EU Health Policy Platform Thematic Network

Mental Health in All Policies

A Mental health in All Policies approach as key component of any comprehensive initiative on mental health

Our vision

We, the signatories of this Joint Statement, consider mental health an integral part of health and believe that everyone has the right to good mental health. Our vision is that of a Europe where everyone's mental health can flourish across the entire life course and everyone can have timely, appropriate and affordable access to support, when needed.

This vision is far from reality. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis and the rising cost of living among others all have a devastating impact on the mental health of the children, youth and adults in Europe, which was already an issue of concern well before the polycrisis, especially for people living in vulnerable situations.

The case for urgent action is clear. The EU and European countries must implement a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to mental health, strengthening systems and mobilising different stakeholders to implement integrated mental health promotion, prevention and support at local, regional, national and European levels.

We call for a Mental Health in All Policies (MHiaP) approach, i.e., for public policies across sectors to promote population mental health and wellbeing by initiating and facilitating action within different non-health public policy areas. The MHiAP approach emphasises the impacts of public policies on mental health determinants, strives to reduce mental health inequities, aims to highlight the opportunities offered by mental health to different policy areas, and reinforces the accountability of policymakers for mental health impacts.

Win-win situations of a Mental Health in all Policies approach

It is well recognised that the promotion of good mental health in sectors other than health creates **win-win situations**, with positive outcomes both in health and in non-health policy areas. For instance, comprehensive school-based mental health and psychosocial support can lead to enhanced academic achievement, increased retention, and reduce learners' risk-taking behaviour (UNICEF). Supporting informal carers' mental health is crucial to ensure their continuous availability to provide care and it is a key action to make European long-term care systems sustainable (Eurocarers). Evaluations show that providing with housing security and quality has a direct impact on people's mental health. Housing policies should consider the impact on mental well-being and offer flexible and adapted solutions to people in vulnerable situations. There is evidence that better integrating mental health benefits into urban planning, especially when tailored to neighbourhoods with poor exposure and access to green spaces has a significant economic savings potential for public care budgets. Investing a greater share of health care budgets to improve public access to green spaces optimised for mental health benefits would also provide nature-based solutions, contributing towards the achievement of biodiversity and climate policy objectives and hereby creating a triple win. Research shows that substantial reductions in productivity loss could potentially be achieved by promoting higher levels of mental health in the workplace.

Hence, though promoting good mental health is **first and foremost a human rights imperative**, it also makes **economic sense**. (Mental) health in all policies and economies of wellbeing are two sides of the same coin, as recognised by the Council of the EU in the Council Conclusions of 2019.

A broader understanding of mental health and its determinants

The first key element of any initiative addressing mental health lies in changing narratives around how mental health is conceptualised and addressed, including in policies and frameworks for action. We argue for a **psychosocial approach to mental health**, i.e., the recognition that mental health is shaped by a variety of life events and transition moments across the life course as well as by wider social, economic, and environmental factors. Throughout our lives, these individual, social and structural determinants may accumulate and interact to protect or undermine our mental health and shift our position on the **mental health continuum**, which is a range of wellbeing having good mental health and psychosocial disabilities at the two extreme ends.

A comprehensive understanding of mental health and its socio-economic and environmental determinants sees a **mental health-in-all-policies approach** as essential to protect and improve mental wellbeing. In such an approach, actions are taken to address mental health within and beyond the health sector, with a strong focus on promotion and prevention. Policies in different areas (such as education, child protection, employment, income, housing, culture, environment, social protection and many more) can impact positively on mental health, by strengthening protective factors and mitigating risk factors for mental health problems. Conversely, lack of sufficient policy provisions or changes to policies (e.g., austerity measures or diminishing income support policies) can adversely affect mental health and wellbeing.

The importance of acting early

The foundations of mental health are laid early in life; as such, risks occurring during developmentally sensitive periods, especially early childhood, can be particularly detrimental. Hence, availability of good quality early childhood education and childcare services; learning environments that promote and protect mental health; evidence based psychological support; family policies (such as parental leave or paid family leave) are all essential pillars for giving children the best start in life. At the same time, intervening with evidence-based methods to minimize the consequences of stressful and traumatic events in childhood and in families is crucial.

It is also very important to acknowledge the specific vulnerabilities of adolescents. Indeed, adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood and is a crucial developmental stage for our mental well-being. Approximately 9 million adolescents aged 10-19 in Europe live with a mental health problem, and suicide is the second most common cause of death among adolescents aged 15-19 (WHO).

The importance of addressing the mental health needs of children is explicitly recognised in the EU Child Rights Strategy, which includes a recommendation by the European Commission to Member States to identify children as a priority target group in their national mental health strategies.

Addressing and improving mental health requires intervening at the structural and organisational level, through good policies and regulations. For instance, in order to address psychosocial risks at work, solutions need to concern the organisational structure and work culture, taking a collective regulation approach over putting the responsibility for change only on the individual (by asking him/her to be more resilient).

A rights-based approach to mental health

A second crucial element of any initiative to address mental health is a [human rights approach](#), where rights-based principles are mainstreamed into all domains and any form of discrimination is prohibited. People continue to experience barriers in life due to their health status, disability or other conditions. Services and programmes across different sectors (e.g., health, housing, employment, education, justice) need to collaborate and provide holistic support to combat discrimination and address inequities stemming from mental health determinants. To facilitate such collaboration, significant strategy, policy and system changes are required.

Focus on social disadvantage and discrimination

Some groups are particularly at risk of experiencing poor mental health, because they live in **vulnerable situations** (e.g., housing instability) or because of **intersectional discrimination** (discrimination that takes place on the basis of several personal grounds or characteristics/identities, which operate and interact with each other at the same time in such a way as to be inseparable). The links between these identity markers or socio-economic conditions and mental health need to be taken into consideration to develop preventive measures and **tailored support**. We call for a **proportionate universalism approach**, i.e., good mental health for all in our societies and communities, with a targeted extra support to those who may need it at a given time in their lives/situations.

International human rights law also demands that people with lived experience and representative organisations are involved in all decisions that impact them in a meaningful and not tokenistic way, at policy and service level. Persons with lived experience should be included in making decisions and shaping the design and implementation of actions in any sectors that impact mental health outcomes, such as in decisions related to building housing policy, social care policy, or actions to reduce poverty or problematic debt. The meaningful participation of people experiencing mental health problems in the design, development and delivery of co-produced preventive interventions and strategies, as well as services, will ensure flexible and appropriate consideration of their needs throughout their lifespan. This will in turn also increase the effectiveness of such initiatives.

We call for **co-creation**, i.e., different actors working together on an equal basis to develop and implement policies, services and communication that foster positive mental health according to a psychosocial model and human rights-based approach. If a key success factor of co-creation is the **empowerment of people with lived experience**, co-creation goes a step further because it establishes that **all the actors – within and beyond health - have to be empowered to work together on an equal basis**.

Translating the vision into reality – Call for action

Our commitment

To translate our vision into reality, we the signatories of this Joint Statement commit to:

- ✓ Empower the communities we represent, so that they can be heard and have choice and influence in every decision that impacts on their mental health.
- ✓ Advocate for mental health considerations to be included in all policies and services, within and beyond health sector.
- ✓ Share resources, data and promising and evidence-based approaches relevant to a mental health in all policies approach.
- ✓ Collaborate and partner up with organisations across sectors to create communities of practice and exchange learnings.
- ✓ Work together to normalise the conversation around mental health.
- ✓ Continue our efforts for mental health of all to flourish even once this Thematic Network ends.

To advance in our mission, we need our efforts to be strengthened with commitment at the highest political level, followed by concrete actions, at EU and (sub)national levels.

Support from the European Union

The European Union can play a key role in supporting Member States' efforts towards better mental health for the European population. It can also lead by example. The announcement of an upcoming initiative on a comprehensive approach to mental health is a commendable first step in the right direction. For it to be effective, the following recommendations need to be taken into account.

1) **Develop a comprehensive, multi-sectoral Mental Health Strategy, based on a psychosocial and human rights approach**

✓ We recommend that the European Commission works towards a comprehensive and multi-sectoral European Mental Health Strategy, including a **clear timeline, adequate budget, objectives, as well as indicators to monitor progress across the EU Member States**. This would steer national level work by requiring States to develop and implement national action plans on mental health which the European Commission could periodically review.

✓ We recommend shifting the **focus of the upcoming initiative away from easier, downstream and lifestyle-oriented actions to upstream factors influencing these**, such as socio-economic and environmental determinants. For instance, to address psychosocial risks at work, we call for an EU Directive on the topic, taking a collective regulation approach over an individual one.

✓ As mental health exists on a continuum and considering the human rights commitment taken by the EU as a state party to the UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities, we recommend the EU to **include the promotion and protection of rights of people with mental health problems and psychosocial disabilities in the upcoming initiative**, rather than just focusing on prevention and promotion.

✓ As the **promotion and protection of children's rights** is one of the key objectives embedded in the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and taking into account the commitments laid down in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, we recommend the EU to explicitly **include the promotion and protection of children and adolescents' mental health in the upcoming initiative**.

✓ We recommend adopting a **co-creation approach** when designing and implementing the initiative, ensuring that persons with lived experience and all other relevant stakeholders (also from fields beyond health) are included in the process. This also means that the European Commission should internally **coordinate among Directorates-Generals** in the development and design, implementation and monitoring of the upcoming initiative.

✓ **Accountability at high level** should be ensured, with one structure in the European Commission overseeing the whole process.

2. **Allocate EU Funds to support Member States in their mental health in all policies actions**

✓ EU funds under different programmes can be used to support Member States in their efforts to implement mental health in all policies actions. For instance, funds under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund Programme can be used to train health and social workers on mental health to respond to refugees' needs (e.g. on how to effectively tackle the increase in stress-induced addictions and effects of prolonged heightened levels of stress and anxiety).

✓ European Social Fund Plus and the European Regional Development Fund can be used to support interventions to facilitate access to mental health-care services for people living in vulnerable situations, as well as to improve regional infrastructures.

✓ The Recovery and Resilience national action plans should include access to mental health services, including exploring the opportunities (as well as challenges) in implementing digital and online technologies to reduce gaps in access to mental health support and to reach populations traditionally lacking access to these services.

✓ The Technical Support Instruments could be used to support reforms in mental health systems and related primary and integrated care systems.

3. Mainstream mental health in all EU policies

✓ European Union's actions in many non-health fields have a decisive impact on the mental health of the population across Europe. Mental health considerations should be built into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policy, legislation and spending programmes across policy domains and sectors. For instance, the ongoing negotiations on the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act should take into account the best interest of the child and prevent any negative impact on their mental health and development. Similarly, as part of the Green Deal implementation, the EC should define a set of minimum requirements for health and well-being impact assessments, whilst jointly addressing the socio-economic and environmental determinants of mental health.
✓ **Mental health impact assessments** are examples of tools that should be used to evaluate and improve the effect of different policies and programmes on people's mental health and wellbeing.
✓ All DGs could include specific activities around mental health prevention, promotion and care in their annual work programmes.

4. Raise awareness and fight stigma

✓ The upcoming EU Initiative on a comprehensive approach to mental health could support European activities – such as MHE European Mental Health Week – to normalise the conversation around mental health among the general public and in specific sectors.
✓ We call for a **European Year of Mental Health** raising awareness in the public domain about how important other sectors and policies are in shaping mental health, by explicitly addressing the socio-economic and environmental determinants of mental health.

Recommendations to European countries

In order to implement a Mental Health in All Policies approach, it is important to have a shared **commitment** and vision between public authorities and stakeholders placed on multiple levels of governance (national, regional, local). **Adequate funding** needs to match the commitment. The right governance structures, as well as institutional capacity and skills need to be put in place, too. Some of these tools are described in the Annex to this Joint Statement.

1. Commit to adopting a mental health in all policies approach

✓ Include mental health in non-health national/regional policies (such as education, family, employment, long-term care, housing, environmental, digital).

 Useful tools: trainings for both civil servants and decision makers on amendable determinants of mental health and on how to use this information on policy making.

2. Prevent and promote – creating the favourable conditions for mental health in fields other than health

✓ Implement strategies for promotion and prevention that address the socio-economic and environmental determinants of mental health, such as The best start for life programmes, access to adequate housing, social protection schemes for families in vulnerable situations, debt recovery and financial hardship support.

✓ Embed mental health promotion in schools through the adoption of innovative and holistic organisational models and approaches within school ecosystems and educational programmes.

✓ Promote physically active lifestyles and access to nature.

✓ Ensure access to affordable public transportation and cultural activities.

✓ Promote good line management practices at work including training on how to handle mental health during the recruitment process, how to handle disclosure and reduce stigma and discrimination, how to support employees' well-being and how to spot early signs of mental ill health.

✓ When addressing psychosocial risks at the workplace, acknowledge that some workers (e.g. older workers) experience additional risks and put in place tailored support to address their needs.

✓ Include mental health and psychosocial support needs in emergency preparedness and response.

✓ Integrate mental health psychosocial support with climate action and implement multisectoral and community-based approaches to reduce vulnerabilities and address the mental health impacts of climate change.

Useful tools: joint commissioning, joint budgeting, mental health impact assessment, social prescribing.

3. Invest in mental health data, evidence and strengthening the knowledge base

✓ Encourage multi-disciplinary studies that bridge the gap between health, social and economic knowledge and demonstrates then links between intervention actions in non-health policies and population mental health.

✓ Integrate mental health into the routine health information system and identify, collate, routinely report and use core mental health data disaggregated by sex, age and other grounds to properly capture intersectionality issues. Indicators on determinants of mental health should also be available in population (mental) health information and monitoring systems (as recommended by WHO).

Useful tools: routine health information systems including mental health indicators and indicators related to determinants of mental health.

4. Co-create policies and services

✓ Set up multi-stakeholder local and/or national policy forums to consider suitable mental health policies and to develop initiatives to influence locally or nationally identified mental health problems. Depending on the specific action to be co-created, these fora could bring together people with lived experience, alongside experts by profession, such as local government representatives, social and health care professionals, educational professionals, service providers and the media.

Useful tools: Mental Health Europe's training, toolkit and guidelines on co-creation in mental health.

5. Provide integrated and community-based care and support

✓ Care and support for people experiencing mental health problems need to be inclusive and actively contribute to independent living and community inclusion. Because of the socio-economic determinants of mental health, mental health care services on their own are not sufficient to support people's mental health. It is essential for mental health services and social sector services to engage and collaborate in a very practical and meaningful way, to provide holistic support. For instance, Housing first is an important first intervention for people experiencing homelessness as lacking a safe shelter has a huge impact on people's mental health. Evidence show that housing first helps with the recovery process and leads to improvements in people's mental well-being. Individual Placement and Support is a

psychosocial intervention with a considerable body of evidence for its effectiveness in [helping people with psychosocial disabilities to obtain and maintain competitive jobs](link).

✓ Bring mental health services closer to those who cannot access them. A possible action consists in using mobile/outreach mental services, but also in improving access to all healthcare for marginalised people, as a first step in accessing mental health supports.

Useful tools: trainings for health and care professionals (e.g., primary care and social care professionals) on intersectoral collaboration and joint service provision.

6. **Raise awareness on mental health determinants and fight stigma**

✓ Strengthen understanding of mental health impacts of all policies, included those apparently not related to mental health.

Useful tools: trainings for civil servants, decision makers and other relevant stakeholders on amenable determinants of mental health (e.g., developing climate literacy for health professionals).

We all have a role to play to achieve the vision of a Europe where everyone's mental health and wellbeing flourish across their life course!

We signatories are keen to join forces and collaborate with European countries and the EU in providing our expertise and ensuring that the voice of people is heard and nobody is left behind.

Signatories

Mental Health Europe

AGE Platform Europe

EMDR – Europe

EUREGHA - European Regional and Local Health Authorities

EuroHealthNet

European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless – FEANTSA

European Federation of Psychology Students' Associations - EFPSA

European Public Health Alliance – EPHA

European Public Health Association Public Mental Health Section - EUPHA

GAMIAN – Europe

Gergana Manolova, Globally Minded Foundation, Bulgaria

ILGA – Europe

PanHellenic Association for the Psychosocial Rehabilitation & Work Re-integration

Standing Committee of European Doctors – CPME

Trimbos instituut - Netherlands Institute of Mental Health and Addiction

UNICEF