

CALL FOR EVIDENCE FOR AN INITIATIVE (without an impact assessment)

This document aims to inform the public and stakeholders about the Commission's work, so they can provide feedback and participate effectively in consultation activities.

We ask these groups to provide views on the Commission's understanding of the problem and possible solutions, and to give us any relevant information they may have.

TITLE OF THE INITIATIVE	A comprehensive approach to mental health
LEAD DG – RESPONSIBLE UNIT	SANTE – Unit on Disease prevention and health promotion
LIKELY TYPE OF INITIATIVE	Non-legislative
INDICATIVE TIMING	Q2-2023
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION	https://health.ec.europa.eu/non-communicable-diseases/mental-health_en
<p><i>This document is for information purposes only. It does not prejudice the final decision of the Commission on whether this initiative will be pursued or on its final content. All elements of the initiative described by this document, including its timing, are subject to change.</i></p>	

A. Political context, problem definition and subsidiarity check

Political context

The World Health Organization defines mental health as ‘a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’.

Trends such as technological change and a rise in living costs have a direct impact on mental health. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine have further underlined the importance of mental health.

These factors have led to a widespread consensus that all strands of EU action should be brought together under one initiative.

In her State of the Union address in September 2022, President von der Leyen announced a new initiative on mental health. Prior to this, at the Conference on the Future of Europe in May, European citizens had highlighted mental health as a major concern. Both the European Parliament¹ and the Council² have echoed these concerns and called for action in this area.

The Commission supports Member States in reaching internationally-agreed targets, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the nine voluntary global targets set by the World Health Organization. In addition, mental health has been emphasised in a variety of sectoral dialogues with citizens, as well as in the European Year of Youth³. Lastly, there is a strong global dimension to mental health issues, as underlined in the recent EU global health strategy.

The Commission will respond with a **Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health** which is included in the [Commission’s work programme for 2023](#) under the priority ‘promoting our European way of life’.

¹ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0205_EN.html

² Lunch discussion in the Health Council on 9 December 2022.

³ Confirmed by the Flash Eurobarometer ‘[Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth](#)’ carried out in 2022.

Problem the initiative aims to tackle

Prior to the pandemic, data showed that more than 84 million (or 1 in 6) people in the EU were affected by mental illness – a figure which has almost certainly increased since then⁴. Around 5% of the working age population had a severe mental health condition, while a further 15% were affected by a more common condition, reducing their employment prospects, productivity and wages. Mental and behavioural disorders are responsible for approximately 4% of yearly deaths in Europe and are the second most common cause of death among young people⁵. But this might not be the whole picture: taboos, stigma, the cultural context and mental health (il)literacy may also lead to under-reporting. Mental health has deteriorated further since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in general but the impact is particularly striking among young people, older people, and other vulnerable groups⁶. The European Institute for Gender Equality found that women reported lower levels of mental well-being than men in each of the three pandemic waves⁷. In addition, according to the WHO, the 10% of COVID patients experiencing long COVID symptoms often face neurological symptoms and higher levels of depression and anxiety⁸.

More recently, the Russian aggression against Ukraine and its consequences for the cost of living, as well as uncertainty about the future, have created new stresses, with long-term impacts on mental health. Nationals of non-EU countries such as those fleeing Ukraine may face particular mental health challenges due to traumatic experiences either in their home country or when fleeing to the EU.

Triggered by a mix of individual, family, socioeconomic and environmental circumstances, mental health disorders carry a high financial and human cost. The direct and indirect costs of poor mental health are estimated to exceed 4% of GDP⁹. These costs are on top of the more intangible costs of emotional distress, pain and suffering experienced by those with an enduring mental illness, as well as by those close to them and healthcare professionals attending to them.

Investing in improving people's mental health is not only about health; it is about ensuring that European society is citizen-centred, resilient and cohesive. The good mental health of the European population is a fundamental resource for social stability and economic prosperity, as well as for quality of life.

The Commission has been working on mental health for over 25 years¹⁰. However, to effectively reduce human suffering and bring benefits to our societies and economies, EU action needs to go beyond health policy and include all policies with an impact on mental health. Following the calls from the European Parliament, the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the State of Union speech by President von der Leyen, there is strong support for a comprehensive and prevention-oriented approach at EU level that can support and complement action at Member State and regional level.

In June 2022, the Commission launched the 'Healthier Together' – EU non-communicable diseases Initiative' to reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases and problems, including mental health, by taking a 'health in all policies' approach. Mental health is also a prominent and recurrent theme in best practice roll-outs across the EU supported by the Commission's health programmes. Member States are already collaborating on rolling out national suicide prevention programmes and on reforming mental health services¹¹. The new Commission expert group on public health helps coordinate Member States' efforts, and mental health has been identified as a key area for future action – a topic to be discussed in a subgroup.

To help health systems better respond to the specific needs of long COVID patients, including in mental health, the Commission has requested that the Expert Panel on effective ways of investing in health write an opinion on the impact of the post-COVID-19 condition on health systems.

Psychosocial risks and work-related stress significantly affect individuals, organisations and national economies. Around half of European workers consider stress to be common in their workplace, and stress contributes to around half of all lost working days. The Commission therefore adopted a Communication on an 'EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027'¹² in 2021, which acknowledges the importance of addressing psychosocial risks at work, including in the light of the digitalisation transition, and puts forward several actions.

⁴ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696164/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)696164_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696164/EPRS_BRI(2021)696164_EN.pdf)

⁵ Eurofound (2021), Impact of COVID in young people in the EU.

⁶ OECD (2021), Health at a glance: Europe. <https://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance/>

⁷ [Gender Equality Index 2021: Health | European Institute for Gender Equality \(europa.eu\)](https://www.eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index-2021/health)

⁸ Post COVID-19 condition (Long COVID) (who.int)

⁹ OECD-Factsheet-Mental-Health-Health-at-a-Glance-Europe-2018.pdf

¹⁰ https://health.ec.europa.eu/non-communicable-diseases/mental-health_en

¹¹ 'ImpleMENTAL' Joint Action (ja-plemental.eu).

¹² COM(2021) 323.

This Communication will also respond to the commitment related to a non-legislative EU-level initiative on mental health at work in cooperation with Member States and social partners.

The Commission also has initiatives under way in a number of policy areas such as health, education, employment, humanitarian aid and research. The Communication would provide an effective overview of how multi-dimensional EU action can be further deepened to respond to the mental health-related challenges outlined above.

Basis for EU action (legal basis and subsidiarity check)

Article 168 of the Treaty states that a high level of human health protection must be ensured when developing and implementing EU policies and activities. EU action complementing national policies must be directed towards improving public health, preventing physical and mental illness and disease, and mitigating sources of danger to physical and mental health.

In addition, the EU has explicit supporting competences to address mental health and well-being according to Article 3(1) TEU, as well as implicit competences in the area of occupational health according to Article 153(1) TFEU.

Legal basis

Non-legislative communication.

Practical need for EU action

The overall aim of the comprehensive EU approach to mental health is to improve mental health by integrating mental health into all relevant EU policies and to maximise the added value of EU policies in national and local efforts.

Mental health is a determining factor in the effectiveness of EU policies as well as in the health, stability and prosperity of our societies. It is therefore essential to ensure that the EU adds maximum value to the coordinated efforts undertaken by Member States and others to help promote mental health, prevent poor mental health, treat mental health problems and deal effectively with the consequences.

B. What does the initiative aim to achieve and how?

The initiative seeks to promote a comprehensive, prevention-oriented approach to mental health as a public health issue and to mainstream mental health into EU policies. It will set out possible future workstreams, focusing on clearly-defined EU added value to facilitate the work of Member States and those on the frontline. This will include:

- **Promotion of good mental health and prevention of mental health problems**, looking at policies, actions and funding for mental health literacy, awareness-raising, citizen empowerment and education across society, from individuals and healthcare professionals to policymakers, social services, networks and public authorities in society as a whole. It also includes addressing the key socioeconomic and environmental risk factors of mental health problems.
- **Early detection and screening of mental health problems**, focusing on where an improved approach could have the biggest impact, such as in educational settings, the workplace, retirement homes, community-based care and healthcare.
- **Actions to further tackle psychosocial risks at work**, focusing on the outcomes of discussions with Member States and social partners, with the input of the EU agency for safety and health at work (EU-OSHA).
- **Support and improving access to treatment and care of mental health problems**, focusing on evidence-based innovative, promising and personalised approaches and interventions, effective treatments and high-quality care, addressing inequalities in access to affordable treatments and medicines, strengthening the capacities of the health workforce, supporting the families of patients affected by mental health disorders and promoting integrated care pathways.
- **Improved quality of life**, appropriate and patient-centred follow-up care, facilitating return to school and work, and advancing on key elements such as de-stigmatisation and rights.
- **Cross-cutting issues**, including research, development and innovation, the role of digital tools, training and support, including inter-disciplinary training for the health workforce, improved exchange and networking among mental health professionals, patient organisations, social services and scientists, focusing on the specific needs of vulnerable groups (e.g. children, elderly, migrants and refugees) and socioeconomic disadvantaged groups (low education, low income, unemployed or at risk being unemployed), and global cooperation on mental health.

Likely impacts

The Communication will promote a comprehensive, prevention-oriented approach to mental health and address the many policies and socioeconomic and environmental determinants that affect mental health.

It will set out possible future workstreams to support a mental health system change and fully integrate mental health considerations into all policies. These workstreams will include actions with a clearly-defined added value at EU level to facilitate the work of Member States and those on the front line and to empower citizens to promote their own mental health.

Future monitoring

Progress against the objective of the Communication will be monitored through existing monitoring on health, including SDG 3.4 related to mental health, the NCD target on mental health as well as relevant European Core Health Indicators such as suicides^{13,14}, depression¹⁵ and psychiatric care beds¹⁶ and occupational health. The existing monitoring will be complemented where necessary with relevant indicators for specific actions under future workstreams.

C. Better regulation

Impact assessment

This Communication will not be subject to an impact assessment, as it does not include committing actions. Proposals resulting from this initiative with significant expected impacts will be subject to impact assessment(s), in line with the Commission's better regulation guidelines.

Consultation strategy

- Member States will be consulted via the subgroup on mental health of the Public Health Expert Group.
- Targeted consultations with stakeholders will take place via the EU Health Policy Platform.
- Sector-specific consultations will be organised where and if needed.
- A Eurobarometer on mental health will be launched in spring 2023.
- The outcomes of the occupational safety and health summit planned under the Swedish Presidency in May 2023 will contribute to this initiative.

¹³ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00122/default/table?lang=en>

¹⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00202/default/table?lang=en>

¹⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/HLTH_EHIS_CD1E/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=2d249b06-f173-48b3-b6ed-e90b57e6f683&page=time:2019

¹⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00047/default/table?lang=en>