

Blog

In tandem with COVID - 19, other, less visible, mental health crises are on the rise.

Michaela Stanová



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In the past years, changes in the digital, social and societal areas have contributed to opening up the discussion about mental health. Pandemic became yet another factor to accelerate this transition towards open communication about ongoing psychological issue in not only European society. Yet, modern times are bringing new challenges, such as [surpassing screen-time](#), growing [social media addiction](#), emphasis on productivity and currently, COVID-19. Additionally, the stigma surrounding mental health persists, particularly among older and male parts of population. The occurrence of COVID-19 caused not only an increase, as well as worsening of the pre-existing mental health conditions, but, thankfully, also interest in addressing them. Both on the level of individuals, and a legislative level.

As the principle of [subsidiarity](#)¹ proposes, mental health² issues fall under the purview of the Member States. That, however, does not mean that EU does not offer comprehensive guidelines and foundation to build the specific mental health programmes for each of the member states. EU has taken measures to help European citizens and national governments tackle this problem. Hence, which measures exactly, are they?

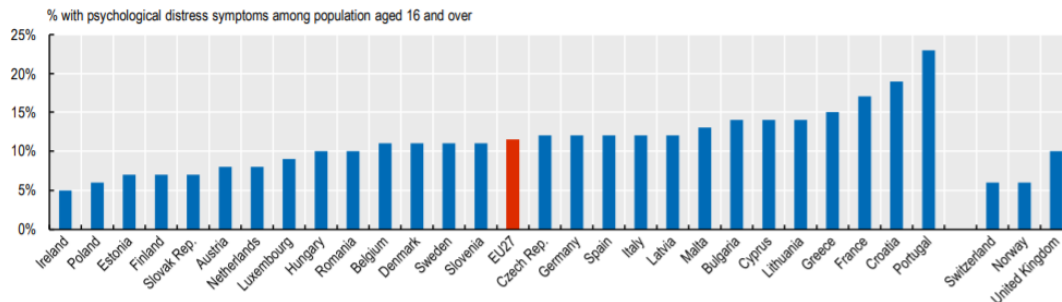
Before pandemic, [in a report from 2018](#), it has been identified that one in six people (17.3%) on average across EU countries had symptoms of psychological distress in 2016. Depression was one of the leading causes of disability. In the EU, one in 25 people has been diagnosed with depression, one in 20 with anxiety. The total costs of mental health issues were estimated at more than 4% of GDP (more than EUR 600 billion) across the 28 EU countries. Without effective treatment and support, mental health problems can have a devastating effect on people's lives, and significantly increase the risk of dying from suicide, which was the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds. In 2017, over 48 000 people died of suicide across EU countries. The most frequent number of suicides were amongst men aged 45 and over. This is one of the results of [on-going stigmatization](#) of men expressing emotions or finding professional help. [Eight in ten](#) suicides are among men.

¹ When applied in the context of the EU, the principle of subsidiarity serves to regulate the exercise of the Union's non-exclusive powers. It rules out Union intervention when an issue can be dealt with effectively by Member States themselves at central, regional or local level. The Union is justified in exercising its powers only when Member States are unable to achieve the objectives of a proposed action satisfactorily and added value can be provided if the action is carried out at Union level.

² Mental health is „a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community“ ([WHO 2004 \(pdf\)](#)). Mental well-being is influenced not only by the individual's attributes and behaviours such as the ability to manage thoughts, emotions and interactions with others, but also by social, economic, cultural and environmental factors such as living standards, working conditions and social protection ([WHO 2013](#)).



Figure 3.20. Prevalence of psychological distress symptoms, 2018



Note: Differences across countries may reflect in part cultural differences. Data are not based on clinical diagnosis. The EU average is unweighted.
Source: OECD calculations based on EU survey on Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/pcxvjy>

These numbers contributed to the realization that mental health is of concern for European Union. With no end of the pandemic in sight, unusual conditions such as isolation, reduced socialization, loss of employment, mourning of death of a close one are only some of the contributors to [worsening mental health](#) across all countries.

Some groups, like frontline workers, people with lower socio-economic status, women³, young people⁴, and elderly have been proportionately affected more than others. With lockdowns all over Europe, the access to much needed help has also been disrupted. People, who have suffered from these issues before, most likely ended up solving them on their own like everyone else, in isolation. Isolation and the fear coming from unpredictable and unknown pandemic were significantly associated with the [change in major depression and anxiety prevalence](#). Countries hit hardest by the pandemic during 2020, such as the V4 countries, had the biggest increase of such disorders.

These problems are being tackled on several levels. They include their own initiative to conflate the national stances on how to deal with rising number of people suffering from mental health problem or to raise awareness and normalize it. Some of the measures are being negotiated on

³ There has been an increase in stress and mental health issues connected to it mostly [among women](#), since they were more likely to be affected by „[the social and economic consequences of the pandemic](#). Additional carer and household responsibilities due to school closures or family members becoming unwell are more likely to fall on women. Women are more likely to be financially disadvantaged during the pandemic due to lower salaries, less savings, and less secure employment than their male counterparts. They are also more likely [to be victims of domestic violence](#),

⁴ Biggest prevalence of depressive disorders and anxiety among young age groups. UNESCO declared COVID-19 to be the most severe disruption to global education in history, estimating 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries to be fully or partially out of school in 2020. With school closures and wider social restrictions in place, young people have been unable to come together in physical spaces, affecting their ability to learn and for peer interaction. Furthermore, young people are more likely to become unemployed during and following economic crises than older people. “



April
2022

the international level. Implemented measures funded by EU, or on which EU collaborates include:

- The European Commission together with Member States prioritised mental health and depression prevention in the [Public Health agenda](#). The aim is to develop mental health promotion and prevention programmes, such programmes and initiatives are included in the [Best practices portal](#).
- A July 2020 European Parliament resolution recognises mental health as a fundamental human right, calling for a 2021-2027 EU action plan on mental health. Members of the European Parliament have also called on the Commission to put mental health at the heart of EU policymaking.
- One of the possible options to partly solve an [increased demand](#) for Mental health care is [eHealth](#). The European Commission wants to provide digital services in health and care, so citizens can ask for help more efficiently, without leaving their home, waiting rooms or lists. It also lowers the cost of psychological help, therefore makes it more accessible to people from lower economic groups.

For example, telehealth app Kry just launched internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy for those struggling with mental health issues, a smartphone-based treatment already available in Sweden and due to be rolled out across Europe in 2022.

- The e- [MEN project](#), which is a EU-wide cooperation platform for e-mental health innovation and implementation, supports and policy.
- The EU-funded [EMPOWER](#) project will investigate and test the impact and cost-effectiveness of a compatible eHealth intervention platform aiming to prevent common mental health complications and reduce psychological distress in the workplace.
- Organization [MHE](#) (Mental Health Europe) formulates recommendations for policy makers to develop mental health friendly policies and is newly a member of the European Expert Group on Disability. That indicates a stronger focus on tackling mental health diseases as seriously as other disabilities.
- Many global and regional organizations have released online guidebooks for the public, specifically for dealing with the lighter mental health issues during COVID 19. One of them being [WHO](#), with which EU closely collaborates.
- During the World Health Assembly in May 2021, governments from around the world recognized the need to scale up quality mental health services at all levels.
- European Union is co-funding the guided self-management tools (e.g. [iFightDepression](#) developed by the European Alliance Against Depression.)



April
2022

- E- Men project, which is a EU-wide cooperation platform for e-mental health innovation and implementation that

By taking the initiative to help people deal with their mental health conditions, the European Union contributes to the life expectancy and quality of its citizens, their resilience, lower addiction rates, general well-being and finally, economic stability.



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Contact

Web: europeum.org

Prague Office address: Staroměstské náměstí 4/1, 110 00, Praha 1

Tel.: +420 212 246 552

E-mail: europeum@europeum.org

Brussels Office address: 77, Avenue de la Toison d'Or. B-1060 Brusel, Belgie

Tel: +32 484 14 06 97

E-mail: brussels@europeum.org

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