

The European Commission
Directorate-general for Health and Consumer protection
Green Paper

Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on mental health for the European union

Within the ILSI Europe Nutrition and Mental Performance Group, food industry and academic partners work to advance understanding of the effects of diet and food components on mental state and performance.

In this context, we read with interest the Green Paper entitled “Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on mental health for the European union”. As is illustrated in the Paper, mental illness is one of the most debilitating conditions, causing great burden to the affected individuals, their families and society. We therefore fully agree that promotion of mental health by preventive or palliative measures and improving quality of life is of the highest importance.

We would like to contribute to the discussion by pointing out two issues that in our opinion should be considered in the development of the EU action plans on mental health.

1. Cognitive impairment as a major mental health problem

The term ‘mental health problems’ compasses a great variety of psychiatric, neurological and psychological conditions, with varying severity. We feel that this diversity of mental disturbances is not sufficiently addressed in the current paper.

Particularly problems relating to cognitive functioning appear to be largely ignored. Deficits in concentration, memory, problem solving, alertness and other intellectual functions can severely hamper professional and social activities. Cognitive impairment is considered one of the most important of factors that contribute to reduced quality of life. These problems also constitute a considerable economic burden in terms of work efficiency, unemployment and health care resources.

Cognitive impairment accompanies many psychiatric disorders, but a major part can be seen as an independent mental problem or, in severe cases, as a discrete mental illness. Dementia is clearly the most severe form of cognitive decline, but milder age-related cognitive problems, such as seen in patients with Mild Cognitive Impairment and even ‘normal’ age related impairment can seriously compromise the individual’s quality of life. These milder forms are highly prevalent in the elderly population. The prevalence of all forms of age-related cognitive impairment will show a sharp increase as the population ages.

Disturbed or sub-optimal cognitive development in children constitutes another target for strategic action. Preventing problems during brain growth and maturation in early childhood, and ensuring adequate conditions for formal and informal education during later childhood, helps promote a healthy mental state, higher quality of life and social contribution later in life. Prevention and management of early onset mental

conditions, such as conduct disorder, autism, attention hyperactivity disorder, and dyslexia is one of the strategic pillars. Another is to ensure optimal environments and conditions for the development of the 'normal' child. These focal points are not or insufficiently addressed.

2. The role of nutrition in maintaining mental health

Several promising strategies to promote mental health have been identified in the paper, including social network stimulation, psychological support, health education programmes and integration strategies. The fact that lifestyle factors can play a major role in preventing and perhaps even alleviating mental health problems, and that lifestyle interventions can therefore be a powerful preventive strategy, is not mentioned. Promotion of physical and mental activity is part of this. Good nutrition is another important factor. An unbalanced diet has been associated with sub-optimal cognitive development in children, diminished school performance, and risk of neurodegenerative and psychiatric diseases. Furthermore, an unhealthy diet promotes other health problems that in turn act as risk factors for mental problems, e.g. cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Thirdly, evidence is emerging that intake of certain food components and avoiding others can have palliative effects in patients with mental problems. We feel that nutritional education should be an integral part of the strategic plan to promote mental health.

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