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Framework for Promoting
Mental Health in Europe
Executive summary

Health promotion has become part of European Union (EU) action. Within health promotion, the role of mental health has recently been emphasised by the Commission. By supporting projects related to mental health, the Commission has thus signalled to Member States that mental health issues are important and that all countries should be aware of the challenges and possibilities related to mental health and its promotion.

The aim of this document, which is the result of a one-year project supported by European Commission DG V/F/3 and co-ordinated by STAKES (the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health, FIN), is to outline the key concepts and a framework for the action needed to promote mental health in Europe. The framework is required in planning, implementing, evaluating and monitoring national and transnational mental health promotion and prevention programmes and policies. The document stresses that mental health and issues related to it call for our special attention because they affect everybody and because they cannot be left to the responsibility of mental health care alone.

Mental health is seen as an essential component of general health. Mental health is a result of various predisposing factors (e.g. early childhood experiences); precipitating factors (e.g. stressful life events); social context; and individual resources (e.g. self-esteem) and experiences. Positive mental health refers to mental health as a capacity to perceive, comprehend and interpret our surroundings, to adapt to them and to change them if necessary, to think and speak, and to communicate with each other. It is determined by four main influences: individual factors and experiences, social interaction, societal structures and resources, and cultural values.

Mental ill-health (negative mental health) encompasses a continuum, which extends from the most severe mental disorders to a variety of symptoms of different intensity and duration, resulting in a variety of consequences. Much mental ill-health is experienced as a part of normal life and is not, usually, presented for care or recorded in epidemiological studies. Such everyday mental problems are correlates of personal distress and can take the form of, for instance, lack of motivation, poor concentration or worrying.
Mental health and well-being are, indeed, issues of everyday life, and should therefore be of interest to every citizen and every employee, and to all care, education and administration sectors. Mental health is created, and jeopardised, in families and schools, on streets and in workplaces. It is the results of, among other things, the way we are treated by others, and the way we treat other people and ourselves.

There are many false assumptions concerning mental health. It is, for instance, widely believed that mental ill-health cannot be treated or prevented. The worst social consequence of such false assumptions is the stigma of mental ill-health. Moreover, the cultural influences of negative attitudes towards mental health tend to maintain this situation. Unlike physical ill-health, which can in many cases be openly discussed, topics related to mental health are often linked with shame.

As a public health concern, mental ill-health is as serious as physical ill-health. Mental disorders are as common as physical disorders. Mental disorders increase mortality, cause disability and suffering, bring about economic losses, lead to exclusion, and influence the development of subsequent generations, possibly even more than physical ill-health. And yet, in western societies mental health has a secondary position to physical health. Mental health receives less attention at the level of policy formulation, decision-making and health service provision. The same concerns investments in health promotion.

We are justified in investing in the promotion of mental health. Promotion of mental health is a comprehensive strategy and a set of positive activities aiming to:

- enhance the visibility and value of mental health at the level of societies, sections of societies and individuals; and
- protect, maintain and improve mental health.

The expression promotion of mental health is normally used as an umbrella concept. It covers a wide range of strategic approaches and paradigms. Promotion of mental health and prevention of mental disorders are seen in this report as necessarily inter-related and overlapping activities. Promotive efforts are also preventive, and vice versa.
Promotion of mental health puts special emphasis on participation and empowerment and on intersectoral co-operation. It can work with whole societies, communities, social groups, risk groups or individuals. Action aiming at promoting mental health underlines and highlights values supporting sustainable development.

Because mental health is partially culturally determined, the approaches, methods and tools used for promoting mental health must be adjusted to the social, cultural, gender, age-related and developmental contexts in question.

Promotion of mental health, like health promotion in general, can work at individual, interactional, structural and cultural levels.

Practical efforts promoting mental health strive to find and enhance factors and processes that protect mental health and reduce factors harmful to mental health. When the efforts are effective, they result in improved well-being, less human suffering, a lower prevalence and incidence of mental disorders, better use of services, higher quality of life, improved social functioning, enhanced social integration and other related outcomes.

Mental health promoting efforts can be action-, development- or research-oriented. A large volume of studies, mostly focusing on individual or interactional determinants of mental health, demonstrates the effectiveness of mental health promotion. However, research projects attempting to enhance the visibility or the value of mental health have not been reported. There are also no studies analysing or comparing mental health policies.

The following areas of priority, either general, concerning development and research, or action-oriented, are emphasised in the report:

- **Enhancing the value and visibility of mental health**
  - Establishing large scale public information campaigns on mental health
  - Starting mental health impact evaluation in all administration
  - Identifying EC action linked with mental health and providing a supportive information exchange capacity
Key Concepts

- Integrating mental health aspects to all health promotion programmes
- Including mental health instruction in school education thoroughly
- Emphasising mental health in all professional training

• Empowerment, participation and Information Society

- Enhancing participatory, community-based mental health promotion
- Raising awareness concerning strengths-based approaches and effective forms of self- and peer-help.
- Establishing innovative projects to develop ‘good telematic content’ and ‘good telematic interfaces’
- Evaluating the risks of marginalisation resulting from increased use of information technology
- Reorienting mental health services and promotion in line with the developing Information Society
- Setting up a network focusing on the telematics of social inclusion and mental health promotion.

• Towards mental health promoting working life

- Raising employers’ awareness of the importance of mental health and its promotion in the work place
- Disseminating information on practices in work place mental health promotion, e.g. by
- Identifying common goals and enhancing the positive aspects of the work process and environment
- Recognising the balance between job demands and occupational skills
- Enhancing social skills training and possibilities for collaboration and joint opportunities
- Developing the psychosocial climate at the work place
- Providing counselling for special groups, e.g. carried out before organisational or other changes
- Applying strategies focusing on enhancement of working capacity and early rehabilitation’
Key Concepts

- **Unemployment, underemployment and re-employment**
  - Evaluating comprehensively real effects of unemployment
  - Preventing stigmatisation of unemployment
  - Supporting re-employment through job creation
  - Supporting re-employment by developing the physical and mental resources of the unemployed
  - Searching actively intermediate statuses between work and unemployment
  - Developing multimodal programmes focusing on unemployment leading to marginalisation

- **Support and protection of children, young people and families with children**
  - Developing written strategic plans on promoting the mental health of children and young people
  - Increasing knowledge of the pathways leading to healthy development or marginalisation
  - Collecting data on the extent of child exploitation and creating protection for the children affected
  - Sharpening the focus on children’s needs in all health promotion programmes targeted at adults
  - Focusing on self-esteem, non-violent behaviour; and good communication and social skills in education
  - Collecting and disseminating information on programmes supporting early parent-child interaction

- **Enhancing quality of life of elderly people**
  - Preventing stigmatisation of old age and discrimination of elderly people
  - Supporting independent living by policy and programme measures
  - Developing programmes promoting self-support by intellectual and physical measures
  - Developing effective and feasible measures of preventive action
• Promoting mental health of alcohol and drug abusers
  - Developing measures focusing on prevention and reduction of combined substance abuse
  - Developing tolerant services for mentally ill intoxicant users who are out of the scope of rehabilitation efforts
  - Supporting research and development regarding the co-occurrence of intoxicant misuse and psychiatric disorders

• Supporting research and development
  - Emphasising transnational comprehensive evaluation of activities in promotion of mental health
  - Emphasising long-span implementation research looking at factors associated to effectiveness and at quality
  - Establishing mental health policy surveys and a policy database
  - Studying and developing the role of health care and social services in promotion of mental health
  - Enhancing information exchange between the researchers, administrators and implementers
  - Emphasising dimensions with European relevance like equity, participation and experienced quality in all R&D action

• Development of information and dissemination systems concerning mental health

Establishing a comprehensive mental health monitoring system by, e.g.
  - Collecting information on existing mental health indicators and their definitions
  - Collecting information on existing mental health information systems and analysing their quality, coverage and validity
  - Developing a mental health monitoring system for the use of the Member States and the Commission
- Testing the dimensions of the mental health monitoring system in pilot projects
- Establishing a high-capacity network for the collection, dissemination and analysis of relevant information

The recommendations for European action, presented in detail in the following section of the report, underline the need for R&D activities such as policy surveys, mental health monitoring and assessment of mental health promoting programmes; specific practical efforts; and the need to foster European co-operation in mental health issues. The recommendations include general guiding principles for action.
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