

Making Room for Mental Health

The Bloom Box



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A Long-Standing Neglected Problem

As European societies embark upon the wholesale economic change brought about by climate change, the digital transition and the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment, for young people, in particular, has the potential to cause a lifetime of mental health problems. In our project “Making Room for Mental Health”, we outline a series of innovative policies that the EU, its Member States, and employers must implement to support mental health among unemployed youth. Doing so will set them on the path to succeed professionally and to stay in good mental health later in life.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, experts estimated that approximately 1 in 6 people experience a range of underdiagnosed mental health problems that fall under the umbrella of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and burn-out. This has a detrimental effect on the economy, costing an estimated 4% of the GDP across the EU pre-Covid. Young people find themselves in a particularly precarious position regarding both their mental health and their career opportunities, which has a long-term scarring effect on this age group. Mental health and unemployment are bidirectionally linked, in that mental health problems both increase difficulty finding and keeping a job and arise from unemployment. Moreover, these unemployed persons face a double stigma: the stigma of unemployment and the stigma of mental health problems, which creates barriers for finding help and active solutions, as well as for reclaiming agency.

Evaluating the Problem: Why We Need to Take Action

As we head toward a more digitised and greener economy, the European Union faces several challenges. While the transition is both necessary and unavoidable, it will, next to other factors (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic and the past and upcoming financial crises), increase

unemployment in the medium to long term. Many high CO2 sectors will experience a downturn. Add to this the growing reality of automated industries, and a state of structural unemployment is imminent. This can be translated into a qualitative mismatch between the jobs available and the unemployed persons able to fill them.

This mismatch will particularly affect the young, among other vulnerable groups (e.g., workers at the edge of retirement age). The EU, its Member States, and employers must approach these structural economic changes holistically, by valuing the potential future contribution and the humanity of young people who currently find themselves jobless, so as to reduce the risk of their mental health deteriorating in the process. This will pay off in the form of savings on unemployment benefits and health care expenditure, and by adding to economic growth in the long run. In short, it would transform a liability into an opportunity for progress.

An Innovative Solution: The Bloom Box

To face these problems, we propose a set of policy goals and a toolbox for managing the unemployment period called “the Bloom Box” (BB). The concept is based on the Finnish “Maternity package”, a box sent to all mothers to provide the essentials for caretaking. The BB is a box of contents which is sent to all young (18-30) unemployed EU citizens when they first register in their respective countries’ unemployment offices. Additionally, the Bloom Box entails a set of policy goals and coordination mechanisms to address youth employment and thus the mental well-being of young people. The package is set to empower youth to take action to improve their situation. The contents (detailed below) support solving the problems that a person can face when unemployed. The BB helps youth reclaim their agency and ward off psychological distress around unemployment in a time of hardship.

Policy Recommendations for Cross-Sectoral Approaches to Youth Unemployment & Mental Health

1. The EU:

The EU has the competence to act in the area of mental health and unemployment, implementing institutional and constitutional changes at the EU and national levels that promote cross-sectoral interactions to tackle these. The EU should:

- A) Incentivize EU Member States to invest in and implement the 'Bloom box' policy goals by including compliance with the latter as an ex-ante conditionality for funds from the European Social Fund to be disbursed.
- B) Adopt a 'macro-approach' to unemployment and mental health in future EU initiatives, which incorporates a broader definition of mental health, including psychological distress.
- C) Expand and enhance knowledge and use of the European Social Fund across Member States.
- D) In line with the cross-sectoral solution proposed, recognise the right to mental health as a fundamental right on its own and thus, make it enforceable, while expanding, connect to mental health and make enforceable the rights and principles found in the European Social Charter.

2. Member States:

- A) Can adopt and implement the 'Bloom box' initiative.
- B) Can enforce institutional change by adopting and implementing tax and employment policies that would support the mental health of unemployed people. Such policies can include tax incentives to hire long-term unemployed people or young people who have experienced mental distress.
- C) Can ensure easier access for users to services and benefits by centralising and appropriately marketing relevant programs and institutions related to mental health and unemployment.
- D) Can introduce and implement a Universal Basic Income (UBI) or Youth Basic Income (YBI) to minimize mental health risks at a crucial time for professional choices.
- E) Can adopt a pre-emptive approach at an early stage in the educational system to minimise the

stigma associated with psychological distress and to provide (vocational) training and reskilling for young people.

- F) Can invest in producing and publicly disseminating funded campaigns which promote the 'Bloom Box' initiative to reduce the stigma associated with mental health and youth unemployment.

3. Potential Employers:

- A) Can include employment and mental health promotion strategies as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).
- B) Can offer psychological support and career counselling, as well as (re-)training opportunities.

4. The Bloom Box:

The BB is an initiative tailored to the young unemployed to facilitate a journey towards healthy habits and employment while fighting the stigma associated with mental health issues and unemployment. To do so, the BB includes several items which address the following four main categories that reinforce the individuals' agency:

- A) Information on unemployment support mechanisms both public and private, as well as a list and information on employers who include employment and mental health promotion strategies as part of their Social Corporate Responsibility (CSR) from across the Member State concerned or the EU.
- B) Booklet of vouchers and discounts to services, including training and education, therapy, community volunteering, sports, leisure, and cultural programmes which individuals can choose from to improve both their mental health and their unemployment situation.
- C) Life upgrades: indoors and outdoors exercising, wellness, nutrition, music and reading oriented activities.
- D) Freebies: pampering objects that encourage motivation, organisation, and stress relief. It also includes a curated list of useful Apps and programs.