managing case files and documentation
- Delivering supportive and therapeutic services

Research highlights that 2020 was particularly challenging for helping professionals in Armenia. Many lacked experiences in crises and were not equipped with the necessary skills, clear instructions, tools, or procedural systems. They often found themselves torn between standard procedures and the new needs that emerged from the crisis, acting based on intuition without a clear action plan. However, the crises in 2020 were followed by new ones in Armenia. The continuous attacks by Azerbaijan and the blockade of Artsakh were followed by the

forcible displacement of Armenians from the Republic of Artsakh, as already mentioned. Though helping professionals enter every subsequent crisis with more knowledge and experience, this knowledge and experience need systematization, institutionalization, and integration into educational programs. This would result in additions to professional competencies and a revision of the professiogram.

Some of the main problems directly affecting the work of helping professionals during crises, are as follows.

- **Insufficient knowledge of the trauma consequences**: Every helping professional should be aware of what to expect from a person who has experienced trauma within the scope of their profession.

"*We had a lack of knowledge and experience in working with traumas. Even though it mostly refers to psychology, during crises, it is crucial to know how severe trauma - loss, death, or even material loss - affects people. We need to understand how individuals act and what to expect from them. We should be equipped with special soft skills to tackle this problem without encroaching on the field of psychology while still providing appropriate social-psychological help*" (female psychologist, 27 years old).

"*Skills in working with trauma, including primary response, releasing emotions, and bringing people to rationality quickly so they can make decisions at the moment, are essential. We need to provide crisis counseling, quickly assess risks 'at a glance,' and, for example, recognize and identify risky situations at reception points with many people*" (female physician, 30 years old).

- **Skills in managing emotions**: Helping professionals are human too and can undergo the same traumas, yet it should not affect their work.

"*We should be emotionally stable. As an Armenian, it is hard for me to see my country in such a difficult situation. However, I should know how to manage my emotions so I can help others experiencing the same emotions*" (female psychologist, 34 years old).

- **Lack of appropriate self-care:** Lack of professional self-care often occurs in the routine work of helping professionals. However, in times of crisis this gap doubles.

"*We should take care of ourselves. However, contrary to this, helping institutions support day and night work, but that's not right*" (female social worker, 43 years old).

- **Management of timely response**

"*So many people were waiting for our help, and we had to respond quickly, without wasting time, and most importantly, rationally and effectively, which was really challenging when you don't have much experience in it*" (female social worker, 30 years old).

- **Special subjects not included in the educational system:** To further advance the soft skills of helping professionals, more specified subjects should be covered.

"*Generally, we should cover subjects such as crisis management, social work in crises, social work with trauma, and many others in this context. I see them in the form of practical camps, where you experience real-life conditions and learn on the spot*" (male social worker, 24 years old).

"*We should have a general subject regarding social work in crises*" (female social worker, 33 years old).

"*There should be a subject regarding cultural diversity and respect, or ethics. This time, differences in language, mentalities, and the division of 'ours' and 'yours' were evident*" (male physician, 27 years old).

- **Skills in running ethical communications**

"*It's of utmost importance to know how to respond to people's problems without pity. General political science knowledge is also needed in this situation*" (male psychologist, 36 years old).

A crisis combines external and internal conditions hindering a person from achieving their goals in physical, social, cultural, spiritual, practical, and temporal dimensions of life. It triggers deviations in individual and social development. In addressing a crisis, helping professionals should adopt crisis intervention strategies, which restructure the whole logic of service delivery. Any crisis requires the revision of the value system and the establishment of correspondence between a person's value structure and their current situation. Crises necessitate well-organized activities aimed at restoring the integrity of human existence in different areas.

In times of crisis and multitasking scenarios, new requirements emerge for helping professionals, including not only professional knowledge and experience but also additional competencies expressed in the 4C formula: creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking (Kembara, Rozak, Hadian, 2019). These competencies prove essential in overcoming the challenges posed by crises. The evolving requirements for the professiogram of the helping professionals emphasize that specific competencies and skills are crucial for achieving the desired and predictable result.

Based on expert assessments, to be effective, helping professionals need such competencies as diligence, initiative, responsibility, time management, self-care skills, trauma management skills, the ability to find solutions in non-standard situations, and the capacity to collaborate in times of crisis. However, the most critical quality is the ability to think outside the box. Furthermore, communication skills play a crucial role – the ability to understand the needs and motives of individuals, adapt to them during communication, and understand the perspective of the person with whom contact needs to be established. This ability characterizes decentralized thinking. Helping professionals also require personal characteristics like presentation skills, teamwork proficiency, organizational abilities, and the capacity to swiftly complete tasks.

Conclusion

Numerous crises happening in the different parts of the world and affecting big amount of people became new normal for the first quarter of the 21st century. This emphasized the importance of crisis management skills for the helping professionals. Research results helped to outline key skills and abilities that should be included in the professiograms of the helping professionals.

On the different stages of the crisis the type and direction of help and its volume changes. On the first stage medical and social support is crucial, psychological help is not as urgent. On the second stage social and psychological support prevails. During the last stage psychological assistance is mostly needed (Burmistrov, 2006). This is true for those directly affected by the crisis, but not for their relatives, the least need psychological assistance from the first stages of the crisis. Intersectional and multidisciplinary approach during the crises is utmost important for timely, targeted and effective response.

Helping professionals should be educated to help people to navigate themselves in the environment transformed because of the crisis, providing relatively ordered information, set general life values and be responsible not only for social, but also for physical well-being of their selves and the persons of concern. This requires changes in their professiograms. Social workers, pedagogues, psychologists, doctors professiograms should include the following skills and abilities: timely response, feedback-orientation, ethical communications, positive thinking, building trust, care, empathy, sympathy, professional self-care, stress and trauma management, internal communications and teamwork, engaging volunteers.

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Conflict of Interests
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.