

**EUROPEAN
HEALTH PARLIAMENT**

EUROPE'S NEXT GENERATION OF HEALTH

COMMITTEE ON DISEASE PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT

**PATHWAYS FOR A HEALTHY STATE
OF MIND IN EUROPE**

*Promoting Mental Wellbeing and Improving
Prevention and Care of Mental Ill Health
in the EU Digital Era*

#WeRun4Health

2018-2019

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The views and opinions expressed in this book are those of the respective European Health Parliament Committees. They do not reflect the views of the individual EHP committee members, nor the views of their respective employers or of the partner organisations supporting the project. Their contributions do not imply endorsement of the specific policy recommendations.

ENDORSEMENTS

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- › **The European Federation of Psychology Students' Associations (EFPSA)**

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"I fully agree with the policy recommendations of the Committee on Disease Prevention and Management. The legislative proposals are very relevant and to the point. I am pleased with their work and quality of their analysis. In particular, I appreciate the attention that has been paid to investment in public awareness of mental health problems and in patient advocacy, as well as ensuring Health Technology Assessment (HTA) for eMental health apps. In order to make Europe a healthier place to live, we need to include "health" and also "mental health" in the EU agenda. To make that possible those policy recommendations should be seriously taken into consideration by European Commission and policymakers."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mental health is vital for individuals, families and communities. But mental ill health is not an incurable diagnosis: for people who develop mental health problems, recovery is the aim and an achievable outcome for all when given the right support – recovery meaning living with and managing mental health problems, while having control over one's own life.

The recommendations herewith aim to **promote a positive shift in attitudes around mental health problems** in order to move towards **better societal understanding**, promotion of mental wellbeing, prevention of ill health, and **increased public investment**.

Because most mental health problems are interlinked with the societal and structural environments we live in, and are dictated by psycho-emotional responses to these experiences, various sectors and stakeholders have a role to play in responding to mental health in Europe, beyond the healthcare sector.

Mental ill health and mental health problems pose an undeniable challenge to Europe's population, societies and economies, which **requires political prioritisation and the mobilisation of resources**. Human rights should constitute a primary argument for investment and action.



INTRODUCTION

In the context of international political attention on mental health, with mental health being integrated for the first time alongside chronic physical health at the United Nations High-Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases in September 2018, and being an integral part of discussions at the World Economic Forum 2019, we have decided to focus our work on the political response to mental ill health.

Over the past six months, we have explored the topic of mental health in Europe. Our committee consulted and held discussions with experts in the field and with patients. Furthermore, we conducted a comprehensive literature review of the current situation in European countries, mapping existing evidence and recommendations. We decided to address important areas where action by the European Union could add value, not only by supporting Member States' activities, but also by creating "an innovative and European way" of promoting mental wellbeing and driving a better future for citizens.

While it affects a large proportion of the population, **mental ill health remains a huge taboo** in our current societies and often leads to social stigmatisation.^{1,2}

Mental health problems can affect everyone at some point during their lifetime. As young professionals working in the healthcare field, we believe that **societal acceptance is key** to bringing change. We believe that such a shift in societies and mentalities would benefit from a terminology change, whereby mental ill health is not considered as one single group of diseases, but instead as "mental health problems". Tackling these mental health problems requires **a holistic, psychosocial approach** looking at physical, social, and structural environments. **People-centricity is crucial**, and it should be emphasised that preventing and caring for mental ill health does not happen in the healthcare sector

"We all have mental health in the same way that we all have physical health. It's OK to have depression, it's OK to have anxiety, it's OK to have adjustment disorder."

- Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, Earl of Dumbarton and Baron Kilkeel

only, but that a whole societal and environmental approach is required.

More importantly, a more **positive narrative should be used in relation to mental health**, talking about "**mental wellbeing**" and "**healthy states of mind**" – which are important patterns of good health and a healthy life.

About Mental Health

- › One out of six people in the EU – accounting for over 84 million people – have a mental health problem.³
- › One in five adolescents in Europe is affected by at least one mental health problem in any given year.⁴
- › The economic impact of mental health problems is estimated at more than €600 billion across the EU, including healthcare costs (about 1.3% of the EU's GDP, or €190 billion) and social security programmes (1.2% of the EU's GDP, or €170 billion).⁵
- › Economic loss from reduced employment and productivity is estimated at 1.6% of GDP, or €260 billion.⁶
- › Over 84,000 people died due to mental health problems in 2015 in the EU.⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

"We can no longer afford to be silenced by stigma or stymied by misguided ideas that portray these conditions as a matter of weakness or moral failing."

- Lady Gaga

Concrete actions from European institutions can help address the mental ill health challenges in Europe:

- › **Investing in awareness of positive mental health, mental health problems and de-stigmatisation;**
- › **Adopting a societal and environmental approach to promotion, prevention and care of mental health problems;**
- › **Increasing investment and funding towards "mentally healthy" societies.**

I. INVESTING IN PUBLIC AWARENESS OF POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND DE-STIGMATISATION

"It is OK not to be OK": Mental health is a state of mind related to how we think and feel, to the issues and barriers we face. Mental ill health is common and is not a personal failure. Despite the fact that many of us are affected, there is a strong social stigma attached to mental ill health, which can worsen one's problems; it might delay or impede efforts to seek help, effective treatment and recovery, as well as cause clinical complications⁸, but it can also hamper policy action. Stereotypical or inaccurate comments about mental health problems contribute to this situation.

Awareness and understanding together represent the first step towards acceptance and, therefore, more inclusive societies. **Promoting positive conversations and education about mental health lays the groundwork for understanding, prevention and appropriate intervention.**⁹

Use the potential of digital tools to support mental health awareness online

Digitalisation can present challenges to mental wellbeing, e.g. continuously checking social media; though, at the same time, it can provide opportunities to improve mental health in the form of e-mental health tools and digital solutions. An increase in mental health problems has been observed in parallel with the digital era and today's digital society, particularly among young people. On the positive side, **one of the opportunities that digitalisation brings is e-tools that can have tremendous impact for awareness-raising online**, reaching wide audiences and breaking the taboo on mental ill health. Because greater societal acceptance is crucial to progress the response to mental health, digital platforms and social media networks should play a role in order to inform and educate the general public about mental health and contribute to more supportive environments and free of stigmatisation of people with mental health problems.

Establish an online EU platform with testimonies from high-level public figures and opinion leaders who speak up about mental health

Showcasing public figures (e.g. from sport, entertainment, business or politics) that openly speak up about mental health can contribute to breaking taboos about mental health. **Role models are needed to change the conversation and tackle stigma around mental ill health.** An excellent example is the Heads Together initiative in the United Kingdom, where the royal family uses its high profile to create awareness about mental health and steer the public debate towards more acceptance of mental health.¹⁰ A European online platform could pave the way to more acceptance and more

open debates about mental health. It could also be a tool to showcase good practices from Member States, but also to highlight particular public and private entities that encourage an open debate about mental wellbeing and de-stigmatisation, as well as encouraging upscaling of best practices.

Set up an EU schoolteachers' awareness scheme, "Train the trainers", for educators from primary to high school settings

Talking about mental health with children is a first step to raise awareness, educate and prevent problems later on in life; it helps children understand that they can ask for help when faced with emotional difficulties, and that they should not be ashamed of talking about their state of mind or that they can support a friend or family member with issues. It can also help prevent bullying, destructive behaviours or anxiety in school settings. During adolescence, awareness about mental health is similarly essential. During the teen years, mental health is especially vulnerable and requires supportive environments, including at home. Peer-to-peer education and similar school-based interventions have shown to contribute positively to bringing about understanding and awareness¹¹, including whole-school approaches delivering social and emotional learning programmes. A systematic approach, oriented towards school teachers in primary, secondary and high school education settings, could bring significant outcomes. We recommend that the EU supports the development of an EU schoolteachers' awareness scheme which would **empower education professionals** and give them the tools to inform and educate pupils about mental wellbeing and ill health; in place across all Member States, it would nonetheless be adapted to the specificities of each national education system. The content and format of such a training scheme should be defined by a consortium of experts from academia, patient representatives and advocacy organisations actively involved in awareness and education projects.

The EU should support and invest in **programmes for Continuous Professional Development** and the integration of transversal skills within national curricula for teachers, professors and health professionals in order to ensure understanding of mental health, as well as knowledge of how to promote mental wellbeing and how to support people with mental health problems.

II. ADOPTING A SOCIETAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACH TO PREVENTION AND CARE OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Mental wellbeing and prevention of mental ill health start in our daily life. While there are some genetic predispositions associated with mental health problems, evidence shows that the majority of risk factors relate to our environment (e.g. at school, work and home).^{12,13} Workplaces that promote mental wellbeing should be the standard. Particular attention should also be given to preventing mental ill health amongst the youth population and supporting at-risk or affected adolescents and young adults, who are at critical stages of life for mental health and wellbeing. To complement existing mental health care approaches, interventions outside the regular care sector should be explored.

Create an EU reward system for companies taking active steps to ensure a healthy environment for mental wellbeing at the workplace

Employers have a major role to play in managing mental health at work. They have access to a large segment of the population who spend significant time at work (1/3 of their adult life)¹⁴ and can be reached repeatedly at low cost. An EU label for companies performing well could create an incentive mechanism for better mental health at the workplace. Companies and trade unions could be rewarded for their good practices in observing WHO guidance on mental health at the workplace¹⁵ and in utilising the tools developed by the EU Joint Action CHRODIS Plus¹⁶ to take measures to prevent work-related stress and mental ill health, promote mental wellbeing and integrate workers with mental health problems via necessary adjustment measures. Investing in such measures is an economical consideration that employers can make, as productivity is directly related to mental wellbeing and increasing mental wellbeing has shown to reduce work abstinence.¹⁷ **An EU label would encourage employers to go beyond legal minimums and give them public recognition** for their good practices.

"An EU label would encourage employers to go beyond legal minimums and give them public recognition for their good practices."

In parallel with incentivisation models aimed to ensure good mental wellbeing at the workplace, EU legislation for transparent and predictable working conditions remains key.

Invest in the future: include specific actions on mental health promotion, wellbeing and care for the youth population in the next EU programmes for action on health

Young people are the future of Europe – and also one of the key at-risk population groups for mental ill health. The prevalence of mental and behavioural health problems in adolescents at population level in Europe is high and increasing.¹⁸ A large proportion of the EU adolescent population lives with or has experienced a form of mental ill health. Yet, good mental health during youth and young adulthood is essential for future personal development. Poor mental health in children and adolescents has an impact on educational outcomes and future integration in the labour market.¹⁹ Meanwhile, half of all adult mental health disorders appear before the age of 14²⁰ and children whose parents suffer from mental health problems are up to two and a half times more likely to experience poorer mental health outcomes than their peers.²¹ We recommend that EU action in the health domain, including in the context of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), allows for interventions that specifically address the needs of the younger generations. In particular, EU funds should: allow for further **research into the impact of social media and the increased use of digital tools by new generations on mental health**; allow for the implementation of effective interventions to prevent mental ill health in the youth population; and **support countries in setting up effective parenting and home-visiting programmes** that promote infant and maternal mental health, allowing every child to have a good start in life, reducing risks of mental ill health in adolescence and adulthood.

Integrate implementation research projects into Horizon Europe in order to increase uptake of nature-based interventions as complementary therapies for mental health prevention and care

Research and studies are increasingly confirming the benefits of non-pharmaceutical therapies building on societal or environmental approaches, such as nature-based interventions (e.g. nature walks and physical activity in general), to improve mental wellbeing and prevent mental ill health (primary prevention), alleviate risks and elevate mental health in people

presenting symptoms of mental health problems (secondary prevention), or help support and maintain recovery.^{22,23} Building on the pioneering example of several EU countries including England and Scotland^{24,25}, national healthcare systems should integrate better those nature-based measures, commonly referred to as “nature prescriptions”, and healthcare professionals should be incentivised to prescribe them more systematically to supplement conventional medicines.

We recommend that Horizon Europe supports: 1) **implementation research to allow transfer and scalability of existing practices across EU countries**, including in urban settings, as well as 2) **increased research into nature-based interventions as a mechanism for addressing mental health**, to improve understanding of the conditions that deliver the best outcomes from such interventions.

Enable Health Technology Assessment (HTA) for e-mental health apps

Innovative and high-quality e-mental health technologies are bringing breakthrough solutions to prevent and care for mental health problems.²⁶ They have the potential to complement psychological approaches, conventional medicines and other interventions and can be implemented in healthcare practice with significant cost savings for healthcare systems. However, **there is currently neither control nor clinical evaluation of these e-mental health tools.** An EU framework to ensure quality, efficiency and safety would protect European citizens from unsafe products (#EUprotects). We recommend that the European Commission **integrates digital health applications and technologies in the EU Health Technology Assessment (HTA) framework** or sets up a specific evaluation framework for such e-technologies, harmonised at European level, to ensure that efficient, secure tools reach patients. The human aspect of care with a doctor-patient relationship should nevertheless remain an integral part of the treatment pathway. Measures should be taken to monitor use and counter any negative effects on people's mental health of using digital solutions.

In parallel, Member States should make the necessary policy reforms and measures to guarantee availability and patient access, including via the implementation of national e-mental health strategies, which encompass infrastructure, skills and adequate reimbursement on the national healthcare system of e-technologies that have been positively assessed.

"Good mental health during youth and young adulthood is essential for future personal development."

Ensure equality of social protection for citizens with mental health problems across Europe and universal access to quality mental health services

Currently, people with mental health problems face structural barriers to appropriate care; one of them relates to access to health insurance. This exacerbates societal stigma around mental health and deters people with mental health problems from opening up about their issues and seeking appropriate care. **Every EU citizen is entitled to fair and equitable access to insurance and should be guaranteed the same level of health protection**, no matter their country of residence or mental or physical health status. This is a principle of equal human rights and non-discrimination. EU anti-discrimination legislation and national frameworks should guarantee universal health coverage for all EU citizens and provide measures to ensure that pension schemes and insurance systems across Europe are not discriminatory towards people who live with or have experienced a mental health problem. A surveillance system should be put in place to ensure compliance with applicable laws.

In addition, the EU and Member States should **effectively guarantee universal access to quality mental health services**, in particular with regards to child and adolescent mental health services.

III. INCREASE INVESTMENT AND FUNDING FOR "MENTALLY HEALTHY" SOCIETIES

Good mental health is important for economic growth and social development in Europe. Mental ill health has a tremendous impact on the EU economy, as it directly affects workforce productivity.²⁷ Currently, the response to mental health and levels of dedicated funding within national healthcare systems vary greatly across EU countries, but it can be observed that **funding is overall insufficient to efficiently address the mental health challenge in Europe**. The proportion of total health system expenditure allocated to mental health prevention and care is often very small; many countries do not even have mental health policies in place, or face shortages of specialist healthcare professionals, while political commitment to improving the situation remains at a low level.²⁸

Increasing investment is a prerequisite for productive, healthy societies and sustainable EU economies.

The European Commission should encourage the development of national mental health promotion and protection action plans via the EU semester recommendations

The need for action and the economic case for investing in mental health promotion and prevention of ill health are clearly outlined by various evidence-based studies, including the EU/OECD *Health at a Glance* report 2018. National action plans are effective means to plan, implement and monitor interventions to deliver tangible results. We recommend that the European Commission encourages Member States to **develop mental health promotion, protection and prevention action plans**, using the opportunity of the country-specific recommendations part of the EU semester process and in its capacity as a facilitator of the EU Steering Group on Promotion and Prevention²⁹, to scale up action across Europe.

Explore the potential of EU public-private partnerships to steer investment in transferring and scaling up identified good practices for mental health promotion and care across Europe

Many good practices exist and are identified as such, but there is a **major gap in implementation**. Part of the problem lies in the lack of long-term funding to ensure a sustainable scalability of good practices over time. **EU Public-Private Partnerships** (PPP) with clear rules on transparency and conflicts of interest for engagement of the private sector could help address this gap. We recommend that the European Commission initiates an EU PPP bringing EU funds together with philanthropic entities/foundations and academia to **develop a sustainable funding model for long-term investment in the transfer of good practices in mental health prevention and care** across Europe.

"Every EU citizen is entitled to fair and equitable access to insurance and should be guaranteed the same level of health protection."

CONCLUSIONS

A group of five people are seated around a table in a meeting room, engaged in a discussion. The image is overlaid with a blue tint. The participants include a woman with long hair in a patterned dress, a man with glasses in a dark suit, a woman with glasses in a dark coat, and two men in suits. They are looking at documents and talking to each other.

People's physical and mental wellbeing go hand in hand with economic growth and sustainability. Mentally healthy societies are a prerequisite for prosperity. Promoting good mental health and wellbeing at a population level should be standard practice. Evidence exists on how to improve prevention and care of mental ill health; some EU countries are implementing pioneering initiatives, while the EU also has the capacity and the potential to generate and deliver on innovative approaches to effectively respond to mental health in Europe. It is now time for political leadership and investment in order to protect Europeans and future generations.

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