



### Flash Report

#### Mental health in a digital world: how to ensure good mental health outcomes for vulnerable groups

On 11 January 2023, the webinar ‘Mental health in a digital world: how to ensure good mental health outcomes for vulnerable groups’ took place on the EU Health Policy Platform, in the framework of the [‘Mental Health in all Policies’ Thematic Network](#). Launched in October 2022, the Thematic Network is led by [Mental Health Europe](#), in partnership with the members of the [Mental Health Advocacy Platform](#), as well as [EuroHealthNet](#), [Trimbos Instituut](#) and [UNICEF](#). It aims to gather knowledge of what works, what is already happening and what still needs to be done in relation to adopting a ‘mental health in all policies’ approach.

The webinar was open to all stakeholders and brought together 165 participants.

**Laura Marchetti** – Policy Manager, Mental Health Europe – explained the rationale of the Thematic Network, i.e., the consideration that mental health is shaped by socio-economic and environmental factors. In order to address these determinants, it is crucial to create favourable conditions in policies beyond the health sector (i.e. ‘Mental health in all policies’). She then introduced the topic of the first webinar: the impact of digitalization on mental health (with a focus on vulnerable groups), in relation to three areas: living in a digital world; working in a digital world and digital mental health care.

She pointed out that the discussion of the day will feed into the Thematic Network Joint Statement (to be published in April 2023).

**Stefan Craenen** - DG SANTE, European Commission- noted that the Mental Health in all Policies Thematic Network is a timely network, given the announcement by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen of a New Initiative on a comprehensive approach to mental health. The Initiative will be launched in the second quarter of 2023. The EC plans on engaging different stakeholders in the process. The first opportunity for stakeholders to share their thoughts on how to reach a comprehensive approach on mental health is the upcoming [call for evidence](#). In parallel, an expert group of Member States has been set up in December 2022, to gather the views of Member States.

Mr Craenen clarified the expectations in relation to the objectives of the ‘Mental Health in all Policies’ Thematic Network: to collect and share information, experience, best practices on ‘mental health in all policies’ approach; to reinforce the cooperation between key civil society organisations that work on the socio-economic and environmental determinants of mental

health; to help reduce health inequalities. He encouraged the members of the Thematic Network to sustain the cooperation, even once the Joint Statement is published. He explained that the Statement – rather than a wish list to the EC- should be intended as a common position on the specific issue, including actions that the Thematic Network members commit to do and take forward, in order to have an impact in the area.

**David McDaid** - London School of Economics and Political Science – emphasized the importance of thinking about mental health with a ‘mental health in all policies approach’. He pointed out that many of the most effective interventions to promote mental health and prevent mental health problems do not happen in the health sector, but in other domains, such as educational settings or working environments. He stressed the mutual benefits arising from mental health promotion: if mental health is taken into account in sectors other than health, the benefits will not be limited to the health sector (there will be win-win situations). For instance, initiatives to promote positive mental health at school will entail better educational attainments and a reduction of school drops-out. Similarly, companies with higher level of psychological wellbeing tend to have better performance. Hence, there is a business case to promote positive mental health environments, by addressing mental health risk factors.

He then focused on vulnerable groups and noted that policies related to welfare, employment, housing have a crucial role in determining mental health outcomes.

After this presentation setting the scene of a Mental Health in all Policies approach, the webinar then went deep into the topic of digitalization and its impact on mental health.

**Leanda Barrington-Leach** - Director of International Advocacy & Head of European Affairs, 5Rights Foundation – focused on how to ensure safety of online environments for children. She highlighted different issues. First, childhood is not recognized online (i.e., children are not treated differently from adults). Digital products and services are not designed with their rights, their needs and vulnerabilities in mind. Commercial interests still too often come before the child’s best interest. Popular digital product and services are designed in such a way to push the risks for children’s mental health far beyond the reasonable. By exploiting human nature (for instance the desire to be liked), they intentionally use persuasive design to keep users online. She depicted a quite concerning picture of the impact of digitalization on children’s mental health. Yet, she noted that digital environment is not optional for children today. Hence, we need to look to way forward. She suggested the following priorities:

- 1) Recognize childhood online and ensure protection to all children (regardless of age)
- 2) Ensure that children’s rights are protected for all services and products that they are likely to access (not just those explicitly targeting children). Incidentally, she pointed out that there is no need to create new, digital rights, as children have children’s rights, and these apply also to the digital world (as evidenced in the UNCRC general comment 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment).
- 3) Children’s rights need to be integrated in digital products and services by default and by design. Digital literacy and parental control are not enough, as parents and children should not hold the responsibility for badly designed systems.

- 4) Systems need to be optimized with the best interest of the child in mind. It is not a technical issue. It's a matter of what you choose to optimize.
- 5) The focus should be on outcomes, meaning that – rather than suing somebody when things go wrong- we need to identify risks in advance, mitigate them and give positive incentives to companies to innovate.

On a positive note, she referred to a growing awareness and political will, even though problems remain in relation to enforcement.

The webinar then moved to the impact on mental health of digitalization in the world of work.

**Sarah Copsey** - Project Manager | Prevention and Research Unit European Agency for Safety and Health at Work – presented work-related psychosocial risks in the digital era and good prevention practice. She reported that digital technologies bring new psychosocial risks and can intensify existing ones (increased workload, increased surveillance, reduced autonomy, isolation, blurring of work and life balance, cyberbullying, gamification of work, gender bias and discrimination, fear for the future). She stressed that psychosocial risks at work come from poor work design and management. When the load of risk factors goes beyond the capacity to cope with them, stress arises, resulting in negative psychological, physical and social outcomes. She made clear that risk factors can be moderated just to some extent by individual characteristics such as resilience. Hence, the solutions need to concern the organizational structure and only then focus on the individual. She presented a hierarchy of three prevention levels: 1) identify and tackle the stressors (with a risk assessment) and promote wellbeing at work; 2) identify and support individuals in stressful situations (by, for instance, strengthening their resilience); 3) support those who are experiencing stress. She emphasized that digitalisation doesn't bring just risks; it also has the potential to improve work, included for vulnerable people. To sway the balance towards opportunities, it is crucial to adopt a person-centered prevention through design approach, by carrying out a risk assessment (without delegating it to technology) when devising new work systems and software. Other priorities are the following: ensuring the technology only has a supportive role and humans stay in command; balance workers data collection with workers' right to privacy; ensure transparency and worker's access to information; provide training for all stakeholders (designers, managers, workers); dedicate more attention to mental health. Ms Copsey echoed the consideration put forward by previous speakers: whether digitalization brings opportunities or risks depends on choices.

The conversation then moved to digital technologies applied to mental health care.

**Marcia Brophy** - Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPS) Specialist, UNICEF – presented emerging learning from digital mental health, when working with vulnerable populations. Dr Brophy introduced a Mental Health and Psychosocial Support intervention framework, developed by UNICEF also for its partners. It consists of the following building blocks: a social-ecological model (with the child at its centre); multilayered and multisectoral approach; integration of gender, disability and inclusion; an understanding of mental health as a continuum; a life course approach. This framework should guide every intervention - whether digital or not. Yet, the integration of all the building blocks is oftentimes still lacking.

Dr Brophy, while recognizing the incredible potential of digital mental health world, identified the following risks: the evidence is limited and the cost of errors is high; the excitement about new technologies may crowd out support for tried and tested ideas; user privacy can be jeopardized. Moreover, investing in digital innovations may exacerbate existing inequalities, in relation to access to digital infrastructure, affordability of devices and internet use; technical skills and digital literacy; social norms. For instance, globally, around 60 per cent of school-age children in urban areas do not have internet access at home, compared with around three-quarters of school-age children in rural households (source: [UNICEF](#)); women are 25% less likely to access digital services than men, also because of social norms (source: [UNICEF](#)): men are still predominantly designing all AI.

Dr Brophy also noted that digital technologies need to be adapted to the cultural context (cultural adaptation has a cost, which needs to be taken into account when evaluating the feasibility of scaling up digital technologies). To maximize the opportunities and minimize the risks, co-design is essential: we need to listen to children, young people, their caregivers and the frontline mental health workforce, in order to ensure that digital technologies are used and to counter the risk of technologies doing more harm than good.

**Jerome de Barros** - DG SANTE, European Commission- shared his appreciation for the work done so far by the Thematic Network. He emphasized synergies between the Thematic Network objectives and the current EU policy developments in the digital field. In particular, he referred to the [European Commission's proposal to implement a European Health Data Space](#) (EHDS). The European Health Data Space aims to:

- Empower people with regards to access to and control over their personal health data.
- Facilitate the EU-wide use and exchange of health data for research, innovation, policy-making and regulatory activities, to improve quality of health care, policies and innovations.
- Foster a genuine single market for electronic health record systems, relevant medical devices -including wellness apps- and high-risk AI systems.

To achieve these goals, the European Health Data Space provides infrastructures, rules, common standards and practices and a governance framework, stimulating and safeguarding the primary use (on a case level) and secondary use (on a population level) of health data.

For wellness apps, the EDHS brings increased EU quality control in the form of voluntary labeling.

In her concluding remarks, **Ms Marchetti** identified the key takeaway: the need to address mental health in all policies, not just in the health domain; the urgency to take action; the need for co-creation (from the design phase to the evaluation); as well as the economic argument supporting a preventative approach to mental health, within and beyond the health sector. Finally, she emphasized that many technological approaches, such as for example personalized care, have the tendency to be directed on detection and diagnosis, with a focus on the individual, who is identified as requiring expert intervention. This dominant framing risks to undermine the socio-economic determinants of mental health. Mental health – far

from being an individual issue – is a societal one and, as such, it needs to be addressed with a broader approach in mind and collaboration among different stakeholders.

She informed that the second webinar of the ‘Mental Health in All Policies’ is planned for the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February (most likely on the impact of the environment on mental health). The Joint Statement will be launched in April 2023.

She thanked the speakers and the participants. She also invited any interested stakeholders to join the Thematic Network, contribute their expertise and share/access the resources (policy, research and practices) available in the Network Library.

### Further information

- ✓ The call for evidence to which Mr Craenen made reference has been published and is available [here](#).
- ✓ Mental Health Europe has launched a Report on ‘[Mental Health in the digital age – Applying a human rights based, psychosocial approach as compass](#)’.
- ✓ The recording of the Webinar is available [here](#).

### Help us improve our activities!

- ✓ Please respond to [this evaluation survey](#) created by MHE.
- ✓ Also respond to [this survey](#) – launched by DG SANTE as part of a ‘Study assessing the EU Health Policy Platform’ – to collect feedback on the live webinars organised through the Health Policy Platform (all the ones you have recently attended, not just this one).

Thank you!



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