

Section: Preliminary studies in Positive Psychotherapy

Integrating canine-assisted therapy elements in resource-oriented Positive Psychotherapy sessions for individuals affected by war



TETIANA IVANETS

MSc Psychology, Basic Consultant of Positive Psychotherapy,
PhD in Political Science, Associate Professor
Mariupol State University (Kyiv, Ukraine)

EMAIL: tatianaivanets602@gmail.com

ORCID: [0000-0003-3248-5033](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3248-5033)

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Abstract

This article presents a study on the effectiveness of integrating canine-assisted therapy into resource-oriented group interventions within the framework of Positive Psychotherapy for individuals affected by war. The study addresses the growing levels of psychological distress, anxiety, and stress among the Ukrainian population in the context of the ongoing war, as well as the need for brief and effective resource-oriented psychological support.

The study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of incorporating canine-assisted therapy into resource-oriented group interventions based on Positive Psychotherapy in improving the psychological and emotional well-being of adults and children affected by war. The theoretical framework is based on N. Peseschkian's concept of Positive Psychotherapy, which focuses on restoring internal balance and activating personal resources through bodily, emotional, social, and meaning-related domains. Contemporary approaches to psychological resources as factors of stress adaptation, as well as empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of canine-assisted therapy in reducing anxiety and enhancing emotional well-being, were also considered.

The study included single-session resource-oriented group interventions within Positive Psychotherapy supplemented with canine-assisted therapy elements. The sample consisted of 23 adults and 50 children aged 11–12 years. Intervention effectiveness was assessed using the SAN method (well-being, activity, mood) for adults and a mood self-assessment scale for children, administered before and after participation.

The results demonstrated statistically significant improvements in participants' psychological and emotional well-being. Among adults, improvements were observed in well-being, activity, and mood, with the most pronounced effect found in mood. Among children, positive changes in emotional state were identified, with mood stabilization or improvement observed in a considerable proportion of participants. The practical significance of the findings lies in demonstrating the effectiveness of short-term group interventions incorporating canine-assisted therapy, particularly under conditions of high psychological burden, limited support resources, and the need for rapid crisis response. The findings support the applicability of such interventions for vulnerable populations affected by war.

Keywords: Positive Psychotherapy, canine-assisted therapy, psycho-emotional state, resource-oriented group interventionists

Introduction

In the context of the full-scale war in Ukraine, a persistent deterioration in the psycho-emotional well-being of the population across different age groups has been observed. Reduced mood, diminished well-being, and elevated levels of stress and anxiety have become increasingly common and may, over time, contribute to the development of depressive disorders. Empirical evidence confirms the high prevalence of psycho-emotional disturbances among war-affected populations.

For example, a study conducted at Mariupol State University in March 2024 involving 214 displaced residents of Mariupol (87 international migrants and 127 internally displaced persons who left the city following its occupation by Russian military forces) revealed high rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and stress. Among participants residing abroad, the prevalence of depression reached 54.4%, severe anxiety 27.6%, PTSD 41.4%, and high stress 46%. Among internally displaced persons, these indicators were somewhat lower but remained substantial: depression 41.7%, severe anxiety 23.6%, PTSD 30%, and high stress 28.4% (Ivanets, 2024).

The ongoing war not only exacerbates existing psycho-emotional difficulties but also increases the number of individuals requiring psychological support. This situation highlights the need for innovative, flexible, and brief psychological interventions aimed at emotional stabilization. In response to these challenges, contemporary psychotherapy increasingly employs integrative approaches that combine different therapeutic methods to enhance treatment effectiveness.

The present study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of integrating canine-assisted therapy into resource-oriented group interventions based on Positive Psychotherapy, delivered as single-session resource meetings, in improving the psycho-emotional state of adults and children affected by war. Such an approach may provide mental health professionals with an effective short-term intervention strategy for supporting individuals exposed to war-related stress.

Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Background

Positive Psychotherapy is a resource-oriented approach developed by N. Peseschkian that focuses on achieving balance across different life domains, positively reinterpreting experiences, developing personal capacities, and strengthening self-help competencies (Peseschkian, 1977). By emphasizing both internal and external resources, the approach is particularly relevant for addressing crisis conditions and the psychological consequences of traumatic events.

In psychology, the concept of personal resources is closely linked to adaptation and coping processes in challenging life circumstances. Key internal resources include resilience, optimism, self-regulation, life goals and meaning, social support, spirituality, self-efficacy, and effective coping strategies. These factors function as protective mechanisms that support psychological well-being under conditions of stress and uncertainty (Serdiuk, 2025). Within Positive Psychotherapy, resource activation is facilitated through positive reinterpretation of experience, bodily regulation of affect, reinforcement of behavioral change through micro-actions, the creation of a supportive social environment, and values-oriented work that promotes a stable life perspective (Serdiuk, 2025).

Growing empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of Positive Psychotherapy in challenging life situations. The approach has demonstrated positive effects on psychological balance and well-being among individuals experiencing depression and stress-related conditions (Christ et al., 2021). Primary capacities such as hope, love, and faith serve as protective factors in crises, contributing to lower levels of anxiety and stress (Kirillov, 2023).

Particular attention has been devoted to group-based Positive Psychotherapy interventions for war-affected populations. Studies involving veterans reported significant improvements across all four domains of the Balance Model (body, achievement, contact, and meaning), with the most pronounced changes observed in the domains of contact and body. Participants also demonstrated an increased capacity to reinterpret traumatic experiences by constructing new meanings rather than adopting a victim-oriented perspective. At the same time,

safe group interaction contributed to the restoration of interpersonal trust (Ihnatovych, 2026).

Research involving women affected by war has likewise demonstrated the effectiveness of Positive Psychotherapy-based group interventions, with reductions in anxiety (16%), frustration (10%), and aggressiveness (8%). In addition, participants showed substantial increases in stress resilience (50%) and psychological flourishing (40%), although some continued to require further psychological support (Nadzi, 2026).

Studies focusing on children affected by war have identified disturbances across all four domains of the Balance Model: body (anxiety and sleep disturbances), achievement (apathy and reduced initiative), contact (social isolation and language barriers), and meaning (identity-related difficulties). Within Positive Psychotherapy, the use of cultural symbols, including songs, fairy tales, and family narratives, has proven particularly effective. These resources facilitate identity restoration, emotional expression, and the re-establishment of a sense of belonging (Ratushnenko, 2025).

In line with the growing interest in integrative approaches to supporting war-affected populations, canine-assisted therapy has emerged as a valuable modality within animal-assisted interventions. Interaction with a dog promotes positive emotional experiences, reduces anxiety and psychological tension, and enhances feelings of safety and emotional support. A growing body of empirical evidence supports its effectiveness in addressing stress, depression, and crisis-related psychological difficulties.

Research indicates that even brief (15-minute) interactions with a therapy dog can reduce anxiety levels by approximately 35% and alleviate pain and depressive symptoms compared to standard interventions (Kline et al., 2019). The presence of a dog during psychotherapy has been associated with reduced anxious arousal and improved formation of the therapeutic alliance (Hunt & Chizkov, 2014). Furthermore, canine-assisted interventions have demonstrated positive effects among individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), contributing to reduced symptom severity and improved quality of life (Krause-Parello et al., 2016).

In addition to its psycho-emotional benefits, canine-assisted therapy has shown positive effects on cognitive functioning, which is particularly relevant in the context of war-related and prolonged stress, often associated with cognitive decline, especially among children. For example, dog-assisted reading programs have been found to improve reading skills and motivation in children (Hall et al., 2016), while brief interactions with therapy dogs have been shown to reduce stress and enhance academic performance among students (Ward-Griffin et al., 2018).

Canine-assisted interventions have been widely applied in international practice with diverse client populations since the 1960s. The scientific foundations of this approach are commonly associated with the pioneering work of Boris Levinson, who highlighted the therapeutic potential of human–animal interaction, as well as Elizabeth O’Leary Corson and Samuel Corson, whose research contributed substantially to the development of animal-assisted interventions as a distinct field of practice (Gee et al., 2021).

In Ukraine, interest in canine-assisted interventions has increased significantly in response to the psychological consequences of the full-scale war. One of the first specialized centers, INNIKOS, was established in Kyiv in 2023 with the support of the Royal Canin Foundation. Subsequently, additional centers were opened in Rivne, Myrhorod, and Chernivtsi. Furthermore, the National Police of Ukraine has launched a pilot program providing canine-assisted support for veterans and their families, involving service dogs that have been retrained for therapeutic purposes.

Currently, no national standards regulating the training and certification of therapy dogs and their handlers exist in Ukraine. Preparation is primarily conducted by individual canine organizations that rely on internationally recognized guidelines and best practices concerning handler competencies and therapy dog requirements. Not all dogs are suitable for therapeutic work. Before entering training programs, candidate dogs undergo behavioral assessments to evaluate the absence of aggressive reactions toward humans and their tolerance of loud noises, unfamiliar objects, and other potentially stressful stimuli. Following successful screening, dogs receive specialized

preparation for interaction with clients in therapeutic settings.

Conceptually, canine-assisted interventions are highly compatible with the core principles of Positive Psychotherapy. The dog functions as a catalyst for resource activation, fostering experiences of acceptance, trust, joy, and emotional safety. These experiences create favorable conditions for the positive reinterpretation of life events and the strengthening of hope as an important psychological resource.

Interaction with a dog may also contribute to greater balance across the four domains of the Balance Model: body, through the reduction of physiological tension and stress; achievement, through structured and purposeful activities; contact, through the development of trust and interpersonal connectedness; and meaning, through experiences of support, belonging, and positive emotional engagement.

An additional advantage of canine-assisted interventions is their capacity to facilitate therapeutic engagement, particularly in short-term group settings. The presence of a dog can reduce initial tension, enhance trust, and promote a psychologically safe atmosphere. Moreover, the symbolic associations commonly linked to dogs – such as friendship, loyalty, and support – can be incorporated into metaphors, narratives, and other symbolic techniques widely used in Positive Psychotherapy, thereby strengthening therapeutic processes. Consequently, the integration of Positive Psychotherapy and canine-assisted interventions provides a promising framework for psychological support for individuals affected by war.

2.2. Methodology and Study Design

Within the study, an integrative approach combining resource-oriented Positive Psychotherapy and canine-assisted therapy was developed and evaluated as single-session group interventions. The intervention aimed to improve participants' psycho-emotional well-being by activating personal resources, restoring internal balance, and reducing stress. The program was adapted for adults and children, taking into account age-specific psychological characteristics.

The interventions were conducted in small groups of 10–12 participants, providing a psychologically safe environment while ensuring

active involvement of each participant. Sessions lasted 90 minutes for adults and 60 minutes for children. In accordance with recommended workload limits for therapy dogs (50–60 minutes of continuous activity), a 30-minute rest period was incorporated during adult sessions. The interventions were facilitated by a psychologist and consultant in Positive Psychotherapy, responsible for the program's psychological component, and a canine-assisted therapy handler, who supervised interactions with the therapy dog. The therapy dog in the study had prior experience working with children, veterans, and war-affected populations through a canine-assisted therapy project implemented by the National Police of Ukraine.

The sample included 23 adults (staff members and students of Mariupol State University, community representatives, internally displaced persons, and helping professionals) and 50 children aged 11–12 years. Participants were recruited according to predefined eligibility criteria. Adult participants were required to meet at least two of the following conditions: internally displaced person (IDP) status, experience of living under occupation, secondary traumatization, or continuous residence in Ukraine since the onset of the full-scale war. For children, continuous residence in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale war was the primary inclusion criterion. Additional requirements for participation included the absence of dog-related allergies, no fear of dogs, and informed consent to participate and to the processing of self-assessment data. For minors, parental consent was obtained. Adult participants were recruited through a preliminary screening questionnaire. In contrast, children were recruited through schools, where teachers and school psychologists provided information about the program and formed groups according to the established criteria.

All sessions incorporated direct interaction with a therapy dog, which served as an additional therapeutic resource. The intervention consisted of three stages: introduction, the main working phase, and reflection. Each session was structured according to the Five Stages of Consultation model in Positive Psychotherapy. The stage of observation (distancing) was implemented during the introduction; inventory, situational encouragement, and verbalization were addressed during the main phase; and goal

expansion was incorporated into the reflection stage. Particular emphasis was placed on activating and strengthening primary capacities, including love, contact, and trust. Interaction with the therapy dog functioned as a resource, facilitating the development of these capacities and promoting participants' engagement in the therapeutic process.

The intervention focused on restoring balance across key life domains affected by war-related stress. During the introductory stage, the exercise "The Animal I Would Like to Be / The Animal I Would Not Like to Be" was used to reduce tension and facilitate safe self-disclosure.

The main phase was based on a modified Balance Model incorporating an "animal element." Participants represented the domains of body, achievement, contact, and meaning through animal metaphors and symbolically distributed resources among them by "feeding" the animals. This technique facilitated the visualization of energy allocation and increased awareness of potential imbalances.

The reflection stage employed a narrative approach in which participants created stories or fairy tales about their "animals." This process promoted deeper self-reflection and activation of internal resources.

In the children's groups, the same structure was adapted to developmental characteristics. During the introductory stage, participants were asked to name words associated with dogs, eliciting positive emotions and associations with friendship, loyalty, and care. The main exercise, "A Story About My Pet," aimed to activate

positive experiences, encourage emotional openness, and enhance feelings of safety. All domains of the Balance Model were addressed indirectly through interaction with the therapy dog, recollection of personal experiences, and exploration of related meanings.

A key principle in both adult and children's groups was the avoidance of excessive focus on traumatic experiences, with emphasis placed on personal resources and positive emotional experiences. Participants were encouraged to interact freely with the therapy dog throughout the sessions, which contributed to tension reduction, facilitated self-disclosure, and supported emotional stabilization.

Intervention effectiveness was evaluated using pre- and post-session self-report measures. Adults completed the SAN scale, which assesses well-being, activity, and mood (Doskin et al., 1973), whereas children completed a five-point mood self-assessment scale. Statistical analysis included calculation of means (M), standard deviations (SD), and paired-samples Student's *t*-tests. Statistical significance was interpreted as follows: $p < .01$ indicated a highly significant effect, $p < .05$ a significant effect, and $p > .05$ a non-significant effect.

Results

The findings indicate an overall improvement in participants' psycho-emotional state following participation in single-session resource-oriented group interventions incorporating elements of canine-assisted therapy.

Table 1. Assessment of the impact of resource-oriented group sessions with elements of canine-assisted therapy on the psycho-emotional state of adults ($n = 23$)

	<i>Changes</i>	<i>Well-being</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Mood</i>
Positive changes	Improvement by several levels on the scale	+1 (9 participants) +2 (2 participants)	+1 (8 participants) +2 (4 participants)	+1 (6 participants) +2 (4 participants)
	Improvement by several tenths of a scale point	8 participants	4 participants	11 participants
	<i>Total</i>	<i>19 participants</i>	<i>16 participants</i>	<i>21 participants</i>
	No change	-	2 participants	-
Negative changes	Deterioration by several levels on the scale	-	-1 (1 participant)	-1 (1 participant)
	Deterioration by several tenths of a scale point	4 participants	4 participants	1 participant
	<i>Total</i>	<i>4 participants</i>	<i>5 participants</i>	<i>2 participants</i>

Among adults, the most pronounced improvement was observed in the mood domain, with positive changes reported by 21 participants (91.3% of the sample). Improvements in well-being were recorded in 19 participants (82.6%), while positive changes in activity were observed in 16 participants (69.6%).

A smaller proportion of participants demonstrated slight declines in the assessed indicators. In the well-being domain, four participants (17.4%) showed a decrease of several tenths of a scale point. In the activity

domain, one participant showed a decline of 1 scale point, while 4 showed slight reductions, resulting in negative dynamics for 5 participants overall (21.7%). In the mood domain, a decrease of 1 scale point was observed in 1 participant and a slight reduction in another, yielding a total of 2 participants (8.7%) with negative changes.

No change was observed in activity scores for two participants (8.7% of the sample). Overall, the findings demonstrate a clear predominance of positive dynamics across all assessed dimensions.

Table 2. Statistical interpretation of the results (adults)

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Pre-session (M ± SD)</i>	<i>Post-session (M ± SD)</i>	<i>p</i>
Well-being	4,52±1,37	5,33±1,18	0,000257
Activity	4,00±1,25	4,77±1,29	0,001756
Mood	4,62±1,32	5,64±1,12	0,000025

The results indicate a statistically significant improvement across all assessed indicators ($p < 0.01$): well-being ($p = 0.000257$), mood ($p =$

0.000025), and activity ($p = 0.001756$), confirming the effectiveness of the proposed integrative approach.

Table 3. Assessment of the impact of resource-oriented group sessions with elements of canine-assisted therapy on the psycho-emotional state of children (n = 50)

<i>Mood improved</i>	<i>Mood worsened</i>	<i>Mood remained unchanged</i>	
		Total	Of these, those whose initial mood was above average
+1 point (16 participants)	-1 point (6 participants)	18 participants	5 participants
+2 points (7 participants)	-2 points (2 participants)		
+3 points (1 participant)			

Positive trends were also observed in the children's sample, although the magnitude of change was more variable than in the adult groups. Overall, mood improvement following the intervention was recorded in 24 children, representing 48% of the sample.

A decline in mood scores was observed in 8 participants (16%), indicating a deterioration in emotional state. For 18 children (36%), mood ratings remained unchanged following the intervention. Notably, most children in this

subgroup had already reported relatively high mood levels at baseline. Specifically, 13 participants (72% of this subgroup) rated their initial mood above the midpoint of the scale, including 5 children who reported the maximum score of 5 and 8 who reported a score of 4.

The absence of further improvement in these cases may be explained by a ceiling effect associated with the measurement scale.

Table 4. Statistical interpretation of the results (children)

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Pre-session (M ± SD)</i>	<i>Post-session (M ± SD)</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Mood</i>	3,52±0,89	4,02±1,24	0,00155

Thus, in the children's group, a statistically significant improvement in emotional state was also observed ($p < 0.01$; $p = 0.00155$), which confirms the effectiveness of the proposed approach even within a short-term intervention framework.

Discussion

The findings suggest that integrating canine-assisted therapy into resource-oriented group interventions within the framework of Positive Psychotherapy may yield a multidimensional therapeutic effect, as reflected in rapid improvements in participants' psycho-emotional well-being following a single-session intervention. Interpretation of the results within the theoretical framework of Positive Psychotherapy indicates that these changes may be associated with the activation of personal resources and the restoration of balance across key domains of functioning.

The adaptation of the Balance Model by including a metaphorical "animal component" appears to have enhanced participants' capacity for self-reflection and facilitated emotional processing. This interpretation is consistent with previous evidence highlighting the value of symbolic and narrative techniques in reducing psychological tension and promoting emotional stabilization.

Canine-assisted therapy emerged as an important therapeutic component, contributing to resource activation and enhancing the quality of group interaction. The observed reduction in initial tension, increased trust, and more rapid development of group cohesion suggest that the therapy dog served as a social mediator, facilitating engagement in the intervention. These observations extend the understanding of canine-assisted therapy beyond emotional regulation to include facilitating interpersonal and group processes.

The present findings are consistent with previous studies demonstrating that interaction

with dogs can reduce anxiety and distress while increasing perceived safety and emotional support. In the current study, however, these effects were observed within an integrated psychotherapeutic framework that addressed bodily, achievement-related, relational, and meaning-related dimensions of experience.

The novelty of the proposed approach lies in reconceptualizing the role of the therapy dog as both a source of emotional stabilization and a metaphorical tool for structuring subjective experience. This integration may facilitate the connection between individual reflection and group dynamics, which is particularly valuable in short-term interventions, where opportunities to develop a therapeutic alliance are limited.

Overall, the findings support the potential of such integrative formats as effective tools for crisis-oriented psychological interventions, particularly among highly vulnerable populations. The combination of a structured psychotherapeutic framework with the emotionally meaningful presence of a therapy dog appears to facilitate rapid stabilization and resource activation, which are especially important in the context of war-related psychological distress.

Several factors should be considered when interpreting these findings. In the children's sample, a decline in mood was observed in 16% of participants, while no change was observed in 10% of children with baseline mood levels of average or below average. These outcomes may reflect the influence of both contextual and methodological factors.

First, the interventions were conducted within the school setting during regular educational activities, which may have affected participants' emotional responses and engagement in the intervention. Second, the groups were primarily composed of children from the same classes and were formed by teachers, introducing potential selection bias and the influence of pre-existing peer relationships on group dynamics and self-reported outcomes.

A further limitation concerns the assessment procedure. Emotional state was evaluated using a single self-report measure, namely a five-point mood rating scale, which may not have captured

the full complexity of participants' psycho-emotional functioning. The use of a more comprehensive assessment battery could provide a more nuanced understanding of intervention outcomes.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by implementing more controlled study conditions and employing multiple assessment instruments. Such improvements would strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings and provide a more robust evaluation of this intervention format's effectiveness.

Conclusions

The findings suggest that the integrative model, combining the principles of Positive Psychotherapy and canine-assisted therapy into a single structured intervention, represents a promising format for short-term, group-based psychological support. This approach appears particularly relevant in contexts characterized by high psychological burden, limited mental health resources, and the need for rapid crisis response. By simultaneously addressing multiple domains of the Balance Model, the intervention contributes to emotional stabilization and activation of adaptive resources, supporting its potential applicability across various vulnerable populations.

Several methodological limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. These include the absence of a control group, the relatively small sample size, the assessment of outcomes immediately following the intervention without long-term follow-up, and the lack of repeated intervention sessions. An additional limitation concerns potential participant bias related to attitudes toward dogs, which cultural factors and prior personal experiences may influence. Although the eligibility criteria required only the absence of dog-related allergies and willingness to interact with a dog, participants' previous experiences with and attitudes toward dogs were not systematically assessed. Furthermore, the exploratory nature of the study limited opportunities for direct comparison with similar research, as comparable empirical evidence remains scarce.

Future research should expand the empirical basis of this approach through larger samples, controlled study designs, and longitudinal assessments of intervention outcomes. Further investigation is also needed to compare different formats of canine-assisted interventions and to examine their effectiveness across diverse age and social groups with varying levels of trauma exposure.

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1. Declarations

1.1. Study Limitations

The study has several limitations that may affect the interpretation of the results, including the absence of a control group and a relatively small sample size. An additional limitation is the predominant reliance on self-report measures, which increases the risk of response bias. Furthermore, the assessment was conducted over a short time period, which does not allow for conclusions regarding the long-term effectiveness of the intervention.

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None.

1.3. Funding

None.

1.4. Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

1.5. Ethical Approval (if applicable)

The study was conducted at Mariupol State University. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants for the use of self-assessment results in an aggregated form (without biographical information).

1.6. Informed Consent (if applicable)

Informed consent was obtained from the study participants.

1.7. AI Responsibility Statement

Authors must declare the use of artificial intelligence tools in the preparation of the manuscript.

Authors confirm that:

AI tools were not used to generate the intellectual content of the article (ideas, arguments, interpretations, or references).

The authors personally verified all references.

ChatGPT was used to check the translation of the article into English (stylistics and adequacy of the translation of terminology).