



**Commission Communication
'A Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health'¹**

Comments and suggestions from Eurocarers

Introduction

Eurocarers² acts as a voice for informal carers, irrespective of their age or the particular health and care need of the person they are caring for.

Informal carers are family members, friends or neighbours who provide -usually unpaid- care to a person with a disability, a chronic disease or any other long-lasting care needs outside of a professional context. They account for close to **80% of care providers across the EU** and should be considered the backbone of care provision across the EU. This precious and invaluable resource should be recognised and supported, particularly against the background of the increasing pressure on long-term care provision across member states.

In terms of mental health, research has highlighted that providing informal care has all the features of a chronic stress experience:

- it causes physical and psychological strain over extended periods of time,
- it is characterised by unpredictability and uncontrollability,
- high levels of vigilance are required
- can have a negative impact on a variety of areas of life, e.g., education, work, social inclusion and poverty

The prevalence of mental health problems among non-working informal carers is 20% higher than among non-carers, and particularly high for people who provide highly intensive care (more than 20 hours per week). Depressive disorders, anxiety, anger and hostility are frequently associated with heavier caring duties.

In other words, carers may experience psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression, which may also negatively affect their physical health. Therefore, they should be considered a vulnerable group where mental health is concerned³.

This short document sets out our views on the above Communication, both from a general perspective as well as from the specific point of view of carers.

The Communication: general comments

¹ COM(2023) 298 final

² www.eurocarers.org

³ [Looking after family and friends – the health effects of being an informal carer | Understanding Society](#)

While Eurocarers appreciates the Commission's initiative – as it marks a welcome return to specific EU-level action on mental health - we note that few new initiatives are proposed. Where this is the case, it not always clear what these will entail and who will be involved⁴. We therefore would urge the Commission to involve stakeholders in the further design, development and execution of its Comprehensive Approach.

In addition, as the list of actions is quite extensive and spread over several of the Commission's Directorates General, Eurocarers would suggest for the Commission to set up a sustainable internal structure or resource to align and execute all these different initiatives, ensuring a consistent, coherent, and true Mental Health in All Policies approach.

The Communication: what's in it for carers?

Eurocarers warmly welcomes the Communication's explicit recognition that *'mental health is an integral part of health'*. In addition, the three guiding principles underpinning the approach do reflect the three main dimensions to ensure a comprehensive framework for action, i.e.

- access to adequate and effective prevention,
- access to high quality and affordable mental healthcare and treatment,
- reintegration into society after recovery.

We also welcome the nine key themes of the approach, each of which describes the specific actions the Commission is envisaging, and which seek to address the main challenges in the field of mental health.

Eurocarers is pleased to note that four of these themes explicitly refer to informal carers i.e.

Promoting good mental health, prevention, and early intervention for mental health problems: the Commission is planning the development of a European Code for Mental health to *'empower people experiencing mental health issues to take better care of their own and their families and carers' mental health by providing a set of evidence-based recommendations'*.

Helping those most in need: action will be taken to improve the situation by *'ensuring that Member States fully and correctly transpose and apply the EU's legislation on equal opportunities and equal treatment of women and men in matters of employment and occupation, on work-life balance for parents and carers as well as on pay transparency'*.

Tackling mental health at work: it is stated that psychosocial risks and mental health at work need *'intensified further consideration'*; as one of the actions, the Commission will support the implementation of the **European Care Strategy** with *actions that contribute to the mental well-being of carers and those cared for*.

Tackling stigma and discrimination: the Commission intends to *improve the quality of life of patients, their families and (in)formal carers, with a particular focus on addressing stigma and discrimination*.

However:

⁴ e.g., the proposed European Code for Mental health and the actions on stigma and discrimination.

While these references clearly reflect the growing recognition of the contribution of carers on the one hand side and of their support needs on the other, we feel that, where carers are concerned, future EU action on mental health could be strengthened and made more specific.

As also outlined in Eurocarers' response to the Commission's 'call for evidence', which lists the risk of mental ill health to carers in detail⁵, specific action should be considered in the following domains:

Attention for the mental health risks of young carers

Young carers are children and young people under 18 years old who provide unpaid care to a family member who is disabled, physically or mentally ill, or misuses substances. It is estimated that, across the EU, 7-8 % of all children and teenagers are young carers. However, despite the

relevance of this phenomenon, young carers are still largely invisible to public authorities, service providers and policymakers⁶.

Many young carers have trouble balancing school and home responsibilities, which may impact their mental health. Research has shown that 38% of young carers report having a mental health condition⁷.

Therefore, young carers should be recognised as a vulnerable group, and be explicitly included in the proposed actions, either targeting young people or addressing vulnerable groups.

Promotion of carers needs assessment:

As informal carers play such an indispensable role in care provision, the psychosocial needs of carers should be assessed as part of any situation in which the family will provide/is providing the bulk of the care required.

Such assessments should consider the support needs of individual carers in a comprehensive fashion, with a view of ensuring wellbeing. They should consider emotional, physical and mental health, involvement in work, education, training or leisure, social relationships, living conditions, financial situation and others.

Promotion of measures to secure and support work/life balance::

Apart from the psychological impact of the balancing act between work and care obligations, in many cases, working carers are forced to reduce their working hours or drop out of the labour market, thereby reducing their income as well as their pension entitlements. Measures such as flexible working time, respite care and counselling could support carers and should be promoted and put in place across the board.

Address the risk and (mental health) impact of poverty and social exclusion:

Many carers face poverty and social exclusion, due to additional expenses in relation to the condition of the person they care for as well as the decreased or lost social security or pension rights mentioned above. Given the huge contribution made by carers in economic terms (apart from their individual and societal contribution), this situation should be recognised and action should be taken to address this.

Conclusions

Informal carers should be considered as an indispensable and invaluable part of European long-term care systems.

⁵ <https://eurocarers.org/eurocarers-contribution-to-the-call-for-evidence-on-the-care-strategy/>

⁶ [About young carers – European Carers Day \(me-we.eu\)](https://www.me-we.eu/about-young-carers-european-carers-day)

⁷ <https://mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/risks-and-protective-factors/home-based-risk-factors/young-carers/>

Support to informal carers should therefore be provided seriously and comprehensively; this support should be perceived as a win-win option with great benefits for carers' well-being and their capacity to provide quality care, as well as for society and the economy as a whole.

Without carers systems would collapse – all the more reason to ensure good mental health to enable carers to keep caring.