

Mental health and the environment: Bringing nature back into people's lives

How European policies can better reflect the impact of environmental degradation on people's mental health and well-being

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Introduction

The event is the official launch of the mental health and environment **policy paper** by the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) and Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal). This paper was funded by a grant from Johnson & Johnson.

The background paper reviews available scientific evidence on the correlation between the environment and people's mental health and well-being in Europe and identifies solutions for policymakers. The paper:

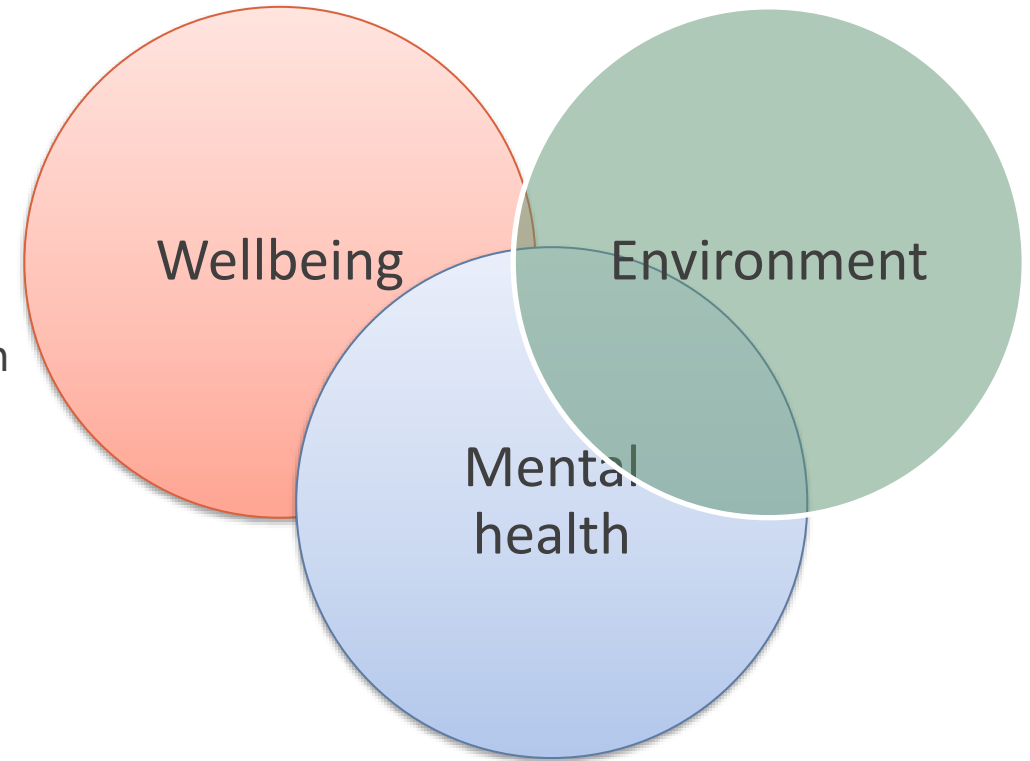
- investigates environmental degradation and pollution as a threat to mental health,
- looks into nature as an enabler of good mental health and the role of nature in the treatment of mental health conditions, and
- discusses how the interplay between the environment and mental health is incorporated into major policy documents and suggest ways for further integration.

On the back of the paper, IEEP and ISGlobal are launching a **policy brief** with recommendations on how increasing biodiversity protection can help protect Europeans' health and aid in the COVID-19 economic recovery.



Mental health and environmental protection: towards a win-win

- Mental disorders such as depression and anxiety today affect more than **1 in 6 EU citizens** representing a massive personal and societal burden.
- Poor mental health is estimated to cost Europe over **€600 billion/year** or over 4% of GDP of which a third in direct health care spending.
- Protected areas have been estimated to provide mental health benefits worth **EUR 5.55 trillion** globally
- **Natural capital investment**, including restoration of carbon-rich habitats and climate friendly agriculture, is among the **five most important fiscal recovery policies**, offering high economic multipliers
- Covering the investment needs of the Natura 2000 network of protected areas could create up to **half a million additional jobs**.



Sources: Mental health: Fact sheet WHO (2019);

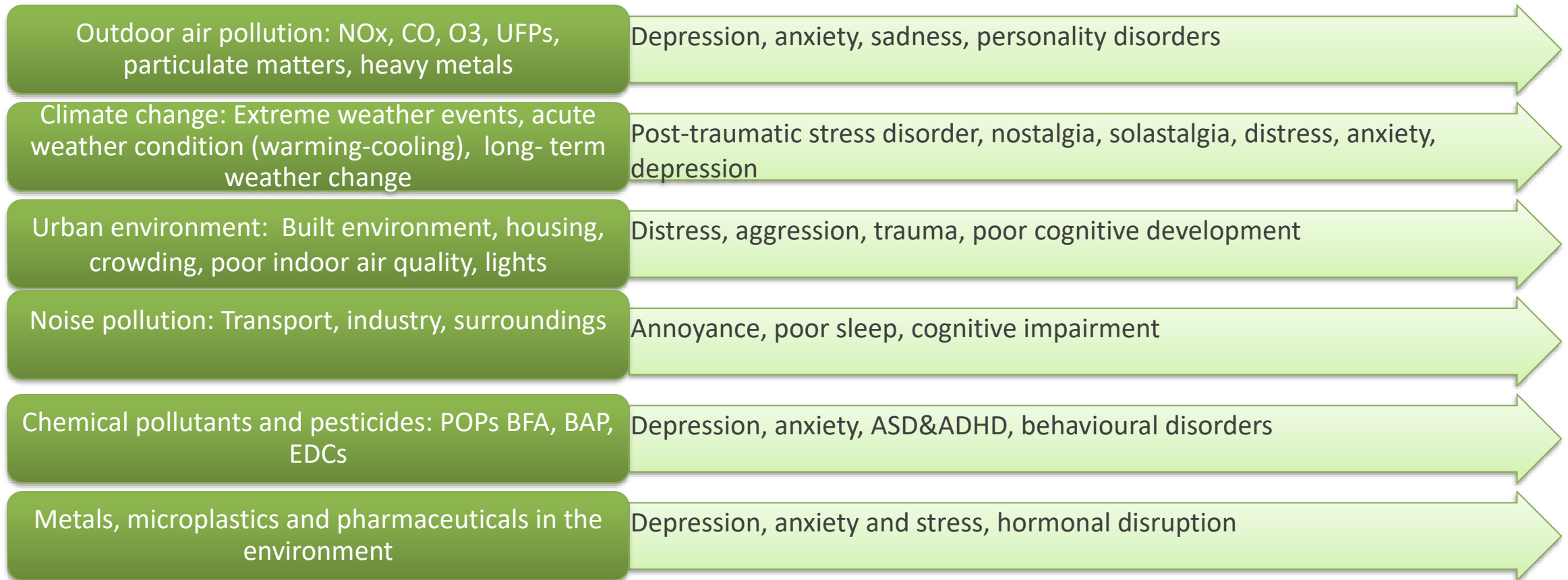
Health at a Glance: Europe 2018; State of Health in the EU Cycle

(Buckley et al 2019)

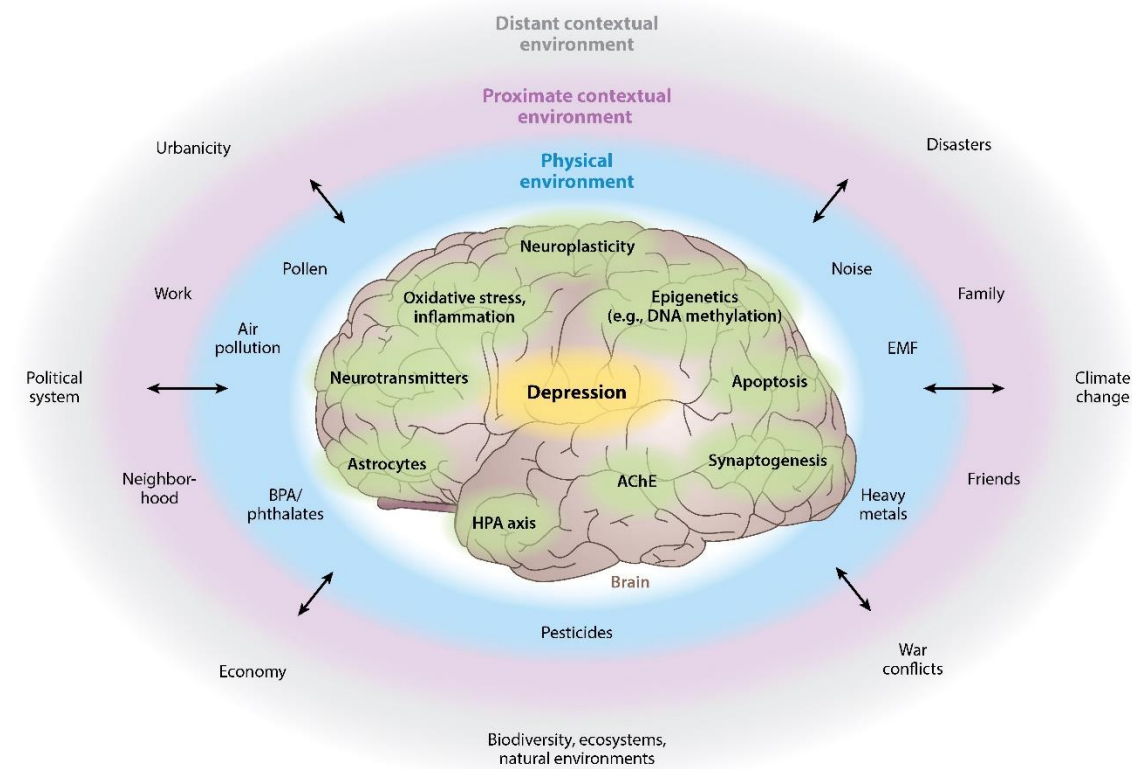
(World Economic Forum 2020)

(ten Brink et al 2016)

Determinants/exposure mental health outcomes



Determinants/exposure → mental health outcomes



van den Bosch M, Meyer-Lindenberg A. 2019. *Annu. Rev. Public Health* 40:239–59

Source: Van den Bosch, M. et al. *Annu. Rev. Public Health* 2019. 40:18.1–18.21

Key messages

Policy paper

Dedicated EU mental health and well-being strategy that includes an overview of priority environmental risk factors and environmental enablers and their impact on mental health and wellbeing – co-benefits



Uneven social distribution of environmental determinants –eg polluted areas, access to green space: maximising mental benefits would involve making spaces for nature in places where it can be most effective

Public policy research should compile substantive evidence that quantifies the economic benefits (eg relative cost/efficiency of environmental factors in preventing harms and helping cures



From both climate- and biodiversity perspectives, the protection of existing green spaces should be prioritised over the development of new ones



Set of minimum requirements for health & well-being impact assessment of all sectoral policies - whilst jointly addressing the socio-economic, environmental determinants of mental health (Sustainability & Better Regulation)



Improve public access to green spaces optimised for mental health benefits will provide nature-based solutions to biodiversity- and climate policy objectives and hereby creating a triple win.



COVID-19 and Mental Health

- Belgium has seen a **sharp increase in the rates of depression** – from 10% in 2018 to 16% in 2020 (Sciensano, cited in UNRIC 2020).
- Around **60% of respondents to a survey in Poland have experienced increased general anxiety** as a result of the pandemic that has affected their daily functioning (Dragan 2020).
- In France, **18% of teleworkers showed symptoms of severe anxiety**, depression, and other mental disorders (UNRIC 2020).
- Parents in Italy and Spain are reporting that their children have **difficulties concentrating**, in addition to showing irritability, restlessness and nervousness (WHO 2020).
- Among persons without pre-pandemic reported mental health problems (Covicat cohort), **severe depression was present in 6.1% and severe anxiety in 13.5%** of the participants (results submitted, Goldberg X, et al, 2020).



TOWARDS RESILIENCE: A KEY CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE

- Access to nature can have immensely **positive effects on people's mental health**, according to a growing body of evidence.
- Environmental degradation, including climate change and pollution, poses a serious threat to our emotional state and well-being.
- Reducing pollution and protecting the environment can also contribute to **reduce multidimensional inequalities**
- The **ongoing COVID-19 crisis** and its socio-economic implications =significant consequences and increased human and economic costs of mental health for years to come.



- Increased need for Europe to strengthen its **economic, health, social, and ecological resilience**.
- addressing environmental degradation as **a win-win solution** for improving mental health and aiding the COVID-19 economic recovery
- Time to adopt the **'Planetary Health' concept**, which recognizes the interlinkages between the health of all that is living and between various Sustainable Development Goals.



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KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure **mainstreaming of health and well-being** considerations in the implementation of the European Green Deal, in particular through encouraging nature-based solutions in local adaptation strategies and urban greening plans, starting with an analysis of health co-benefits as part of forthcoming impact assessments linked with the EU's restoration plan.
- Address the **funding gap for implementing the EU Biodiversity Strategy** for 2030, for instance by ensuring at EU level that adequate cohesion funding, including through the European Regional Development Fund, is allocated to biodiversity protection and ecosystem restoration projects, and that nature-based solutions are promoted within the Recovery and Resilience Facility guidelines for Member States.
- Integrate **resilience indicators**, which consider inter-linkages between mental health and the environment, into the **European Semester, the forthcoming 8th Environment Action Programme, and the future communication on the “economy of well-being”**.
- As part of Europe's forthcoming **zero-pollution action plan, ensure that those furthest behind benefit the most**, by prioritising investments which increase access to nature and reduce exposure to pollution in low-income and marginalised communities throughout Europe.

References



Policy brief

<http://bit.ly/mhe-ieep-brief>



Background paper

<http://bit.ly/mhe-ieep>

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