**Highlights**

* Developing reliable and sensitive instruments for mood disorders screening is critical in a global context marked by international crises (pandemics, wars).
* The Patient Health Questionnaire-4 (PHQ-4) is an ultra-brief measurement of core signs of depression and anxiety.
* A small modification to the widely used PHQ-4 scale (adding the "Once or twice" response option) can increase its ability to capture the mild fluctuations prevalent in subclinical samples.