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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	Promotion of the benefits of sport for mental health and wellbeing - Exchange of views

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the exchange of views at the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 20 November 2026.

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Promoting the Benefits of Sport for Mental Health and Wellbeing

Presidency steering note

Background

The EU Work Plan for Sport 2024-2027[1], identifies 'Mental health and wellbeing in sport' as a key topic.

A valuable discussion on mental health in sport took place among Member States at the EYCS Council on 12 May during the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU. Ministers from across the EU exchanged views on strengthening sport policies and practices to promote the design of sports environments ''in a way that reduces psychological pressure while supporting the mental well-being of athletes, coaches, sports officials and the wider sport workforce.''[2]

Following on from that discussion, and the establishment of the OMC group on 'Securing and promoting the mental health and wellbeing of athletes, coaches and officials', the Presidency would like to provide an opportunity for Ministers to discuss the best way to promote the benefits of sport for mental health and wellbeing for all.

The State of Play

Regular physical activity and sport are widely recognised as important contributors to good physical and mental health. They can help reduce the risk of long-term health conditions, support cognitive functioning, and ease symptoms of common mental health difficulties.

1 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202403527

2 Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (Culture and Sport) - Consilium

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Physical activity can both help protect mental health and support people living with mental health difficulties and constitute one of the most effective methods of promoting mental wellbeing and preventing mental health problems across the life course[3]. For those experiencing such difficulties, it is particularly important that opportunities to be active are low-threshold, inclusive and easily accessible.

Based on a 2023 Eurobarometer survey on mental health[4], 41% of respondents indicated physical activity as one of the most important factors to achieve good mental health, making it the third most selected response after living conditions (60%) and financial security (53%).

In addition, the 2026 Eurobarometer survey on Sport and Physical Activity[5] shows that improving mental health or reducing stress is cited as a driver of participation in sport and physical activity by 26% of respondents.

Although regular exercise and sport are key to remaining both physically and mentally fit, the 2026 Eurobarometer on sport and physical activity reported a significant level of physical inactivity, with 39% of respondents indicating that they never exercise or play sport.

Furthermore, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic showcased how staying indoors for long periods can negatively impact mental health[6]. During the pandemic, at a time when many children had limited opportunities for social interaction and physical activity, depression among young people more than doubled[7].

3 WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020 (https://iris.who.int/ handle/10665/336656). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
4 Mental health - October 2023 - - Eurobarometer survey
5 Sport and physical activity - September 2026 - - Eurobarometer survey
6 Get moving, feel better: #BeActive for mental health | Sport
7 Commission Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health

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In the current context, excessive time spent on screens and social media can also take a toll on mental and physical health, in particular among children and young people. Too much screentime can be associated with symptoms such as lack of motivation to undertake other activities[8].

The most prevalent barrier to practicing sport has been reported as lack of time, according to 37% of respondents to the 2026 Eurobarometer on sport and physical activity. This was notably followed by lack of motivation or interest in practising sport more regularly, as indicated by 26% of respondents.

There are many determinants that can play a role in people's level of activity, including social, cultural, environmental and economic factors that can impact access and opportunities to being active[9]. In Europe, data has shown that those with lower incomes are less likely to practice sport, while also highlighting that people with a high level of educational attainment spend more time on physical activity[10]. Research has also found that in many countries women are less active than men[11].

On the other hand, there is also an unequal distribution of mental health issues across different population groups, with depression being more widespread among women, as well as among those with lower income and education levels[12].

8 healthy screentime - European Commission
9 Physical activity – World Health Organisation
10 Sport participation - practicing sport and physical activity - Statistics Explained - Eurostat
11 WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour
12 Mental health - Public Health - European Commission

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Challenges for Policy

Promoting good mental health, preventing mental health problems and providing early intervention are generally more effective and more cost-efficient than treatment alone. While physical activity and sport are key elements of a healthy lifestyle, prevention and early intervention also depend on broader conditions that enable people to be active and connected, including equitable access to quality sport and physical activity opportunities regardless of age, gender, disability or socio-economic status. Mental wellbeing is shaped by life-course experiences and by the social, physical and economic environments in which people live, learn and work. Action in and beyond the sport sector, including, for example, safe and inclusive sport settings, access to facilities, safe public spaces, green areas and community-based opportunities, can therefore play an important role in promoting mental wellbeing and preventing mental health problems.

Cooperation across sectors is crucial to strengthening mental health systems. Improving equitable access to support, treatment and care for people experiencing mental health difficulties may encompass innovative and person-centred approaches, such as social prescribing of sport and physical activity, including participation in community-based initiatives and activities that can contribute to the promotion of good mental health and wellbeing.

Sport and physical activity can promote good mental health and wellbeing through wider social pathways, including by creating opportunities for volunteering, community participation and active citizenship, strengthening social connection and cohesion, and providing structured, positive leisure time that may reduce sedentary behaviour and excessive screen time, including exposure to online risks such as cyberbullying, especially among young people.

Community-based sport and physical activity initiatives can help reduce stigma, strengthen social support and encourage open discussion about mental health.

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Discussion Questions

Ministers are invited to respond to the questions below, and asked to limit their interventions to 3 minutes total:

1. What are the best methods to encourage people to engage in sport for their mental health and wellbeing, especially regarding the challenges outlined above, e.g. lack of time, lack of access, gender imbalance?

2. How can we share the benefits of sport for mental health with people who practise sport regularly?

3. What could be done at national or EU level, where appropriate, to better foster the links between active lifestyles and mental health and wellbeing, especially with regard to coordinating across sectors in the promotion of the benefits of sport for mental health, (e.g. public health, community sector, youth sector)?

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