



# A supportive framework



**Maria Nyman, Director, Mental Health Europe**

Highlighting the challenges experienced by those with mental health issues, Maria Nyman explains the correlation between psychosocial diseases and poverty, as well as the activities launched by MHE to provide health and social support



## When was Mental Health Europe (MHE) established, and what are its overarching objectives?

MHE was created almost 30 years ago – originally, as the European Regional Council of the World Federation for Mental Health. We became fully independent in 1996 and represent more than 80 organisations in 30 European countries. We are a European NGO working to prevent and promote awareness of mental health problems and, most importantly, advocate for the human and civil rights of individuals affected by psychosocial conditions and ensure that they receive high quality care.

## Can you outline your professional background? What led you to become Director of MHE?

I have a legal background with a specialisation in European Union (EU) law and human rights. I started my career at the European Disability Forum (EDF), an organisation working to promote the rights of people across the spectrum of disabilities. I worked there for seven years, first as a policy officer and then as a campaign manager. I initially became interested in working in the disability field for family reasons; I have seen first-hand the stigma, discrimination and barriers that exist in society.

For these reasons, it was very natural for me to join a European NGO to work with disability and advocacy. After some years at EDF, I thought it would be interesting to focus more closely on one disability, which led me to look for opportunities within more disability-specific NGOs. That's what led me to MHE, where we work on psychosocial disabilities, or mental health problems.

I have now been Director of MHE for three years, working to tackle mental health challenges – one of the most prevalent yet 'invisible' areas of disability. There is still a lot of work to do to improve the rights of people in this area.

**Securing a job is an important part of recovery, as it helps individuals gain confidence, create objectives and feel as though they can contribute to society**

## What are the main obstacles facing the mental health arena in Europe?

The lack of awareness around mental health is a huge obstacle that needs to be addressed. Although MHE and many other organisations are working hard, we are not there yet. The financial crisis, for instance, led to the abolition of numerous services supporting those with mental health problems. Moreover, many individuals who had been integrated into society were re-admitted to institutions as there were insufficient community care solutions available. Many of these negative effects still need to be tackled.

In addition, the prejudices against people with mental health problems increased during the financial crisis, as many in society believed that they were benefit scroungers. There were a lot of very negative discussions around people with mental health problems in the media.

I also think that the role of the media will need to be highlighted more in the future; just one negative article in a popular newspaper can destroy significant progress made in the field of mental health. Society needs to be more aware that individuals with mental health problems are not (often) dangerous; they are not the stereotypes portrayed by the media. In fact, they are frequently the victims of violence as opposed to those who cause it.

## **MHE has developed a campaign for helping young people with severe mental health problems who wish to move back into employment. What challenges does this demographic specifically face? How is the organisation striving to support these individuals?**

One of the main targets of the EU 2020 strategy is to fight unemployment and poverty. Young people are one of the most important groups on which to focus. Many of those who experience a severe mental health problem (such as an episode of psychosis) at a young age are subsequently entered into the system of exclusion, wherein they are not given the opportunity to gain work experience and have difficulties entering the job market. This often leads to a lifelong dependency on benefits and unemployment – which often worsens mental health issues – so it's important to break that cycle at the very beginning.

Therefore, those affected by severe mental health problems need services focusing both on healthcare and support to enter the employment

## Practice and Understanding in Supported Housing (PUSH)

Maria Nyman explains how the PUSH project is supporting those affected by mental health issues

PUSH is a project set up by a few European NGOs, including MHE, FEANTSA, Housing Europe and the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities. The programme looks at how to integrate housing services with other support services, to help people with mental health issues and disabilities, as well as those who are homeless.

Often, people are homeless because they have severe mental health problems, or they acquire mental health problems while living on the streets because it is a very difficult life. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that health, social and housing services are all provided; receiving support in one area but not another will not combat the entire

problem. The programme was created to promote models where housing and care services are integrated, so that individuals receive local (within the community and not at a remote institution) housing where they also have the possibility to benefit from services. Another aim was to start a collaboration between the housing and disability sectors because there is a lot of common ground.

MHE has been working for many years on deinstitutionalisation – moving people out of big psychiatric hospitals where they often have very impersonalised care and live in horrific conditions. For this to work, we need to ensure that there are housing, health and social services available to the community.



## Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)

In August 2013, MHE set up a task force to address important issues with *DSM V*. Here, Maria Nyman summarises the main areas of focus and their activity updates since its launch



The reason for setting up the *DSM V* task force was to evaluate the medical approach to the Manual – especially this new version – which includes new categories and diagnoses of mental health problems. Our concern lies with the overdiagnosis of minor mental health problems that should not be classified as a disease or disability. For example, following a loss in the family individuals experience a period of grief, which is absolutely normal and not a mental health problem.

We wanted to have a social rather than medical approach to this edition. Now, however, though the fifth version has been launched, the work continues. Overmedicalisation in society is still

growing and there are many reasons for promoting alternatives, like supporting people with talking therapies. It is also important to tackle the roots of the problem rather than just the symptoms. We are, therefore, continuing to raise awareness. Right now, there is another international manual under revision, the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)*. The *ICD* and *DSM* are the two main manuals that psychiatrists use across the world. We aim for the *ICD* revision to integrate a more social model of psychiatric problems, rather than adopting a pure medical approach. Our group is still working on that revision, raising awareness of overmedicalisation and transparency in relation to clinical trials. It really is valuable work to promote a more social, human approach to mental health problems.

market. Securing a job is an important part of recovery, as it helps individuals gain confidence, create objectives and feel as though they can contribute to society. This is why we started the campaign for young people, with an individual placement and support (IPS) framework, which is a very successful model that has helped many young people with mental health problems get back into employment very quickly by tackling both issues concurrently.

Many people believe it is important to address mental health problems first and then try to get the individual back into employment, but it really should be an integrated approach, where different types of services work in harmony to provide immediate support. This strategy is

important for the young people themselves as well as society. MHE is therefore implementing the IPS method across the three-year campaign. So far, it has been very successful; we have received a lot of positive feedback and interest in this model.

The government also sees it as a method to save financially and help more people secure employment, so there are a lot of benefits. Young people need appropriate care and support now. If we miss out this generation, then there will be a multitude of problems later on for this demographic and society as a whole.

### Has the organisation been involved in any recent conferences?

In collaboration with a few other organisations, we recently organised a side event on extreme exclusion and poverty at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the European Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion with a focus on undocumented migrants and homeless people and their mental health. The event was an ideal platform through which to shine light on this forgotten demographic that doesn't often appear on official records and is poorly reflected in statistics on poverty and exclusion. The same can be said for those who are homeless and have very limited or no access to health services.

Moreover, on 10 December we organised a conference in the European Parliament with other organisations within the European Expert Group on Deinstitutionalisation on what EU institutions can do to promote community-based services as an alternative to large institutions.

## MHE's mission, vision and values

The organisation is endeavouring to uphold the mental health and wellbeing of all citizens across Europe by focusing on the following core values:

- Independence
- Human rights
- Transparency
- Self-determination
- Recovery



[www.mhe-sme.org](http://www.mhe-sme.org)