

# War in Ukraine affected well-being worldwide, but people's speed of recovery depended on their personality, finds study

February 28 2024, by Luke Smillie

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The war in Ukraine has had impacts around the world. [Supply chains](#) have been disrupted, the [cost of living](#) has soared and we've seen the

[fastest-growing refugee crisis since World War II](#). All of these are in addition to the devastating humanitarian and economic impacts within Ukraine.

Our international team was conducting a global study on well-being in the lead up to and after the Russian invasion. This provided a unique opportunity to examine the psychological impact of the outbreak of war.

As we explain in a new study published in [Nature Communications](#), we learned the toll on people's well-being was evident across nations, not just [in Ukraine](#). These effects appear to have been temporary—at least for the average person.

But people with certain psychological vulnerabilities struggled to recover from the shock of the war.

## **Tracking well-being during the outbreak of war**

People who took part in our study completed a rigorous "[experience-sampling](#)" protocol. Specifically, we asked them to report their momentary well-being four times per day for a whole month.

Data collection began in October 2021 and continued throughout 2022. So we had been tracking well-being around the world during the weeks surrounding the outbreak of war in February 2022.

We also collected measures of personality, along with various sociodemographic variables (including age, gender, political views). This enabled us to assess whether different people responded differently to the crisis. We could also compare these effects across countries.

Our analyses focused primarily on 1,341 participants living in 17 European countries, excluding Ukraine itself (44,894 experience-

sampling reports in total). We also expanded these analyses to capture the experiences of 1,735 people living in 43 countries around the world (54,851 experience-sampling reports)—including in Australia.

## **A global dip in well-being**

On February 24 2022, the day Russia invaded Ukraine, there was a sharp decline in well-being around the world. There was no decline in the month leading up to the outbreak of war, suggesting the change in well-being was not already occurring for some other reason.

However, there was a gradual increase in well-being during the month *after* the Russian invasion, suggestive of a "return to baseline" effect. Such effects are commonly reported in [psychological research](#): situations and events that impact our well-being often ([though not always](#)) do so [temporarily](#).

Unsurprisingly, people in Europe experienced a sharper dip in well-being compared to people living elsewhere around the world. Presumably the war was much more salient for those closest to the conflict, compared to those living on an entirely different continent.

Interestingly, day-to-day fluctuations in well-being mirrored the salience of the war on [social media](#) as events unfolded. Specifically, well-being was lower on days when there were more tweets mentioning Ukraine on Twitter/X.

Our results indicate that, on average, it took around two months for people to return to their baseline levels of well-being after the invasion.

## **Different people, different recoveries**

There are [strong links](#) between our well-being and our individual personalities.

However, the dip in well-being following the Russian invasion was fairly uniform across individuals. None of the individual factors assessed in our study, including personality and sociodemographic factors, predicted people's response to the outbreak of war.

On the other hand, personality did play a role in how quickly people recovered. Individual differences in people's recovery were linked to a [personality trait](#) called "stability." Stability is a broad dimension of personality that combines low neuroticism with high agreeableness and conscientiousness (three traits from the [Big Five](#) personality framework).

Stability is so named because it reflects the stability of one's overall psychological functioning. This can be illustrated by breaking stability down into its three components:

1. low neuroticism describes [emotional stability](#). People low in this trait experience less intense negative emotions such as anxiety, fear or anger, in response to negative events
2. high agreeableness describes [social stability](#). People high in this trait are generally more cooperative, kind, and motivated to maintain social harmony
3. high conscientiousness describes [motivational stability](#). People high in this trait show more effective patterns of goal-directed self-regulation.

So, our data show that people with less stable personalities fared worse in terms of recovering from the impact the war in Ukraine had on well-being.

In a supplementary analysis, we found the effect of [stability](#) was driven specifically by neuroticism and agreeableness. The fact that people higher in neuroticism recovered more slowly accords with a wealth of research linking this trait with [coping difficulties](#) and [poor mental health](#).

These effects of personality on recovery were stronger than those of sociodemographic factors, such as age, gender or political views, which were not statistically significant.

Overall, our findings suggest that people with certain psychological vulnerabilities will often struggle to recover from the shock of global events such as the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

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