

## Input to Call for Evidence on a comprehensive approach to mental health

HIV Outcomes welcomes the European Commission’s upcoming Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health. With the breakthroughs in antiretroviral therapy (ART) and the increased life expectancy of people living with HIV, the incidence of multimorbidity, including mental health problems, is a growing concern<sup>1,2</sup>. In view of this evidence, we hence recommend that the Commission’s communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health calls for:

- **Support Member States in expanding access to mental health support to those who experience stigma and discrimination**

European countries have expanded access to mental health support for young people in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but these actions could be encouraged more widely. In a 2022 OECD survey, 15 out of 22 surveyed European countries indicated that they had newly implemented or reinforced existing psychosocial and mental health support for students in response to the pandemic<sup>3</sup>. There is a need for a systems’ approach to tackle the stigma and discrimination suffered by vulnerable groups, such as people living with HIV, even within healthcare settings<sup>4</sup>.

HIV-related stigma detrimentally affects mental health-related outcomes in people living with HIV, resulting in<sup>5</sup>:

- lower use of both health and social services
- greater incidence of depression and mental distress

Studies across WHO Europe showed that around 40% of people living with HIV had mild to severe psychological distress since the COVID-19 outbreak and have needed psychosocial support. Among this group, 70% reported feeling more depressed and anxious<sup>6</sup>. The burden of deprived mental health is extremely severe in HIV positive communities, where it was reported that 91.7% of those who recognise having poor mental health have suffered from suicidal ideation or self-harm<sup>10</sup>. It is imperative that healthcare systems take a comprehensive approach to address these issues by raising awareness, promoting education, and advocating for inclusive policies. Failure to do so not only perpetuate HIV-related stigma and discrimination, but it also undermines the integrity and principles of the healthcare system itself<sup>3</sup>. This should encompass:

- **Guidance and support for effective implementation of mental health services** as part of care programmes for vulnerable groups

<sup>1</sup> WHO Regional Office for Europe, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. HIV/AIDS surveillance in Europe 2022 – 2021 data. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Rueda S, Mitra S, Chen S, et al. Examining the associations between HIV-related stigma and health outcomes in people living with HIV/AIDS: a series of meta-analyses. *BMJ Open* 2016;6:e011453. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-011453

<sup>3</sup> OECD/European Union (2022), *Health at a Glance: Europe 2022: State of Health in the EU Cycle*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/507433b0-en>.

<sup>4</sup> UNAIDS. *Confronting discrimination; overcoming HIV-related stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings and beyond*. 2017. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/confronting-discrimination-overcoming-hiv-related-stigma-and-discrimination-healthcare>

<sup>5</sup> Rueda, S. et al. Examining the associations between HIV-related stigma and health outcomes in people living with HIV/AIDS: a series of meta-analyses. *BMJ Open* 6, e011453. 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Delle Donne, V. et al., Psychological distress during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in an Italian population living with HIV: an online survey. *Le infezioni in medicina*, 29(1), 54– 64.2021.

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The EU should provide guidance to Member States regarding the implementation of mental health services, drawing on best practices from across the region<sup>7</sup>. This is particularly important to vulnerable communities such as people living with HIV, where the implementation of mental health services is not consistent throughout the EU. Effective implementation allows interdisciplinarity, joint responsibility, evidence-based practice, and an opportunity to leverage existing efforts and resources to improve the quality of mental health services.

- **Reimbursement of mental health services**

Low income has been associated with an increased risk of poor mental health, a trend that was even more clear during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>3</sup>. Several European countries, such as Denmark, Romania, Austria, Poland, and France, have bolstered funding to strengthen mental health care services for young people. Nevertheless, this should continue outside of the pandemic settings, in a more systemic way.

- **Monitoring of Health-Related Quality of Life (HRQoL)**

To develop evidence-based mental health policies, and to monitor progress towards mental health goals, it is crucial to assess mental health outcomes. This is particularly relevant to people more prone to suffer from mental health diseases, such as people living with HIV. Considering this, we call for the development or implementation of HRQoL tools to measure *inter alia* the mental health of people living with long-term conditions as HIV.

To measure HRQoL, the Commission should consider recommending to Member States the use of patient-reported outcome measures (PROMs), which include lived experience and person-centred actions, and provides population-level insights into the effectiveness of mental health prevention, awareness, and response measures<sup>8,9</sup>.

- **Training healthcare professionals** to deliver integrated and person-centred care for people experiencing mental health issues

Multidisciplinary, integrated, and person-centred care entails comprehension of individual needs, including those of specific population groups<sup>5</sup>. Mental health training, including training on effective ways of using PROMs, is needed for healthcare professionals and carers, especially when dealing with people living with long-term conditions such as people with HIV<sup>10</sup>. According to a report from EATG, only 40.3% of EU/EEA people living

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<sup>7</sup> HIV Outcomes. Enhancing long-term health and well-being among people with HIV. HIV Outcomes Beyond Viral Suppression; 2022. <https://hivoutcomes.eu/update/hiv-outcomes-policy-asks/>  
<sup>8</sup> European AIDS Treatment Group. PROMs in HIV Research and Development: Analysis of Community Needs and Engagement. European AIDS Treatment Group. 2021. <https://www.eatg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/eatg-proms-in-hiv-research-referencereport.pdf>  
<sup>9</sup> Gelkopf M, Mazor Y, Roe D. A systematic review of patient-reported outcome measurement (PROM) and provider assessment in mental health: goals, implementation, setting, measurement characteristics and barriers. *Int J Qual Health Care* 2021.  
<sup>10</sup> Safreed-Harmon, Kelly; et al., Reorienting health systems to care for people with HIV beyond viral suppression. *The Lancet HIV*, 6(12), e869–e877.2019. doi:10.1016/S2352-3018(19)30334-0

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with HIV reported having some type of psycho-emotional service being available in their place of residence<sup>11</sup>. In addition, according to the same report, only approximately 31.7% of people living with HIV from the EU/EEA countries stated ever having been treated for mental health problems, despite more than half having had mentioned symptoms or diagnosis of a mental health condition after their HIV diagnosis<sup>10</sup>. In some cases where mental health support is technically available, reports show that generic provision is not appropriate. Mental health services must address people’s specific needs, and for people living with HIV that will be mental health providers with some level of training around HIV<sup>12</sup>.

• **Funding for mental health research as well as for mapping and dissemination of existing mental health support service**

Research on mental health requires more funding and investment, namely, to focus on studying:

- Access gaps to mental health services across Member-States
- Social determinants of mental health, including stigma and discrimination
- Fundamental role of mental health support resources.
- Mapping and dissemination of existing mental health support services and models at a multidisciplinary level, including integrated models at primary care.

HIV Outcomes reiterates its support for the upcoming Communication and remains at your disposal for any questions.

About HIV Outcomes

*HIV Outcomes is an initiative and network comprising of experts and organisations jointly advocating to improve the health-related quality of all of people living with HIV, while implementing policy and clinical changes in countries within the WHO Europe Region. This initiative aims to improve the sustainability of European healthcare systems by sharing evidence-based best practices and innovative approaches to HIV care that look beyond viral suppression.*

<sup>11</sup> Simões, D. on behalf of the EATG HIV & Mental Health project team. Short report on mental health of People living with HIV and staff of organisations working in the field of HIV in the WHO European Region. Brussels, Belgium, January 2021.  
<sup>12</sup> National AIDS Trust, HIV and mental health: Improving generic NHS talking therapy services for people living with HIV in England. UK, October 2021

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