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PROMOTING MENTAL WELL-BEING IN EMPLOYMENT

Policy position of Mental Health Europe

*"It's not stress that kills us,
it is our reaction to it"
(Hans Selye¹)*

Policy position

Mental Health Europe acknowledges that mental health problems are high and rising amongst the workforce and the general population.

We express our concern for the prevalence of low psychological well-being and mental illness in the workplace, as a key factor leading to problems for the individual, the employer and society at large².

We support innovative approaches and coordinated actions to improve the quality of employment conditions and to protect the mental health and well-being of people at work and beyond.

Mental Health Europe calls for the establishment of effective partnership between policy makers, health professionals, employers, educational and social partners to promote good mental health, reduce stress in the workplace and develop employment policies which grant equal access and respect to all.

Background

In Europe, one in five people at work suffers from a high level of stress at work, the second most common health symptom.

Stressors at work increase the risk of anxiety, depression and burn out. Working conditions that can lead to mental health problems include a negative management style, low social support, poor communication and information,

¹ Hans Hugo Bruno Selye (1907-1982), known as "the father of stress", developed in 1926 his now-famous theory of the influence of stress on people's ability to cope with and adapt to the pressure of injury and disease.

² Evidence from the EU funded Stress-Impact study (<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Psychology/stress-impact/index.htm>) and elsewhere indicates that mental health problems are a major cause of both short and long-term absence from work and are the single biggest cause of absence in some countries.

noise, work overload, time pressure, repetitive tasks, interpersonal conflict, job insecurity, lack of control and job autonomy and organisational changes³.

The **European Union** recognises the multi-factorial nature of the determinants of good mental health and the need to address mental health issues in a co-ordinated way⁴.

Within the frame of the new cycle of the **Lisbon strategy** (2008-2010)⁵, the **European Employment Strategy** (EES)⁶ stresses the need for both more and better jobs, and for improved social inclusion and gender equality.

The **Community strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work**⁷ identifies poor mental health as the fourth most frequent cause of incapacity for work and highlights the need to develop a preventing culture in training programmes at all levels of education and in all fields, including vocational training and university education.

The **EU Health Strategy 2008-2013**⁸ recognises that mental health problems are a major cause of work absenteeism and early retirement, thereby causing immense economic losses and social burdens.

However, despite the strong correlation between mental well-being and work conditions, and despite the increasing attention to this topic at European level, there is limited awareness among policy makers about the workplace as a major setting for promoting mental well-being⁹. Developing policies to protect mental health at work will offer a twofold possibility:

- a) help realise the goals of a comprehensive mental health policy, and
- b) help realise some of the goals of employment, public health, education and social policies, each of which have an impact on mental health and well-being at work.

Key recommendations

In order to develop a **comprehensive mental health promotion policy in employment**, Mental Health Europe calls upon decision makers at European, national and local levels to take action and to put the following recommendations into practice:

- **A positive mental health approach**¹⁰ **for all people at work** shall be encouraged, while ensuring at the same time that the needs of individuals

³ Jané-Llopis, E.&Anderson, P.(2005). Mental Health Promotion and Mental Disorder Prevention. A policy for Europe. Radboud University Nijmegen.

⁴ Health-EU portal, section on EU activities linked to mental health: http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/health_problems/mental_health/index_en.htm

⁵ Commission website on the Lisbon Strategy: http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/index_en.htm

⁶ Commission website on the European Employment Strategy:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_strategy/index_en.htm

⁷ Commission website on the Community strategy on health and safety at work:

http://ec.europa.eu:80/employment_social/emplweb/news/news_en.cfm?id=209

⁸ White Paper 'Together for Health: A Strategic Approach for the EU 2008-2013'. COM(2007) 630

⁹ Wynne R., Director, Work Research Centre (Ireland), and expert of ProMenPol project

(<http://www.mentalhealthpromotion.net/>)

¹⁰ "Medical models of mental health are still dominant in some EU countries and may obscure the social causes and contexts of mental distress. '**Mental well-being**' is a more useful term to use than 'mental (ill) health' as it is something that all European citizens can readily relate to their own lives and experiences". MHE response to the consultation on the Green Paper on Mental Health (http://www.mhe-sme.org/assets/files/MHE%20response_final.pdf)

with mental health problems are duly taken into account when designing employment policies.

- **Core elements of employment policies** must include ongoing job support that encompasses opportunity for career growth, and job placement that provides an opportunity for advancement. Employment policies shall not exclusively focus on skills training as this would isolate individuals from the rest of society.
- **Interventions to reduce stress in the workplace** shall be designed and linked effectively to existing initiatives, encouraging cross-sectoral and multi-level cooperation between key stakeholders within and outside the health and employment sectors.
- **Mental well-being promotion in the workplace** must be built upon the individual's strengths and abilities while de-emphasising any mental, intellectual or physical disability. Career development programmes should centre on the individual preferences on securing the competitive jobs they want, with job development tailored to their own career interests and capabilities.
- **Clear and accountable information** must be provided to the employers on the importance and benefits of promoting mental well-being at work.
- **The education sector at all levels** shall be engaged as it plays a key role in promoting awareness and improving resilience by teaching positive coping strategies to enable people to recognise signs and symptoms of mental health distress.
- **Training and social support must be provided** in order to empower people at work and lead them to improvements in competence, coping strategies, job satisfaction, work capacity and reduced stress.
- **Initiatives that improve equal employment opportunities** for all, and in particular for those with mental health problems, must be encouraged and supported. All individuals have equal rights to seek, obtain, and maintain employment in their community.