



European Brain Council

# NO HEALTH WITHOUT BRAIN HEALTH

Promoting Brain Health in the European  
Union to leave no one behind

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# OUR CALL

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Thriving democracies and economies can make a difference through supporting environments that enable each citizen to achieve their full brain health potential conducive to both personal and societal well-being.

Developing a systemic, cross-disorder understanding that allows for effective prioritisation of limited resources is critical. Concerted action to improve access to prevention, effective and timely diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitative and supportive care is sorely needed to achieve potential savings and improve EU citizens' quality of life. Brain conditions, neurological and mental alike must be made a national priority, through both policymaking and economic prioritisation.

**We call on the European Parliament and European Commission 2024-2029 to support policy making towards equitable and quality brain health to combat brain challenges, promote societal cohesion, boost economic productivity and guide the EU to the role of global leader in brain research.**



## What are Brain Conditions?

The term “brain conditions” is an umbrella term encompassing both neurological and mental conditions.

There are approximately 400 classified neurological conditions and 200 psychiatric disorders, which include epilepsy, depression, Alzheimer's disease, Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's, depression, stroke, Schizophrenia, headache, anxiety disorders, chronic pain and rarer brain disorders such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), dystonia and ataxia.

## What is Brain Health?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines brain health as the state of brain functioning encompassing cognitive, sensory, social-emotional, behavioural and motor domains, allowing a person to realise their full potential over the life course, irrespective of the presence or absence of disorders. Brain health promotes optimal brain development, cognitive health and well-being for all across the life course.

In the context of the Horizon 2020 Brain Health Partnership, ‘brain health’ should be interpreted as a concept that encompasses neural development, neuroplasticity, brain functioning, and recovery across the life course, including mental health and wellbeing elements.

Compromised brain health greatly increases the risk of disorders across the life span and hinders the achievement of each individual's full human potential.



# NO HEALTH WITHOUT BRAIN HEALTH



## Introduction

The human brain is an incredibly complex organ, acting as the control centre of our bodies, in charge of even the smallest functions. The brain allows people to thrive: to live in health and in happiness, to power our labour markets and economies, and to build for future generations.[1]

Brain conditions – neurological and mental alike – are heterogenous, widespread, disabling and difficult-to-treat non-communicable and chronic diseases. Conditions affecting the brain and the central and peripheral nervous systems in general emerge throughout the life course and are characterised by disruptions in brain growth, damage to brain structure and/or impaired brain functioning.[2]

Brain conditions are still amongst the most complex conditions to understand and treat. Their impact poses serious challenges for health systems, economies, patients, caregivers and their families. Yet, brain conditions still lack the awareness and recognition they are due for a European Union that strives to build and maintain healthy and prosperous lives for all.

### POLICY ASK: RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT BRAIN CONDITIONS

- Prevent stigma and address discrimination that both lead to severe discrimination and act as barriers to seeking healthcare
- Promote inclusion of people with brain conditions in society
- Embed brain health in awareness-raising activities and present a positive approach to brain conditions
- Raise awareness to drive national, European and international action

**Understanding how the brain works, how brain diseases progress and finding treatments and cures, as well as understanding determinants to guide preventative measures, for these diseases should not be seen as a burden. It is a long-term endeavour for which research investments and support are crucial.**

## Sustainable development demands brain health

Brain health is essential for health, well-being, productivity and creativity across the lifespan. Its definition goes beyond the absence of disease, embracing all cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social functions which are necessary to cope with life situations. It fosters a person-centred approach focused on promotion, prevention, treatment, care and rehabilitation.[3] A healthy brain is the ultimate prerequisite for mental health with positive social and economic impacts.

# NO HEALTH WITHOUT BRAIN HEALTH



Promoting brain health throughout the life course calls for actions looking at determinants that affect the brain at different stages of life (such as physical health, healthy environments, safety and security, learning and social connection, and access to quality services determinants).[4]

**Optimising brain health can not only reduce the prevalence and burden of brain conditions, it can also improve mental and physical health overall and create positive social and economic impact, all of which contribute to greater well-being and help advance society, irrespective of the presence or absence of disorders.**

## **POLICY ASK: DRIVE PREVENTION OF BRAIN CONDITIONS**

- Promote brain health to tackle well-known risk factors and improve quality of life
- Promote brain health using a life-course approach to brain disorders.
- Investigate health determinants that influence the way our brain develops, adapts and responds to threat and adversity (physical health, healthy environments, safety and security, life-long learning and social connection, access to quality services)
- Implement strategies for promotion and prevention across the life course.

## The time is ripe

Optimising brain health for all is paramount to ensuring human health and well-being globally. The World Health Organization's brain health work is focused on promoting optimal brain development, cognitive health and well-being across the life course.

## **POLICY ASK: IMPROVE CARE**

- Implement integrated and people-centred campaigns
- Promote a health and social care through multisectoral and interdisciplinary collaborations with a holistic and integrated person-centred approach focused on promotion, prevention, treatment, care and rehabilitation and the active engagement of persons with lived experience, their families and carers.

Its Intersectoral global action plan on epilepsy and other neurological disorders (2022–2031)[5] is looking at improving care, recovery, well-being and participation of people living with neurological disorders across the life-course, while reducing associated mortality, morbidity and disability. The European Commission EU non-communicable diseases (NCD) initiative[6] - Healthier Together – acknowledges the burden of major NCDs (including mental health and neurological disorders) focuses on health promotion and disease prevention. It aims at identifying and implementing effective policies and actions to reduce the burden of major NCDs and improve citizens' health and well-being.

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## Investing in the Brain

Given the complexity of the brain, a wide range of research techniques, based on human, artificial, digital and, predominantly, animal models – which remain essential for progress in this domain – and bottom-up initiatives like the European Research Council, must be supported.

### **POLICY ASK: FOSTER BRAIN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN EUROPE**

- Make brain research and innovation an EU priority and dedicate significant funding
- Foster research on the prevention of neurological disorders, determinants and assessments of brain health
- Develop a European Brain Research and Innovation Plan towards understanding brain function, prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and care of diseases, and enhancing synergies to accelerate progress
- Recognise pronounced disparities in brain health research, care, and infrastructure across regions
- Recognise that brain research is interdisciplinary and requires a wide range of research techniques based on different models (human, artificial, digital and, predominantly, animal, which remains essential for progress in this domain.
- Facilitate concerted actions to build research infrastructure, strengthen human resources in research and development, increase collaboration among the research community, health professionals, people living with brain disorders and the private sector to catalyse brain research and development.
- Support for the development, assessment and establishment of efficient models for reimbursement of digital health technologies.

Understanding how the brain works, how brain conditions progress, finding treatments and cures and improving brain health is a long-term endeavour. Fostering brain research and innovation holds the promise of dramatically reshaping healthcare delivery. Scaling-up prevention, treatment and rehabilitation efforts to adequate levels could lead to substantial savings (over \$4trn by 2030).[7]

Continued research and development in the brain space are crucial. Despite considerable advances in basic neuroscience, the complete understanding of brain functions and the mechanisms behind brain disorders remains a future perspective, mainly due to the complexity of the system itself. Consequently, a large number of brain conditions remain without a disease-modifying therapy or cure and both fundamental and translational research is still highly needed.

To showcase the priorities and needs of basic, translational and clinical researchers together with health care professionals (neurologists and psychiatrists) and patients, the Shared European Brain Research Agenda (SEBRA) was designed and adopted on 2022 as the outcome of a broad consultation and consensus of the brain community to pave the way for future brain research in Europe.

This SEBRA is now feeding into the preparation for the Brain Health Partnership within Horizon Europe (expected to start in 2025). Furthermore, to improve prevention, diagnosis and treatment of neurological and psychiatric disorders, research based on identified clinical needs is crucial.

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## Investing in the Brain

Further steps were therefore taken to foster a clinically informed research agenda, such as with the publication of Strategic Research Agenda for neurology in December 2023.

Despite all this, the latest UN Report on the SDGs, released in 2023, does not register any progress in tackling NCDs. In fact, SDG target 3.4 to 'reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment' is far from being met.[8]

Given the complexity of the brain, a wide range of research techniques, based on human, artificial, digital and, predominantly, animal models – which remain essential for progress in this domain – and bottom-up initiatives like the European Research Council, must be supported.

### **POLICY ASK: DRIVE COLLABORATION TO STEER INNOVATION AND IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE**

- Contribute to the global and international brain health approach (together with national and subspecialty societies, other medical societies, the World Health Organization, patients' organizations, industry and other stakeholders)
- Enhance global brain research collaboration to spur innovation and quicken effective outcomes to the benefit of people living with brain conditions everywhere.
- Foster and enhance global collaboration in the brain area, with the ultimate goal of improving the lives of people living with brain conditions, neurological and mental alike.

### **POLICY ASK: GENERATE DATA TO INFORM POLICY AND ACTIONS**

- Drive effective change and tackle the societal burden through data generation that is essential to provide a clear and measurable understanding of the global and local burden of disease across the world.
- Develop a clear understanding of the issue and the significant nuances involved with brain conditions to nurture economic prioritisation and targeted policies
- Address the huge data gap exists around gender-specific research (sex- and gender-related actors that impact neurological disorders beyond prevalence (and may have important implications on drug development and global policies).

Accurate estimates of disease burden are pivotal for driving neurological policy agendas. The biggest challenge remains how little we know about how many people are living with what conditions, in which countries.[9]

Obtaining this data is key to provide the evidence that will drive evidence-based discussions and steer change in policies and decisions. Existing efforts such as the Burden of Neurological Diseases in Europe Study should be supported and continued, while shared methodologies across brain disorders should be encouraged to yield a clear and unified picture of the burden as a whole.

# NO HEALTH WITHOUT BRAIN HEALTH

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## Boosting economies of wellbeing through brain health

The fact is, understanding the brain is not just to address a “burden”. It is also to allow people to thrive: to live in health and in happiness, to power our labour markets and economies, and to build for future generations. Brain health has an increasingly critical role in our economies, predicated on ‘Brain Capital’ – encompassing an individual’s social, emotional, and cognitive resources – with the world increasingly putting a premium on brain skills and brain health.

The notion of calling for an Economy of Well-Being aligns here perfectly, with the goal of supporting sustainable economic growth and well-being by working together to the benefit of people and society. A virtuous circle in which build up individual wellbeing and long-term economic growth are mutually reinforcing should guide policies to promote a brain healthy future.

Instead of divesting in a cost, policymakers and society at large should view the prioritization and support of brain health and research as a solution. By prioritising brain health at the highest levels, we can make the investment into prevention, wellness and optimisation, building towards a better future for every citizen of the world.

## Paving the way for brain health as an EU policy priority

European authorities must devise and implement a plan to tackle brain health in an integrated and comprehensive manner in cooperation with all EU Member States. Acknowledgement of urgency and prioritisation are needed to make sure that brain disorders remain high on the health policy agenda at the country level and globally.

To reduce the burden of brain conditions, a strategic research and innovation agenda, driven by a European Brain Health Partnership within the 2nd Strategic Programme of Horizon Europe and developed in collaboration with all interested stakeholders, must be fully supported.

**Brain disorders must be made a national, European and global priority, through policies and economic prioritisation, to yield the greatest benefits for those directly affected and for society as a whole.**

# NO HEALTH WITHOUT BRAIN HEALTH

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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO OPTIMIZE BRAIN HEALTH:

- Make brain health an EU health, research, social, education priority Introduce brain health mainstreaming in all national and European policies and initiatives (health, work, education, environment, culture)
- Set-up a European Parliament Intergroup on Brain Health & Research
- Foster EU medical and social research in cooperation with partner societies, international organizations, policymakers, patients and family associations
- Support the establishment and implementation of concerted national brain plans at Member State level, to maintain health and combat brain diseases throughout the human lifespan.

## References

- [1] [Call to Action to United Nations & Member States during Brain Health & Research Day @ UNGA78](#), September 2023.
- [2] [Brain Health](#), WHO
- [3] [The European Academy of Neurology Brain Health Strategy: One brain, one life, one approach](#), Basetti C.L.A. et al., *Eur J Neurol.* 2022; 00:1–8.
- [4] [Optimizing brain health across the life course: WHO position paper](#). Geneva: World Health Organization; 2022. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
- [5] Horizon Europe - Work Programme 2023-2024 - 4. Health - (European Commission Decision C(2023) 2178 of 31 March 2023)
- [6] European Commission, [Healthier together – EU non-communicable diseases initiative](#).
- [7] [Improving the mental and brain health of children and adolescents](#), WHO.
- [8] [Sustainable development demands brain health](#), Editorial, *The Lancet*, 18 September 2023.
- [9] [The value of action - Mitigating the global impact of neurological disorders](#), Findings Report, *The Economist*, September 2022.

# ABOUT EBC



## WHAT WE DO

### Our Vision

The European Brain Council (EBC) is a network of key players in the “Brain Area”, with a membership encompassing scientific societies, patient organisations, professional societies and industry partners.

A non-profit organisation based in Brussels, its main mission is to promote brain research with the ultimate goal of improving the lives of the estimated 179 million Europeans living with brain conditions, mental and neurological alike.

### Our Mission

With the aim to speak with one voice, EBC stands as the platform to foster cooperation between its member organisations and other stakeholders, consistently promoting dialogue between scientists, industry and society. As showcased by its growing portfolio of projects, research and policy papers, as well as events, EBC emphasizes the importance of continued interaction with the European Institutions to build strong European health policies, raising awareness and encouraging education on the brain and the repercussions of neurological and mental health conditions on society as a whole.

