

Public Health

World Mental Health Day 2018: Helping Children and Young People Cope

By Vytenis Andriukaitis, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety

In May of this year, along with thousands of people in 160 cities across the world, I took part in an event called "Darkness into Light." Together with my fellow Commissioners Phil Hogan and Christos Stylianides, colleagues and citizens of Brussels, we gathered at 4 in the morning at the Cinquantenaire park in Brussels and headed for a 5km walk to raise awareness and funds for suicide prevention. The walk was founded in Dublin in 2009, by grieving parents, as a way to commemorate their son who died from suicide.

Yesterday, the funds raised were transmitted to the organisations that work on raising awareness on suicide and mental health for these are issues that we do not talk about enough. There is still too much stigma attached. But I know that mental health issues can affect us at any time in our lives. This is why it is high time to put the mental health at the par of the physical health.

We must be particularly vigilant when it comes to children and young people. Recent figures show that more than one in six people in the EU – about 84 million people – suffer from mental health problems. Statistics also show that 50% of mental health disorders begin at a young age, particularly in adolescence [\[1\]](#). Furthermore, intentional self-harm remains one of the most common external causes of death of young people. In 2014, it accounted for 18 % of deaths for those aged 15-19 years, 21 % of deaths for young people aged 20-24 years and 20 % for those aged 25-29 years [\[2\]](#).

Our youth is exposed to different and new types of pressures than previous generations. In addition to the pressures of growing up, education, parental and societal expectations and peer relations; young people today have to deal with issues such as body shaming and cyberbullying.

To protect them, we must continue to promote the definition of health put forward by the World Health Organisation, which states that health is a complete state of physical, psychological and social well-being. This is a cross-sectoral issue – doctors, teachers and other care givers must work together.

The European Commission has recognised this with a number of important actions to help promote mental health and well-being. The 'European Framework for Action on Mental Health and Wellbeing', agreed in 2016, highlights what needs to be done in primary and secondary schools, as well as activities to prevent abuse, bullying, and violence against young people.

To implement the 'Framework for Action on Mental Health', the Commission created the EU Compass for Mental Health in 2016, a 'cross-cutting' database of policies and good practices, with a section specifically dedicated to youth mental health. It is now up to Member States, stakeholders, and health professionals to make the best possible use of the Compass and other EU initiatives.

Together with the Member States, industry and civil society, we introduced the "European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children". This is a series of actions for online safety, combining coordination, financial support, legislation and self-regulation aimed at protecting children from the risks of the digital world.

Helping our children and youth cope with the challenges they face in school, at home, online or amongst their peers will protect their physical and mental health and well-being. Let's all work together to spare other parents and other families the pain of coming to terms with a family member's, especially their child's, untimely death due to mental health illness.

Is there anything each of us can do on personal level? I say we can. We can start today checking in with a friend, colleague or family member that we think might be struggling with their mental health.

[\[1\]](#)

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Being_young_in_Europe_today_-_health

[\[2\]](#)

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Being_young_in_Europe_today_-_health

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