



Recommendation of the Council on Integrated Mental Health, Skills and Work Policy

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Background Information

The Recommendation on Integrated Mental Health, Skills and Work Policy was adopted by the OECD Council on 14 December 2015 on the proposal of the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee and the Health Committee in consultation with the Education Policy Committee. Building on 10 country reviews, synthesis publication, and High Level Policy Forum involving health and employment Ministers on 4 March 2015; this legal instrument recommends that Adherents follow a set of policy guidelines for an integrated approach to address the impact of mental health problems on health, education, employment and social outcomes.

The OECD's expertise on integrated mental health and work policy

In 2012, the OECD published [Sick on the Job? Myths and Realities about Mental Health and Work](#), which provided new evidence on the linkages between mental health and work. Building on this, in 2015, the OECD published [Fit Mind, Fit Job: From Evidence to Practice in Mental Health and Work](#), a synthesis report drawing on nine country reviews, which concluded that a three-way change in mental health and work policy is needed, characterised by early intervention, the integration of policies and services, and the active involvement of first-line actors. The findings were presented at the *High-Level Policy Forum on Mental Health and Work: Bridging Employment and Health Policies* in March 2015, where countries called for the development of a set of policy principles to reflect the key tenets of an integrated approach to mental health and work policy, culminating in the development of the Recommendation.

An extensive process that reflects the need for a mental health-in-all policies approach

To ensure perspectives from multiple policy areas were taken into account, the Recommendation was developed by two Committees, the ELSAC and the HC, in consultation with the EDPC. The Recommendation thus incorporates comments from representatives from employment, health, and education ministries, reflecting the aim of the Recommendation to contribute to breaking siloes in mental health policy. The Recommendation also benefitted from comments from the Business at the OECD (BIAC) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC).

Scope of the Recommendation

While mental health policies have been evolving in countries, providing more effective and timely health care, education, and employment support for people experiencing mental health issues has remained a major challenge. Mental health policies have largely remained delivered in siloes, often with a narrow focus on the health system, with only occasional consideration for other relevant policy areas such as education, employment and social protection. The Recommendation thus presents policy principles across four thematic areas – including health systems, education and youth systems, workplaces, and welfare systems – that form the core of a mental-health-in-all-policies approach.

The Recommendation also calls for decision-makers in each of the thematic areas to prioritise integration and awareness of the importance of addressing mental health issues. For example, in the health care system, greater consideration should be given to the vital role that employment and educational support can play in promoting good mental health and full participation in society, and that issues at school or work such as truancy and sickness absence are often associated with poor mental health.

The Recommendation includes the following key sections corresponding to each of the thematic areas:

- **Mental health care systems** should be improved to provide more timely and appropriate access to services that take into account the role that meaningful education and work can play in promoting good mental health. The Recommendation thus outlines the need to ensure primary care workers are trained in mental health, and the value of strengthening the education and employment focus of the mental health care system.
- **Youth and education systems** need to support young people throughout all stages of education and in the transition from school to work. The Recommendation thus calls for co-

ordinated and timely access to support for children and young people delivered through schools, investments in preventing early school leaving for young people experiencing mental health issues, and continuous support for young people experiencing mental health issues in the transition from school to higher education and/or work.

- **Workplaces** need to develop policies that promote good mental health at work and to support employees experiencing mental health issues in their return to work. The Recommendation thus calls for policies to promote psychosocial risk assessment, to increase awareness and competence of line managers in mental health, and to support return-to-work for workers experiencing mental health issues on sick leave.
- **Welfare systems** and social protection systems need to be better equipped and responsive to the needs of people experiencing mental health issues. The Recommendation thus calls for ensuring caseworkers receive training to understand mental health issues, and for integration of mental health treatments into the delivery of employment services to support jobseekers experiencing mental health issues into work.

For further information please consult: <https://www.oecd.org/employment/mental-health-and-work.htm>.

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Implementation

Indicators

Indicators on the social, health, education and labour market outcomes of individuals experiencing mental health issues were prepared for all Adherents where data is available in 2021, and are included in the publication [Fitter Minds, Fitter Jobs: From Awareness to Change in Integrated Mental Health, Skills and Work Policies](#). These indicators will be updated no later than 2026, when the committees responsible for the Recommendation will next report back to the Council.

2021 Report to Council

The Recommendation instructs the ELSAC and the HC to serve as a forum for sharing experiences and good practices; support Adherents in the implementation of the Recommendation; and monitor progress and policy development as well as reporting to the Council.

A Report on dissemination, implementation and continued relevance was presented to the Council in 2021 ([2021 Report](#)), assessing progress made by Adherents in implementing the Recommendation five years since its adoption. The 2021 Report found that since the adoption of the Recommendation, Adherents have increasingly focused on integrating mental health policies with education, skills, social and health policies. Yet further progress is needed to transform progress at the strategy level into more integrated practices at the working level. Structural barriers continue to hamper efforts to break silos and implement an integrated approach to mental health policy, while a shortage of financial resources hampers efforts to ensure timely and accessible support. Progress is also uneven across the four thematic areas identified by the Recommendation, with the clearest examples of integrated practices being seen in youth policies, whereas integrated practices remain rare in social protection and welfare policies. Workplace and health policies take an intermediary position.

The 2021 Report also concluded that the Recommendation is still up-to-date and relevant in 2021 amidst the COVID-19 crisis. More than half of the Adherents who responded to a questionnaire on the usefulness and continued relevance of the Recommendation in May 2020 reported that they consider the context of the COVID-19 crisis to have made the Recommendation more important going forward. As the longer-term and structural impacts of the COVID-19 crisis become clearer over time, due consideration on whether the Recommendation requires revisions in 2026 will be given, when the committees responsible for the Recommendation will next report back to the Council on dissemination, implantation and continued relevance of the Recommendation. This should be allied by efforts by both the Secretariat and Adherents to strengthen dissemination of the Recommendation, including through translating the Recommendation and undergoing country reviews that use the Recommendation as a benchmark.

In order to raise awareness of the findings of the 2021 Report and to provide further quantitative evidence, including the Indicators, as well as considerations about the implications of the experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic for the implementation of the Recommendation, the publication [*Fitter Minds, Fitter Jobs: From Awareness to Change in Integrated Mental Health, Skills and Work Policies*](#) was released on 4 November 2021 and launched at the [*OECD Forum Series 2021: Working It Out: Mental Health & Employment*](#) on the same day.

THE COUNCIL,

HAVING REGARD to Article 5 b) of the Convention on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development of 14 December 1960;

HAVING REGARD to the Recommendation of the Council on a General Employment and Manpower Policy [C(76)37];

HAVING REGARD to the OECD Action Plan on Giving Youth a Better Start [C/MIN(2013)4/FINAL, Annex I];

HAVING REGARD to the important work done by the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union on the rights and opportunities of persons with disabilities and mental illnesses;

RECOGNISING the important work undertaken by the World Health Organisation, especially on the need for integrated health and social care services in community-based settings, more generally and for children in particular, and to this end the World Health Organisation's "Comprehensive mental health action plan 2013-2020" which was adopted by the World Health Assembly on 27 May 2013;

WELCOMING the analyses and conclusions in three recently published OECD reports, notably "*Sick on the Job?*" (2012), "*Making Mental Health Count*" (2014) and "*Fit Mind, Fit Job*" (2015);

HAVING REGARD to the High-Level Policy Forum held in The Hague (Netherlands) on 4 March 2015, during which ministers and government officials representing 30 OECD Members concluded that it is timely and urgent to address mental health, skills and work issues in a more coherent and integrated way and to facilitate mutual learning across countries;

CONSIDERING that improving education, health and labour market opportunities and outcomes of people living with mental health conditions needs concerted action in a range of policy fields – including health policy, youth policy, labour market policy and social policy – with a shift in three aspects, i.e. in the *timing* and in the *modalities* of policy intervention and in the *actors* needed for the policy change;

ACKNOWLEDGING the importance of prevention to reduce the incidence of mental illness and to ensure mental resilience and awareness early in life through action to address family disadvantage, social risk factors, domestic violence and intergenerational transmission of poor mental health and to provide family support in dealing with mental illness, aspects that go beyond the scope of this Recommendation;

RECOGNISING that mental illnesses are not evenly distributed between men and women and that policy responses therefore will have to take gender aspects into account;

RECOGNISING that, as for physical health needs of individuals, people living with mental illness need timely, adequate therapeutic and medical treatment in order to minimise the impact of the illness on their wellbeing and to prevent a further deterioration of their mental health, and that work can contribute to recovery and shorten the duration of treatment;

RECOGNISING that childhood and adolescence are crucial periods for promoting wellbeing and good mental health and addressing problems arising from mental illness, including poorer educational outcomes and greater difficulty in accessing further and higher education and the labour market;

RECOGNISING the importance of job quality for workers' wellbeing and mental health;

RECOGNISING that all areas of income support should be able to provide the support needed to people living with mental health conditions since these conditions are highly prevalent not only among people on sickness and disability benefits, but also among those on unemployment and social assistance benefits;

RECOGNISING the need to improve access to, and take-up of, treatment, social support and employment counselling for people affected by mild-to-moderate mental health conditions,

predominantly stress-related illnesses and mood and anxiety disorders, which account for the bulk of people living with poor mental health;

RECOGNISING the considerable economic and social benefits that may be achieved, at all levels of government, from a coordinated and integrated policy approach to mental health that covers young people and people of working-age and links together employment, welfare benefit, health services as well as education;

On the proposal of the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee and the Health Committee in consultation with the Education Policy Committee:

AGREES that, for the purpose of the present Recommendation, *mental health* – following the World Health Organisation’s widely-accepted definition – refers to a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community;

I. RECOMMENDS that Members and non-Members having adhered to this Recommendation (hereafter “Adherents”) seek to improve their mental health care systems in order to promote mental wellbeing, prevent mental health conditions, and provide appropriate and timely services which recognise the benefits of meaningful work for people living with mental health conditions. To this effect, Adherents should, as appropriate:

- a) **foster mental wellbeing and improve awareness and self-awareness of mental health conditions** by encouraging activities that promote good mental health as well as help-seeking behaviour when mental illness occurs and by building effective strategies to address stigma in consultation with a range of government and non-government stakeholders;
- b) **promote timely access to effective treatment of mental health conditions**, including mild-to-moderate mental illnesses, in both community mental health and primary care settings and through co-location of health professionals to facilitate the referral to specialist mental health care, while ensuring the involvement of people living with mental health conditions in decisions about the appropriate care and treatment plan;
- c) **strengthen the employment focus of the mental health care system**, particularly by carrying out awareness-raising activities to emphasise the positive contribution quality work can make to recovery, by introducing employment outcomes in the health system’s quality and outcomes frameworks, and by fostering a better coordination with publicly- and privately-provided employment services;
- d) **expand the competence of those working in the primary care sector**, including general practitioners, family doctors and occupational health specialists, to identify and treat mental health conditions through better mental health training for health professionals, the incorporation of mental health specialists in primary care settings, and clear practices of referral to, and consultation with, specialists;
- e) **encourage general practitioners and other mental health specialists to address work (or school) and sickness absence issues** including by using evidence-based treatment guidelines which support return to work (or return to school) where possible and by ensuring that health professionals have the resources to devote sufficient time to address work issues.

II. RECOMMENDS that Adherents seek to improve the educational outcomes and transitions into further and higher education and the labour market of young people living with mental health conditions. To this effect, Adherents should, as appropriate:

- a) **monitor and improve the overall school and preschool climate** to promote social-emotional learning, mental health and wellbeing of all children and students through whole-of-school-based interventions and the prevention of mental stress, bullying and

aggression at school, using effective indicators of comprehensive school health and student achievement;

- b) **improve the awareness among education professionals** and the families of students, of mental health conditions young people may experience and the ability to identify signs, symptoms and problems and refer students for assessment and interventions appropriate to their needs, while ensuring an adequate number of professionals is available to all educational institutions with knowledge on psychological and behavioural adaptation and accommodations required in the learning environment;
- c) **promote timely access to co-ordinated, non-stigmatising support for children and youth living with mental health conditions** or social-emotional problems by better linking primary and mental health services and reducing waiting times in the mental health care sector and by an easily accessible support structure, linked to preschools, schools, post-secondary institutions, and other youth and community services, which provides comprehensive assistance including treatment, counselling, guidance and peer support;
- d) **invest in the prevention of early school leaving at all ages and support for school leavers living with mental health conditions** through appropriate follow-up with due regard to personal privacy of those who have dropped out from school, or are at risk of doing so, with a view to reconnect those students with the education system and the labour market;
- e) **provide non-stigmatising support for the transition from school to higher education and work** for students living with mental health conditions (or, for the return to education for those who have dropped out) through better collaboration and better integrated approaches by schools, post-secondary institutions, employers, employment services and the mental health care sector.

III. **RECOMMENDS** that Adherents, in close dialogue and co-operation with the social partners, seek to develop and implement policies for workplace mental health promotion and return-to-work. To this effect, Adherents should, as appropriate:

- a) **promote and enforce psychosocial risk assessment and risk prevention in the workplace** consistent with applicable privacy and non-discrimination laws, with the adequate support of occupational health services, to ensure that all companies have complied with their legal responsibilities;
- b) **develop a strategy for addressing the stigma, discrimination and misconceptions** faced by many workers living with mental health conditions at their workplace, with a focus on strong leadership, improved competencies of managers and worker representatives to deal with mental health issues, peer worker training, and active promotion of workplace psychological health and safety;
- c) **promote greater awareness of the potential labour productivity losses due to mental health conditions** by developing guidelines for line managers, human resource professionals and worker representatives to stimulate a better response to workers' mental health conditions, covering ways to best assist those workers, including recognition and intervention with co-workers and advice on when to seek professional support, with due regard to personal privacy;
- d) **foster the design of structured return-to-work policies and processes** for workers on sick leave, and their (prospective or current) employers, notably by promoting a flexible and gradual return to work in line with the worker's improving work capacity, with the necessary work and workplace adaptation and accommodations, and by using or experimenting with fit-for-work counselling services with a strong mental health component;

- e) **encourage employers to prevent and address overuse of sick leave** by facilitating dialogue between employers, employees and their representatives and treating doctors as well as other mental health practitioners on how an illness affects the work capacity and how adjusted working conditions can contribute to a solution, with due regard to medical confidentiality.

IV. RECOMMENDS that Adherents seek to improve the responsiveness of social protection systems and employment services to the needs of people living with mental health conditions. To this effect, Adherents should, as appropriate:

- a) **reduce preventable disability benefit claims for mental health conditions** through recognition of the (possibly reduced or partial) work capacity of those potentially claiming a benefit, using appropriate tools and methods to identify work capacity, and through a focus on early identification and early provision of medical and/or vocational support as necessary;
- b) **help jobseekers living with mental health conditions into work** through appropriate outreach tools to identify an adequate support process that facilitates access to employment services and training as well as services that address the labour market barriers associated with a jobseeker's mental health condition;
- c) **invest in mental health competences for those administering the social protection system** by providing training for caseworkers, social workers and vocational counsellors to improve their understanding of mental health issues and the health benefits of work and by ensuring adequate co-operation of benefits, social services and employment services offices with psychological coaches;
- d) **encourage the integration of mental health treatment into employment service delivery** by stimulating cooperation of employment services with the health sector, especially primary and community-based mental health professionals, and by encouraging the development of evidence-based vocational interventions for jobseekers with mild-to-moderate mental health conditions which combine psychological counselling with pre- and post-placement services or work experience programmes.

V. INVITES the Secretary-General to disseminate this Recommendation.

VI. INVITES Adherents to disseminate this Recommendation.

VII. INVITES non-Adherents to take account of and adhere to this Recommendation.

VIII. INSTRUCTS the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee and the Health Committee to:

- a) serve periodically, or at the request of Adherents, as a forum for a structured exchange of views and sharing of experiences and good practices on matters related to the Recommendation;
- b) support the efforts of Adherents to implement this Recommendation as requested, e.g. through comparative data, analytical studies and measurable policy impact indicators;
- c) monitor progress and policy development, including through the use of relevant indicators, in the follow-up to this Recommendation and report thereon to the Council no later than five years following its adoption and regularly thereafter.

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