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Improving workplace mental health: The role of EU policy makers

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‘Around half of European workers consider stress to be common in their workplace and it contributes to around half of all lost working days. It is time we confront the issue head-on for the benefit of our workers and our economy alike’¹.

Executive Summary

This briefing is part of a series of briefs prepared as part of the EU-funded H-WORK project². It builds on the outcomes of the project and provides concrete recommendations addressing EU-level policymakers - European Commission, Council of Ministers and European Parliament - in order to

- Foster mentally healthy work environments by creating a framework for cross-cutting and targeted actions across the EU;
- Take action to prevent work-related mental health conditions, to protect and promote mental health at work, and to support all workers to participate fully and equitably in work and to facilitate return to work;
- Stimulate and facilitate cooperation with and between EU Member States as well as relevant stakeholders (e.g., Social Partners, service providers...)

These targeted and specific recommendations take account of the limited EU-level health policy remit as well as of current and expected policy development. They are informed by the need identified in the project to address and improve mental health at work and that specific policy action will support this aim.

Introduction

This policy brief is part of the outputs of the EU Horizon 2020-funded H-WORK project. This project aims to ‘effectively promote mental health at work by designing, implementing and validating multi-level assessment and intervention toolkits, evaluating individual and organisational outcomes of measures taken’.

In the project, mental health promotion is conceived as ‘the process of enhancing protective factors that contribute to good mental health’³.

More specifically, the project has developed practical tools that:

- analyse the mental health and well-being of employees: the H-WORK Assessment Toolkit – (HAT),
- test and validate a set of interventions: the H-WORK Interventions Toolkit (HIT),
- verify and monitor the interventions and their economic impacts: the H-WORK Evaluation Toolkit (HET).

Apart from the above, the project has also developed a series of policy briefs, containing concrete recommendations for action targeting various relevant stakeholders active in the field of mental health (e.g., policymakers, social partners, managers, payers...). In other words, H-WORK looks at how its findings can help to ensure a concrete and lasting impact in terms of mentally healthy workplaces.

While recognising that policy is developed at many levels, this policy brief specifically looks at the role of and possibilities for action by EU-level policymakers – European Commission, Council of Ministers and European Parliament. However, the recommendations are also relevant for policymakers at national and transnational levels.

Key points:

H-WORK aims to promote mental health at work by means of developing concrete tools for change as well as concrete policy recommendations, targeting a variety of stakeholders.

The recommendations contained in this brief are based on H-WORK’s finding that there is both a need as well as concrete possibilities for improvement.

¹ Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, 7 June 2023

² [H-WORK – Mental health in SMEs and public workplaces](#)

³ Mental health promotion: a literature review, Pollett H., 2007

The brief can be read in conjunction with H-WORK Deliverable 2.2 as this provides a detailed overview of recent and current (policy) actions taken at EU and national levels, addressing mental health at work. The recommendations are in line with this work and aim to contribute to:

- facilitating recognition of the importance of mental health at work and taking practical actions to enhance a 'mentally healthy' work environment,
- promoting mental health at work (i.e., prevention of mental ill health) as well as catering for the needs of those that are already living with mental ill health.

What is meant by 'policy' in this context?

H-WORK recognises that 'policy' takes many shapes and forms. It can take the form of binding and prescriptive legal measures that specify methods and desired outcomes. It can also be non-binding, describing the desired outcome, while leaving the ways and means to obtain the goal to the players concerned. In addition, there are other measures which can be seen as 'policies', such as initiatives aiming to stimulate cooperation in certain fields, which can prepare the ground for more formal or binding policies at a later stage.

Analysis of the current EU policy context

Bearing in mind the limited competency of the EU and its institutions with respect to binding legislation in the field of mental health, the EU policy level has nevertheless addressed mental health in a variety of ways since 2004. Mental health at work has been one of the key fields of interest. Some examples below.

A number of 'soft' measures – mainly related to knowledge gathering and good practice exchange - led to the development of a comprehensive EU Framework for Action in 2017, containing a number of guiding principles and policy recommendations for national policy makers. Since then, the EU-level interest in specific action in the field of mental health has decreased – despite national governments calling for a comprehensive EU Mental Health Strategy in October 2019⁴ - and the topic has become part of the EU overall chronic and non-communicable disease agenda. This attention has now returned, sparked both by the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., social isolation, anxiety, loss...) as well as that of the current war in Ukraine. As a result, many stakeholders (patient organisations, health professionals, carers...) and the European Parliament have stepped up their advocacy activities and are calling for a comprehensive EU Mental Health Strategy - in line with the October 2019 Council Conclusions mentioned above.

This increased attention, sense of urgency and strong advocacy inspired the Commission to announce the development of a Communication 'A comprehensive EU approach to mental health' in October 2022, which was adopted on 7 June⁵. This is based on three guiding principles, i.e.:

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

Ongoing and planned actions are listed under 9 key themes, providing the framework for concrete action by means of 20 related 'flagship initiatives'; one of these themes is explicitly devoted to mental health at work, and accompanied by two flagship initiative, i.e.:

Policy can be binding and non-binding legislation but also 'softer' actions like exchange of good practice, awareness campaigns and fact-finding actions, which can precede the development of 'hard' policy.

Key points:

The EU remit in the field of mental health is limited but action has been and is being taken. Interestingly, 'hard' policy can be developed around health and safety at work - which leaves space for addressing mental health.

The interest in mental health is growing, due to the impact of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine.

A recent Commission Communication sets out 9 themes and 20 related actions, including psychosocial risks at work.

⁴ [Economy of Wellbeing: the Council adopts conclusions - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁵ [A comprehensive approach to mental health \(europa.eu\)](#)

- an EU initiative on psychosocial risks at work: a peer review on legislative and enforcement approaches with a view to present an EU-level initiative on the psychosocial risks in the medium term,
- two campaigns on safe and healthy work in the digital age and on psychosocial risks and mental health at work with a focus on new and overlooked occupational sectors, respectively.

Recommendations for EU-level policy and action

While recognising that the EU cannot propose binding measures in the field of mental health, there are a number of important measures and actions that should be considered.

All EU institutions:

Promote the concept of parity of esteem

Any EU-level policy initiative with an impact on health should be based on the principle of mental health having equal parity with physical health.

Take a holistic approach of mental health at work

Prevention of mental ill health, mental health promotion, treatment, care, cure – all of these should be considered when developing and implementing initiatives to promote mental health and well-being at work.

The European Commission:

Prepare an annual 'State of the Union' report on mental health at work

Along the lines or as part of the 'Health at a Glance' reports⁶, developed in conjunction with the OECD; these reports provide an analysis of the state of health of EU citizens and the performance of EU health systems. A similar approach relating to mental health at work would help to identify gaps – both in terms of knowledge as well as in action – and support better policy development at Member States level and EU level.

Include mental health in the European Framework Directive on Safety and Health at Work⁷

While the Directive has increasingly covered the issues related to more general health and wellbeing – such as psychosocial stress at work – this focus should be expanded, implemented, monitored, assessed and adapted, to ensure adequate attention for mental health and well-being at work.

EU-OSHA⁸, as the EU information agency for occupational safety and health, contributing to the EU [Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work⁹](#) and other relevant EU strategies and programmes can play a major role in this respect. It should ensure consistent and more attention for mental health, not just on a project or campaign basis but as an integral and standard part of health and safety measures. It should ensure synergies with the Commission's future work on mental health, making sure that mental health in employment is being addressed, monitoring approaches and identifying good practices through tools, such as the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) surveys¹⁰.

Proposing and implementing a specific European Directive on Mental Health Promotion in the Workplace could also be considered.

The three main EU institutions have different roles to play, with the Commission proposing actions, the European Parliament and Council deliberating and agreeing to these and the Commission to implement.

The European Commission has several avenues for action, both in terms of ensuring implementation of ongoing (policy) action as well as new initiatives.

The June 2023 Communication 'A comprehensive approach to mental health' will determine EU-level action for the short and immediate term.

⁶ [Health at a Glance: Europe 2020 \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁷ [The OSH Framework Directive | Safety and health at work EU-OSHA \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁸ [What we do | Safety and health at work EU-OSHA \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁹ [EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027 | Safety and health at work EU-OSHA \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁰ [European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks \(ESENER\) | Safety and health at work EU-OSHA \(europa.eu\)](#)

Propose national action plans on mental health, that also address mental health at work

In order to ensure change, progress as well as facilitate cooperation and mutual exchange and learning are needed. Any EU mental health initiative should be supported by related national action programmes, which will help implementation of the proposed actions across the EU. Examples of such national action plans accompanying EU level action can be found in the areas of rare diseases¹¹ and cancer¹². The national action programmes should be developed, implemented and assessed (on the basis of clear aims and criteria) with the support of relevant stakeholders - improving mental health in the workplace should be one of the workstreams.

Implement a 'mental health in all policies' approach

As also underlined in the June Communication, mental health at work has many facets and is impacted by many different factors. EU policies – at minimum all health and social policies – should be checked for their potential impact on mental health in the workplace; mental health should become part of the standard impact assessment of proposed policies.

Ensure dedicated internal resources to address mental health policy and action

Related to the point above, and also to ensure proper implementation of the 'Comprehensive approach to mental health as proposed in the June Communication, the Commission should ensure resources to develop specific actions on mental health as well as checking on all policies for their impact on mental health, in terms of staff and budget. There should be formal structures for internal cooperation, coordination and exchange to ensure this cross-cutting policy approach and outcome.

Support EU funded research on mental health at work

The Commission should continue to support research efforts (also by Eurofound)¹³ that contribute to a better understanding of the situation and needs in terms of promoting and maintaining mental health at work. In addition, this research should focus on defining appropriate services (access to diagnosis, early interventions and care). Programmes such as Horizon Europe are highly suitable to support this type of research: the H-WORK project being a useful example of such EU-funded research, supporting a wider knowledge base and indicating inroads for action.

Work together with other policy stakeholders and other relevant players

Involving other policy stakeholders will ensure synergies and consistency and will increase awareness of the importance of mental health at work. For example, it will be important to cooperate with the WHO on the implementation of its Mental Health Action Plan and with the European Social Partners to ensure more attention for mental health in their deliberations. Involving other stakeholders from the area of mental health at work (e.g., the European Network of Workplace Health Promotion, ENWHP) in developing and implementing specific actions will safeguard the relevance of these initiatives for people on the ground.

The Council of Ministers (national governments)***Ensure the development of national action plans on mental health***

These plans, following the examples of earlier action on cancer and rare diseases, should address mental health in general, and contain a workstream on mental health at work. These plans should have clear and measurable objectives and function as a framework for exchange of experience and practice between Member States.

The Council of Ministers can instigate national action programmes on mental health which will facilitate good practice exchange and mutual learning.

¹¹ Health Commissioner calls for national plans to tackle rare diseases – EURACTIV.com

¹² EPAAC - National Cancer Plans

¹³ Eurofound | europa.eu

Hold an annual meeting to take stock of mental health at work and how it is addressed

The Council for Ministers of Employment and Health should hold an annual meeting devoted to mental health at work, with the aim to exchange data and experience (including from the national action programmes), highlight the main issues and gain commitment to minimum standards of policy and service supply across the EU. This will ensure formal and regular exchange of good practice, experience and data, and promote mutual learning.

The European Parliament

Propose specific (policy) actions on mental health at work

The Parliament is in a strong position to urge the Commission to take specific action on mental health at work, by means of Own Initiative reports, amending health and social policy reports, Written Questions to the Commission, statements, and Resolutions.

Closely monitor the work of the European Commission and EU-OSHA

The Parliamentary Committees on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) and Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) and the Subcommittee on Public Health (SANT) should carefully monitor the Commission and EU-OSHA in relation to its mental health at work activities to ensure strategic compliance with overall policy goals. MEPs should make full use of the tools mentioned above to support this activity.

Dedicate an Own Initiative report to mental health at work

The Parliament's relevant Committees should come forward with an Own Initiative report on mental health at work (following the 2022 report entitled 'Mental Health in the Digital World of Work'¹⁴ and the 2021 report entitled 'The Right to Disconnect'¹⁵, calling on the Commission to come forward with either a separate Directive on Mental Health at Work or to strengthen the mental health dimension in the current Framework Directive on Health and Safety at Work.

The European Parliament can push for more and more specific action in the field of mental health at work and also act as a 'watchdog', keeping tabs on the Commission's activities, output and progress.

Conclusions

In terms of EU policy development on mental health, the Commission Communication 'A comprehensive approach to mental health' is the most important reference point; it fits well with the multi-level perspective of the H-WORK project. This approach is grounded in an appreciation of mental health as an outcome of conditions in personal circumstances, workplace, society, community and environment. In this context, it is important to note that the workplace is not only a factor influencing mental health; it is also a setting in which measures can be implemented to address external causes of poor mental health as well as one part of the reconciliation between work and life, or work and care.

Promoting mental health at work is more than only avoiding ill-health; it is about increasing feelings of wellbeing, resilience and a sense of fulfilment. The workplace needs more consideration as a setting conducive to staying in employment with a mental health condition and promoting return to work after illness. The radical shifts in the labour market and the rapidly changing nature of work are relevant to both these themes.

Key points:

Most important reference point: the Commission Communication 'A comprehensive approach to mental health'

Promoting mental health at work is more than only avoiding ill-health; it is about increasing feelings of wellbeing, resilience and a sense of fulfilment.

¹⁴ [REPORT on mental health in the digital world of work | A9-0184/2022 | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁵ [Texts adopted - The right to disconnect - Thursday, 21 January 2021 \(europa.eu\)](#)

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