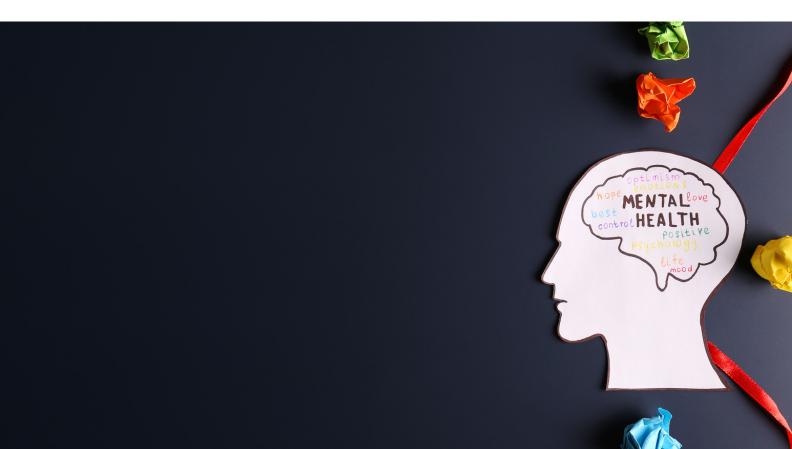# MAKING MENTAL HEALTH EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

THE CASE FOR A DESIGNATED EUROPEAN YEAR FOR MENTAL HEALTH

DISCUSSION PAPER

GAMIAN-EUROPE

MEP ALLIANCE
FOR MENTAL
HEALTH

WHY A EUROPEAN YEAR FOR MENTAL HEALTH?

- According to the European Commission, mental ill health affects more than one in six people across the European Union in any given year, with a total cost of over EUR 600 billion – or more than 4% of GDP – across the 28 EU countries ('Health at a Glance', 2018).

- Mental ill health can affect persons at any age and in a variety of forms (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, ADHD, etc.).

- Mental ill health has costs and consequences that impact individuals, families and carers, health and social systems, employers, communities and the economy.

- Poor mental health is consistently associated with unemployment, low income or standard of living, poor physical health, challenging life events, poor quality of life, stigma and taboo.

- Social and economic inequality and exclusion are both a cause and a consequence of mental ill health.

- Mental health disorders are the fastest growing current health burden: neuropsychiatric disorders are responsible for 1/3 of all disabilities, for 15 % of inpatient costs and for a quarter of all drug costs.

- Half the case loads of social workers relate to mental health.

- There are large differences between and within EU member states in relation to access to services and support.

- Dealing with mental health problems involves a range of services such as health and social care, employment, education and housing, which are often not aware of the scale of the problem. Moreover, millions of days of work are lost each year, due to mental ill health. Despite this impact on individuals and society, and despite many governments acknowledging the issue, mental health and related policy have been accorded relatively low priority in practice across the EU.

After several specific mental health activities in the past, the EU is not taking mental health forward in an integrated manner on a scale that is required to benefit the population.

Clearly, there is an urgent need for better and wider understanding and visibility of the importance and impact of mental health as well as for effective policy and practice in this area. This could help to improve people's well-being while ultimately saving – public and private – resources.

NOW IS THE TIME TO TAKE ACTION!

Awareness of the importance of mental health has never been so high: the COVID-19 pandemic has truly put the spotlight on mental health, as highlighted – inter alia by the 2020 Health at a Glance report, compiled by the OECD[1].[2]. Rates of anxiety and depression, already increasing as a consequence of the pandemic and related measures taken, will only increase further as a result of the predicted economic uncertainty. Moreover, the pandemic has revealed systemic problems in the way society treats mental health, as services have not been able to keep up with growing demand.

A dedicated European Year of Mental Health could be a tangible and coordinated initiative to raise awareness, provide a platform for sharing good practice and experience, promote and facilitate discussion and contribute towards improving mental health across the board.

While the limited remit in the field of mental health at EU level has to be recognised, it should make use of the tools that it does have at its disposal; designating a European Year is one of those tools.

[1] "the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis have led to a growing burden of mental ill-health, with emerging evidence of higher rates of stress, anxiety and depression; compounded by disruptions to health care for those with pre-existing mental health conditions."
[2] For the full report: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/82129230-en/1/3/1/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/82129230-en&_csp_=e7f5d56a7f4dd03271a59acda6e2be1b&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book

WHAT COULD THE OBJECTIVES BE?

One of the main objectives of (and challenges for) the Year would be to Make Mental Health Everybody's Business – rather than only the business of those people directly affected by mental ill health.

A European Year should have a broad as well as a narrow focus: In a broad sense, focusing on population mental health, it can help to:
- Raise awareness of the importance of good mental health for all
- Improve knowledge and understanding of mental ill health by providing appropriate information and creating opportunities for open discussion
- Facilitate cross-sector, cross-country sharing of experiences and good practice, stimulate mutual learning
- Forge cooperation between various stakeholder groups, looking beyond the area of mental health
- Highlight the positive impact of exercise and physical activity and the negative impact of harmful alcohol consumption on mental health.

In a narrow, more specific sense, focusing on those already living with mental ill health or those who are more at risk, it can:
- Contribute to a better understanding of the situation and needs of people living with mental ill-health
- Highlight the needs of other vulnerable group at risk of stigma and discrimination e.g., LGBTQ, BAME, disabled people…)
- Pay attention to mental health across the life span, looking at the various age groups and how mental health and resilience can be promoted at various ages.

WHAT COULD THE PRIORITIES THEMES BE?

There are a number of potential themes:

Societal issues:
- Reducing stigma / changing attitudes and behaviors
- Mental health in the digital era
- Enhance resilience, empowerment and social support
- Mental health literacy, awareness and mental health skills
- Cross sector cooperation (e.g., education, schools, employment, social, cultural)
- The use of language about mental health
- The needs of vulnerable groups (LGBTQ, migrants, people with disabilities, patients, BAME communities…)
- Mental health at different ages

Services, treatment and care:·
- Improving care and treatment provision (including prevention, early intervention, promotion, recovery)
- Increasing research for better treatment (e.g., psychology/psychiatry; pharmacology…)
- Integrated care models
- Community services
- Mental health and co-morbidities
- New ways of intervention
- Access to services and treatment
- Patient and carer empowerment

Mental health staff:
- Skills of health and mental health care staff
- Promote cooperation between the different agencies
- Understanding the needs of vulnerable people
- Promote the involvement of 'experts by experience'

Employment:
- Taking into account the needs of vulnerable people to ensure inclusion in the workplace·
- Promoting better mental health at work
- Promoting better inclusion of people living with mental ill health in the workplace

Schools:
- Health in schools: mental health skills and education

NB in order for the Year to have maximum impact the number of themes may need to be limited.

WHAT SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES COULD BE PART OF THE YEAR?

Various types of activities could be part of the Year, e.g.:

I*nformation/(social) media campaigns*, each focusing on different mental health issues.

Events:
- Major EU level conferences to launch the Year/close the Year
- National conferences/events
- Youth Festival for Mental Health, where positive mental health stories could be shared
- Links with other, related campaigns (e.g., brain awareness campaigns, Mental Health Week etc.)
- Information campaigns (broad and narrow)

Competitions:
- Competitions, e.g., song contest, photographic, 'my journey' story telling, podcast and video contest...
- Journalist awards

Good practice collection and sharing:
- Good practice collection and sharing (clearing house), forging cross-country and cross-sector links

Political initiatives:
- EP Resolution on mental health
- EP Own initiative report on mental health
- (Joint) policy statement by Council/Commission/Parliament
- Council conclusions on mental health (reiterating the call for a Mental Health Strategy)
- Revive the discussion around the 2017 EU Framework for Mental Health and Well-being and its implementation

WHO SHOULD
BE INVOLVED?

The Year should bring together **a variety of stakeholders from the mental health area (patients, health professionals, service providers, carers...) as well as those with a different remit (youth, older people, families, women, employers/employees, vulnerable groups...)**

During the Year, shared learning and exchanges between all these different elements would be facilitated, offering the opportunity for understanding how mental health 'works' and what it means across the EU.

Patients, as experts by experience, need to be involved in the planning and implementation of the Year, in order to make it as relevant for them as possible.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS?

- A clear view of the desired outcome of the Year is required. The Year should achieve an increase in awareness by the general population; and help agencies to come together in planning for better service and policy for mental health. In a more political sense; it could pave the way for an EU Strategy on Mental Health, as called for by the 2019 Finnish presidency conclusions and EPSCO Council.

- We need to 'attract' the broadest possible range of stakeholders; a theme for a Year of Mental Health needs to unite as many stakeholders as possible.

- The theme should be accompanied by a strong mission statement.

- The Year needs to be prepared by an inclusive coalition as this will provide more in-depth reflection and a credible and powerful output and impact. A critical mass is required for the Year to have real effect afterwards.

- Ensure the support of one of the upcoming (Trio) Presidencies will be crucial.

- Good contacts with DG Santé and DG Employment will be essential, also using current policy developments as a 'hook' to make the case (e.g., European Pillar of Social Rights, or bringing another value to the discussions on economic recovery), ensuring that the idea fits in with current policy; objectives. Yet, the support of the European Parliament, beyond the current supporting MEPs will be crucial, too (e.g., Resolution, formal strategic paper from the European Parliament's research team…).

- It will be important to actively involve civil society at national level as well (e.g., the members of the EU-wide groups involved) to ensure the widest possible visibility and impact.

- WHO Europe support would also be helpful.

CONTRIBUTORS

PREPARED BY CHRISTINE MARKING