

## Mental Health - the hidden epidemic

Written by Colin Mackay on 10 October 2019 in Opinion  
Opinion

Mental health has been on the margins of the European health debate for too long. It's time to leverage the awareness created by World Mental Health Day.



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The stigma surrounding mental health means that its dramatic impact on individuals, families and society – not to mention health services – is too often poorly recognised.

Yet around 10 percent of Europe's population suffers from mental ill health in some form each year. Worse still, mental ill health – particularly depression – is a factor in suicide, the leading cause of death in 15 - 29-year olds.

Despite this dramatic impact, it remains a problem too rarely spoken about. World Mental Health Day, on 10 October, provides an opportunity to redress that balance.

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Discussing mental health openly will help those suffering from mental illness to access the resources they need.

Mental Health Europe (MHE), a leading EU advocacy group, stresses that it is important to recognise the degree to which mental health touches every aspect of citizens' lives. It can impact their relationships with the people around them, the way that they work, the kind of work they do, where they live and even their basic human rights.

For this reason, MHE wants to see integrated mental health-friendly policies in all sectors and all Member States. It believes that a "Health In All Policies" approach should also apply in mental health, as it touches on areas as diverse as employment, migration, and social affairs.

"The increasing intense pace of life is a factor; too often people fail to achieve an adequate work-life balance, leading to rising levels of stress and burnout" **Miriam Dalli**  
**MEP (MT, S&D)**

There are, MHE believes, many existing initiatives that can provide opportunities for improving mental health policy in Europe.

These include the European Pillar of Social Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the European Disability Strategy.

MHE also wants policymakers to follow up on the European Framework for Action on Mental Health and Well-Being and would welcome an EU-wide campaign to raise awareness of the stigma attached to mental health and the rights of persons with psychosocial disabilities.

It urges MEPs to take a stand on discrimination against people facing mental health issues and to actively support the transition from institutional to community-based care for people with mental ill-health.

MHE believes the key to improving attitudes to, and treatment for, mental health issues lies in ensuring transparency in the mental health sector. There is a need for greater support and investment in mental health research and implementation that focuses on prevention and promotion throughout life.

It urges MEPs to collaborate with independent mental health organisations free from conflicts of interest and with representatives of those with experience in using mental health services.

UK S&D MEP Julie Ward describes mental health in the UK as “being treated as a Cinderella service, with chronic underfunding”.

She wants to see the EU “invest in measures to improve mental health and support for sufferers”, and along with her fellow S&D members will press to ensure that the issue is high on the agenda during this legislative programme.

Recognising that health remains a Member State competence, she wants to see “a particular focus on education, both in schools and informal settings, on recognising the early signs and symptoms of mental health and reducing the current stigma”.

Her S&D colleague, Maltese MEP Miriam Dalli, is particularly concerned by the rise in anxiety disorders.

*“Including individuals with personal experience of mental health issues in the decision-making process would send the right signals and deliver better outcomes”* **Jean Lambert, former MEP (UK, Greens/EFA)**

According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, this affects almost 25 million people in the EU. She believes that “the increasing intense pace of life is a factor; too often people fail to achieve an adequate work-life balance, leading to rising levels of stress and burnout”.

She continued, “outside the work environment, the constant bombardment by social media to always look perfect and to be seen to live each moment to the maximum only adds to the pressure, particularly on younger people”.

She wants to see policymakers “create more opportunities for more body-positive messages”.

A vital component will be early education, particularly on those issues that can influence mental health, such as body shaming and other forms of bullying, including cyber-bullying. “Giving ourselves the time and space to ensure our own wellness and self-respect can make a major difference.”

Jean Lambert, until recently a UK Greens MEP, believes attitudes are changing to mental health, and that some of the former reluctance to talk about the issues are fading, thanks in no small part to the work of NGOs and activists.

However, although the EU has had a degree of success in increasing awareness of the need for support in mental health, much remains to be done.

She wants the new Parliament to “place mental health at the centre of the policymaking agenda” and to ensure that “existing programmes, such as the EU Compass for Action on Mental Health and Wellbeing, are replaced and their successors adequately funded.

She believes that “including individuals with personal experience of mental health issues in the decision-making process would send the right signals and deliver better outcomes”.

## **About the author**

Colin Mackay is a Brussels-based writer and editorial consultant.

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