# COVID-19:

Our mental health
will shape Europe's future.

Act now to boost mental health
policy.

The impact of COVID-19 on the 84 million people with mental ill-health in the European Union alone should not be underestimated. The current crisis is unleashing unprecedented social and economic consequences on our societies, and even more so on people with mental ill health, as they are especially at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Given the anticipated demand for medium and long term psychosocial support in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, governments need to act now if they want to ensure that the current public health crisis does not become a sustained social crisis, with stark consequences for inclusive growth and cohesion of European States.

## We need to act now

COVID-19 exposes us to a shared vulnerability when our most valued universal asset, our health, is at stake. The pandemic, however, can disproportionately hit people who are already facing difficult situations, including people with psychosocial disabilities. In addition to common risks and challenges, people with mental ill-health face a disruption of support and services and are at increased risk of violence and further discrimination and social exclusion.

Fear, uncertainty and stress caused by these exceptional circumstances can exacerbate mental health problems and lead to long-term negative consequences within communities, families and on the individual level for people experiencing mental distress. In addition, economic disadvantage and the deterioration of social networks and local dynamics carry the risk to create further inequalities, leading to increased mental health problems and ultimately to less cohesive societies.

Building on 35 years of action in the European arena, Mental Health Europe calls for a human rights-based response to the Coronavirus pandemic, prioritising people over profit and respecting the needs of people with psychosocial disabilities.

Our recommendations:

# 1. PUBLIC COMMUNICATION INITIATIVES

COVID-19 puts a spotlight on how our mental health is influenced by a range of social determinants such as where we live, work and age. While there are, inevitably, individual differences in our reactions to the pandemic, it is key that the current situation and its consequences are primarily seen as a social crisis demanding a collective and social response.

European states and the EU can:

## Acknowledge publicly the additional stresses

Acknowledge publicly the additional stresses that 'lockdown' puts on people physically, mentally and economically. Experiencing mental distress now is a normal response to exceptional circumstances.

## Share good practices across Europe

Share good practices across Europe where countries have developed clear communications to citizens around looking after their mental health and wellbeing[1].

## Launch prevention public health campaigns

Launch public health campaigns to prevent an increased consumption of psychotropic drugs that can be prescribed by general practitioners and mental health practitioners and as such, avoid the medicalisation of experiencing distress in the current circumstances. Information campaigns to prevent an increased consumption of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs are also needed.

## Invest in mental health literacy

Invest now in mental health literacy. This is of the utmost importance in various settings, from health care professionals having to deal with the mental health impact of the crisis on patients or their families, to frontline workers and public

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[1]      As an example, in Scotland the Government launched a media campaign called #clearyourhead which gives tips on managing wellbeing and links to support that can be provided

officials that come in contact with citizens in periods of confinement, to the general public[2].

## Provide accurate and clear information in an accessible format

Prepare well for the 'recovery' phase of the pandemic as lockdown measures are gradually released/relaxed.

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2       WHO's QualityRights initiative provides materials for training, guidance and transformation

As there will still be anxiety and stress for citizens during this uncertain period, accurate and clear information, made accessible to people with psychosocial disabilities in format and provision, is key to citizens' wellbeing .

The EU could support Member States in preparing for this, for example by providing communication guidelines. If Member States find alignment in their public communications, it will help citizens cope with the uncertainty.

# 2. ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Some existing support for people with mental health problems is being reduced or stopped during the lockdown. In addition, it is reasonable to suppose that the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences will impact people with pre-existing mental health problems and psychosocial disabilities to greater extent than the general population. Therefore, proactive steps should be taken to identify and contact people who are at risk of social exclusion and discrimination. Those who are more socially disadvantaged are less likely to access support, and policy makers should be proactive in assuring that services and support reach everyone without exception.

European governments and the EU can:

## Stimulate online psychosocial and peer support

Stimulate online psychosocial support and peer support helplines if not done yet and provide funding to access devices if necessary.

## Plan for increased demand in mental health services

Plan for increased demands and referrals to mental health services as lockdown is relaxed, and ensure they remain properly funded. Strengthening integrated social and healthcare could be key to this, and investment in peer workers is crucial.

### Invest in community-based health services

Increasingly invest in community-based health services that respect the will and preferences of users. Services in the community are showing the flexibility to adapt and to reach out actively to persons in vulnerable situations.

### Use funding to provide care in the community

Ensure that funding is used for community-based care respectful of the UN CRPD and not for further institutionalisation of people with psychosocial disabilities.

### Ensure access to domestic violence support

Provide access to domestic violence information and services to support people, including children, experiencing abuse and violence at home. People with psychosocial disabilities, of any age, may experience increased risk of abuse and violence during home quarantine or home isolation.

### Rethink priorities of the EU health agenda

Rethink priorities of the EU health agenda and take up a stronger coordination and support role in strengthening human rights compliant mental health systems in Europe.

# 3. PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS

In times of great uncertainty, citizens look to their governments for leadership. The current crisis puts at risk the human rights of people with mental ill health and psychosocial disabilities.

European governments and the EU, in collaboration with civil society and people with lived experience, can:

### Reverse the reduction of rights immediately

Be aware of where existing mental health legislation or other state powers have had safeguards for citizens reduced to allow expediency in light of Covid-19 and make sure that these reductions in rights are reversed as soon as possible.

### Promote basic social rights

Ensure that progress that has already been made in supporting community-living schemes and social support for people with psychosocial disabilities are not cut down. Economic protection packages appropriate to people with psychosocial disabilities should include universal basic income, income protection schemes, loan guarantees, medical insurance cover, rent protection (and protection from eviction), government equity transfers etc.

## Adopt comprehensive long-term strategies

Adopt now comprehensive long-term strategies to mitigate the health and socio-economic consequences of the current crisis on people with psychosocial disabilities, involving people with psychosocial disabilities and their representative organisations in the design of the strategies.

Mental Health Europe calls on policy makers from all parties and institutions to come together and act now to boost mental health policy, recognising the impact of the crisis on the mental health of millions of front-line health workers, the newly unemployed, their families, and so many others during and after confinement.

It's time for a politics of compassion, kindness and care. Together we can make mental health a priority.

**Additional information on COVID-19 and mental health can be found on Mental Health Europe's resource page:**
www.bit.ly/COVID19-MentalHealth