

## **A comprehensive approach to mental health**

In a world undergoing rapid change, people's mental well-being is under significant pressure. The European Union works on strategies, programmes and tools to support governments in reducing stigma and discrimination, while also increasing investment in mental healthcare.

You are listening to 'Raising the Game: Better Legislation', and in this episode, we are taking a look at the EU approach to mental health.

Mental health issues affect all EU countries and beyond.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 6 people in the EU were struggling with their mental health.

Other factors, like climate change and environmental degradation, have heightened anxiety levels, especially among young people. In addition, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, and the situation in the Middle East, along with the rise in living costs and increased digitalisation, have further worsened an already difficult situation.

A recent Eurobarometer survey showed that 46% of Europeans surveyed had experienced emotional or psychosocial issues, such as depression or anxiety, over the previous year. However, half of those affected did not seek professional help.

Behind these statistics are millions of personal stories. Vulnerable groups include not only individuals with chronic health conditions and their caregivers, but also infants and children exposed to neglect, adolescents experimenting with substance use, elderly people feeling lonely, workers suffering from burnout and minority groups facing discrimination. Others include members of the LGBTQ+ community, prisoners and people impacted by conflicts, natural disasters or other crises.

The European Union is aiming to ensure that no one is left behind and that people have equal access to prevention and mental health services across the EU. But what steps is it taking to do this?

In 2022, mental health was mentioned for the first time in a State of the Union address, when European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a new initiative.

'We should take much better care of our friends and partners and beloved ones. And –for many who are burdened with anxiety and who are lost – appropriate, accessible (accessible – that's so important) and affordable support can be life-saving. We know that this support is not there today: accessible, affordable and appropriate support. So we have to make sure, with proposals on mental health, that we really improve in this subject. It is, for some of our fellow Europeans, life-saving.'

In 2023, the European Union launched its first-ever comprehensive approach to mental health, opening an ambitious new chapter for EU action in this area.

This strategy is based on three key principles that should apply to every EU citizen: First, they should have access to effective prevention measures; second, they should have access to high-quality and affordable mental healthcare; and third, they should receive support to reintegrate into society after recovery.

Recognising that mental health is not an issue for the healthcare sector alone, the EU's approach involves other important areas such as employment, education, digitalisation, urban planning, culture and the environment.

The Commission has made 1.23 billion euros available to support initiatives across these fields with a focus on children and young people.

Younger generations are increasingly dealing with anxiety, sadness, fear, self-harm, low self-esteem, bullying and eating disorders. Children displaced by conflicts, such as those fleeing Russia's war in Ukraine, children from the Middle East and children who have been victims of sexual exploitation or abuse, are particularly at risk.

Although data on children's access to mental health services is limited, UNICEF reports that around 11.2 million children and young people in Europe suffer from mental health conditions. Alarmingly, suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15- to 19-year-olds in the EU, second only to traffic accidents.

To address this crisis, the EU4Health programme has funded public health initiatives focused on young people's mental well-being.

For example, the Commission's guidelines on well-being in schools are aimed at training professionals, such as teachers, to reduce stigma around mental health issues and build a more resilient and cohesive society.

UNICEF, in close cooperation with the European Commission, is supporting EU countries in improving the physical and mental health of children and adolescents by developing a prevention toolkit.

The EU also provides financial support to Child Helpline International, which handles over 13 million individual calls globally every year and assists nearly 3 million children and young people. The World Health Organization recognises child helplines as a crucial component of suicide prevention, as they provide a lifeline when social or professional support is lacking.

The Digital Services Act, adopted by the EU in 2022 in response to the risks and challenges of digital transformation, imposes targeted measures to better protect minors online. This includes measures to protect children from inappropriate content and aggressive online marketing of unhealthy products and services.

Mental health challenges don't end in childhood, however. Issues like stress and anxiety often persist into adulthood as well, especially in the workplace.

Having a good work environment is crucial for our health.

A recent survey found that 27% of European workers had experienced work-related stress, depression or anxiety in the past year. In some EU countries, many workers believe that disclosing a mental health condition would negatively impact their careers – this belief is particularly prevalent in France, Greece, Cyprus and Italy.

The European Union is developing new initiatives and best practices to help employees remain in work or return successfully after illness. These initiatives take into account the new challenges of the digital workspace and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the European Parliament recognises the benefits of remote work, it also warns of the significant health risks posed by over-connection and blurred work-life boundaries. The Commission, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work and EU countries are working to include mental health in future health crisis and pandemic response plans.

Maria Walsh, author of the 'Mental Health in the Digital Workplace' report, has expressed the need for continued efforts:

'You can never do enough: best practices, signposting, working on really progressive legislation. So we are creating and becoming the gold standard when it comes to mental health and wellness here in the European Union.'

Whether in the classroom or the office, mental health is a priority the European Union needs to address across all ages and social groups.

Meeting the mental health needs of Europeans, now and in the future, is vital – because there is no health without mental health.

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