



Hybrid meeting

European Parliament, Brussels

21 March 2023

‘A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH IN EUROPE: PLAN, ACT, CHANGE’

MEETING REPORT

Meeting Agenda

Welcome and introduction

- MEP Tomáš Zdechovský (EPP, Czechia)
- MEP Cyrus Engerer (S&D, Malta)

Keynote: Stella Kyriakides, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety

Short interventions from MEPs

- Alex Agius Saliba MEP (S&D, Malta)
- Estrella Durá Ferrandis MEP (S&D, Spain) remotely
- Stelios Kympouropoulos MEP (EPP, Greece)
- Radka Maxová MEP (S&D, Czechia)
- Juozas Olekas MEP (S&D, Lithuania)
- Sirpa Pietikäinen MEP (EPP, Finland)
- Maria Walsh (EPP, Ireland)

Short interventions from NGOs

- Péter Kéri, President, GAMIAN-Europe
- Claudia Marinetti, Director, Mental Health Europe (MHE)
- Alva Finn, Secretary-General, Social Platform
- Vera Bonvalot, Member of the Executive Committee, European Disability Forum (EDF) remotely
- John Leader, Member ExCo, European Federation of Psychologists Associations (EFPA)
- André Decraene, Vice President, European Federation of Associations of Families of People with Mental Illness (EUFAMI) remotely

Interventions from the upcoming EU Presidencies

- Pilar Aparicio, General Director for Public Health, Spanish Ministry of Health remotely
- Petra de Sutter, Deputy Prime Minister, Belgium

Q&A

Conclusions and close

Background to the event

In her September State of the Union address, President von der Leyen announced that a new initiative on mental health would be published in 2023, as one of the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe. In the past years, mental health has become increasingly discussed in different sectors. Attention to mental health has never been so high.

Data on the EU Member States show that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many risk factors associated with poor mental health and weakened many protective factors. In the first half of 2022, the mental health and well-being of many in EU countries remained affected by the ongoing impact and uncertainty around the pandemic, as well as anxieties and depression caused by the rising cost of living and Russia's war against Ukraine.

This only adds to historical challenges in the mental health field and barriers to the support and recovery of people experiencing poor mental health. The prevalence of a biomedical model of mental health coupled with stigma and misinformation has often legitimised the exclusion of people with psychosocial disabilities from society. At the same time, certain groups (women, children and young people, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTI, older persons, and undocumented people) are more at risk of being impacted by poor mental health and less likely to receive tailored support.

It is clear that a comprehensive EU-level approach to mental health is a necessity for many people. Yet, its final impact and success will depend on its development in the coming months. This is why, ahead of the European Commission's adoption of a Communication on this approach in the second quarter of 2023, the Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing and the MEP Alliance for Mental Health are gathering stakeholders and experts to discuss the content of the upcoming initiative.

Aims of the event:

The event's main objectives are twofold:

- Provide a platform for input and discussion for MEPs and stakeholders, including suggestions concerning the design and content of a comprehensive approach to mental health; and
- Enter into dialogue with the Commission on the state of play, timeline, and content of the initiative.

Welcome and introductions

Tomáš Zdechovský MEP welcomed participants and underlined the importance of the meeting as it addresses a new and crucial step towards concrete EU-level action on mental health. He stated that:

- MEPs have worked for several years to ensure such action.
- This effort was boosted by the 2019 Finnish Presidency Council Conclusions, calling on the Commission to come forward with a comprehensive EU Strategy on Mental Health.
- Many Written Questions were tabled detailed statements and position papers were submitted, and meetings were organised on the need for an EU Strategy.
- And finally, last September, President von der Leyen, in her State of the Union address, announced a 'comprehensive approach to mental health'.
- MEPs warmly welcome the Commission's intention to publish such an approach before the summer.
- The recent public consultation document indicates the 'comprehensive' nature of the Commission approach, with 6 relevant workstreams covering a wide range of issues.
- However, any future activity should keep the balance and cover all aspects of mental health, ranging from prevention and mental health promotion to care, support, treatment and recovery. Those already living with mental ill-health should not be forgotten.
- Second, mental health stakeholders should be actively involved in the development, implementation, monitoring and assessment of the Commission's approach: patients, service providers, formal and informal carers, health care professionals and others should all be involved, to ensure the relevance of the initiative.
- Third, the initiative should call for national action plans on mental health as that is the level where the real competency lies.



Co-host Cyrus Engerer MEP underlined the timeliness of the event, as it reflects the mental health crisis impacting people around the world, with people lacking sufficient tools and support to express and manage complex emotions and challenges.

He emphasised the following:

- There is an urgent need to foster mental health literacy and make this topic the norm rather than the exception. Comprehensive awareness campaigns to stimulate mental health literacy could be part of the solution and should be a priority in the future Commission initiative, supported by the European as well as national parliaments.
- The EU fought the COVID-19 pandemic as a Union, and the same approach should be taken to address this mental health crisis.
- Considering that 2023 is the European Year of Skills, EU policies should help equip citizens with skills to express complex emotions and mental health needs, along with skills to identify the mental health needs of others and to know how to support them.
- In the same light, the EU institutions and Member States should support the integration of Social and Emotional Learning programmes in school curricula and those of teaching staff. Only by recognising the importance of mental health literacy in education systems will we be able to normalise talking about mental health and seeking support.
- A comprehensive European Mental Health Action Plan, as part of the European Health Union, is required as a matter of urgency. As part of this, the EU must invest in free and accessible mental health services, elevating mental health treatment and achieving parity of esteem with physical illness.

He then welcomed **Stella Kyriakides, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety** and invited her to inform the audience of the Commission's comprehensive approach to mental health.

In her presentation, the Commissioner underlined, among others, the importance of the event at a time when mental health is more than ever a public health challenge. She recalled that our societies are still recovering from an unprecedented pandemic which affected all age groups, changed our lives and impacted the most vulnerable. Moreover, the war in Ukraine and its far-reaching consequences are sources of ongoing anxiety, taking a heavy toll on citizens' mental health in many different ways.



The need to act now is self-evident – and the Commission is indeed acting, as the first ever EU comprehensive approach to mental health will be presented in June. This should be seen as an important moment as well as an opportunity to act and respond to expectations from citizens.

The Commissioner stated that the initiative will build on the recommendations from citizens at the Conference on the Future of Europe. It also responds to the European Parliament's repeated calls to step up action on mental health. Underlining that the Commission is not starting from scratch, Mrs Kyriakides shared information on several ongoing EU mental health initiatives and funding opportunities, such as:

- EU4Health providing over EUR 30 million in support for mental health, within public health, over the last 3 years;
- the Commission 2023 work programme supporting the comprehensive approach to mental health with a budget of 18 million euros;
- the 'Healthier Together' initiative, with one of its five action strands specifically covering mental health.

However, more needs to be done comprehensively. This is what the Commission will present in June, to support and complement action at Member State and regional levels.

To develop this initiative, Member States are being consulted in the Expert Group on Public Health, and stakeholders and citizens were invited to participate in a recent Call for Evidence, providing their views and stating their priorities. This consultation yielded 313 responses, highlighting the need to reinforce:

- better mental health promotion and prevention;
- skills development through training;
- education and awareness-raising, including de-stigmatisation;
- improved and equal access to care;
- health at work, including burnout prevention;
- a better understanding of social and environmental determinants.

A strong focus will be placed on vulnerable groups – including children, young people and older people.

In parallel, the Commission has launched projects with the WHO and the OECD. These offer technical assistance and capacity-building for Member States to transfer and exchange best practices on mental health. A survey has been developed in cooperation with the WHO to assess the capacity of national mental health systems, forming the basis for tailored support for each Member State. In addition, 30 million euros has been earmarked for a project with the Red Cross to support the mental health of displaced Ukrainian people.

The Commissioner concluded by emphasising the need to view mental health as an inextricable part of overall public health. There is an opportunity now to rise to the challenge and put mental health at the heart of all policies, making it a priority for years to come. The European Parliament is a key player here, as are NGOs, providing a strong voice for those facing mental health issues.

Interventions from MEPs:

Tomáš Zdechovský MEP then invited colleagues to present their views on the initiative. The following guiding questions had been circulated prior to the event:

- How can action at the EU level support mental health promotion, prevent, mitigate and respond to mental health challenges, and help people in their journey to recovery?
- How should mental health considerations become part of a wide variety of EU and national policies supporting good mental health for all, including those experiencing mental ill-health and their families across the EU?
- How can stakeholders (experts by experience, mental health professionals, academics) be meaningfully involved in the development, implementation, monitoring and assessment of the initiative?

The following MEPs took the floor:

Alex Agius Saliba MEP (S&D, Malta) warmly welcomed the Commission's intention to propose a comprehensive initiative on mental health and stated that



- MEPs have long supported the development of robust and inclusive EU mental health policies, addressing this topic holistically and positively.
- This means addressing the prevention of mental ill health, mental health promotion as well as improving the situation and options for those that are living with mental health conditions – and their families.
- He was involved with the development of the S&D's recent position paper on mental health and the Commission should use this as inspiration when developing the next steps.
- As a supporter of both groups, he welcomed the joint nature of the meeting, co-organised by the MEP Alliance for Mental Health and the Coalition for Mental Health and Well-being.

- There is a need for these two groups to join forces permanently, to create an even stronger voice for mental health – a voice that should be heard within as well as outside the European Parliament.
- Efforts should be made to ensure the creation of a formal Intergroup on mental health in the next Parliament, which could be coordinated by a group of relevant stakeholders. This would have two advantages:
- There would be more formal and wider recognition of the importance of the topic within the Parliament as well as greater visibility, which would attract more MEPs
- It would help to create even stronger links with and between the stakeholders involved, capitalising on their engagement, knowledge and commitment.
- The strongest voice for mental health possible is required, to better support the Commission in the development and implementation of its mental health work.

Estrella Durá Ferrandis MEP (S&D, Spain) stated that the journey to get to concrete Commission action has been long and indicated that:

- This event has an important symbolic meaning: it is the end of a road and the beginning of a new period for coordination and work in the field of mental health, defining joint positions within the European Parliament and with civil society.
- The Commission's "call for evidence" showed that civil society is aware of the strong link of mental health to structural factors – e.g., child poverty, access to housing, employment and education – that must be addressed by public policies.
- A psychosocial approach, based on comprehensive and multidisciplinary care, which does not only focus on the pharmacological aspect, is also very important.
- Throughout life, multiple individual, social, and structural determinants can either protect or undermine mental health. Risks can manifest themselves at all stages of life; those that occur during sensitive periods of development (e.g., early childhood), are particularly detrimental.
- Prevention is essential and starts at school; therefore, skills training programmes to prevent the consumption of alcohol, drugs and violent behaviour in adolescents need to be in place.

- Also, educational programmes aimed at developing positive and socio-emotional behaviour can prevent cases of bullying and violence, also in late life.
- Furthermore, mental health care should move towards the community model, which is more accessible and acceptable than institutional care.
- All World Health Organisation Member States have committed to applying the Comprehensive Action Plan on Mental Health 2013–2030; any future European mental health strategy should take this into account.
- We are at a crucial moment, in which the urgency of strengthening mental health systems is recognised.
- The structural causes of poor mental health should not be underestimated, and a psychosocial and integrated approach is needed – now more than ever.

Radka Maxová MEP (S&D, Czechia) recalled her involvement with last year's S&D position paper on mental health, calling for an EU Mental Health Strategy, which is now more relevant than ever. She also stated that:

- Such a Strategy would allow for a comprehensive and holistic approach towards mental health – imperative as mental health is a cross-sectoral and cross-policy issue.
- It should ensure mental health mainstreaming, exchange of good practices, research and robust data collection, de-stigmatisation and initiatives on raising awareness.
- It would also need a focus on prevention and early detection of mental ill health as the impact and costs of not doing so are substantial, both at the individual as well as societal level.
- The stigma related to mental health needs to be lifted; the promotion of good mental health and addressing mental health issues should become a normal part of our lives.
- Health services need to be accessible, including for children and young people.
- The Health Group of the Conference on the Future of Europe (chaired by Radka Maxová MEP) has called for more European action in the area of health, in particular, to improve the ways in which mental health is being addressed.

- Member States are responsible for the policies and services addressing mental health; however, the promotion of good mental health, prevention of poor mental health, and availability of appropriate services is a common goal. Therefore, the added value of EU-level action is clear.
- A European Year of Mental Health would help to raise awareness and would be a significant stepping stone towards an EU Mental Health Strategy.

Sirpa Pietikäinen MEP (EPP, Finland) urged colleagues and stakeholders to join forces rather than compete, as the objectives and intentions are similar and shared. The principle of cooperation should be embraced by all.



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Addressing the Commission initiative, she stated that the framework as outlined in the consultation paper is robust. However, there are a few priority issues:

- Access to treatment and support of vulnerable groups should be at the core of the initiative.
- Prevention is crucial, like in all other areas of health. However, in the field of mental health, too little is done to prevent mental ill health or ensure person-centred access to the support that is required (and preferred). Professionals should be educated to be able to support primary as well as secondary prevention.
- The concept of prevention should be viewed and implemented in the domain of physical health, e.g., diabetes, and cardiovascular conditions.
- Mental health should be inserted in the EU legislation, i.e., in the Framework Directive on Health and Safety at Work. On the one hand, the working environment is increasingly stressful, while on the other it is not equipped to adequately identify mental health problems, e.g., stress or burnout. Equally, the workplace does not cater for the needs of people returning to work after experiencing a mental health problem.
- More research is required into the causes of mental ill health and the development of appropriate support, care and treatment.
- The lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic should not be forgotten; there are still many frontline health workers experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, and the strong impact on young people needs to be recognised and managed. Older people and informal carers were also badly affected.
- The voice of NGOs working in the mental health field will be indispensable for the Commission and Parliament to ensure relevant actions. Their input and wisdom are and will be indispensable.

Eimear Deery, speaking on behalf of Maria Walsh MEP (EPP, Ireland) welcomed the cooperation of the MEP Alliance for Mental Health and the Coalition for Mental Health and Well-being. She also stated that:

- Apart from the huge advocacy efforts made by MEPs and NGOs, the Citizens Dialogue has been a real driver for change and has provided a strong impetus to push for change.
- The fact that a future initiative on mental health is now firmly on the EU agenda is a great achievement. We need to make sure that this will turn into the required and desired comprehensive EU Strategy.
- A future initiative should address stigma as stigma and discrimination function as a barrier to recovery. In addition, stigma thrives in environments that are not informed; action needs to be taken to change this.
- Also, the EU-level initiative should lead to actions at the national level in order to have a real impact.
- New data, particularly on the capacity and functioning of health systems as well as economic data will be very welcome as they will help advocate for change.
- Mental health should become part of the EU occupational health and safety legislation, as that will be a powerful way to get attention for the topic.
- A horizontal approach should be taken, in which there is room for the needs of vulnerable groups.
- Finally, it would be useful to dedicate a large, joint event – possibly around World Mental Health Day on October 10 – to address the content of the Commission proposal.

Stelios Kypouropoulos MEP (EPP, Greece) warmly welcomed the meeting, both as an MEP as well as a psychiatrist. He underlined that

- Mental health has been marginalised for a long time.
- COVID-19 has put the spotlight on the importance of mental health: the pandemic and its aftermath, including the economic crisis, has put a burden on citizens' well-being and mental health services. A large increase in symptoms of depression, stress and anxiety conditions was observed, especially among younger age groups.
- The situation was even more difficult for persons with pre-existing mental health conditions.

- Today more than ever, young people, women, disabled persons, and older people, are at risk of being disproportionately impacted by mental ill-health. In addition, they are less likely to receive tailored mental health support and care.
- This is why a human rights-based European Strategy on Mental Health addressing the socio-economic elements of mental health is imperative if an equitable approach to mental healthcare is to be achieved.
- The Commission initiative should boost the deinstitutionalisation process and foster the development and implementation of community-based care services. A substantial number of persons living with mental ill health still reside in institutions across Europe and have no access to community-based services.
- Prevention is better than cure. But how can the mental health of our citizens be ensured?
- One step could be for the EU to prioritise the coordination of actions and strategies which aim to break through stereotypes, achieve social inclusion and provide appropriate support.

Juozas Olekas MEP (S&D, LT) warmly welcomed the Commission's intention to take concrete action on mental health. He emphasised that:

- Since the elections in 2019, MEPs have called for an EU Mental health Strategy, in line with the 2019 Finnish Presidency Conclusions.
- Now, 3,5 years later, discussions on concrete plans are taking place.
- As a medical doctor, he has seen the devastating impact of mental ill health – not only on the individual but also on families and carers, on the community and society as a whole.
- The COVID pandemic has demonstrated the importance of mental health. While the full impact of the pandemic (e.g., of social distancing, anxiety, loss and bereavement) on mental and brain health is not yet known, it is clear that it has been substantial – also on health care professionals.
- The war in Ukraine has led to eight million Ukrainian refugees taking shelter in Europe. Their unprocessed trauma is limiting their ability to become part of society in their host countries.
- Mental and brain health needs to be better supported across Europe.



- Broad cooperation between stakeholders needs to be fostered, making sure we include the voice of patients.
- This broad cooperation is also required within the European Parliament as mental health is important to us all, regardless of our personal political affiliations. Today's meeting is a good example of such cooperation, and this needs to be continued in years to come.
- The Commission's plans, as outlined in the recent consultation document, will indeed be comprehensive and it may not be possible to do justice to all topics that matter.
- However, three priority issues should not be forgotten in the initiative:
 1. The need to address and get rid of stigmatisation as this influences all decisions and actions in the field of mental health.
 2. The possibilities offered by new technologies to support family carers as well as patients and health professionals in obtaining and providing care and support.
 3. EU - wide coordination of research (also addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation concerning the Ukrainian refugees) - needs to be ensured

Interventions from NGOs:

Tomáš Zdechovský MEP invited NGO representatives to take the floor and respond to one or more of the questions listed above, from their specific perspectives.

The following speakers presented their views:

Peter Kéri (President, GAMIAN-Europe) welcomed the Commission initiative and made the following points:

- GAMIAN-Europe - and many other organisations - have advocated for the development of an EU Mental Health Strategy and EU Year for Mental Health for many years and the fact that there are concrete plans now is a reason for celebration.
- His organisation has submitted an elaborate submission to the recent Commission consultation; but rather than summarise this, 4 keywords should be highlighted, i.e.,
 - Patient-centredness
 - Access to all levels and forms of support and care
 - Choice
 - Empowerment



- These four words should be at the core of any future initiative and should be the guiding principles for any action taken about people living with mental ill-health.
- They are also at the core of all of GAMIAN-Europe's activities.
- Another key principle relates to cooperation.
- This is why this joint meeting and the close cooperation between the MEP Alliance on Mental Health and the Coalition on Mental Health and Well-being matters: it helps to strengthen the voice of the sector.
- Setting up a formal Intergroup in the next Parliament is in line with this view, as apart from attracting more MEPs, it would help consolidate the cooperation between organisations and strengthen advocacy efforts.
- This strong force and voice within (and outside) the Parliament will be needed as the future initiative needs the relevant involvement of all mental health stakeholders.

Claudia Marinetti (Director, Mental Health Europe - MHE) stated that the focus of a future initiative should be on promotion and prevention, as well as on those living with mental health problems and psychosocial disabilities – their rights should be promoted and protected. She also emphasised:

- The need to ensure attention to recovery paths, moving away from a paternalistic approach to treating people.
- The meaningful participation of those that have lived experience of mental health in the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of the initiative is crucial, taking a co-creative, collaborative approach. This should involve key mental health actors as well as actors beyond the health sector, working together on an equal basis.
- Industrial and commercial interests should not overtake the needs of people with mental health problems.
- We need to develop and stimulate mentally healthy communities; the upcoming European Mental Health Week, coordinated by Mental Health Europe, will focus on this topic.
- A truly comprehensive approach to mental health can only be achieved utilizing a psychosocial approach, addressing the broader social, economic and environmental determinants of mental health.



- A 'mental health in all policies' approach is required; the Health Policy Platform's Thematic Network on Mental Health in All Policies is currently elaborating a joint statement on this topic. This will be issued in early April and will be open for endorsement.
- To facilitate change the Commission should ensure long-term coordinated action among Member States, also when it comes to the cooperation of services and programmes across different sectors.
- Finally, the Commission should develop a European Mental Health Strategy with a timeline, adequate budget and clear objectives as well as indicators to monitor progress.

Alva Finn (Secretary-General, European Platform of Social NGOs) underlined that mental health has moved up the political agenda, also due to the attention to this topic as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. She also said that:

- Mental health is everywhere – it is part of every single human interaction.
- Treating it as a problem has not helped mental health or mental health systems; it has also not helped those living with mental ill health.
- Many stakeholders have been calling for a Mental Health Strategy, and it is important to link this with the broader social Commission initiatives.
- There are links between mental health and the European Pillar of Social Rights, which addresses three main policy areas: equal opportunities, the workplace and social protection.
- It is clear to see that mental health is an important element in each of these. Poverty, social exclusion, older people living in institutions, and people with disabilities having no access to care – all of this has an impact on mental health.
- A holistic approach is required to address the prevention of mental ill health; it is about the person's life in its entirety rather than just about how they interact with the health system.
- The Social Pillar's Action Plan will be reviewed, and it would be useful for a revised Plan to include a section focusing on mental health aspects, e.g. related to the key area of (access to) support and care services.

Vera Bonvalot (Member of the Executive Committee, European Disability Forum - EDF) highlighted EDF's support for a comprehensive and holistic approach to mental health to ensure the right to health and the integrity and inclusion of all, including persons with disabilities. She addressed three key points:

1. The need to have a human rights-based approach to mental health.
2. Access to mental health services is a fundamental right which should be granted to all and be based on the principle of integrity, equity and inclusion. As it is a right, people should have access, but also full control to the mental health support, services and medication of their choice.
3. The initiative must ensure the availability, accessibility and variety of mental health services. No one should be left behind. The process to develop, implement, monitor and assess the initiative should include persons with different types of disabilities. It is also very important to hear the voice of young people. The Youth Dialogue, which took place with Commissioner Kyriakides earlier this year, was very welcome in this respect.
4. Mental health considerations should be mainstreamed in other EU initiatives, e.g., considered in the deinstitutionalisation process of persons with disabilities, in initiatives related to victims' rights, and in combating violence against women. To clinical treatment in persons with acquired brain injuries. It is often said that there is no health without mental health, but we also believe that there is no striving society without mental health.

John Francis Leader (Member of the Executive Council, European Federation of Psychologists Associations - EFPA) welcomed the many inspiring and practical suggestions and ideas that had been shared so far. The challenge moving forward is how to take these ideas and progress them, making sure there is momentum and ensuring they affect the ground.

EFPA has identified seven pillars as particularly important:

1. Mental health commitment:

Mental health should feature in all EU policies. It should be properly funded, resourced and measured. Initiatives in this area would ideally be bound together in the form of a European Year for Mental Health.

2. Societal crises response:

Mental health should be a core part of any policy response to current and future societal crises.

3. Community-oriented services:

EFPA supports the World Health Organisation's call for more community-oriented mental health services. It is important to laterally spread access to support beyond primary care settings.

4. The workplace:

Mental health in the workplace should be a priority, enshrined in health and safety regulations and built-in from the ground up. EU-supported projects like H-Work could be ground-breaking in this respect.

5. Climate change:

Mental health is indivisible from the challenges of climate change. Support programmes—for children and young people especially—should be introduced.

6. Training standards and regulations:

The training of mental health practitioners should be based on a recognised standard, properly funded and regulated.

7. Equality of access:

Citizens should be engaged as partners and stakeholders and have equal access to appropriate mental healthcare and healthcare professionals. People increasingly spend their time in digital as well as physical contexts, so both should receive equal consideration.

Andre Decraene (Vice President of, the European Federation of Associations of Families of People with Mental Illness - EUFAMI) also welcomed the Commission's initiative on mental health.

For EUFAMI, a comprehensive approach to mental health should include:

- A therapeutic alliance between the individual, the mental health care team and the family carers, as this is vital to provide relevant, person-centred, holistic and high-quality mental health services. This relationship must be facilitated practically to ensure flexibility, availability and continuity of care.
- The fact that care provided in the community shifts the burden of care to family carers needs to be recognised and addressed.
- Recognition of the contribution and burden of family carers. Carers can substantially facilitate recovery provided they are adequately informed, supported and trained. They must be listened to by health professionals. Not taking family carers seriously or not sharing information with carers can hamper or delay recovery.
- Continuity of care is of paramount importance, with services coordinated and integrated to meet the full range of social, psychological and physical care needs of persons with mental health problems. Seamless mental health care services should be available in a continuum stretching from community primary care to specialist secondary mental health services. Multidisciplinary health teams must be an integral part of such services.
- A human rights-based approach and core financing for organisations representing families and patients are crucial. We strongly believe that it is possible for all patients/service users to gain control of their lives, recover their self-esteem and move towards building a life where they experience a sense of belonging and participation. This is an essential component of the recovery approach.

Interventions from the upcoming EU Presidencies

Cyrus Engerer MEP warmly welcomed the high-level representatives of the Spanish and Belgian EU Presidencies. He invited both to provide information on how mental health will be addressed during their respective terms of Presidency and how they will progress the Commission initiative in terms of implementation.

Pilar Aparicio (General Director for Public Health, Spanish Ministry of Health). Pilar Aparicio (General Director for Public Health, Spanish Ministry of Health) stated that until recently, mental health was a relevant policy but due to COVID-19 and other crises, mental health is a priority.

Mental health is an important policy area for Spain as well as for the upcoming Spanish Presidency. Spain's ambition is to improve the quality of life and care, and this underpins every principle of the Spanish healthcare system. This is set out in a general Health Pact.

Caring for the mental health of individuals as well as caring for the community to which they belong is critical to advance the quality of life and enabling citizens to fully exercise their rights and duties.

Since 2006, a national Mental Health Strategy has been in place. This is being evaluated and updated, and a new plan for 2022-2026 addresses the fight against stigma, mental health promotion, the prevention of mental health problems and suicidal behaviour and the eradication of poverty.

This acts as a framework for the development of different actions and also includes a chapter on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the mental health of the population and lessons learnt in this respect.

The new strategy comprises 10 lines of action, addressing 10 lines of action, including:

- Autonomy and dignity of patients, avoiding coercion;
- Promotion of mental health and prevention of mental health problems;
- Suicide prevention;
- Care provision based on recovery in the community, taking into account education, work and family;
- Mental health in childhood and adolescence;
- Family care;
- Education and participation of citizens;
- Coordination;
- Training innovation and knowledge (on social and family-related factors, work environment, mental health technologies...).



As for the upcoming Spanish EU Presidency, mental health will be the main health priority. Key issues will include citizens' rights, social inclusion and the fight against stigma. Other themes will relate to mental health promotion and prevention of mental ill health in vulnerable groups, families, schools, and the workplace. In addition, there will be attention to mental health in children and young people as well as support for the mental health of the healthcare workforce.

Mrs Aparicio concluded by underlining the added value of Member States working together to improve mental health. Sharing knowledge will support a better understanding of what is happening on the ground.

Petra De Sutter (Deputy Prime Minister, Belgium) remarked that only a minority of the 16% of Europeans who experience mental health problems are receiving treatment and care.

Thankfully, attention to mental well-being is on the rise. An increasing number of countries are investing in improved mental health care - including Belgium, where the federal government has set aside 200 million euros for mental health care.

This investment should primarily serve to make psychological care more accessible and less expensive. At the same time, mental healthcare for children and youth in need of acute, intensive, or long-term treatment is being strengthened, with prevention being the main focus.

Belgium has also introduced the 'right to disconnect', in the public sector as well as in the private sector. Furthermore, a 'Mental Health@Work'-network has been set up, connecting all services involved and all levels of competence. The intention is to cooperate and share knowledge transversally and as broadly as possible.

When looking at the upcoming Belgian Presidency, mental health at work will be highlighted. Belgium is in favour of an EU Directive to prevent psychosocial risks at work and is open to working towards this during its Presidency.



Mrs De Sutter concluded by underlining the many existing good practices and the ambition throughout the EU to make mental health a priority. The COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the number of people with mental health problems. This increased visibility will hopefully lead to a greater focus on mental health and increased investment in psychological care. Hopefully, it will ensure that treatment and support are not just for the lucky ones.

From breaking the stigma to making care accessible and affordable to invest in prevention – work remains to be done.

Q&A

Cyrus Engerer MEP invited questions from the audience and the following issues were raised:

- The future initiative should make sure to address all vulnerable groups, including those with chronic health conditions – rare disorders included. For instance, people living with HIV have a high risk of developing mental health problems – notably depression – and this could impact adherence to antiviral therapy.
- The physical health needs of people living with chronic conditions have long overshadowed the mental health needs – of those affected, but also of their families.
- The initiative should also ensure that the continuity of care is maintained, ensured and protected all along the care pathway, both from a family as well as from the person living with the mental health problem.
- Global statistics underline the need to have a special focus on children and young people. This should be a priority.
- The mental health of carers also deserves special attention, along with parenting programmes supporting young children.
- The comprehensive approach to mental health is welcome and required. Stakeholders should work together and coordinate actions to ensure that mental health becomes everybody's business.
- Intersectionality is a keyword, especially about ensuring that all vulnerable groups are addressed. People do not belong to one category only and face different barriers when it comes to mental health and mental healthcare.
- The discourse of mental health needs to be normalised; it needs to be talked about in schools at a young age. This will help to break the stigma and will help build resilient communities rather than resilient individuals.

Stefan Schreck (Advisor Stakeholder Relations, European Commission, DG Sante)

briefly responded to questions, stating that ensuring that all vulnerable groups will be included in the initiative is on everybody's mind – however, it is not easy to accomplish. This is true for all health initiatives; reaching some of the groups is difficult. It will need to be considered in all aspects of the design of every action that is planned.

As part of the implementation of the Europe Beating Cancer Plan, a registry for cancer inequalities will be established. This will bring inequalities to the fore and can be helpful also for new actions taken within the context of mental health.

Concerning the situation in the field of HIV, the Commission's new Public Health Expert Group, channelling all input from Member States into the mental health initiative, is also responsible for the long-term consequences of conditions such as HIV. This means that there will be synergies.

As for the importance of suicide prevention, the Commission is already supporting specific projects in this field (e.g., ImpleMENTAL). Identifying, disseminating and implementing best practices is a powerful tool for change and will be used in the new initiative as well. This is fully in line with the EU Treaty, which stipulates that the Member States are responsible for healthcare and the allocation of resources in the field of health.

Conclusions and close

Cyrus Engerer MEP thanked speakers and participants and underlined the value of bringing representatives from different areas together to discuss the way forward. This discussion needs to be continued and include the voice of those implied and affected.

The differences between the needs of different groups need to be taken into account, and the most marginalised of society must be given a voice.

Children and young people were disproportionately affected during the pandemic in terms of their mental health and a focus on this age category is a priority.

Everyone deserves a life away from the confines of mental challenges that could take away the love for life and living their life to the fullest.

Tomáš Zdechovský MEP also thanked participants and pledged his commitment to continuing the discussion and keeping the topic on the EU and national policy agendas. The cooperation with the Commission and Council is positive at this stage and must be continued.



CONTRIBUTORS

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