



STAYING ACTIVE - THE IMPACT OF (UN-)EMPLOYMENT ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF AN AGEING EUROPE

POLICY POSITION OF MENTAL HEALTH EUROPE

**- Issued on the occasion of Mental Health Europe's debate in the
European Parliament on December 7, 2011 -**

Introduction – Active ageing and the labour market

The year 2012 has been proclaimed as the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. The European Year aims to serve as a framework for raising awareness, identifying and disseminating good practices and encouraging policymakers and stakeholders at all levels to promote active ageing and to support greater cooperation and solidarity between generations. The European Year 2012 would like to emphasize the benefits older people can bring to society. The generation of people over 50 can contribute with their experiences on the labour market. Therefore, one of the goals of the EY 2012 is to help people stay at work longer¹.

In an increasingly ageing Europe, the average life expectancy at birth of the total population is 78.82 years (75.7 years for men and 82.13 years for women).² While everyone would like to enjoy good physical and mental health in their later years, demographic developments pose challenges to maintaining good health in later life. Risk factors can include the loss of social support from families, friends and colleagues and the emergence of loneliness, depression or illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. This will have implications on public health and social systems, labour markets and public finances across the EU³. Unemployed and persons at risk of unemployment are particularly vulnerable towards developing mental health problems.

Mental Health Europe's position paper aims to explore how employment and unemployment affect the mental health of older people (50-years-old and up), and how policy-makers can maintain or re-integrate older workers into employment, thus fostering mental health at the workplace.

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/ey2012main.jsp?catId=971&langId=en>

² http://www.indexmundi.com/european_union/life_expectancy_at_birth.html

³ [Mental Health in Older People. Consensus paper, Jané-Llopis & Gabilondo \(2008\), Luxembourg: European Communities, http://www.ec-mental-health-process.net/consensus.html](http://www.ec-mental-health-process.net/consensus.html)



Policy background

Promoting and protecting the mental health of older people is one of the key priorities of the European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being⁴, launched in 2008. Moreover, the European Commission's White Paper "Together for Health. A strategic approach for the EU 2008-2013" points out how important it is to maintain good mental health in order to be able to actively participate in society at an old age.

With a Recommendation of October 3, 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market, the European Commission launched a European strategy comprised of three pillars: minimum income, access to quality services and inclusion into the labour market. The Recommendation highlights the importance of life-long learning to stay in the labour market, and points out that attention should be given to health and wellbeing at work.⁵

Through the Europe 2020 Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth, the EU Member States have committed themselves to increasing their overall employment rate from 68.6 % in 2010 to 75 % in 2020.⁶ In order to reach the target, it will be crucial to increase the employment rate of older workers (between 55 and 64 years) which was only 46.3 % in 2010.⁷ In the EU 2020 flagship initiative "New Skills and Jobs", one of the seven flagship initiatives of the EU 2020 Strategy, support for better forecasting, planning of needs and training of health professionals is mentioned, which should contribute to both organizational innovation and inclusive growth. The flagship initiative "European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion" aims to ensure that all people are socially included, and that poverty - in unemployment, but also in-work poverty as well as poverty in old age - should be prevented. However, the implementation of the EU 2020 Strategy is still in its very beginnings and Mental Health Europe would like to urge policy-makers to really put these aims into practice.

Current developments in the (un)employment situation of people above 50 and its implications for mental health

During the last decade, in practically every EU Member State, older workers have been dismissed or been „invited“ to retire earlier because of financial reasons and the profit-oriented approach of enterprises. Getting laid off has multiple negative consequences, including from a social point of view, as people are suddenly left out of networks they were accustomed to enjoying.

Moreover, unemployment very often causes serious financial problems. Older people in economic distress should be given the opportunity to work to improve their

⁴ European Pact for Mental health and Well-being, European Commission, 13 June 2008, http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/index_en.htm

⁵ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:307:0011:0014:EN:PDF>

⁶ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/europe_2020_indicators/headline_indicators

⁷ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-29062011-AP/EN/3-29062011-AP-EN.PDF



financial situation. It is known that financial hardship worsens the propensity to develop or deteriorate mental health problems.⁸

Furthermore, older women face heightened financial problems, since their rights to benefits are often lower than those of men, due to shorter periods of active work. Many women interrupt their careers to care for their children, or choose to work part-time, meaning that their unemployment and pension benefits are calculated in accordance with the lower income. It is therefore important to make sure that people have enough means to live in dignity, before and after retirement, and to maintain a certain standard of living. They should be enabled to participate in community activities, such as through employment, volunteering or leisure pursuits.

In today's workforce, pressure on people in employment has increased significantly and many people started suffering from mental health problems. The incidence of burnout syndrome, or anxiety and depression, is particularly increasing. A number of people took the way into „invalidity-pensions“. Such measures increase state spending on social security and pre-pension payments, which at times of financial crisis leads to significant problems in state budgets. On the other hand, pre-retirement benefits do not take into consideration that people above 50 often wish to continue their career, as an employment has beneficial effects on their health and mental wellbeing. Having a job gives them the chance to keep their place in society, to have contacts, to communicate and to feel needed. Older people wish to make a contribution to society, they want to play an active role and do not want only be recipients of care and support. Employment is a very important factor to achieve this. Older employees can share knowledge and experience acquired during their working life. However, it should be borne in mind that people who wish to retire before they are eligible to do so should be given the necessary support and motivation to stay in their jobs. Working flexible hours or part-time work could be a solution.

Life-long learning measures play a crucial role in keeping people employed. Employees should be trained continuously to keep up with the latest developments and skills needed on the labour market. The precious experience of older employees, which they gained during their working life, should be combined with new competences. It is important to adapt training courses to the target audience; for example, it needs to be taken into account that younger and older employees may learn in different ways or at a different pace. Older employees should be enabled to learn new skills in a way that makes them confident to apply them, for example handling new technology. Also, an exchange of knowledge between younger and older employees should be encouraged to achieve optimum results. Stigma and prejudices regarding older workers should be systematically reduced. Policy-makers and companies can play a role in achieving this - an open and friendly working atmosphere benefits everyone, both in terms of good mental health and in terms of productivity.

⁸ MHE Survey on the link between poverty and mental health problems, 2010: http://www.mhe-sme.org/assets/files/publications/MHE%20Report%20and%20analysis%20of%20questionnaires%20link%20poverty%20and%20mental%20health_211010.pdf



Mental Health Europe Recommendations

Recommendations addressed to Policy-Makers at all levels

- Implement EU and national campaigns that raise awareness on mental health issues related to employment faced by older employees, combat stigma regarding older persons in employment and promote solidarity between generations.
- Engage stakeholders in consultations and establish cooperation mechanisms with employers, trade unions and work councils to improve the situation of older people at the workplace, foster their participation in the labour market and to avoid negative repercussions on the mental health of (older) workers.
- Foster volunteering initiatives, as an alternative to employment if someone is not able to work, in order to ensure social participation, to engage in a meaningful activity as well as to foster the transfer of knowledge and an intergenerational dialogue.

Recommendations addressed to Policy-Makers at European level

- Encourage policy-makers at national level to provide measures to facilitate the labour market participation of older persons and to implement a strategy for mental health promotion at the workplace which is adapted to the different age groups.
- Implement the EU Active Inclusion Strategy through comprehensive and coordinated policies involving different directorates within the European Commission and the national ministries (such as Health, Employment, Social Affairs, Justice, Research, Finance, Education and Culture).
- Strengthen EU tools for the exchange of best practices (e.g. through the Open Method of Coordination) by further developing the mechanisms of cooperation, for instance by intensifying the flow of information between EU Member States and key stakeholders active in policies related to active ageing.
- Foster research on mental health and wellbeing related issues in older age, including depression and suicide.



Recommendations addressed to Policy-Makers at national level

- Develop flexible retirement schemes that allow older people to work longer on a full-time or part-time basis and encourage mental health promotion initiatives at the workplace.
- Support measures to aid the rehabilitation of persons suffering from or recovering from mental problems, in particular by fostering social inclusion initiatives to prevent loneliness and isolation.
- Improve data and evidence-gathering regarding mental health and well-being at the workplace and disseminate good practices.
- Foster adapted counselling for the unemployed above-50 to strengthen their resilience and reduce any loss of motivation to search for employment.
- Make enterprises aware of the potential and economic gain offered by mental disorder prevention and mental health promotion at the workplace.
- Provide support for companies to implement life-long learning and continuous training of the workforce. Encourage them to make sure that skills remain up to date and enable an efficient combination of acquired working competences and new working methods or technology.

Recommendations addressed to enterprises, trade unions and other related stakeholders

- Provide flexible employment opportunities for older people and benefit from their experiences; employment gives older people the chance to keep their place in society, to have contacts, communicate and have the feeling they contribute to society – and in this way maintain their mental health.
- Foster an early identification and support for tackling mental health problems of (older) employees who are vulnerable to the development of mental health problems, as early intervention is more cost-effective in the longer run.

Mental Health Europe
Brussels, 7 December 2011

About Mental Health Europe

Mental Health Europe (MHE) is an organisation committed to the promotion of positive mental health, the prevention of mental distress, the improvement of care, advocacy for social inclusion and the protection of human rights for people with mental health problems, their families and carers. MHE vision is of a Europe where mental health and well-being is given high priority in the political spectrum and on the European health and social agenda, where people with mental health problems live as full citizens with access to appropriate services and support when needed, and where meaningful participation is guaranteed at all levels of decision-making and administration. MHE's values are based on dignity and respect, equal opportunities, freedom of choice, anti-discrimination, social inclusion, democracy and participation.

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