

# Problems of psychological well-being and distress of the personality: causes and consequences

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**Abstract** — The article discusses the study, analysis and systematization of ideas related to psychological well-being (PW) and its levels, models in the context of personal health, free from professional and personal destructions. Employees of the Main Office of the Ministry of Emergency Situations took part in the research. As a result of a series of empirical studies and on the basis of factorization of PW and indicators of personal characteristics, the types of psychological well-being of an individual are highlighted: «socially compensatory productive-passive dysfunctional type», «prosocial productive-active medium-profit type», «prosocial productive-passive highly prosperous type».

**Keywords** — *professional burnout, psychological well-being, orientation towards achievements through independence, orientation towards achievement through conformism, employees of Ministry of Emergency situations.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of psychological well-being/distress of a person in the modern world seems to be relevant due to the fact that it affects almost all aspects of his life - psychological health, attitude to the world, work activity, stability or predisposition to professional-personal deformations and destructions etc. This problem is of particular importance from the specialists of «extreme professions» which include employees of the Ministry of Emergency Situations, whose activity is directly associated with high risk and exposure to a large number of stress factors. It can be agreed with T.Ribo, who considered the disease to be a fine instrument of analysis which «makes experiments for us, by no other way realizable», and considers that extreme activity is such a subtle tool that

allows us to study the features and predictors of psychological well-being/distress.

As a systemic multi-level psychological phenomenon, welfare/distress affects emotional experiences, well-being, behavior, choice of life strategies. The identification and management of predictors of psychological well-being/distress is important for the development of technologies for the psychological support of work, life and longevity of citizens of any country. If earlier it was believed that extreme situations cause exclusively negative consequences for a person, then today both foreign and domestic authors are actively exploring the positive impact of psychological trauma on further development of the personality, that is, the so-called «phenomenon of post-traumatic growth» or «post-traumatic stress-related growth of personality», which is manifested in the opening of new opportunities for a person, increasing the value of life, the significance of personal relationships, the emergence and awareness of their own forces, intensification of spiritual consciousness [1], [2], [3]. Moreover, in extreme situations extra stroke can be observed.

Three areas of positive change, or growth directions, that occur as a result of life crises are distinguished in the literature: the first is the mobilization of hidden possibilities of a personality that form a person's resilience to present and possible future life dramas; in the second direction of changes it is confirmed that trauma strengthens meaningful relationships; as for the third, existential, direction, it affects changes in a person's life philosophy regarding the present and future.

Post-traumatic growth can form a specific «readiness for action» that allows a person surviving trauma to overcome

the subsequent events relatively calmly and confidently. If a person succeeded in rebuilding his life world, incorporating the experience gained in it, the ability to cope with negative consequences, then future difficulties that he may encounter will not require much psychological work, the person will not perceive these circumstances as «trauma». The person's ideas about life are changed, the purposes are changed, «viability» is formed.

Of particular interest in this context is the multi-level «onion» model of psychological well-being. «Onion» theory of Happiness J.Czapinski, in which the central level of psychological well-being is «will to live», the internal source of positive guidelines [4]. Indeed, without this component, the work of the Emergency Ministry employee is impossible. A high level of expression of the «will to live» is a source of optimism and struggle with difficulties, while a low level is a source of pessimism and apathy. J.Czapinski believes that most people have a high level of psychological well-being due to a pronounced «will to live» (they are satisfied with the life in general, and may not be satisfied with its individual spheres).

To achieve success in case of professional activity in extreme conditions a person can implement various models of psychological well-being: asymmetric (in the case of exposure to an extreme environment) is characterized by a predominant appeal to internal resources and symmetric (in case of exposure to a less extreme environment) is characterized by a harmonious interaction of the personality with the environment and implies equal treatment of the personality to both internal and external development resources. At the same time, if the subjective environment is assessed as non-extremal, then in objectively extremal living conditions the personality uses a symmetric model of psychological well-being [5].

In Western psychology a large number of studies have been conducted on cross-cultural, environmental and age-related factors of psychological well-being (E. Diener, M. Diener, C. Diener; S. Oishi, R.S. Wyer, S. Colcombe; N. Steverinkand, S. Lindenberg), the influence of music and aesthetic perception on well-being (R. MacDonald, G. Wilson), the adaptation of a model of well-being for psychotherapy (G.A Fava, E.Tomba). In Russian psychology the subjects of subjective and psychological well-being are also represented by a significant number of studies (E. Bocharova, L. Kulikov, R. Shamionov, L. Zhukovskaya, V. A. Voronina, P. P. Fesenko and etc.). From the position of integrative approach multilevel models of psychological well-being are developed (A. Voronina;N.Baturin), in which psychosomatic, mental, psychological health are considered the levels of psychological well-being. For each level there are both subjective and objective parameters of measurement. In the model of N. Baturin, for example, psychological well-being is provided by the interaction of various personality traits, while the deep level of well-being, the «will to live», influences more superficial levels [6].

Currently there is evidence of the structure of psychological well-being, significant interrelations of psychological well-being with the meaningfulness of life (P.Fesenko), with social activity and group values (R.Shamionov), creativity (J.Suntsova and coauthors) are established; peculiarities of psychological well-being in the

conditions of extreme vital activity (E.Vesna, O.Shiryayeva), age differences in the experience of psychological well-being (A.Voronina) are considered. In ethnopsychology studies are conducted on the structure and predictors of well-being among representatives of different socio-cultural groups (V. Gritsenko; A. Vagapova) under conditions of migration (N. Usova, Z. Lepshakova, M. Efremova).

Significant place is occupied by studies of connection of career and professional well-being (P. Kozyreva, 2005), professional well-being and resilience (R. Berezovskaya), the connection between well-being and viability, burnout syndrome, life position (N. Vodopyanova,). Theoretical studies on the classification of approaches to the determination of the psychological well-being of the individual are conducted (A. Sozontov, R. Shamionov, E. Evtushenko).

As predictors of psychological well-being, researchers name the following the average level of sovereignty of the psychological space (E. Panin), high appreciation of the significance of the world and its opportunities (A. Kronik), the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (E. Desi, R. Ryan), real relationships with the world (D.Leontyev), self-efficacy (A. Bandura) etc.

Theoretical analysis of scientific research on the problem of psychological well-being, as well as the summary of results of a number of empirical studies conducted by us, allows us to conclude the following.

Currently, there is no common understanding of psychological well-being/distress and its impact on professional and personal destruction. The categorization of the concept of psychological well-being is determined by the research (scientific) model. The outer determinants of psychological well-being and resistance to distress and its consequences remain less studied. Systematic consideration of all obtained results is required to build a dynamic model of well-being and factors that impede psychological distress that determines the deformation processes of a personality. R.Shamionov believes that the main function of psychological well-being is the creation and preservation of a dynamic balance between a personality and the surrounding world [8]. This thesis is of particular importance for workers of extreme professions.

Psychological distress as a phenomenon is a subjective experience that affects different areas (levels) of physical, mental, social and spiritual discomfort.

As a complex subjective experience caused by the cognitive assessment process, global assessment of one's own life, in general, the psychological well-being of an individual influences the rethinking of past and present life, as well as the design of the future life of an individual as a subject of the life path. Psychological well-being is a multi-level education in which different types can be distinguished on the basis of the levels of meaning and personality types (Ya. Pavlotskaya, D. Zinovyeve; A. Zhuravlev, A. Kupreychenko). Attitude towards oneself and the world is the central meaningful criterion for the typology of psychological well-being.

As a result of a series of empirical studies and on the basis of factorization of indicators of psychological well-being and personal characteristics, the following types of

psychological well-being of a personality have been identified: egocentric (dysfunctional type); group-centric (medium successful type); prosocial (highly successful type). The internal structure, the system of relations, the psycho-emotional states of the three types have fundamental differences related to one or other strategies for the regulation of inter- and intrapsychic processes. Despite the large number of studies in the area of psychological well-being, there remains a large number of unsolved aspects regarding external and internal causes, mechanisms, dynamics of psychological well-being-distress and its influence on professional and personal destruction.

The purpose of the research: analysis and systematization of ideas on psychological well-being/distress and its levels, predictors, models in the context of personal health, free from professional and personal destructions.

## II. METHOD

Research methods: theoretical analysis, psychological testing of inter/intrasubjective parameters, indicators of personal destruction and burnout syndrome in individuals of different age and professional groups.

Research techniques: questionnaire «The scale of psychological well-being» K. Riff (adapted by L. Zhukovskaya and E. Troshykhina); California psychological questionnaire of personality (CPI-480) H. Gough (were interpreted the scales of «achievement through submission» (Ac) and «achievement through independence» (Ai); «Hardiness Survey Test» (in adaptation of D. Leontiev and E. Rasskazova); Professional burnout questionnaire K. Maslach, S. Jackson (in adaptation of N. Vodopyanova, E. Starchenkova); Diagnosis of burnout method (V. Boyko); «Index life style» questionnaire (Plutchik-Kellerman-Conte); questionnaire «Traumatic stress» (I. Kotenev - modified by T. Gurenkova, O. Golubeva); projective technique for diagnosing specific features of coping with difficult situations «Man in the rain»; techniques «Level of subjective control» (in adaptation by E. Bazhina, E. Golyunkina, L. Etkind); «Individual typological questionnaire» (L. Sobchik); personal scale of anxiety manifestation (in adaptation by T. Nemchin).

In total, 226 employees of the Main Office of the Ministry of Emergency Situations took part in the research (41 of them were from the Headquarters of the Ministry of Emergency of Russia in the Volgograd Region and 185 employees of the Fire Units of Volgograd and Volgograd Region aged 22 to 60 years).

The study was conducted in several stages during 2015-2019.

## III. RESULTS

Summarizing the results obtained for all methods, we came to the following conclusions:

1. The generalized results of the performed diagnostics indicate that the majority of respondents (94%) are characterized by average level of anxiety, average level of vitality, high level of involvement, high index of control and risk-taking scales, which characterizes them as people who do not experience stress in stressful situations, being involved in their professional activity at a high level and

enjoying it, being able to risk even in situations in which there is no guarantee of success. Every fifth subject has high level of professional burnout, which is characterized by exhaustion of emotional resources and isolation from social contacts with colleagues and communication partners, as well as a keen sense of ineffectiveness of professional activity. In half of the subjects is noted the loss of sense in their professional activity, the lack of desire to make efforts at the workplace, focus on external factors in production activity. Comparing the indicators of professional burnout among employees of the Headquarters (employees of State Administration) and employees of fire departments, it can be stated that 44% of the employees of the Headquarters have average level of professional burnout, and 45% of the employees of fire departments have low level.

2. While analyzing the indicators of professional burnout according to the method of K. Maslach, S. Jackson by the «Emotional exhaustion» scale were revealed 2 levels of professional burnout: dominating is the low level of emotional exhaustion (53.9% of all subjects) and the average level of emotional exhaustion (41.5%). Only in 4.6% of the subjects high level of emotional exhaustion is revealed, it indicates that these employees contribute considerable part of their emotional resources to their own professional activity.

3. Regarding the level of emotional burnout, only in 3% of the sample we observe its high index, manifested in experiencing the events occurring at work as psycho-traumatic circumstances, in dissatisfaction with themselves and with their profession. Only in 4.5% of the subjects, all the phases of stress – «stress», «resistance» and «exhaustion» are either already formed or are in the formation stage.

4. Analysis of the identified defensive mechanisms demonstrates that according to the intensity of their usage by the subjects they are distributed as follows: intellectualization (66.2% of respondents), denial (52.3% of respondents), reactive education (27.7%), projection (9.2%), suppression (7.7%), compensation (6.2%). Such protective mechanisms as regression and substitution were not identified (0% of respondents). The obtained results can be interpreted as follows: a personality blocks experiences caused by an unpleasant or subjectively unacceptable situation with the help of logical guidelines and manipulations, unconsciously invents logical judgments and conclusions to explain his failures, which is necessary to maintain his own positive image of «I»; at the same time, the subjects are also characterized by primitive defensive mechanisms, manifested in avoiding any thoughts about traumatic, stressful events, constantly attracting the attention of others by available means, painless expression of the feeling of acceptance of the world and of oneself. In other words, most of the studied employees are accustomed to find rational reasons for their professional failures and not to accept emotionally unacceptable information. The conducted correlation and regressive analysis of the obtained results allows us to conclude that the model of professional burnout of the Ministry of Emergency employees consists of other components: emotional exhaustion and reduction of personal achievements. In this model the coefficient of determination is 0.956, that is, this model is valid for 95.6% of cases.



5. Thus, giving general characteristic to the employees of Ministry of Emergency situations, it can be confirmed that they do not perceive the nature of their professional activities as extreme, they manage to create and maintain dynamic balance between the personality and the environment, using a considerable part of their emotional resources and psychological defences for professional activities.

6. A simple correlation analysis for the entire sample suggests that the higher the level of the overall indicator of well-being is, firstly, the higher the orientation towards achievements through independence is ( $r = 0.659$  with  $p = 0.000$ ), secondly, the higher the orientation towards achievement through conformism is ( $r = 0.377$  with  $p = 0.005$ ), thirdly, the goal orientation is higher ( $r = 0.805$  with  $p = 0.000$ ), the work experience and the age of the subjects do not give significant connections. This information proves the idea that staff happiness is extremely significant for the success of an organization. But the previous study, carried out under the direction of D. Zinovyeva [9], showed that psychological well-being in the model of K. Riff rather refers to psychological metasystem formations, integrally reflecting the levels of organization of the personality itself [10]. The results of the current study also showed that psychological well-being in the context of orientation for achievements has a different content and multidirectional nature of internal relationships depending on the severity of the level of well-being. The obtained results allowed us to identify three groups of subjects:

- The group with low level of well-being (11.3% of the total sample). The analysis of the structure of interrelations between parameters of well-being and parameters of achievement through independence or conformism has shown that people with low level of well-being are not characterized by striving for goals and achievements, autonomy. The overall indicator of well-being in this group increases only due to relationships with other people ( $r = 0.838$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). There is a well-known stable relationship between well-being and extroversion, but this indicator cannot influence the efficiency of work in this area. Moreover, the higher the people in this group are oriented toward relationships, the less they are oriented toward goals ( $r = -0.851$  with  $p = 0.032$ ). Taking into account the low level of self-acceptance in this group, we assume that the high contribution of orientation to relationship here is a compensatory and protective form of coping strategy. These are the relations characterized by the attempt to grow personally in relationships with other people, these are the relations of primary socialization when a person needs social reflection and confirmation. We assume that productivity of such employees is possible in conditions when the social contact itself can be considered as productivity. In work that does not require intensive social contact, such features can reduce productivity. We will call this group «socially compensatory productive-passive dysfunctional type».

- The group with the average level of well-being (67.9% of the total sample). Energy and activity in achieving goals are most likely inherent to employees with the average level of well-being. Both achievement strategies are used in this group, both through independence and conformism ( $r = 0.460$  with  $p = 0.005$ ), but at the same time, only

achievement through independence makes a contribution to the overall indicator of well-being ( $r = 0.667$  with  $p = 0.000$ ), which indicates that these are self-sufficient, independent-minded people who prefer to make their own decisions. This is also confirmed by high contribution to the overall well-being target orientation ( $r = 0.563$  with  $p = 0.000$ ) and autonomy orientation ( $r = 0.358$  with  $p = 0.032$ ). In this group, self-acceptance is positively associated with competence ( $r = 0.376$  with  $p = 0.024$ ), which distinguishes this group from the previous one ( $r = -0.899$  with  $p = 0.015$ ) and characterizes the group of middle-beneficial as having a more harmonious personality structure. Relations are significant in the general index of well-being ( $r = 0.454$  at  $p = 0.005$ ), but they lower autonomy in this group ( $r = -0.485$  at  $p = 0.003$ ), which, in our opinion, indicates a more constructive, rather than compensatory nature of relations. Autonomy, competence, growth, goals, self-acceptance also make a significant, statistically significant contribution to overall well-being. This group receives the working title «prosocial productive-active medium-profit type».

- The group with the high level of well-being (20.8% of the total sample). This group shows relatively paradoxical results. The main contribution to its overall indicator of well-being is made by relations ( $r = 0.843$  with  $p = 0.001$ ) and self-acceptance ( $r = 0.627$  with  $p = 0.039$ ). Relations and growth are interrelated as two main parameters of well-being in this group ( $r = 0.604$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ). This picture shows that achievements, autonomy, competence cease to be significant in such structure of the organization of the personality. These results are also consistent with the previous study, in which the most prosperous subjects were referred to passive. In our opinion, it is due to the fact that tasks for growth here are not solved by productivity in the results, but by the process of formation of meaningful relationships, self-regulation, and not by regulating relations with the material world. Such a personal landscape can be referred to the highly harmonized, socially oriented, but not focused on productivity in the organization. The name of the group is «prosocial productive-passive highly prosperous type».

Linear regression analysis of the data by the method of step-by-step selection conducted on three samples depending on the level of well-being also showed that self-acceptance and relations are the main predictors of average level of well-being, while there exists high contribution of orientation towards achievements and goals. The main predictors at the high level of well-being are autonomy, self-acceptance and relations, the contribution of the «achievement» parameter is lost, probably, it leads to the reduction in external productivity. With the low level of well-being the main predictors are only relationships and achievements through conformism.

Thus, the well-being of the employee and his focus on productivity have a non-linear relationship, and the type of activity of the organization can determine the necessity for employees with different levels of well-being. The concept of a prosperous employee should be related to the nature of the goals and objectives of the organization, which is also confirmed in the studies of R. Lucas and E. Diener [11]. Models for constructing relationships with oneself and the world are manifested in various patterns of social and professional behavior, integrated into the content and level of

a personality well-being. Extreme conditions of the subjects' activity did not determine the fundamental differences between the structural links of psychological well-being when compared with the data obtained by us in civil samples. The main predictor of well-being can be considered a high level of human self-acceptance, positive relations and autonomy. Thus, it is possible to reduce the level of human distress by influencing the nuclear content (self-acceptance and relations) of such systemic phenomenon «psychological well-being». Regression models demonstrate that for organizations with complex operating conditions specialists with the average level of well-being are most preferable.

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