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Speech by the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy on the occasion of the European Depression Day

Stress. Depression. Burn-out. Three forms of mental and physical illness to which we have only recently started paying more attention, in Europe and elsewhere in the world. It is a phenomenon related to our modern civilisation, certainly to a very large extent. I am not an expert, but it seems to me that modern life is probably the main cause: rising individualism and the weakening of family and social links, cut-throat competition, unemployment, economic crisis. It is no coincidence that the theme of happiness has become a best-seller!

Many people struggle in their daily life against stress. Stress situations that they are pushed into by the so-called modern "way-of-life"; running behind something they don't control; trying to perform better without being able to measure this performance in terms of their own personal development. A mix of professional and family stress is a dangerous cocktail.

And things get worse when stress leads to depression. Depression arises when people feel that they are no longer in the driving seat of their own life, that they no longer have a grip; when they are always comparing themselves with others and get the feeling that they are lagging behind in terms of performance, of opportunities, prosperity, beauty..., Ultimately this can sometimes lead to burn-out, "the" illness of modern times...

These people are, for the most part, working very hard. But they are not getting "recognition", or they feel that they are not getting recognition, from the people around them, from their hierarchy, from the "system", or from society more generally.

That is why it is of tremendous importance that people in charge of "*Personnel*" departments or teams are truly skilled people. Skilled at human relations. Because how you deal with persons is perhaps the most important factor of harmony and development for a company or an institution. I personally regret the "human resources" terminology and I still prefer the older "*Personnel*" terminology, because it's all about persons, not just about resources.

And what is missing more and more today is respect between people. Respect that implies acknowledging each person's dignity.

More and more people today end up falling into the vicious circle of stress, depression and burn-out, because they do not feel recognized for what they are. When people are appraised only based on performance and image they tend to increase more and more their performances and to build up an image that doesn't correspond to what they really are. Their sense of personality may suffer and that can turn into a vicious circle of stress and sometimes depression. The paradox is that overperforming ends up as underperforming! A wise and respectful (personnel) policy is more efficient than any new form of "Stakhanovism".

Dealing with this is not easy. Neither for the persons themselves, nor for their closest circle of family and friends. And the negative effects spread like a game of dominos. Statistics illustrate clearly the need for a measures and a new approach:

- OECD data suggests that one in two people will experience mental ill-health at some point in their life. One in two!
- In Europe alone, over 30 million people suffer from depression, which is one of the top three causes of disease burden in all EU Member States;
- In Europe alone, an estimated one of ten people has to go on leave each year due to depression!
- and the World Health Organisation predicts that by 2030, depression will be the leading cause of disease around the world; physical or mental.

You know these figures for sure, but I continue to find them striking.

This is why I most welcome the *"MEP Ambassadors against depression"* programme, a brilliant initiative to build on the engagement of Members of the European Parliament in the active fight against depression throughout Europe.

I also most welcome the Framework Directive on "Health and safety at work" which can be an important step forward towards the protection of mental health of all employees.

Let us not forget that mental health is mentioned in Article 168 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union. I quote part of the Article: *"A high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of all Union policies and activities. (...) Union action (...) shall be directed towards preventing physical and mental illness and diseases, and obviating sources of danger to physical and mental health"* (end of quote).

I know that stress, depressions and burn-out won't end with legal measures and directives. But neither are they not unavoidable or unescapable. Fighting back against them is not only a task for politicians but for society as a whole, through men and women who are in direct contact with their colleagues and fellow human beings. The spiral can only end when the values of respect, dignity and solidarity are reinforced both in private and public life.

Yet I am certain that the combination of legal measures and shifts in attitude can and will change, even little by little, the society we live in. Insisting on values and, at the same time, taking essential political measures can make life better. And that is part of our political mission. Thank you.
