

What Lies Ahead for

**MENTAL HEALTH**

in the  
European Union?





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Throughout the European Union (EU), mental health issues are widespread, impacting a significant portion of the population. According to a recent report of the European Parliament's Research Services, it is estimated that more than 84 million people in the EU are struggling with mental health problems. Conditions such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse have deep-seated effects on individuals, families and entire communities.

Mental health poses a considerable societal challenge for the EU. It significantly affects the well-being of individuals and carries profound implications for social cohesion and the economy. Mental health problems can indeed lead to social isolation, stigma and discrimination, hindering those affected from seeking the necessary support, especially among vulnerable groups such as migrants and those facing economic hardship. Furthermore, the issue comes with substantial economic costs, manifesting in increased healthcare expenditures, reduced workplace productivity and higher rates of absenteeism.

In recent years, youth mental health has become a growing concern, with elevated rates of depression and anxiety among young Europeans. Contributing factors include academic pressures, the pervasive influence of social media and economic uncertainties. Ageing demographics in Europe also highlight the significance of addressing the mental health needs of the elderly. Conditions such as dementia and depression are of particular concern within this age group.

These challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. While one in six individuals in the EU were grappling with mental health issues before the pandemic, many more are facing extra burdens to their mental well-being, particularly young people and those with pre-existing mental health problems.

Yet, EU healthcare systems often struggle to provide adequate mental health services, resulting in extended waiting times, limited access to specialised care and insufficient funding for mental health programmes.

In light of the above, the EU and its member states have recently taken steps to tackle these challenges.

In September 2022, President von der Leyen announced the launch of a new initiative on mental health as part of her State of the Union Address. A call for evidence was conducted between the 18th January and the 15th February 2023 so as to gather input from citizens and stakeholders on the challenges and potential actions/solutions pertaining to the following key areas underlying the new initiative:

- ✿ Promoting good mental health and preventing mental health issues.
- ✿ Early detection and screening.
- ✿ Addressing psychosocial risks at the workplace.
- ✿ Ensuring access to treatment and care.
- ✿ Enhancing the quality of life.
- ✿ Exploring cross-cutting themes relevant to all five thematic pillars.

Building on the outcomes of the call, **the European Commission (EC) released a Communication entitled “A comprehensive approach to mental health” on the 7th June 2023**. The objective is to put mental health on par with physical health and to ensure a cross-sectoral approach to mental health issues. The Communication draws on three guiding principles that should apply to every EU citizen:

(i) to have access to adequate and effective prevention, (ii) to have access to high quality and affordable mental healthcare and treatment, and (iii) to be able to reintegrate society after recovery.

The document encompasses 20 flagship initiatives (described below). It is supported by a comprehensive budget of €1.23 billion drawn from various EU financial instruments and aimed at assisting Member States in their efforts to prioritise the mental health and well-being of their citizens.

# Flagship initiatives introduced by the Communication

## Integrating mental health across policies



### Flagship 1

#### **European Mental Health Capacity Building Initiative**

In 2023, the EC intends to allocate €11 million from the EU4Health programme to enhance Member States' capacity for a holistic mental health approach with WHO collaboration. Additionally, €10 million will be allocated to support stakeholders in promoting mental health in communities, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children, young people, and migrant/refugee populations. In 2024, the EC will introduce a comprehensive toolkit for multi-disciplinary mental health capacity building.

Promoting good mental health, prevention and early intervention for mental health problems



### Flagship 2

#### **European Depression and Suicide Prevention Initiative**

The EC will dedicate €6 million to reducing the risk for people to experience severe mental health issues by supporting the development and implementation of depression and suicide prevention policies in Member States based on the exchange of best practice (2023).



### Flagship 3

#### **Healthier Together initiative – strengthen the mental health strand**

The EC will allocate €8.3 million to strengthen the mental health strand of the 'Healthier Together' EU non-communicable diseases initiative, with the aim to support Member States' actions on promoting mental health, creating supportive environments and policies, enhancing social inclusion and tackling stigma and discrimination associated with mental health issues



### Flagship 4

#### **Access gate for people experiencing mental health issues**

The EC will create an EU repository under the EU Best Practice Portal compiling Member States' best practices to learn from each other and guide people towards effective care (hotlines, help points, etc). To help people navigate through available support services, Member States will be invited to create national websites for people to have one point of reference to improve access, support and care.



### Flagship 5

#### **European Code for Mental Health**

The Commission will allocate €2 million to empower individuals dealing with mental health challenges, enabling them to improve their own well-being and that of their families and carers. This will be accomplished by offering a collection of evidence-based recommendations that will be actively promoted and accessible online.



### Flagship 6

#### **Developing joint ecosystem for brain research**

The EC will enhance research on brain health, which encompasses mental health, through close collaboration with Member States to establish a collaborative ecosystem. The latter will serve as a platform to unite researchers and stakeholders, streamlining and coordinating their efforts to optimise research investments at both the EU and Member States levels.

## **Boosting the mental health of children and young people**



### Flagship 7

#### **Child and youth mental health network**

In 2024, the EC will support the creation of a child and youth mental health network to exchange information, mutual support and outreach via youth ambassadors.



### Flagship 8

#### **“Child Health 360: prevention toolkit”**

In 2023, the EC will develop a prevention toolkit focusing on prevention, early intervention of children at risk and addressing the interlinks between mental and physical health and key health determinants. Special attention will be paid to the risks of bullying in educational settings.



### Flagship 9

#### **Youth First Flagship**

In 2023, the EC will develop tools for children and young people to actively address, for example, healthy lifestyles and the prevention of mental health problems in close cooperation with children and young people (€2 million).



### Flagship 10

#### **Healthy Screens, Healthy Youth**

The EC will support the following activities:

- ✳ Continuation of implementation of the Better Internet for Kids strategy (BIK+);
- ✳ Practical guidance for authorities on improving the protection of children in the digital world, complemented by a monitoring of the impact of the digital transformation on children’s well-being through the Better Internet for Kids portal;
- ✳ Code of conduct on age-appropriate design to be facilitated by the EC based on the new rules in the Digital Service Act package (DSA);
- ✳ Facilitate continuation and reinforcement of the work under the code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online, under the DSA.

## Helping those most in need



### Flagship 11

#### **Protecting victims of crime**

By Q2 of 2023, the EC will seek to improve the access of crime victims to psychological and mental health support by revising the Directive establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime.



### Flagship 12

#### **Cancer mission: platform for young cancer survivors**

The EC will provide young cancer survivors with a platform to help them to boost their mental health, via the Horizon Europe Cancer Mission. It will also support collaborative work between Member States to provide psychological support to cancer patients, their carers and families (€8 million).

## Tackling psychosocial risks at work



### Flagship 13

#### **EU-level initiative on the psychosocial risks**

The EC will conduct a peer review on legislative and enforcement approaches to address psychosocial risks at work in the Member States with a view, and subject to its outcomes and the input of social partners, to present an EU-level initiative on the psychosocial risks in the medium term.



### Flagship 14

#### **EU workplace campaigns**

EU-wide EU-OSHA Healthy Workplaces Campaign - Safe and healthy work in the digital age, including a focus on mental health at work (2023-2025);

EU-wide EU-OSHA Healthy Workplaces Campaign on psychosocial risks and mental health at work with a focus on new and overlooked occupational sectors, including agriculture and construction, and groups including low skilled, migrant or young workers (2026-2027/28).

## Reinforcing mental health systems and improving access to treatment and care



### Flagship 15

#### **Initiative for more and better trained professionals in the EU**

As of 2023 the Commission will strengthen training for healthcare and other professionals, such as teachers and social workers. A new cross border exchange programme for mental health professionals will also be launched through dedicated funding support under the EU4Health programme (€9 million). This should allow to have around 2000 professionals trained across the EU by 2026 and on average 100 exchanges per year.



### Flagship 16

#### **Technical support for mental health reforms across several sectors**

In 2024, the EC will increase the availability and affordability of mental health services for people by offering, upon demand, technical support to Member States to design and implement reforms to improve the availability of integrated cross-sectoral mental health services through the technical support instrument.



### Flagship 17

#### **Gathering data on mental health**

As of 2025, the Commission will ensure that the European Health Interview Survey (EHIS) includes additional data on mental health to ensure strong monitoring and assessment of progress on mental health across the EU.

## Breaking through stigma



### Flagship 18

#### **Tackling stigma and discrimination**

The EC will allocate €18 million to:

- ✿ Improve the quality of life of patients, their families and (in)formal carers, including cancer patients, with a particular focus on addressing stigma and discrimination by supporting Member States to identify and implement best practices;
- ✿ With the same objective it will support stakeholders to implement projects, such as awareness-raising activities to break through stigma and address discrimination, ensure social inclusion, protect the rights of patients, focusing on vulnerable groups;
- ✿ Develop EU guidance on breaking through stigma and tackling discrimination with the Member States under the Expert Group on Public Health and stakeholder groups;
- ✿ Introduce communication activities to promote awareness in the fight against stigma.

## Fostering mental health globally



### Flagship 19

#### **Mental health support for Ukraine's displaced and affected people**

The EC is deepening collaboration with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, allocating €28 million to provide psychological first aid to those affected by the Russian war in Ukraine. Financial support will also be strengthened for psychosocial assistance to displaced individuals. Additionally, online training programmes for first responders, teachers and social workers in psychological first aid and psychosocial support will be explored. An extra €0.5 million will be dedicated to enhancing psychosocial support in emergency situations.

Furthermore, the EC, in partnership with Ukraine, will establish a specialised e-learning programme for paediatricians and primary care medical staff to aid Ukrainian children experiencing stress and anxiety due to the war. This programme will equip healthcare professionals with the skills needed to provide trauma care and improve children's mental health. The EC will also collaborate with Member States to offer affordable psychosocial support to war-displaced individuals, complementing the healthcare provided under the temporary protection directive.



### Flagship 20

#### **Supporting the dissemination of the Inter Agency Standing Committee Minimum Service Package on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)**

The EC will continue to support the dissemination of a Minimum Service Package intended to support humanitarian actors to deliver quality care in humanitarian emergencies. It provides guidelines on how to integrate timely, coordinated and evidence-based mental health services into overall humanitarian response.



# Potential offered by the initiative for Eurocarers work

Informal carers can benefit from the “A Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health” initiative in various ways. Firstly, it acknowledges the essential role they play and aims to provide resources and support to ease the burdens they often face. Carers frequently experience stress and mental health challenges due to their responsibilities, and the initiative intends to reduce this burden and improve their well-being.

Moreover, the initiative strives to improve access to information and services for both individuals with mental health conditions and their carers. This includes resources on effective care, information about available support services and guidance on self-care for carers.

The comprehensive approach encourages collaboration between healthcare providers, mental health services and carers, fostering a more integrated approach to mental health care. Recognising the value of informal carers in the well-being of individuals with mental health issues is a significant step forward.

In addition, the initiative aims to tackle stigma and discrimination, which can often be directed at informal carers due to the nature of mental health issues. By reducing stigma and isolation, it creates a more supportive environment for carers.

Mental health education for carers is also a focal point, with initiatives to educate them about mental health issues, treatment options, and self-care practices. This knowledge benefits both carers and those receiving care.

Furthermore, financial support from the initiative is expected to lead to the development of specific support programmes and resources for carers. This will help carers navigate the challenges they face in providing care to individuals with mental health conditions.



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