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YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH – THE CASE FOR A COMPREHENSIVE EU APPROACH

POSITION PAPER

The European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI) is a confederation of more than 40 national and European trade union organisations from over 20 European countries, with a total of more than 5 million individual members. Founded in 1990, CESI is a recognised European sectoral social partner and advocates improved employment conditions for workers in Europe and a strong social dimension in the EU. CESI Youth, founded in 2013, is the youth branch of CESI, steered by a Youth Representative, a Vice-Youth Representative, and a Board. CESI Youth represents the voice of numerous young members of CESI member unions.

Tackling youth mental health following the Covid pandemic: An EU approach is needed

Following the Covid pandemic and amidst a war in Ukraine, soaring inflation rates and uncertain economic and financial prospects for the EU, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that children and adolescents between 11 and 14 years are suffering from high degrees of depression and anxiety, tragically often leading to suicide.¹ Globally, one in seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder, accounting for 13% of the diseases in this age group². According to UNICEF, the second cause of death amongst youth in Europe is suicide³. Eurofound's 'Living, working and Covid-19'⁴ survey showcases that young people's mental health is in worse condition than that of the rest of the population: 55% of the young people interviewed for the survey reported to be struggling with mental health issues following the Covid pandemic lockdowns. And according to findings of the European Youth Forum⁵, almost two-thirds of young people in Europe may suffer from depression or anxiety.

CESI Youth considers it of vital importance to take decisive steps to improve the mental wellbeing of citizens, especially of the young ones.

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health> consulted in November 2022

² Idem

³ <https://www.unicef.org/media/108121/file/SOWC-2021-Europe-regional-brief.pdf> consulted in November 2022

⁴ Eurofound survey 'Living, working and COVID-19' <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2020/living-working-and-covid-19>, accessed November 4 2021.

⁵ European Youth Forum 'Beyond Lockdown' report <https://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/publication-pdfs/European%20Youth%20Forum%20Report%20v1.2.pdf>, accessed November 4 2021.

CESI Youth key demands are the following:

1. Member States must strengthen investments and evidence-based policies in mental health. They must **take immediate action to include youth perspectives in mainstream economic policies and address the impacts that Covid-19 has had on young people**, in terms of access to education, housing, healthcare and labour markets. The Covid-19 pandemic, the consequences of the war in Ukraine, and not least soaring inflation, have led to rising unemployment, increasing precarious work, decreasing incomes⁶, and lacking access to housing and healthcare.
2. **More effective programmes for a better occupational well-being should be developed and implemented in the workplaces.** Negative psychological, physical and social impacts on work-related stress, burnout or depression could be prevented if mental well-being in the workplace became a standard priority for management, work councils, trade unions and individual workers who need to be more empowered and in charge of their wellbeing. Mental health is a major occupational health and safety concern and should be included in EU-OSHA frameworks as well as national health and educational strategies.
3. CESI Youth welcomes the year 2023 as the European Year of Skills also from the perspective of mental health. However, the Year must be flanked by **serious public investments to adapt youth policies to skills mismatches and improved labour market integration**. This would ensure better employment conditions for young persons, and help alleviate mental pressures associated to lacking, unsuitable or non-rewarding working environments. Too little efforts were made at national and European level during the European Year of Youth in 2022 to address the most pressing issues faced by the young generation: unemployment, precariousness, skills mismatches, poverty, societal exclusion, and non-access to housing.
4. CESI Youth welcomes the Commission President's commitment⁷ to develop an EU Action Plan on mental health. Such strategy, spanning across all fields and sectors, is urgently needed. The EU and the Member States, together with all educational and occupational stakeholders, including social partners and unions and their youth representatives, should make mental well-being at the workplace an integral part of the ongoing post-Covid pandemic recovery. The aim must be to **reach a bottom-up, life-cycle approach to mental wellbeing in which all institutions involved at different stages are shaping, training, and delivering a way of living and working having mental wellbeing at the core**⁸.
5. **An EU Mental Health Strategy should comprise the right to telework and the right to disconnect of young people.** If well-designed, new forms of work contribute to changing mindsets towards more flexibility at work especially among young people. Telework and ICT-based mobile work led to higher degrees of flexibility of work arrangements – yet also to a blurring of work and private life. The right to disconnect and the respect of rest periods as foreseen by the EU working time directive are of crucial importance.

⁶ Moxon, D., Bacalso, C. and Șerban, A. M., *Beyond the pandemic: The impact of COVID-19 on young people in Europe*, European Youth Forum, Brussels, 2021.

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/strategic-planning/state-union-addresses_en, consulted in November 2022

⁸ It is important for all sectors including healthcare professionals, educational actors and academia, industry and social partners to have a joint approach to mental health and support services for those going through mental distress is provided. For Mental health issues often start at very early ages and this topic should be more discussed and promoted with school and student representatives, care givers and teachers. A reform of the education sector is needed in order to build better mental resilience of young people and to help them acquire the needed competences for the challenges that they face in the future.

6. A problem shared is a problem halved – this also applies to the ‘coming out’ of mental health issues by affected persons. **Stigmas around mental health need to be lifted**, addressing mental health issues needs to be part of our daily societal reality.
7. **Mental illnesses including anxiety and depression should be recognised in all Member States as serious health issues; appropriate funding for health services to address them should be made available, affordable, and accessible.** Despite the variety of therapeutic paths, most young people facing mental illness do not receive sufficient mental-health treatment⁹. Lack of access to treatment is a worldwide problem, and the gaps are extreme in some places, especially in poorer or more isolated regions and countries. Funds should be made available for early detection mechanisms, prevention, and treatment.
8. **More emphasis should be placed on prevention and early detection of mental distress through more targeted and tailored campaigns to raise awareness about the mental health of young people.** The costs to prevent mental illnesses are lower than the costs for treating them, and facing absenteeism at work due to mental illness is more expensive than taking appropriate preventive measures at organisational level. Targeted and tailored campaigns to raise awareness about the mental health of young people are needed. Mental health should be included in all policies and approaches, flanked by investments and campaigns to increase mental health literacy. Trade unions as well can play an active role in raising awareness about mental health at work.

⁹ <https://www.greens-efa.eu/opinions/youth-mental-health/> consulted in January 2023