



Flash Report

Towards a comprehensive approach to mental health

Strengthening the link between mental health and environment

On 22 February 2023, the webinar “Towards a comprehensive approach to mental health- Strengthening the link between mental health and environment” 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 168 participants.

Claudia Marinetti – Director, Mental Health Europe- welcomed the participants and explained that a comprehensive approach to mental health requires a clear understanding of the interconnections among wider determinants of mental health, shifting the focus away from the individual to the context in which they live. She explained that the objective of this webinar was to support an understanding of the interconnections between environment and mental health, both in terms of risk and protective factors. The first session of the webinar will focus on risk factors, mainly on the impact of climate change on mental health. It will feature a setting the scene introduction by WHO, followed by two practical experiences, from the perspective of health professionals (highlighting their need for climate literacy) and of front-line responders (presenting their experience on mental health and psychosocial support in occasion of natural hazards). Then, the second part of the webinar will focus on nature-based solutions as a tool to support mental health, showcasing a promising practice from Ireland.

Stefan Craenen - DG SANTE, European Commission- clarified the expectations in relation to the objectives of the “Mental Health in all Policies” Thematic Network: to collect and share information, 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 explained that the Joint Statement – rather than a wish list to the EC or Member States - 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. Mr Craenen 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. He informed the participants that the initiative will be adopted on 7th June and that the EC services are promptly working on it, by actively engaging Member States and stakeholders in the process. He invited all interested

stakeholders to [register](#) to the [Stakeholders webinar on Mental Health](#), that will take place on Thursday 2 March 2023. On that occasion, the EC will provide a preliminary overview of the responses received to the [call for evidence](#) -closed on 15 February- and will hear from stakeholders what they think is important to be included in the upcoming initiative.

Ana Maria Tijerino - Technical Officer Mental Health Flagship, WHO Europe - presented the [WHO policy brief on mental health and climate change](#), launched in June 2022. She explained that the impact of climate change on mental health is an emerging topic. Originally framed in the context of response to emergencies/disaster management, it should be extended in scope beyond this specific focus. We need to be concerned about mental health in the context of climate change, as climate change exacerbates many social and environmental risk factors for mental health problems. Ms Tijerino explained that the pathways by which climate change can affect people's mental health and psychosocial well-being are multiple and highlighted that vulnerable groups may be exposed to more difficult situations. She stressed that, even though there are gaps in understanding the impact of climate change on mental health and psychosocial well-being, current knowledge is sufficient to act. In presenting the terminology related to climate change effect on mental health, she cautioned about the risk to pathologize normal reactions to abnormal events and to medicalise human experiences. She then moved to possible approaches to address the mental health impact of climate change, such as: integrate mental health psychosocial support (MHPSS) with climate action; implement multisectoral and community-based approaches to reduce vulnerabilities and address the mental health impacts of climate change; address the large gaps that exist in funding both for mental health and for responding to the health impacts of climate change. Ms Tijerino concluded her presentation by referring to the [WHO European Framework for action on mental health](#) and to the [Pan European Mental Health Coalition](#), which was set up in September 2021 to materialize this framework for action.

Ilonka Horváth - Senior Health Expert, Kompetenzzentrum Klima und Gesundheit, Austrian Public Health Institute- emphasized the unequal distribution of climate change impact across society, as people with preexisting mental health problems are disproportionately at risk. Hence, mental health problems can be a vulnerability factor, as well as an outcome of climate change hazards. She referred to the [WHO Framework to build climate resilience health systems](#) and its connections with building blocks of health systems. She then zoomed in the building block "health workforce" and focused on health-related climate literacy for health professionals. Ms Horváth pointed out that mental health care professionals can make a valuable contribution to tackle climate-related mental health risks. They can perceive, mitigate and treat climate-related health and mental health problems, as well as prevent them. They can also use the role of key multipliers for transformative action at the behavioral and system levels. She called for climate-related professional practice, and suggested possible courses of action, such as: integrating climate literacy in the curricula of health professionals; setting up trainings for health care professional on climate; developing capacity of health care workers to understand the mental health impact of climate change. She also emphasized the need to establish a pool of trainers and to share promising practices and experiences.

Marija Juzbašić - Head of the Psychosocial Support and Protection of Vulnerable Groups Unit, Croatian Red Cross- presented the mental health psychosocial support (MHPSS) programme developed by Red Cross and implemented in the recent earthquake in Croatia. The Red Cross response was based on four pillars: humanitarian aid; restoring family links; infoline; and mental health and psychosocial support. Ms Juzbašić stressed the importance to

train staff and volunteers in mental health, as even those not directly working on this can act as the first focal point to screen people after emergencies and to identify people in need for psychosocial support. The MHPSS emergency team was active on the ground in the early response phase (up to 3 months after the emergency), then the focus was on training local experts, in order to strengthen the resources of the local community and enable local actors to continue the work once the Red Cross team had left. Red Cross emergency team adopted a proactive approach, reaching out to people and discussing about their needs. The emergency team was present in evacuation centres and remote team. 50% of the people visited by the Emergency Response (ER) mobile team expressed the need for psychological first aid (in the aftermath and at later stage). She echoed the point made by the previous speaker on the existence of vulnerable groups (e.g. older adults). She stressed the need to strengthen local communities and explained that a key component for an effective response consists in bringing different actors together (local practitioners, local psychiatric hospitals, local center for social welfare). As final remark, she pointed out that front-line responders' mental health needs should not be overlooked. There are more and more hazards, the responders are the same and oftentimes there isn't enough time to recover from one emergency to the next. Non all front-line responders are trained in self-care in emergency.

During the Q&A, there was a comment on the need for targeted action in the case of children and young adults. **WHO representative** responded that this specific group does indeed deserve more efforts (both in service provision and in promotion/prevention). This is why one of the six work packages of the [Pan European Mental Health Coalition](#) is dedicated to mental health of children and young adults. **Ms Horváth** added that young people are particularly impacted by climate change but not enough involved in decision making. She pointed out that the way to address the needs of young people is by ensuring that every action is co-created with them.

The webinar moved to the session of environment as protective factor for mental health.

Niamh Ní Chonghaile - National Woodlands and Nature Project Lead with Mental Health Ireland, Coillte and Get Ireland Walking – presented the [Woodlands for Health programme](#), a 12 week woodland-based walking programme for adults availing of mental health services & supports. She pointed out that there is a growing body of research-based evidence on the positive impact of nature on mental health. Nature can be considered a fourth pillar for a healthy life, alongside diet, exercise and sleep. She explained the structure of the programme: a national steering group - made up by members of national partners organizations – gives direction and advice and then the programme is implemented by local steering groups. These groups include members of the national partners, plus crucial referral sources at local level (occupational therapists, mental health associations, mental health nurses, social prescribers...). The partnerships established at local level help to ensure that people are matched up with the right services and support for them. In terms of resources, transport is provided, as well as refreshments. The costs of the programme are shared between local steering group partners who are also helped to access local and national funding opportunities. This supports sustainability and self-sufficiency. The programme - currently existing in 22 counties of Ireland with other 4 in planning stages- has been evaluated, in 2014 and in 2020. The [first evaluation](#) showed increased mood and sleep and decreased suicidal thoughts. The [2020 evaluation report](#) showed improvements in self-reported well-being and nature connectedness, which can increase pro-environmental behaviors (this indicates mutual benefits in terms of mental health and environmental outcomes, in line with the One Health approach). Ms Ní Chonghaile

concluded by referring to other nature-based mental health and well-being projects involved with her role: [Setting up your walkshop](#) with Men's Shed; a [guided walking meditation](#) developed for National Walking Day 2022, hosted by a well-known radio presenter in Ireland; and a recently set up co-production group on nature and mental health and well-being, bringing together academics, ambassadors, practitioners and other key partners.

During the Q&A, Ms Ní Chonghaile informed the audience that they have developed an implementation guide on how to set up a Woodlands for health programme (available in the next weeks). Indeed, the programme can be applied to different settings (some parts need to be consistent, whereas other elements are flexible).

Peter LÖFFLER - DG CLIMA, European Commission- stressed that the last years made it clear that adapting to climate change is not just an option anymore. Climate adaptation is a need, and a legal obligation under the European Climate Law. It must involve all sectors and all level of governments, as it concerns all of us. DG CLIMA has been engaging with DG SANTE, as the climate crisis will come with significant challenges for health systems. Mental health is an important dimension of this, especially for vulnerable groups. The mental health impact of climate change needs to be better addressed in climate policies and practices. He pointed out that there is a growing awareness of the climate and health nexus, and increasing policymaking in the field. At the international level, the G7 Health Ministers committed last year to increase their efforts on climate and health, including mental health. Also, a [WHO Europe Conference on Environment and health](#) is upcoming (Budapest, July 2023). At the EU level, an important development has been the setting up, in 2021, of the [European Climate and Health Observatory](#), a joint initiative of the European Commission, the European Environment Agency and many other organisations (including WHO Regional Office for Europe). Last year, a new [section on mental health effects](#) has been added to the observatory portal. Another joint effort has been the work of the HPP [Thematic Network on Climate Action and Health through education and training of public health professionals](#), led by [ASPHER](#). Mr Löffler emphasized that an approach to mental health can only be called 'comprehensive' if it considers the climate determinants. He expressed his appreciation for the webinar and echoed many of the points shared by previous speakers, such as the consideration that we know enough to be able act. Mr Löffler expressed his interest for the next steps of the Mental Health in all policies Thematic Network, mainly the Joint Statement. He stressed that the timing is very good, as the Joint Statement will be able to inform the forthcoming Commission Communication on mental health, the upcoming [WHO Conference on Environment and health](#) and the work of the [European Climate and Health Observatory](#).

In her concluding remarks, **Ms Marinetti** explained the next steps: a Joint Statement will be made publicly available on the HPP, beginning of April and then launched on 19th April, at the EU Health Policy Platform Annual Meeting, in Luxembourg and online. She stressed the urgency to act and find solutions to current mental health challenges and expressed her belief that together we can achieve the desired result.

The **recording of the webinar** is available here: https://youtu.be/YYtXa_oBW54

Please help us improve! Respond to this **evaluation survey**: <https://forms.gle/1kbQkBWqg6V1V9NLA>