

# PRIORITISING HEARING HEALTH AND MENTAL WELL-BEING IN EUROPE'S AGEING POPULATION

In Europe, one third of people aged over 60 are living with a disabling hearing loss.<sup>1</sup> While the connection between ageing and hearing loss is well known, the associations between hearing loss and mental health conditions are not and are often not publicly or widely discussed.

This is despite the fact that mental health conditions such as depression are more than twice as common among people living with hearing loss compared to their hearing peers.<sup>2</sup> Studies also consistently report untreated hearing loss alongside higher rates of isolation and loneliness, as well as a lower quality of life.<sup>1-3</sup>

This has no doubt been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

With this in mind, we have brought together the latest research on these important topics to highlight their interconnectedness and call on policy makers to prioritise holistic hearing and mental health strategies.

## WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

According to GAMIAN-Europe, a leading mental health charity, "the term mental health refers to our emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. It includes how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. We define good mental health as a state of wellbeing in which an individual is able to function in everyday life and is able to cope with normal life stressors".

*(Nigel Olisa, Executive Director)*



## WHAT IS A DISABLING HEARING LOSS?

The World Health Organization states: "Disabling hearing loss refers to hearing loss greater than 35 decibels (db) in the better hearing ear. Nearly 80% of people with disabling hearing loss live in low- and middle-income countries. The prevalence of hearing loss increases with age, among those older than 60 years, over 25% are affected by disabling hearing loss."<sup>4</sup>



## UNTREATED HEARING LOSS LEADS TO MENTAL ILL-HEALTH AND LONELINESS

Following well documented peaks in mental ill-health during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unsurprising that mental health has become a priority on the eu health agenda. Age UK<sup>5</sup> report that the proportion of people experiencing depression over 70 years has doubled since the start of the pandemic, and one in three (34%) older people stating that their anxiety had worsened over the same period.



**1/10  
PEOPLE**

*experience mental health challenges at any one time – in many cases hidden and untreated.<sup>6</sup>*

As a recognized comorbidity of hearing loss, mental ill-health among people with untreated hearing loss is a growing concern.

Poorer mental health, including stress and anxiety, depression, and behavioural and emotional disorders, is shown to be more prevalent among people living with hearing loss compared to those without.<sup>2,7</sup> In fact, one study identified that hearing loss could increase the symptoms of anxiety and depression fourfold.<sup>3</sup>



### THE FACTS: HEARING LOSS IN EUROPE

- By 2050, 1 in 4 people are projected to have hearing loss, equivalent to 236 million Europeans<sup>1</sup>
- Less than 10% of those who could benefit from treatment for severe hearing loss receive it<sup>8</sup>
- In Europe, 10.9% of people aged 60-69 experience hearing loss. This prevalence reaches 42% of people aged 80-89 and more than 56% for the over 90 years old<sup>1</sup>

Individuals who self-report as feeling isolated or lonely face an increased risk of mental health conditions, as well as physical diseases such as strokes, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and dementia.<sup>9-11</sup> According to the WHO, social isolation and loneliness shorten the lives of older people and affect quality of life.<sup>12</sup>

**BETWEEN  
20-34%**

*of older people across 25 European countries have reported feeling lonely.<sup>13</sup>*

Those who live with a disability or sensory impairment such as hearing loss are at greater risk.<sup>9,10</sup>

*“Social isolation and loneliness due to hearing loss can have important implications for the psychosocial and cognitive health of older adults. Lack of engagement and feeling lonely may mediate the pathway linking hearing loss and cognitive decline. Furthermore, both can contribute to worsened mental health, leading to experience of depression and distress.”<sup>1</sup>*

Reports of fragmented communication due to hearing loss, the inability to fully participate in conversation, and social withdrawal are cited as factors that lead to increased social isolation in adults with hearing loss.<sup>2,14</sup> The odds of experiencing loneliness were 2.2 times higher among older adults living with hearing loss compared to hearing peers.<sup>14</sup>

## TREATING HEARING LOSS POSITIVELY IMPACTS MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Left untreated, hearing loss continues to contribute to social withdrawal, loneliness and depression. However, studies measuring the effect of cost-effective hearing interventions such as hearing aids and cochlear implants show significant benefits connected to mental well-being.

Following cochlear implantation, most patients report a significant increase in quality of life. This includes improved communication and social engagement as well as positive emotional, psychological, mental health and physical well-being.<sup>15-18</sup> For older adults with severe hearing loss, cochlear implants are also shown to significantly reduce depressive symptoms at 6 and 12 months after treatment.<sup>19</sup>

Research with hearing aids has demonstrated a positive effect on social, emotional and psychosocial functioning as well as symptoms of depression.<sup>20,7</sup>

## THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF HEARING LOSS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Untreated hearing loss and associated comorbidities place additional pressure on healthcare systems and are costly to the European economy. According to the WHO, the European Union incurs annual costs of approximately \$224.5 billion due to hearing loss, encompassing healthcare and education expenditures, associated comorbidities, and productivity losses.<sup>1</sup>

Considering additional costs of associated comorbidities, this sum increases further. According to the European Commission, mental ill health has a total cost of over 600 billion – or more than 4% of GDP – across the 27 EU countries and the UK.<sup>21</sup> In the UK alone, a study estimated that loneliness resulted in additional health and social care costs of £11,725 per person within 15 years.<sup>22</sup>



## SPEND TO SAVE

- Every \$1 invested in EU hearing care can yield a return of \$30 over a 10-year period<sup>1</sup>
- In lower-middle-income settings, every international dollar invested in newborn hearing screening generates a return of \$1.67 international dollars<sup>1</sup>
- Every international dollar invested in hearing screening for people older than 50 years generates \$1.62 international dollars in high-income settings<sup>1</sup>
- Cochlear implants deliver a positive return on investment ranging from \$1.46 to \$4.09 international dollars<sup>1</sup>

## WE CALL FOR A EUROPEAN HEARING HEALTH STRATEGY

Our members and partners urge the European Union to launch a patient-centred European Hearing Health Strategy, affirming its commitment to a Health Union that includes all citizens, especially those living with hearing loss.

We encourage the Strategy to focus on **HEAR** pillars:



### Hearing Loss Awareness

Raise awareness of hearing loss and educate populations to reduce stigma and promote social inclusion.



### Early Detection and Prevention

Implement effective strategies are put in place at the national level to ensure prevention and detection of hearing loss.



### Access and Care

Increase and facilitate access to hearing healthcare, interventions, treatment options and rehabilitation for persons living with hearing loss.



### Research and Data

Further support research and the collection of data to facilitate evidence-based policymaking for persons living with hearing loss.



Join our call for a European Hearing Health Strategy and endorse the [Manifesto on Hearing Health](#)

Contact us for questions:  
[contact@hearinghealth.eu](mailto:contact@hearinghealth.eu)

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