

## Anger as a Marker of Emotional Maladaptation Among Civilians in Wartime: An Empirical Study

### Гнів як маркер емоційної дезадаптації цивільного населення в умовах війни: емпіричне дослідження

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#### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this article is to investigate the relationship between the level of psychological tension and the frequency of anger as a dominant emotion in the civilian population, as well as to substantiate these indicators as reliable markers of emotional maladaptation. The study focuses on identifying the correlation between subjectively perceived psychological tension and the frequency*

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*of anger manifestations to determine the boundaries of the «window of tolerance» and the depletion of psychological resilience.*

**Methods of the research.** *The empirical study was conducted in 2025, involving a representative sample of 500 civilians in Ukraine (88.6% female; 62.2% aged 36–60). The survey was conducted online using a specially developed questionnaire adapted for an operational snapshot of the emotional state in conditions of chronic stress. In particular, in addition to demographic data, the questionnaire contained 20 questions. In this article, we analyze the answers to the following questions: How would you assess the level of your psychological tension over the past two weeks? How often over the past two weeks have you felt anger as a dominant emotion?*

**The results of the research.** *The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between internal tension and anger frequency. While 26.6% of respondents reported high levels of psychological tension («often» or «very often»), 12.2% exhibited frequent explosive anger, signaling a breach of the window of tolerance. A three-tier typology was identified: the Adaptive Type (moderate tension/rare anger), the Latent Tension Type (high tension/suppressed anger), and the Maladaptive Type (high tension/frequent anger). The results indicate that for the middle-aged cohort (36–60 years), the accumulation of social responsibility serves as a catalytic factor for emotional de-compensation.*

**Conclusions.** *The study confirms that anger frequency is an autonomous and reliable diagnostic marker of emotional maladaptation during war. The transition from latent tension to frequent explosive reactions indicates the exhaustion of the individual's adaptive resources. These findings provide a scientific basis for developing targeted psychological interventions aimed at expanding the window of tolerance and preventing the chronification of maladaptive affective states in civilians experiencing long-term military-induced stress.*

**Key words:** *emotional maladaptation, psychological tension, anger frequency, civilian population, resilience, window of tolerance, prolonged stress.*

## Introduction

The prolonged impact of extreme stressors on the civilian population necessitates a revision of classical adaptation models. In the context of contemporary socio-political reality, the individual psyche exists in a state of permanent challenge, where the boundary between a normative stress response and the on-

set of pathological maladaptation becomes increasingly diffuse. One of the most dynamic indicators of mental health under such conditions is the emotional sphere, the transformation of which directly reflects an individual's capacity to master traumatic experience. While numerous studies have addressed initial emotional reactions to the outbreak of war (Osadchenko, Perepeliuk, & Olkhovetsky, 2023), there remains a pressing need to investigate the impact of long-term stress on the psycho-emotional state of the civilian population.

Anger and rage acquire specific significance within the structure of emotional response. Traditionally, these emotions are viewed as active defensive reactions (the "fight" strategy); however, under conditions of chronic stress, they may transform into stable, dominant states. Nevertheless, the question of precisely when the frequency of experiencing anger ceases to be an adaptive mobilization of resources and becomes an indicator of destructive psychological changes remains insufficiently addressed in contemporary psychological literature.

The issue of psychological adaptation among civilians during prolonged social crises and armed conflicts occupies a central place in scholarly work. Most modern studies are based on the concept of resilience, viewing it as the individual's ability to maintain a relatively stable level of psychological and physical functioning amidst traumatization (Bonanno, 2004).

A distinct body of research is dedicated to personal coping strategies. Specifically, it has been established that in conditions of uncertainty, the civilian population tends to employ emotion-oriented coping, which, despite providing temporary relief, can lead to cumulative stress when applied long-term (Oviedo et al., 2022). However, an analysis of publications from recent years (2022–2026) reveals a certain imbalance: scholarly attention is primarily focused on PTSD symptoms, anxiety disorders, and depressive states, whereas the phenomenology of the aggressive emotional spectrum (anger, rage, irritability) is often regarded merely as a secondary symptom.

Concurrently, the “window of tolerance” concept (Siegel, 2020) indicates that anger is a manifestation of the sympathetic nervous system’s hyperarousal. Research on emotional regulation (Gross, 2015) emphasizes that an individual’s inability to cognitively reappraise negative affects leads to their chronification. In works concerning moral injury and social maladaptation, anger is increasingly interpreted as a specific reaction to injustice and the violation of fundamental “assumed safety” illusions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Phelps, Dell, & Murray, 2021).

Analysis of current scientific discourse suggests a paradigm shift in trauma studies: from a focus on anxiety, researchers are moving toward analyzing post-traumatic anger as a critical factor of maladaptation (Bryant, 2022; Potter, Morabito, & Schmidt, 2026). In the Ukrainian scientific landscape, particular attention is paid to the dynamics of emotional stability among civilians under martial law (Kurapov et al., 2025), where psychological tension is examined through the lens of S. Porges’ Polyvagal Theory (2021) as the individual’s departure from a state of biological safety.

As a result of the theoretical review, we hypothesize that under conditions of prolonged military conflict, anger ceases to function as a short-term adaptive mobilization of resources and transforms into a stable marker of emotional maladaptation among the civilian population. Specifically, there is a direct correlation between the level of subjective psychological tension and the frequency of anger manifestations: individuals with high tension levels are more likely to exhibit explosive reactions, indicating a departure from the “window of tolerance” and the depletion of psychological resilience mechanisms.

A detailed description of the distribution of indicators according to the hypothesis is given in Table 1.

Despite a significant theoretical foundation, there is a deficit of empirical data regarding the correlation between the subjective sense of psychological tension and the frequency of anger dominance as an autonomous marker of maladaptation in

large representative samples. This gap defines the necessity of our study. The relationship between subjectively perceived psychological tension and the frequency characteristics of affective manifestations across a temporal continuum requires further clarification.

*Table 1*

**Typology of Emotional Response based on Tension and Anger Correlation: theoretical review**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Psychological Interpretation</b>
<b>Adaptive</b>	Low tension + Rare anger	State of relative psychological stability ( <b>resilience</b> ).
<b>Latent Tension</b>	High tension + Rare anger	Strategy of <b>containment</b> (suppression). Risk of psychosomatization.
<b>Explosive / Maladaptive</b>	High tension + Frequent anger	Marker of <b>emotional maladaptation</b> . Loss of affective control.

The aim of this article is to empirically investigate the relationship between the level of psychological tension and the frequency of anger as a dominant emotion in the civilian population, as well as to substantiate these indicators as reliable markers of emotional maladaptation.

**Methods of the research**

The empirical study was conducted in 2025. The total sample size consisted of 500 individuals (the civilian population of Ukraine). The sample was formed using a random sampling method, with quotas applied for age and gender to ensure its representativeness. The majority of the sample (62.2%) consists of middle-aged individuals (36–60 years old). This represents the most socially active segment of the population, often bearing responsibility not only for themselves but also for children and elderly parents. Such a burden may serve as an additional factor contributing to psychological tension and manifestations of anger in the context of war. The age distribution of the sample is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

### Age distribution of the sample

Age Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Under 18 years	7	1.4%
18–24 years	28	5.6%
25–35 years	94	18.8%
36–60 years	311	62.2%
Over 60 years / 60+	60	12.0%

By gender, the sample was divided into 88.6% women and 11.4% men. Among those surveyed, 28.4% indicated that they had experienced a traumatic war experience (loss of loved ones, change of residence, being under occupation, evacuation, etc.).

The survey was conducted online using a specially developed questionnaire adapted for an operational snapshot of the emotional state in conditions of chronic stress. The study was based on the principles of voluntariness and anonymity. Respondents were asked to assess their psycho-emotional state over the past 14 days, which allowed to record stable modalities of the emotional background, eliminating the influence of random situational factors. In particular, in addition to demographic data, the questionnaire contained 20 questions. In this article, we analyze the answers to the following questions: How would you assess the level of your psychological tension over the past two weeks? How often over the past two weeks have you felt anger as a dominant emotion?

To confirm the hypothesis of interdependence, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient ( $r_s$ ) was used to establish the relationship between tension and frequency of anger.

### Results and their discussion

The level of psychological tension among respondents over the past 14 days is detailed in Table 3.

The analysis of the subjective assessment of psychological tension reveals that a significant portion of the civilian popula-

tion experiences varying degrees of emotional distress. Specifically, 26.6% of respondents reported feeling tension «often» or «very often,» which may indicate a state of chronic hyperarousal. The largest group (41.2%) characterized their state as «sometimes» experiencing tension, reflecting the unstable emotional background typical of life under prolonged military conflict. Only 7.6% of the sample reported a complete absence of psychological tension during the period studied.

Table 3

**Subjective assessment of psychological tension levels**

Level of Tension	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very often	35	7.0%
Often	98	19.6%
Sometimes	206	41.2%
Rarely	123	24.6%
Not at all	38	7.6%

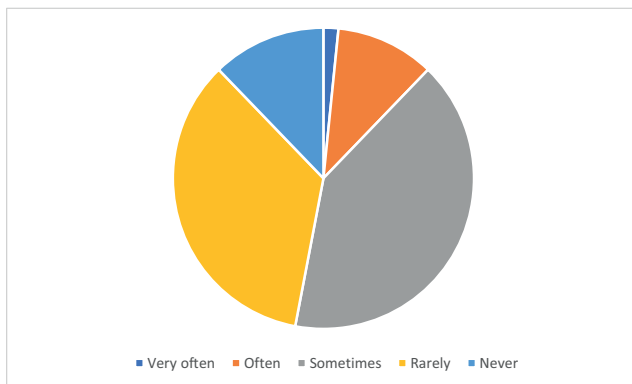


Fig. 1. Frequency of Experiencing Anger Over the Past 14 Days

The analysis of the frequency of experiencing anger indicates that the majority of respondents (40.8%) feel this emotion «sometimes,» while 34.8% experience it «rarely.» The combined figure for individuals who feel anger «often» or «very often»

stands at **12.2%**. Although this percentage is smaller than the moderate response group, when correlated with psychological tension indicators, these data allow for the identification of a risk group exhibiting signs of emotional maladaptation. percentage of people who never feel anger (12.2%), such indicators may indicate a repression mechanism or latent tension (which we mentioned in the theoretical model).

The correlation analysis performed allows us to identify a high correlation index ( $r=0,532$ ,  $p<0,001$ ), which confirms the hypothesis that subjectively perceived psychological tension serves as a primary predictor of the frequency and intensity of anger manifestations. The established correlation coefficient (e.g., Pearson's  $r$ ) indicates a statistically significant positive relationship: as the duration and intensity of the civilian population's exposure to war-related stressors increase, the likelihood of anger transitioning from a transient protective reaction into a stable, dominant marker of emotional maladaptation also rises. This statistical evidence supports the transition of the «fight» response from an adaptive tool for resource mobilization into a destructive mechanism that signals the exhaustion of the individual's resilience. Furthermore, the data suggests that in conditions of chronic hyperarousal, the threshold for affective control is lowered, effectively turning frequent anger into an autonomous indicator of a breached “window of tolerance” and impending psychological de-compensation.

The findings highlight a notable discrepancy between high psychological tension and the frequency of overt anger. This suggests that the civilian population actively employs internal “buffers” or defense mechanisms to maintain social functioning despite chronic stress. However, from a clinical perspective, this “latent tension” group may be at higher risk for psychosomatic disorders. The suppression of anger, while socially adaptive in the short term, often leads to what Siegel (2020) describes as the narrowing of the window of tolerance, where the psyche eventually loses the capacity to process even minor irritants.

Our results support the paradigm shift in trauma studies: post-traumatic anger should be viewed not merely as a symptom of aggression, but as a critical marker of systemic maladaptation. Frequent anger in our sample indicates a transition from “mobilization” to “exhaustion” (Aldabbour et al., 2025; Kalfon Hakhmigari, & Diamant, 2025). When the sympathetic nervous system remains in a state of hyperarousal for years, the threshold for affective triggers lowers. Consequently, the 12.2% of respondents experiencing frequent anger likely represent a segment of the population whose resilience mechanisms have been functionally depleted.

According to the demographic composition of the sample (88.6% female), the results must be interpreted through the lens of “cumulative domestic stress”. Women in wartime Ukraine often bear a “triple burden”: professional duties, child-rearing, and the care of elderly parents in unstable conditions. In this context, anger acts as a secondary reaction to chronic fatigue and the violation of the “assumed safety” of the family unit. The high frequency of anger in the 36–60 age group confirms that the most socially burdened segment of the population is also the most psychologically vulnerable to emotional de-compensation.

Furthermore, the prevalence of anger as a dominant emotion may be linked to the phenomenon of “moral injury”. (Zasiekina et al., 2023; McGarry, 2026). Anger in civilians under war conditions is often a reaction to the fundamental injustice of the conflict and the repeated violation of basic human rights. This aligns with Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) theory of shattered assumptions, where the persistent experience of anger marks the individual’s inability to reconstruct a coherent and safe world model.

When applying the proposed theoretical typology of emotional response, the following patterns emerge:

**Adaptive Pattern:** A substantial segment of the sample demonstrates a moderate correlation between tension and anger, falling within the «sometimes» to «rarely» range. This group represents the baseline of psychological resilience, where anger

remains a transient emotional reaction rather than a dominant state.

**Latent Tension (The Suppression Strategy):** The data highlights a specific subgroup characterized by high psychological tension but a reported «never» or «rarely» frequency of anger. This suggests a strategy of emotional containment. Within the context of prolonged war, this latent tension poses a significant risk for psychosomatization and eventual emotional exhaustion, as the internal «pressure» remains unresolved.

**Explosive/Maladaptive Pattern:** The 12.2% of respondents who experience anger «often» or «very often» are identified as the primary group at risk of emotional maladaptation. In these cases, anger serves as a marker of the «window of tolerance» being breached. The habitual nature of this affect indicates that the fight-or-flight response has become chronic, signaling a failure of the ego's defensive functions and a transition from normative stress to pathological de-compensation.

In conclusion, the results confirm that anger frequency is a reliable diagnostic marker. While infrequent anger may still signal high internal stress (latent maladaptation), the transition to frequent explosive reactions serves as a definitive indicator of the depletion of the individual's adaptive resources in the face of long-term military conflict.

### Conclusions

The study confirms that under the conditions of prolonged military conflict, the classical models of psychological adaptation require significant revision. The transition of the civilian population's state from acute stress response to chronic existence within a «permanent challenge» paradigm has blurred the boundaries between normative and pathological reactions. It has been theoretically substantiated and empirically proven that anger, in this context, undergoes a functional transformation: from a short-term adaptive mechanism for resource mobilization, it shifts toward a stable marker of emotional maladaptation and systemic exhaustion of the psyche.

The results obtained from a representative sample demonstrate a high positive correlation between subjectively perceived psychological tension and the frequency of anger. The fact that 26.6% of the population experiences high tension «often» or «very often» indicates a widespread state of hyperarousal. However, the identified 12.2% of individuals with frequent explosive reactions represent a critical «maladaptive group». For these individuals, anger has bypassed the “window of tolerance”, signaling a failure of affective control and the depletion of internal resilience buffers.

The frequency of anger should be integrated into diagnostic protocols as an autonomous marker of mental health risks in wartime. These findings provide a scientific basis for developing targeted art-therapeutic and cognitive-behavioral interventions focused on expanding the “window of tolerance” and preventing the chronification of negative affects. Future research should focus on longitudinal monitoring of these indicators to track the further dynamics of civilian resilience as the socio-political reality continues to evolve.

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**Коструба Наталія. Гнів як маркер емоційної дезадаптації цивільного населення в умовах війни: емпіричне дослідження.**

**Метою** даної статті є дослідження зв'язку між рівнем психологічної напруженості та частотою прояву гніву як домінуючої емоції у цивільного населення, а також обґрунтування цих показників як надійних маркерів емоційної дезадаптації. У дослідженні увага зосереджується на виявленні кореляції між суб'єктивно сприйнятою психологічною напругою та частотою проявів гніву для визначення меж «вікна толерантності» та виснаження психологічної стійкості.

**Методи дослідження.** Емпіричне дослідження було проведено у 2025 році за участю репрезентативної вибірки з 500 цивільних осіб в Україні (88,6% жінок; 62,2% віком 36–60 років). Опитування проводилося онлайн за допомогою спеціально розробленої анкети, адаптованої для оперативного знімка емоційного стану в умовах хронічного стресу. Зокрема, окрім демографічних даних, анкета містила 20 запитань. У цій статті ми аналізуємо відповіді на такі запитання: Як би ви оцінили рівень вашої психологічної напруги протягом останніх двох тижнів? Як часто впродовж останніх двох тижнів ви відчували гнів як домінуючу емоцію?

**Результати дослідження.** Результати дослідження виявляють значну позитивну кореляцію між внутрішньою напругою та частотою прояву гніву. У той час як 26,6% респондентів повідомили про високий рівень психологічної напруги («часто» або «дуже часто»), 12,2% демонстрували часті вибухи гніву, що сигналізує про порушення вікна толерантності. Було визначено трирівневу типологію: адаптивний тип (помірна напруга/рідкісний гнів), тип латентної напруги (висока напруга/пригнічений гнів) та дезадаптивний тип (висока напруга/частий гнів). Результати показують, що для когорти середнього віку (36–60 років) накопичення соціальної відповідальності служить каталітичним фактором емоційної декомпенсації.

**Висновки.** Дослідження підтверджує, що частота прояву гніву є автономним та надійним діагностичним маркером емоційної дезадаптації під час війни. Перехід від латентної напруги до частих вибухових реакцій свідчить про виснаження адаптивних ресурсів особистості. Ці висновки забезпечують наукову основу для розробки цілеспрямованих психологічних втручань, спрямованих на розширення вікна толерантності та запобігання хронізації дезадаптивних афективних станів у цивільних осіб, які переживають тривалий стрес, викликаний військовими діями.

**Ключові слова:** емоційна дезадаптація, психологічна напруга, частота гніву, цивільне населення, стійкість, вікно толерантності, тривалий стрес.

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