



**MENTAL
HEALTH**

14th EESC CIVIL SOCIETY PRIZE

Rewarding excellence in civil society initiatives



European Economic
and Social Committee

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Foreword



We live in challenging times. The world faces multiple overlapping crises, including Russia's war in Ukraine, the rising cost of living, geopolitical instability and broad economic stress – all tied up with the ongoing impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. All these factors risk undermining the mental wellbeing of individuals and society as a whole.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression spiked across Europe. Alongside this concerning situation comes a growing awareness that mental health is as vital as physical health. It is pivotal to social cohesion and universal participation, which are common values shared across the EU. The EESC emphasises the significance of mental health as a crucial element to the health of European citizens.

That's why the 14th EESC Civil Society Prize is dedicated to mental health, recognising the remarkable efforts of non-profit initiatives in mental health treatment and prevention across Europe. The applications showcase the vital contribution that civil society makes in promoting mental health, while also underscoring the need to prioritise it in society.

I am delighted to announce we received over 100 applications from all over Europe and beyond. A sense of collective melancholy hangs over many applications. Yet out of this have grown many positive, forward-thinking and supportive initiatives that help to foster individual and collective mental wellbeing – and even change our mindset on the treatment of mental health itself.

The five chosen winners represent just a tiny fraction of the work civil society does to improve mental wellbeing. Non-state organisations provide a critical support system to help Member States fight what some are calling the 'silent epidemic' of poor mental health.

I would like to personally congratulate all those who entered the prize. The EESC is proud to support mental health, and we will continue to do so into the future. Once again we have seen that civil society forms the bedrock on which stronger communities are built.

Aurel Laurențiu Plosceanu
EESC Vice-President

Civil society supporting mental health

Civil society is an essential component of healthy democratic societies. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) gives it a voice at the highest level of the European Union (EU), bridging the gap between civil society and the European institutions. Established under the 1957 Treaty of Rome, the EESC unites 329 members from across the EU, and represents diverse economic and social components of civil society. The EESC brings together the three main pillars of civil society: employers; workers; and civil society organisations.



Since 2006, the EESC's flagship Civil Society Prize shines a light on the often unrecognised contributions from civil society to shaping and upholding a European identity, one based on shared values, and to fostering European integration. Each year, the prize focuses on a different topic linked to the EESC's political priorities. Previous editions have covered diverse themes ranging from gender equality, to climate action, to the integration of asylum seekers.

The 14th edition of the prize highlights the role civil society plays in promoting mental health. By choosing this theme, the EESC is rewarding creative and innovative non-profit projects that help individuals with mental health conditions, and foster an environment for good mental wellbeing across society. This includes initiatives working to change the way European society views mental health for the better.

The applications cover a wide range of topics: some projects prevent psychosocial risks in the workplace, others tackle issues such as substance abuse and cyberaddiction, or combat stigma around mental health – and much more. The EESC hopes that by honouring and showcasing these vital non-state efforts in supporting mental health, it can also inspire others to do the same.

The EESC received 105 entries from across the EU. The evaluation committee assessed the applications based on their potential long-term impact; the degree of participation and collaboration; and on their uniqueness and innovation. The total prize money of EUR 50 000 will be distributed to the five winners. This brochure highlights some of the incredible breadth and depth of the applications received, and presents the winners in detail.

Mental health under pressure

Mental health is complex by nature, and is impacted by a range of factors, from biological, to psychological, educational, social, economic, cultural and occupational. The [World Health Organisation](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response) defines it as a "state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community." The corollary is that when mental health deteriorates, it can undermine our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world around us.

Around [4 % of annual deaths in the EU](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Mental_health_and_related_issues_statistics#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20there%20were%2019.4,in%20the%20EU%20in%202020) are attributed to mental health and behavioural disorders. Poor mental health also has a huge economic impact, as the direct and indirect costs account for roughly [4 % of GDP](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/a-new-benchmark-for-mental-health-systems_4ed890f6-en#page131). More than a third of these costs result from lower employment rates and falling productivity at work.

The social and political context behind this silent epidemic is also complex, with several overlapping crises playing a role. Even before the emergence of COVID-19, mental health problems affected at least 84 million

World Health Organisation: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>

4 % of annual deaths in the EU: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Mental_health_and_related_issues_statistics#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20there%20were%2019.4,in%20the%20EU%20in%202020

4 % of GDP: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/a-new-benchmark-for-mental-health-systems_4ed890f6-en#page131

1 in 6 people: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/mental-health/#:~:text=Before%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic,in%20the%20EU%20\(17.3%25\).](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/mental-health/#:~:text=Before%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic,in%20the%20EU%20(17.3%25).)

people – around [1 in 6 people](#) – across the EU. Yet the pandemic had a heavy impact on mental health issues for European citizens. The closure of schools, coupled with feelings of anger and dissatisfaction, and a rising level of disinformation and mistrust all contributed to the deterioration of mental health across large swathes of society, and anxiety and depression spiked in this troubling period.

While the elderly and vulnerable groups suffered significant effects, figures show the largest impacts were reserved for young people: the share of young people with symptoms of anxiety more than doubled in several European countries, according to the [OECD](#). Frontline healthcare workers, tackling the pandemic in the most precarious of settings, experienced additional stress. Meanwhile, a surging demand for mental health support was met with widespread disruptions to mental health care services, resulting in [23% of EU citizens reporting unmet mental health care needs](#) in the spring of 2022 – and 49% for young people. Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, increasing cost of living, and political instability aggravated the risk of mental health conditions. A [Eurobarometer](#) survey in June 2023 showed 46% of the EU population – almost 1 in 2 people – had experienced emotional or psychosocial problems in the past 12 months.

With public health systems under strain, civil society stepped in to fill the gaps. Many non-profit organisations, often with strong links to local communities, offered much needed support to vulnerable groups and overlooked populations.

A combined effort to support mental health

Mental wellbeing has risen to the top of the political agenda in the EU. In a [July 2020 resolution](#) on the EU's post-COVID-19 public health strategy, the European Parliament called for action on mental health. The Parliament, European Council and European Commission all committed to paying special attention to addressing mental health in a [Joint Declaration on the EU Legislative Priorities for 2023 and 2024](#).

As a result, the Commission adopted a comprehensive [approach to mental health](#) in June 2023. Supported by €1.23 billion in EU funding, this new approach aims to promote mental health in all EU policies, with a focus on three guiding principles: adequate and effective prevention; access to high-quality and affordable mental healthcare and treatment; and reintegration into society after recovery.

Mental health is also a political priority for the EESC, and is at the core of its work. The EESC has called for binding legislation to prevent psychosocial risks in the workplace, and advocates for stronger measures to promote mental health at national and EU levels. In April 2023, the Committee adopted an [opinion on precarious work and mental health](#). It encourages a reform of mental health care across EU health systems, to improve prevention, early detection and screening.

The challenges associated with mental health can only be addressed with a combined effort across society. The wide-ranging applications for the 14th Civil Society Prize show the fundamental contribution of civil society in this regard: individual citizens, organisations and other non-state actors are all working to create a positive environment across the EU that fosters better mental health for all.

[OECD](#): <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/d64085ce-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/d64085ce-en#section-d1e472-d86e72ed4e>

[23% of EU citizens reporting unmet mental health care needs](#): https://health.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3f9d55be-9e36-43d9-99ad-b96ac63a5b9b_en?filename=2022_healthatglance_rep_en_0.pdf

[Eurobarometer](#): <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3032>

[July 2020 resolution](#): https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0205_EN.html#:~:text=1,2

[Joint Declaration on the EU Legislative Priorities for 2023 and 2024](#): https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/36bfb0cb-87d8-4f63-9b3d-5080a5c80e2f_en?filename=221213-Joint%20Declaration%202023-2024.pdf

[approach to mental health](#): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0298>

[opinion on precarious work and mental health](#): <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/precarious-work-and-mental-health>

Boosting mental health throughout the life cycle

The diverse applications for the 14th Civil Society Prize showcase a comprehensive range of initiatives all working to promote mental health in innovative ways.

Mental health is fluid in nature and can fluctuate throughout a person's life. The prize entrants represented efforts that aim to improve mental wellbeing through the entire cycle of life, from childhood and adolescence to old age.

Many factors play into mental wellbeing, including the circumstances in which people are born, study, work and live. Many initiatives worked to address these social determinants of mental health, aiming to tackle the root causes across society. Others aimed to address some of the contributory factors in the workplace that can lead to poor mental wellbeing, including instability of employment. Many of them included community-based interventions, which provide care and psychosocial support outside of national health care systems.

The projects reflected a biopsychosocial approach to mental health, focusing on mental health promotion, prevention, psychosocial support, reintegration to society and reducing stigma and discrimination.

Addressing mental health in young people

Mental health problems developed in early years can reshape a person's life entirely. In the EU, [schools and child day care centres have reported](#) growing rates of children dropping out of education, exhibiting behavioural problems or difficulty concentrating, or who have been violent. The underlying contributory factors are thought to range from an inability to resist consumer products, addiction to computers and general developmental deficits. There is an alarming trend towards a higher use of antidepressants among children and young people, suggesting alternative, non-pharmaceutical treatments are sorely needed.

A broad range of initiatives that applied for the 14th Civil Society Prize aimed to boost mental health among this vulnerable group. These ranged from innovative community-based approaches to help young adults absent from school due to long term ill health conditions; organisations working to raise awareness of and prevent eating disorders in schools; and projects tackling climate change anxiety.

HospiEdu Foundation (KórházSuli Alapítvány)

The HospiEdu Foundation, based in Hungary, created "An Exceptional Handbook for the Inclusion of Special Students". Leading child psychiatrists created a book exploring some of the most common mental health issues that affect adolescents.

The target audience is teachers who have a student with mental health issues in their classroom. The handbook is combined with a kit known as the "Box of Acceptance": a selection of inclusion games and other professional resources for teachers. The foundation also offers training to help classes to prepare for the return of a classmate experiencing mental health problems.

NGO Peaasjad

NGO Peaasjad is an Estonian NGO set up in 2009 by mental health specialists. It aims to promote the mental health of Estonia's young people, help detect mental health problems early and facilitate access to support services.

To raise awareness of factors that contribute to good mental health, NGO Peaasjad created the "5 mental health vitamins": good sleep, physical exercise, balanced nutrition, good relationships, and pleasant emotions. Campaigns involving diverse organisations across society target children and youth. The team also offers lesson plans, worksheets, and e-learning materials for kindergartens and schools.

[schools and child day care centres have reported: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52012IE1774&from=EN>](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52012IE1774&from=EN)

[HospiEdu Foundation \(KórházSuli Alapítvány\): <https://korhazsuli.hu/>](https://korhazsuli.hu/)

[NGO Peaasjad: <https://peaasi.ee/en/>](https://peaasi.ee/en/)

APVA Voz do Autista

This Portuguese organisation is formed by adults, parents of autistic children and healthcare professionals that are autistic. It promotes inclusion and the acceptance of autistic people in communities across Portugal.

Voz do Autista identifies and shares with key stakeholders what about mental health services is helpful or harmful to autistic people, based on the experiences of people and professionals with autism.

To gather experiences, an autistic research-advocate works as an empathetic listener, meeting online with the person prior, during and after an in-depth interview.

Narrative 4

Narrative 4 Ireland incorporates emotional intelligence into education, offering three online modules to train teachers and youth workers. They learn how to use storytelling as a tool for changing youth cultures, and creating a sense of mental wellbeing, resilience and peer support.

Through various steps, including listening, telling a story and showing empathy with others, this preventive project for the wellbeing of adolescents reduces stereotypes, and increases conflict resolution. The initiative also helps youth organisations and schools to empower their youth and help them find their voice.

Tackling psychosocial risks in the world of work

The workplace is a facet of life that can place significant pressures on mental wellbeing. Time pressures and deadlines, excessive workloads, increasing demands on flexibility and mobility, and frequent restructuring can all initiate or exacerbate mental health problems.

In 2020, 44.6 % of the employed population aged 15-64 across the EU reported facing risk factors for their mental wellbeing at work according to [Eurostat](#). Work overload or time pressure was the most commonly mentioned risk factor for mental wellbeing at work, reported by nearly a fifth of employed people in the EU.

Increasing uncertainty over jobs and livelihoods in a difficult economic climate forms an additional risk to mental wellbeing. Precarious work increases the chance of mental health deteriorating among employees, and includes job insecurity and exploitative temporary contracts.

The EESC has [called for the EU to adopt binding legislation](#) and to develop and modernise the Directive on Occupational Safety and Health (89/391/EEC). Many applications to the prize aimed to tackle psychosocial risks at work, to alleviate this common pressure point on the wellbeing of many citizens.

Progetto Itaca Parma

Progetto Itaca Parma is a non-profit organisation based in Italy. It created "Job Stations", as a first step for those with mental health conditions towards recovery and reintegration into society and the labour market.

The project aims to promote work as a tool for social and professional rehabilitation, restoring confidence, dignity and self-esteem. Participants first work at the Job Station, before entering or rejoining a company. A tutor from Itaca works for 21 hours per week, providing specialist advice on re-entry to work and disability management in coordination with the company, alongside a supervisor in the company.

Österreichischer Tierärzteverlag

"Vetmental" is an Austrian initiative designed to support mental health among veterinarians. This includes prevention by reducing occupational stress, and involves interdisciplinary experts such as health psychologists, communication experts and business administration. The project covers topics like digitalization, practice management, time management, organisation and leadership through free webinars.

APVA Voz do Autista: <https://vozdoautista.pt>

Narrative 4: <https://narrative4.ie/>

Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Self-reported_work-related_health_problems_and_risk_factors_-_key_statistics

called for the EU to adopt binding legislation: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/world-day-safety-and-health-work-2023-eesc-calls-eu-legislation-preventing-work-related-psychosocial-risks#:~:text=This%20is%20why%20the%20EESC,either%20physical%20or%20psychological%20suffering.>

Progetto Itaca Parma: <https://www.facebook.com/ProgettoltacaParma/>

Österreichischer Tierärzteverlag: <https://www.tieraerztekammer.at/oeffentlicher-bereich/kontakt/oesterreichischer-tieraerzteverlag>

Sandra Vuk

Sandra Vuk started giving webinars from Croatia in 2019, delivering 100 during that year. This expanded to 350 during the COVID-19 pandemic, attracting participants from Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Slovenia.

Through her project "Webučionica 4.0 / Webclassroom 4.0", she offers free educational resources through workshops and webinars, which have up to 1000 participants. These also focus on the mental wellbeing of educators through mentoring and a podcast for professional and emotional support. Examples include "Relax with Drawing" workshops, which involve 12 teachers and combine arts and Google classroom technology to foster social connection between teachers and reduce stress.

Mental wellbeing in specific situations

The dignity and legal rights of individuals is central to European identity. An approach to mental health that recognises this is key to overcoming challenges associated with poor mental wellbeing.

A number of applicants in the 14th Civil Society Prize tried to shift our understanding and treatment of mental health towards a recovery model, through the creation of supportive environments. These include new helplines, mental health support during the aftercare of burns injuries or during cancer therapy, post-traumatic assistance after calamities or in crisis situations, and support to young mothers to prevent postpartum depression.

depreHUB

The depreHUB hotline is a 24/7 helpline that removes barriers to the access of specialist depression support. The project, run by the Happy Minds Association, a non-profit organisation in Romania, also offers free psychosocial support services, prevention techniques, information, awareness raising, conferences, podcasts, prevention, assessment and intervention campaigns. Free online and face-to-face psychotherapeutic counselling and therapy are also available.

Currently the only free helpline for people with mental health issues in Romania, it helps adolescents, those at risk of suicide, people living in rural areas and Romanians living abroad. Even Romania's emergency services redirect people to depreHUB.

Boeren op een Kruispunt

The "Farmers' café" (Boerencafé in Dutch) is a Belgian project aiming to foster mental wellbeing among farmers and horticulturalists. It offers a café and folk plays to let participants feel they are not alone with their problems and can come to a safe, supportive environment to discuss them informally.

Bulgarian Red Cross

With over 200 volunteers, the Bulgarian Red Cross is empowering sound and resilient mental health through supporting Ukrainian refugees, offering psychological first aid and psychosocial support.

Efforts include face-to-face and group sessions; group activities for children; art-therapy; support groups for overcoming trauma and stress, as well as specialised therapy services.

The aim is to build resilience and foster interpersonal relationships. Volunteers include 100 trained Ukrainian professional psychologists. So far psychological first aid and support has been offered to over 11,000 Ukrainian citizens.

Sandra Vuk: <https://sandrinaučionica.weebly.com/>

depreHUB: <https://deprehub.ro/>

Boeren op een Kruispunt: <https://www.boerenopeenkruispunt.be/>

Bulgarian Red Cross: <https://en.redcross.bg/>

Reducing stigma around mental health

One major hurdle that still must be overcome is the reduction of stigma surrounding mental health, which is still maintained by various parts of society, including the media. To this end, a significant number of initiatives employed art therapy interventions, virtual arts, a digital museum, and music festivals. Several initiatives also trained journalists, mass media professionals and police officers to boost mental health literacy and reduce stigma.

Ally Zlatar

Ally, an activist and artist based in the Netherlands, has created a series of exhibitions, publications, workshops and artists residences on topics such as mental wellbeing, eating disorders, gender violence, migrant experiences and climate anxiety.

In "[The Starving Artist](#)", for example, she explored the significance of eating disorders through contemporary art, including her own personal experiences.

Her work is rooted in the experiences of marginalised and rural communities, and provides a platform for creative expression that challenges norms, educates the public, and fosters empathy.

Her aim is to destigmatise these issues, promote change, empower marginalised voices, and encourage collective action.

Fundación Rey Ardid

"Visiones Emergentes" is a project showcasing the talents of artists with psychological suffering. The Rey Ardid Foundation from Spain works with local artists to develop programmes including exhibitions in museums, festivals, virtual exhibition rooms and a street showroom.

The aim is to foster 'socio-labour insertion' of people with disabilities and severe mental illnesses through art and culture, and to fight stigma by treating authors as artists, without associating them with mental illness.

The Society of Social Psychiatry P. Sakellaropoulos

"Erasing Stigma. Upon our Word" highlights the effects of stigma regarding mental health in public and media discourse. It promotes self-advocacy and the protection of rights for people affected, prevents exclusion and fights discrimination.

Actions include combating stigma, anti-stigma campaigns, as well as lobbying and recommendations for institutional change. The initiative aims to strengthen civil society participation through a voluntary advocacy team involving 12 NGOs.

Art In/Sane

Valentin-Veron Toma is a medical anthropologist at the Romanian Academy in Bucharest. Through his project "Art In/Sane", launched in 2019, he identifies and collects psychopathological art collections in hospitals all over Romania to save them from degradation and raise awareness of their importance in society.

The initiative includes the study of occupational and art therapy programmes, and debates about art as soft therapy. It recognises psychopathological art not just as cultural heritage but as a means to change public attitude, reduce stigmatisation and increase visibility of vulnerable groups. The project has produced exhibitions of psychopathological artworks by mental ill patients, a dedicated website and digital museum with collections from the last 60 years.

Ally Zlatar: <https://allyz.cargo.site/>

"The Starving Artist": <https://allyz.cargo.site/Doctoral-of-Creative-Art>

Fundación Rey Ardid: <https://www.reyardid.org/blog/salud-mental/visionses-emergentes/>

The Society of Social Psychiatry P. Sakellaropoulos: <https://ekpse.gr/en/>

Art In/Sane: <https://www.artinsane.eu/biografie-dr-valentin-veron-toma/>

Promoting community-led assistance

A population-based approach to mental health takes into account civil society's strong community links. This includes the many community-based organisations present throughout the EU, such as grassroots societies, youth organisations, family associations and all bodies through which citizens participate in local and municipal life, and religious communities.

These networks establish a supportive environment for mental health within communities, and help to reshape the physical, social and economic characteristics of homes, schools, workplaces and elsewhere in the community to protect mental health.

Several projects put forward for the prize demonstrate the power of these community links. These include one project that empowers members of the community to recognise the symptoms of mental illness in themselves or someone close. Other initiatives show that psychosocial support on a community level can help to manage depression, promote healthy lifestyles, offer counselling to autistic individuals, support substance abuse recovery, tackle loneliness – the list goes on. Community-led support can provide broad foundations to boost mental health across societies.

Thrive Ireland

Thrive is a grassroots action-led mental health movement based in Balbriggan, Ireland. It is shaped and led by the community and supported by Mental Health Ireland. Its aim is to create a sustainable group capable of conducting meaningful projects, and promoting good mental health and wellbeing with and for the community.

The project started the "Connect Café" for the local community, offering suicide alert training, wellbeing workshops, conferences, mental health campaigns, and activities to mark the world mental health month.

Multiplying health: Participation for Change

A team of two facilitators and volunteers is working to increase the social wellbeing of participants, promote and strengthen social ties and to combat situations of isolation in a vulnerable neighbourhood of Barcelona, Spain.

The project, which is carried out by the Associació Benestar i Desenvolupament (ABD), uses a person-centred approach to mental health, offering weekly or biweekly group sessions.

FinFami

FinFami – the Finnish Federation of Mental Health Caregivers – cares for the interests of families and caregivers of people going through mental health rehabilitation.

Their services recognise the situation of those indirectly linked to mental health conditions, and enable professionals from different sectors to speak up and be directed to relevant services. This strengthens mental health skills, and highlights the diversity of service needs of family members, while delivering a preventive approach to support a group at risk of depression.

Agricultural Social Mutual Fund (MSA)

MSA is an elective institution that represents the population with ties to agriculture across France.

It has developed a sentinel network in the agricultural world – in France and in the overseas territories – to prevent malaise among the agricultural population. The network helps farmers cope with the climate crisis, isolation, and other things which may impact their mental health.

The MSA Agricultural Welfare Prevention Programme promotes wellbeing, helps with the early detection of distress and prevents suicide. The volunteer sentinels close to the agricultural world (such as veterinarians, bank advisors, municipality, farmers) are trained to detect people in distress and direct them to suitable support structures.

Thrive Ireland: <https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/thrive-ireland/?external=1>

Multiplying health: Participation for Change: <https://abd.ong/en/>

FinFami: <https://finfami.fi/>

Agricultural Social Mutual Fund (MSA): <https://www.msa.fr/lfp>

The Five Winning Projects

1st prize: Third Age Foundation – AgeWell (Ireland)

Older members of society can often feel isolated and forgotten, and many suffer from the adverse mental health effects of loneliness. AgeWell is a social engagement network that improves wellbeing among the elderly. Using a combination of in-house visits and a phone application, it offers social and emotional support to those who lack it – and identifies health risks early.

AgeWell is run by the Third Age Foundation, a charity based in Ireland. The project started as a pilot in South County Meath in 2018, and has since expanded to the whole county. It has demonstrated consistent reductions in loneliness, while providing improved social, emotional, and informational support, increased wellbeing, physical activity, and self-rated health.

AgeWell's unique model of integrated care supports older people to live well for longer in their own homes and communities, through a cost-effective method that complements formal health and social care systems.

AgeWell is proud to make older people part of the solution as volunteers, providing a community-based approach to improving the psychological and physical wellbeing of vulnerable at-risk older people. Volunteers therefore enrich their own lives, as well as those of others.

The project also offers peace of mind for family members, who can be secure in the knowledge their loved one has regular companionship, and someone to look out for their health and wellbeing.

The project has been approached by a number of healthcare professionals and providers looking for the service to be expanded into their counties and Community Health Organisation Areas. The Third Age Foundation is currently discussing potential expansion pilot sites in three new counties, and is working on some technology upgrades and redevelopments for the app, to improve user interface, enhance efficiency, quality, and functionality.

The long-term vision for AgeWell is to reach every county in Ireland, and that it is integrated into the national healthcare service, supporting older people to live well for longer and to age better.

For Third Age, to win the EESC prize is “a tremendous recognition of all the hard work and dedication of our programme team (staff and volunteers) over the last 5 years, responding to and supporting the needs of our growing older population, especially those who are isolated, alone, at-risk and in-need, by enabling them to live well and age better in place”.

<http://www.thirdageireland.ie/>





2nd prize: Pro Lapinlahti Association – Lapinlahden Lähde (Finland)

Lapinlahden Lähde, or “The Spring of Lapinlahti”, combines urban activism with the promotion of mental health.

This citizen-led community centre was built through the renovation of Helsinki’s Lapinlahti Hospital, Finland’s first ever psychiatric hospital and a place that encompasses historical significance and unique cultural heritage.



The initiative has seen formerly dilapidated buildings and surrounding parklands transformed into a vibrant and peaceful place-based community centre, offering nature-based solutions and accessible arts to promote mental health and wellbeing.

The Lapinlahden Lähde initiative provides sustainable solutions for many pressing issues of Europe: deteriorating mental health, social exclusion, racism, the climate emergency, abandoned city buildings, and lack of confidence in local democracy.

The project offers everyone – and especially people with mental health difficulties – a nurturing and inclusive environment to heal, learn and enjoy nature and culture. It promotes mental wellbeing by offering a safe and accessible community promoting healing, vocational training and a meaningful daily life. The initiative also encompasses a communal garden, a public sauna, a bakery, and cafes, and offers a workplace for numerous mental health and wellbeing professionals.

Lapinlahden Lähde was set up by the Pro Lapinlahti association, a non-profit, non-governmental citizens’ association. Lapinlahden Lähde provides vocational training, workshops, lectures, accessible arts and courses related to mental health literacy. With 50,000 visitors each year, the centre is now open to the public, breaking down stigma and raising awareness of mental health.

Moreover, the project represents a real-life paradigm shift away from a medical, treatment-only model of mental disorders, towards the recovery model – from paternalism to empowerment. The initiative has positive mental health effects on many dimensions, including personal meaning, social inclusion, decreased feelings of loneliness and the reduction of stigma.

“The Lapinlahden Lähde initiative enables people from vulnerable circumstances to participate in society and engage in a multitude of different activities allowing them to reach their potential,” says a spokesperson of Pro Lapinlahti. The EESC prize will help “promote the important message of the Lapinlahden Lähde initiative – a message of hope, equity and inclusiveness.”

<https://lapinlahdenlahde.fi/>



3rd prize: Association for Mental Health INTEGRA – Crazy? So what! (Slovakia)

The right conversations can change minds. "Crazy? So what!" is an initiative run by Integra in Slovakia that promotes compassionate understanding of mental health among young people.

A team consisting of one professional expert, and one person with lived experience of mental illness, visits schools to talk to people aged between 15 and 20. Over a day of discussions, students can learn directly about experiencing poor mental health, and the road to recovery.

The programme is based on the concept of a tetralogue-model, using a process that focuses on encounters between different groups. During the first part of the day, a professional teaches students about the importance of mental health as a foundation for healthy development from childhood to adulthood. The person with lived experience of mental illness then shares their own story from becoming mentally ill to recovery. This works like an icebreaker, offering students a chance to open up about their own experiences and find inner strength.

Through direct dialogue, students can learn more about the experience of poor mental health, helping them to avoid feelings of shame and guilt and figure a way out of frustrating helplessness. And as the communication is intergenerational, this lets them grow more aware of their own suffering in adolescence, and conquer any doubts they may have about becoming healthy adults.

Overall, the open and heartfelt dialogues empower young people to communicate with people they trust, including peers, friends, siblings and even with their parents and teachers, creating a strong mental foundation as they head into adulthood.

"Young people are always strongly impressed to meet people who have overcome mental crises and to whom they can ask anything. This will show them that if they have any problems, help is always there. And that is the main idea of the programme – to draw attention to the importance of mental health in time, and at the same time to awaken understanding towards people with mental problems," says a spokesperson from Integra.

The prize money will be used primarily as a reward for people who have experienced psychological difficulties and participate in the program "Crazy? So what!" as personal experts in schools and also for the further development of the programme.

"Almost every class has students who have problems. Giving them a little spark of hope on their journey is priceless," says the spokesperson.

<http://www.integradz.sk/>





4th prize: Lilinkoti Foundation – The World of Recovery (Finland)

The World of Recovery (TWoR) consists of two hope-filled games designed to support mental health. Both games promote recovery through goals that inspire a healthy self-image, personal autonomy, and an active and meaningful life. They target mental health and substance abuse recoverers, along with professionals, and are free to use.

The games were created by the Lilinkotisäätiö, a non-profit foundation in Finland that has worked to improve the quality of life and housing services for people with mental illness since 2004.



The first game is a non-violent mobile application designed to support players' journey towards recovery. First, the player creates an avatar, who must follow quests in the real world, such as "You are important. Take a photo of something you are proud of," or "Go outside and take a photo of something huge." Players are supported by positive feedback, an overall experience that boosts active participation and self-esteem. The game works with various levels of digital, cognitive and physical abilities, and can even boost them: someone with limited digital skills can learn how to better use a smartphone as they play, for example.

The second creation is an award-winning table-top role-playing game: The World of Recovery: Salainen tukikohta (The Secret Base). This collective storytelling adventure is an interactive group activity in which characters interact in a futuristic game world. They must make choices, communicate and cooperate while being guided by a game master. The game was designed to improve emotional and problem-solving skills and boost self-esteem, as players experience emotions and help each other – through the game, and recovery. The game won the prestigious Game Deed of The Year award 2023 at Ropecon, Finland's largest annual event for non-digital games.

The project involved mental health and substance abuse recoverers, along with professionals, to co-create the games and reach often overlooked populations. The games have generated huge interest: hundreds of professionals and recoverers have taken part in training sessions, games and presentations. "It's hard to put into words the wonderful things playing The World of Recovery has brought into my life," said one game-player. "The World of Recovery is the best thing that has happened to me in a while," said another.

The Lilinkoti Foundation and The World of Recovery Team are proud of their games and the co-development team behind them. "It has been wonderful to witness the games bring together people from different backgrounds. The World of Recovery allows you to drop the roles of mental health recoverer or professional and come together as equals, individuals with strengths, challenges and dreams. The project has also brought together gaming communities and the mental health sector in a unique, bridge-building way," says a team member.

<https://www.lilinkoti.fi/>

<https://www.theworldofrecovery.fi/>



5th prize: Animenta APS – Telling Stories for Good (Italy)

Eating disorders affect over 4 million people in Italy alone, half of which are adolescents. The COVID-19 pandemic also lowered the age of onset for eating disorders, particularly among adolescents.

“Telling Stories for Good” was launched by Animenta, a non-profit organisation that has been working to prevent and raise awareness of eating disorders since 2021. Animenta also provides concrete support to those suffering from the disease as well as their families.

The project was designed to break down stereotypical narratives and social stigma around eating disorders, and encourage people to seek help. Teams of professionals and volunteers visit educational institutions, bringing discussions and information about eating disorders.

Telling Stories for Good works on two fronts: online prevention and information, which engages audiences through interactive forums and webinars; and in person activities for both students and teachers. As of June 2023, volunteer professionals have so far met with over 10 thousand children across Italy, taking the topic of eating disorders to educational institutions. The initiative focuses on Italian cities that lack eating disorder treatment centres.

In person activity in schools, with the help of professional volunteers, has helped to promote early recognition and prevention, and even intervene on related issues such as bullying and cyberbullying, which often precede the onset of eating disorders.

Virtual online dinners, created with the help of a volunteer dietitian, also engage young people to approach meals again in a healthy way.

Animenta now has over 300 volunteers comprising professionals, parents, and young adults who have lived experience of eating disorders. Future goals include creating a ‘school kit’ with materials, games, and helpful documents, and to form collaborations with other associations across Europe dealing with eating disorders, and develop new strategies to tackle the disease.

For Aurora Caporossi, the founder of Animenta, “winning means being able to further realise the work we are doing, adding even more value to the importance of prevention in the area of eating disorders. Specifically, it sends a message: eating disorders are serious illnesses, and taking action to prevent them and provide concrete support is important.”

<https://animenta.org/>

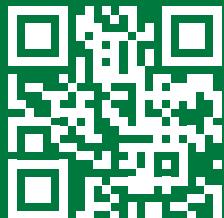




European Economic and Social Committee

Rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 99
1040 Bruxelles/Brussel
BELGIQUE/BELGIË

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