



**Conference on the Health of Young People: Be Healthy, Be Yourself  
9 – 10 July 2009**

**PROMOTE HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN MENTAL WELL-BEING!**

**Mental health status of young people in the EU**

Good mental health in childhood is a prerequisite for optimal emotional and psychological development, productive social relationships, effective learning, ability to care for oneself, good physical health and effective economic participation as adults. Whilst the majority of young people in the EU enjoy good mental health, with around 80% of young people in Europe reporting a high level of mental well-being<sup>1</sup>, up to 50-75% of mental disorders present in adult life have their onset during adolescence. Mental health problems have risen to achieve significant importance within child and adolescent health and can be identified in between 10% and 20% of young people, with higher rates among disadvantaged population groups.

The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is fundamental to the future social and economic growth of the EU. It is thus important to promote mental health and well-being and prevent mental disorders in the early years of life and amongst children and young people. This requires progressive universal policies and action across a wide range of policy areas, particularly child and family policy, education, employment and training policy and through support for parents during the early years of a child's life. Targeted support and actions are also required particularly where there is increased evidence of risk factors for poor mental health and mental illness<sup>2</sup>.

**The Built Environment and Mental Health**

The built environment has direct and indirect effects on mental health.

Children are more vulnerable to changes in their physical, emotional and social environments because of their rapid physical and mental health growth and smaller body size. The health and well-being of children depends on the safety and quality of their physical / natural environments, built environments and social environments – at home, school and in the community. Children also need to be in environments which protect them from violence, abuse, exploitation, injuries and neglect.

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<sup>1</sup> Mental Health in Youth and Education, Consensus Paper, <http://www.ec-mental-health-process.net/consensus.html>

<sup>2</sup> European Pact for Mental Health and Wellbeing, European Commission, June 2008, [http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph\\_determinants/life\\_style/mental/docs/pact\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/docs/pact_en.pdf)

High-rise housing is inimical to the psychological well-being of women with young children. Poor-quality housing appears to increase psychological distress<sup>3</sup>.

Indirectly, the physical environment may influence mental health by altering psychosocial processes with mental health consequences. Personal control, socially supportive relationships, and restoration from stress and fatigue are all affected by properties of the built environment.

More research is needed to examine the potential role of the physical environment in mental health. Even more challenging is the task of developing underlying models of how the built environment can affect mental health. It is also likely that some individuals may be more vulnerable to mental health impacts of the built environment. Because exposure to poor environmental conditions is not randomly distributed and tends to concentrate among the poor and ethnic minorities, we also need to focus more attention on the health implications of multiple environmental risk exposure.

### **Create supportive environments to protect child mental health and well-being**

The inextricable links between people and their environment constitutes the basis for a socio-ecological approach to health. Changing patterns of life, work and leisure have a significant impact on health. Work and leisure should be a source of health and well-being for people. The way society organizes work should help create a healthy society. Health promotion generates living and working conditions that are safe, stimulating, satisfying and enjoyable.

Experts agree that we need to focus not only upon individual behaviour change, but also upon health-promoting environments. Although environmental problems on a global scale may seem overwhelming, nevertheless, much progress can be made at local levels to create and maintain healthy environments<sup>4</sup>.

The terms 'disease prevention' and 'health protection' have been used to describe various medical and public health strategies aimed at preventing the onset of physical and mental illness (eg vaccinations against infectious diseases, reduction of workplace hazards, and governmental regulation of food and drug safety).

The concept of 'health promotion', however, differs from the disease prevention orientation in that it places greater emphasis on the role of individuals, groups and organisations as active agents in shaping health practices and policies to optimize both individual wellness and collective wellbeing. Mental health promotion aims at protecting the mental health status of the population and ensuring equal opportunities and resources to enable all people to achieve their fullest mental health and well-being potential. This includes a secure foundation in a supportive environment, access to information, life skills and opportunities for making healthy choices. People cannot achieve their fullest mental health potential unless they are able to take control of those things which determine their health.

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<sup>3</sup> Evans, Gary W. [Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine](#), Volume 80, Number 4, Dec 2003 , pp. 536-555(20)

<sup>4</sup> Stokols, D. (1992). 'Establishing and maintaining healthy environments: Toward a social ecology of health promotion.' *American Psychologist*, 41(1), 6-22.

## **Conclusion: Key recommendations from Mental Health Europe**

Despite there is general acknowledgement that environmental factors can lead to disease, disability and other medical conditions, the connections to mental health conditions are not as well-known. However, there is a substantial amount of scientific evidence showing that living in unhealthy environments can lead to both temporary and long-term mental health problems and illness<sup>5</sup>.

Policy and decision makers have to take action to promote supportive environments and to prevent environmental exposures to toxic substances that can contribute to raise mental health problems. In order to achieve a real change, Mental Health Europe puts forwards the following recommendations to be put into practice:

- **Identifying and removing the risk factors may improve the mental well-being of all and the quality of life for the affected individuals and their families** (see annex). Unfortunately, some effects of some exposures are irreversible, and so preventing the risk in the first place is always the best route. Parents and other family members, teachers, coworkers and health-care providers are encouraged to look for physical cues related to mental health issues. However, individual vigilance can go only so far: prevention of many exposures requires society-level policy changes.
- **Systematic assessment of the mental health impact of a rapidly changing environment** - particularly in the areas of employment and urbanization - is essential and must be followed by action to ensure positive benefit to the well-being of the individuals. The protection of the natural and built environments and the conservation of natural resources must be addressed in any mental health promotion strategy.<sup>6</sup>
- **Reducing physical, architectural and infrastructural barriers.** More accessible, safer and securer transport should be provided. Social aspects of transport should be a challenge for the policy makers as many countries report that people with mental health problems face situations of isolation, loneliness and social exclusion due to transport problems<sup>7</sup>.
- **Integrating mental health considerations into city urban planning,** by introducing basic education on (mental) health determinants in the curricula of urban planners, architects and other relevant professionals.
- **Sustainable partnerships should be created between urban, social and health planners, as well as young people** in order to create and improve the infrastructures for young people. Potential partners to engage in different settings are schools and youth organisations, as well as local authorities, NGOs, and local City Councils. Young people shall be encouraged to take part in the social and cultural life of their communities, by creating supportive environments and implementing peer-led activities for adolescents and young people.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fact Sheet on Mental Health and Environmental Exposures, Learning and Developmental Disabilities Initiative, November 2008, <http://www.iceh.org/pdfs/LDDI/MentalHealthFactSheet.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, International Conference on Health Promotion 'The move towards a new public health', 17-21 November 1986 Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

<sup>7</sup> See recommendations in the MHE response to the EC Green Paper on Public Transport, March 2008, <http://www.mhe-sme.org/en/publications/mhe-position-papers.html>

<sup>8</sup> 'Promoting the mental health and well-being of the new generations. Policy position of Mental Health Europe', Dec 2008, <http://www.mhe-sme.org/en/publications/mhe-position-papers.html>

*Annex*

<b>Mental Health in the EU - Environmental determinants of mental health<sup>9</sup></b>	
<b>RISK FACTORS</b>	<b>PROTECTIVE FACTORS</b>
access to drugs and alcohol displacement isolation and alienation lack of education, transport, housing neighbourhood disorganisation peer rejection poor social circumstances poor nutrition poverty racial injustice and discrimination social disadvantage urbanisation violence and delinquency war work stress unemployment	empowerment ethnic minorities integration positive interpersonal interactions social participation social responsibility and tolerance social services social support and community networks

**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.

[www.mhe-sme.org](http://www.mhe-sme.org)

<sup>9</sup> 'Prevention of Mental Disorders. Effective Interventions and Policy Options', WHO, 2004, [www.who.int/mental\\_health/.../prevention\\_of\\_mental\\_disorders\\_sr.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/.../prevention_of_mental_disorders_sr.pdf)