

ABC's of Mental Health Europe CONCEPT DESCRIPTION



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Introduction

About the project

The ABC's of Mental Health project has been developed to improve mental health and well-being for disadvantaged target groups across Europe. This will be achieved through further development and scale-out of the successful, research-based “ABCs of Mental Health” model.

Starting in September 2024, the project will last for 36 months.

Visit the project website to discover more about the partnership and the project:

<https://abcmmentalhealth.isca.org>

About the concept

The existing ABCs of Mental Health model and its related research have been reviewed and compiled under the leadership of the University of Copenhagen.

Best practice principles have been extracted with added knowledge and experience from the partner group to formulate and customise a more universal model that could be implemented in various settings and with multiple target groups.

This document is the first building block for further roll-out and long-term sustainability.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HADEA). Neither the European Union nor HADEA can be held responsible for them.

Executive Summary

The 'ABC's of Mental Health Europe' project aims to improve the mental health and well-being of disadvantaged groups in Europe by developing the 'Act-Belong-Commit' model.

About the model

This research-based model for mental health promotion provides a common framework for understanding and action.

The theory of change for the ABC's of Mental Health, outlines the assumptions underlying the impact of the ABC's of Mental Health at three levels: individual, group, and societal. A fundamental assumption is that all three levels are crucial for the optimal effectiveness of the ABC's of Mental Health, and that efforts at these levels mutually influence each other.

Why is mental health important for everyone?

Mental health is essential for a fulfilling life and must be proactively promoted. The prevalence of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and stress has increased significantly since COVID. It is no surprise that [a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2023](#) revealed that 89% of EU citizens consider mental health promotion to be as crucial as physical health promotion.

Could promoting mental health be as simple as ABC?

This is the powerful idea behind the three key messages of ABC's of Mental Health which encourages individuals to take action, connect with others and engage in meaningful activities.



How will the ABC's of Mental Health Europe project be implemented?

The project, which starts in September 2024 and runs for 36 months, is co-funded by the European Union.

The project emphasises the importance of community participation and individual commitment in building resilience and mental wellbeing.

It is based on five guiding principles:

1. thinking universally,
2. communicating ABC messages,
3. applying a salutogenic approach,
4. working across sectors and
5. adapting initiatives locally.

By incorporating these principles, the project hopes to create a common framework for mental health promotion across Europe, building on local initiatives and cross-sector partnerships.

GET READY TO TAKE A DIFFERENT
PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE AND




Glossary of keywords

| Mental Health


The term “mental health” can seem abstract and unmanageable. The ABC's of Mental Health offer a common language and framework for mental health promotion, helping to break down cross-sectoral and disciplinary boundaries and aiming at making it easier to collaborate across.



The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2001) defines mental health as: ... *“a state of well-being in which an individual can realize his or her own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and make a contribution to the community.”*


This definition encompasses two key dimensions: an experiential dimension and a functional dimension.



The Two Dimensions of Mental Health



 <p style="margin: 0;">Experiential Dimension</p> <p style="margin: 0;">How you feel</p>	<p style="margin: 0;">This refers to your subjective well-being—how you experience life emotionally and psychologically.</p> <p style="margin: 0;">It includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling happy, calm, or satisfied with life. A sense of self-worth and confidence. Emotional resilience (being able to bounce back from stress or setbacks). Inner peace and contentment.
 <p style="margin: 0;">Functional Dimension</p> <p style="margin: 0;">How you act</p>	<p style="margin: 0;">This focuses on your ability to navigate daily life and social interactions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coping with daily stress and responsibilities Maintaining relationships and working well with others Performing well at work or studies Being able to contribute to society and engage in meaningful activities



Mental health involves feeling good about oneself and one’s life and functioning well in daily interactions with others.

Being mentally healthy is as important as being physically healthy, as it enhances quality of life and helps prevent conditions like depression and anxiety. Mental health affects learning, and health- and risk behaviour. Mental disorders represent one of the most significant global health burdens, and numerous studies indicate that mental health is deteriorating worldwide.

Over the past decades, the focus on mental health has been primarily on treatment and prevention, focusing on mental illness, poor well-being and risk factors for common mental disorders such as stress, anxiety and depression. However, mental health is much more than the absence of mental disorders and stress. It also involves feeling a sense of belonging, having a reason to get up in the morning, and contributing to something greater than oneself.

To go further: [WHO’s report - Promoting mental health](#)

| Mental Health Promotion - MHP

Mental Health Promotion (MHP) refers to the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals and communities to improve their mental health and well-being. This involves increasing control over the determinants of mental health, such as self-esteem, coping skills, social connectedness, and overall well-being

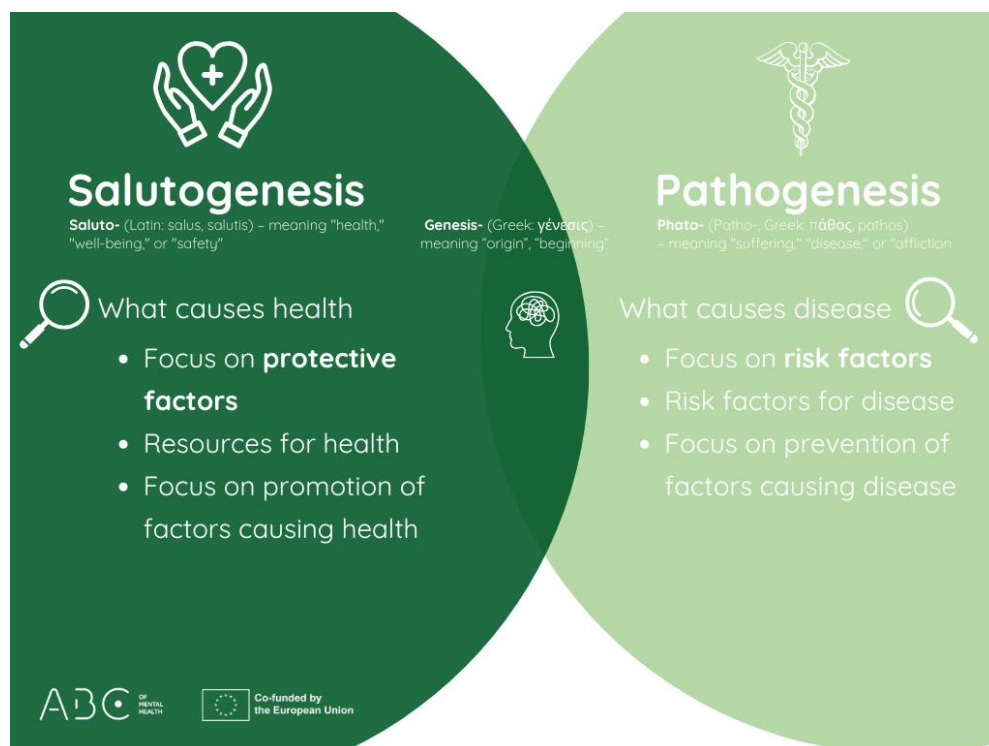
MHP aims to create supportive environments and build individual and community resilience, focusing on the positive aspects of mental health rather than just the absence of mental illness.

MHP focuses on helping people to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to promote and protect their own mental wellbeing, while simultaneously working to create positive changes in our shared social environments that promote our collective mental wellbeing. It emphasizes the importance of social justice, equity, and participation in decisions affecting one's life and health.

Further reading on MHP: [Prevention United](#)

| Salutogenic perspective

The salutogenic perspective focuses on factors that support human health and well-being, rather than those that cause disease.



The salutogenic approach was developed by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky in the late 20th century and emphasizes the importance of resources, behaviours, and conditions that promote and sustain health. The core idea is to understand what keeps people healthy and how individuals can enhance their sense of coherence and well-being.

Further reading on salutogenic approach: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK435854/>

| Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a holistic concept encompassing physical, mental, and emotional health.

It involves a sense of balance and satisfaction in life, including positive relationships, a sense of purpose, and the ability to manage stress. Wellbeing also includes the capacity to enjoy life, feel connected to others, and maintain a positive outlook. It is influenced by various factors such as lifestyle, environment, and personal choices. Overall, wellbeing is about experiencing good mental health and flourishing in all aspects of life.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines wellbeing as “a positive state experienced by individuals

and societies”. It is considered a resource for daily life, influenced by social, economic, and environmental conditions.

| Wellbeing literacy

Wellbeing literacy is the ability to understand and effectively communicate about wellbeing. It involves having the vocabulary, knowledge, and skills to discuss and promote wellbeing for oneself and others. This capability includes using various modes of communication, such as speaking, writing, and listening, in a context-sensitive and intentional manner.

Wellbeing literacy helps individuals and communities better-understand and support mental and physical health, fostering a more holistic approach to overall wellbeing.

| ABC messages

There are three core messages in the ABCs of mental health. These are research-based, actionable messages for promoting mental health. They can be applied, e.g., when communicating what can be done to promote mental health in individuals and populations. The three ABC messages are:



| ABC five guiding principles

The ABC's of Mental Health is a principle-based approach using five overarching principles as guidance for implementing and evaluating the ABC's of mental health.

The principles have been derived from ongoing work, research, and experience in the Danish ABCs partnership. A principles-based approach means that the ABC initiatives are not fixed in form but are created and developed collaboratively among the ABC partners and their members, citizens, users etc as opposed to a standardised, manual-based intervention with specific procedures that must be implemented uniformly across all settings.

All 5 ABC Guiding principles are equally important. They have been derived from the work and experiences in Denmark and were validated as a valuable framework of action in the European context by the project partners. The ABC 5 Guiding principles are:

- ▶ Principle 1. Think universally: Mental Health is relevant for everyone
- ▶ Principle 2. Communicate the ABC messages
- ▶ Principle 3. Apply a salutogenic approach: Focus on mental health-promoting factors and surroundings as opposed to risk factors for poor mental health
- ▶ Principle 4. Work across sectors and disciplines: Mental health is something we create together

- ▶ Principle 5. Adapt initiatives locally: Apply an ABC lens to new and existing initiatives

| ABC framework

A flexible and collaborative approach for promoting mental health at a population level.

The ABC framework builds around the five guiding principles of the ABC's of Mental Health. It emphasises creating and developing initiatives through partnerships and active engagement with members, citizens, etc. Unlike standardised, manual-based interventions, the ABC framework allows for adaptability and continuous improvement based on ongoing research and feedback, ensuring that initiatives are tailored to meet the specific needs of different communities and settings.

| ABC initiatives

Initiatives carried out by members of the ABC-partnership (sport organisations, municipalities, NGOs, private organisations, etc) are directed towards their target groups (members, citizens, users, employees). An ABC initiative can either use the ABC framework to develop new mental health-promoting initiatives or adjust existing initiatives using an ABC lens. Initiatives can include campaigns, events, and ongoing training. ABC initiatives can also present the framework and messages directly to the target groups (e.g. through materials, posters etc.).



Chapter 1: Theory and background research on mental health

What promotes Mental Health?

The ABC's of Mental Health work from a salutogenic perspective, drawing significant inspiration from one of the pioneers in health research, Aaron Antonovsky and his resource and opportunity-oriented understanding of health.

Antonovsky's curiosity was piqued when he encountered a small group of women who, despite having been in concentration camps during World War II, reported feeling well, trusting others, and experiencing no mental health problems or illnesses. Intrigued, Antonovsky sought to understand how individuals who had endured such extreme conditions as the Holocaust could continue to function, love, engage in daily activities, build positive social relationships, and manage family and work, unlike other survivors who led dysfunctional lives.

He shifted the focus from why people become ill to what keeps people healthy despite their challenges and posed a simple yet profound question: "What creates health?" This question marked a radical shift in health research during the 1970s. This new focus and his introduction of the concept of salutogenesis (from the Latin "saluto" for health and the Greek "genesis" for origin, meaning the origin of health) initiated a new health perspective.

Antonovsky found that those who do best, both mentally and physically, have a strong Sense of Coherence (SOC). He characterised a healthy person as capable of managing life's stress factors, attributing this to a high SOC. This SOC comprises three lifelong learning processes: meaningfulness, comprehensibility, and manageability.

The ABC's of Mental Health are inspired by Antonovsky's concept of health, which emphasises the sense of vitality and joy in life and the ability to navigate the various stress factors of everyday life.

RESOURCES TO GO FURTHER

- ▶ [Sense of Coherence \(SoC\)](#), Aron Antonovsky introduced the key concept of sense of coherence as part of the salutogenic model in the book *Health, Stress and Coping* in 1979. This chapter presents the measurement of the sense of coherence and the validity and reliability of the 13-item scale.
- ▶ [Applying Salutogenesis in Community-Wide Mental Health Promotion](#), Published in January 2022 in "The Handbook of Salutogenesis", this chapter describes mental health not as a stable trait but rather as a constant process which needs to be protected and promoted.

Mental health status in Europe - Why is Mental Health Promotion worth prioritising?

Current Status of Mental Health in Europe

Mental health has become a significant public health concern across Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing mental health issues and introduced new challenges. Before the COVID crisis, over 84 million people (1 in 6) in the EU were struggling with mental health problems (Source: [Mental Health in the EU – European Parliament brief](#)).

The prevalence of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and stress has increased significantly since then. For instance, in 2022, 55% of adults in Europe were at risk of depression, with the highest rates observed in Poland, Greece, and Cyprus. Vulnerable groups, including young people, the elderly, and those in precarious living situations, were particularly affected.

Interestingly, [a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2023](#) revealed that 89% of EU citizens consider mental health promotion to be as crucial as physical health promotion.

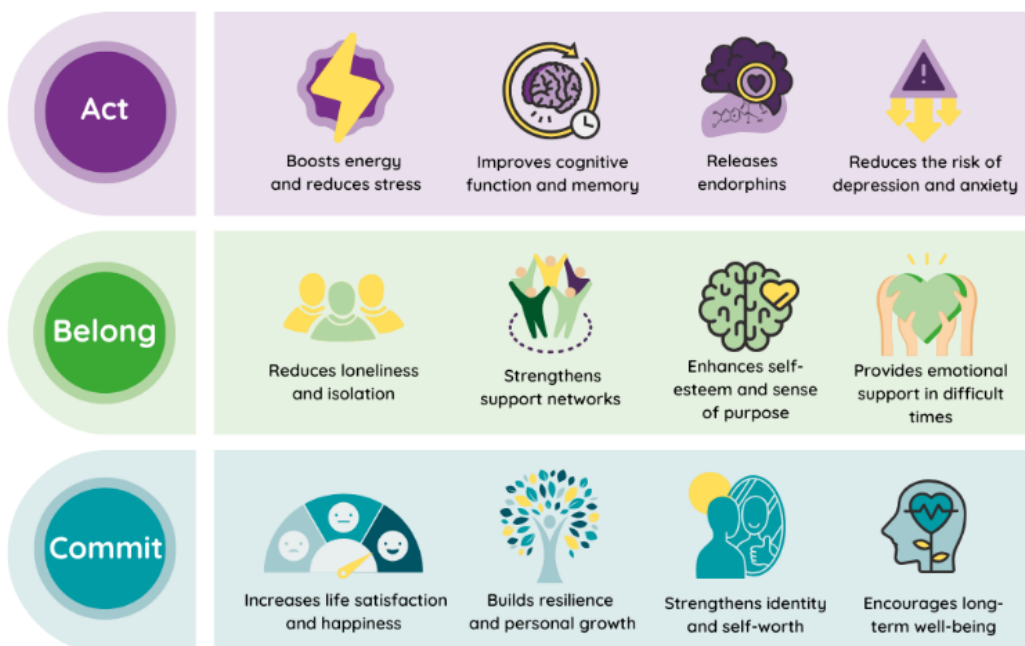
Identified approach

[A comprehensive approach to mental health, adopted by the European Commission in June 2023](#), emphasizes the need for effective prevention, high-quality and affordable mental healthcare, and reintegration into society after recovery. This approach aims to address the mental health crisis by integrating mental health across various policy areas, promoting early intervention, and improving access to care. This underscores the need for a holistic approach to health that includes mental well-being.

Research shows that promoting mental health is beneficial to individuals and societies. It is crucial to increase awareness of what individuals can do to enhance their and others' mental health—among the general population, frontline staff, volunteers, organisations, associations, and municipalities. The ABC's of Mental Health follow recommendations from experts like the WHO and European Commission on making intersectoral partnerships work.

Research indicates that being active in various ways (physically, socially, mentally and spiritually), engaging in social activities, and doing something meaningful - the 3 main ABC messages - improves quality of life, life satisfaction, and self-assessed mental health. These activities also reduce the risk of developing depression, anxiety, cognitive decline and alcohol problems.

Benefits of implementing the ABC of Mental Health approach



| *The way ahead*

The status of mental health in Europe highlights the urgent need for prioritising mental health promotion. With significant numbers of individuals affected by mental health issues and the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a comprehensive and proactive approach is essential. To effectively promote mental health in practice and across organisational and professional boundaries, there is a need for a common understanding of mental health and a shared, simple language – a common framework for action and understanding.

By promoting mental health, we can improve individual well-being, enhance social cohesion, and reduce the economic burden of mental health conditions. It is time to recognise mental health as a fundamental component of overall health and take concerted action to support mental well-being across Europe.

We will work on achieving this goal through the ABCs of Mental Health approach.

RESOURCES TO GO FURTHER

- ▶ Santini, Z.I.; Koyanagi, A.; Tyrovolas, S.; Haro, J.M.; Donovan, R.J.; Nielsen, L.; Koushede, V. [The protective properties of Act-Belong-Commit indicators against incident depression, anxiety, and cognitive impairment among older Irish adults: Findings from a prospective community-based study](#). *Exp. Gerontol.* 2017, 91, 79–87.
- ▶ Santini, Z.I.; Jose, P.E.; Koyanagi, A.; Meilstrup, C.R.; Nielsen, L.; Madsen, K.R.; Koushede, V. [Formal social participation protects physical health through enhanced mental health: A longitudinal mediation analysis using three consecutive waves of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe \(SHARE\)](#). *Soc. Sci. Med.* 2020, 251, 1–9.

Chapter 2: The origins of Act-Belong-Commit

Australia – where it all started

Act Belong Commit is Australia's longest-running mental health promotion campaign.

It was first developed in 2002 when researchers at Curtin University set out to investigate people's perceptions of mental health and the behaviours they believed protected and promoted mental wellbeing. Findings were used to develop the Act Belong Commit campaign message and strategy.

Following a successful pilot phase (2005-2007) in six regional communities throughout Western Australia, the campaign was launched state-wide in 2008.

The Act Belong Commit campaign in Australia has two key elements:

- ▶ A statewide mass media led social marketing health promotion campaign
- ▶ Supportive Programmes and Initiatives that build the capacity of the community to promote mental health and wellbeing.

These are delivered across a range of sectors and audiences including health services, local governments, schools, workplaces, community organisations and local clubs. The flagship strategy is the campaign's Partnership Programme.

Visit the official ABC Australia website: [Act-Belong-Commit](#)

Discover Rob Donovan's presentation developed for our Study Visit in Jan 2025: [ABC origins and background view from Australia](#)

A first spin-off in Denmark

Before the current partnership in Denmark, preliminary work was done to adapt the Australian Act-Belong-Commit to a Danish context, resulting in the ABC's of mental health.

To explore the foundation for expanding the ABC's of mental health in Denmark, an investigation was conducted to understand which population groups, across gender, age, social background, and geography, were associated with mental health and being mentally healthy. The study revealed that most people understood mental health according to WHO's definition. Furthermore, the messages - **Do something, Do something with someone, Do something meaningful**- align well with what people associate with mental health and well-being. However, these aspects are often neglected in daily life (Nielsen et al. [Mental health is what makes life worth living](#)).

In 2014, Denmark became the first country outside of Western Australia to translate and adapt the Act, Belong, Commit to a different context.

Act, Belong, Commit abroad.

Since then, the initiative has spread to Finland, the Faroe Islands, Norway, Sweden, and Austria.

You can read more about the initiatives in different countries and gain insight into how they have adapted the ABC's locally on their websites (where info is available)

Faroe Islands: folkaheilsa.fo/salarlig-heilsa/abc-fyri-salarliga-heilsu



CASE STUDY ABC in Faroe Islands - initiatives that reached out to a broad audience:

- ▶ **School games:** first education of students in sports that are not so famous there: e.g: badminton, CrossFit or basketball
- ▶ **Dissemination of ABC posters** to raise awareness of students as regards when they are active, when they belong and when they are committed, they get stickers to make them more conscious about ABC messages; such as when they are helping their classmates to turn sports as a cohesion tool rather than a sole competition.
- ▶ ABC Initiatives in the national psychiatric department. ABC team within the psychiatric department. They try to raise awareness about mental health issues (not just focusing on treatment).
- ▶ **Different kinds of events throughout the year:** ABC Week in October; Active January and Active October (campaigns during a month; a calendar with suggestions for being active mentally, physically, socially and spiritually speaking).

Norway: [ABC for god psykisk helse](#)



CASE STUDY ABC Norway

- ▶ **Context:** Mental health is a huge unsolved public health challenge in Norway. Female teenagers are more exposed than male; trend has been on the rise over the years (e.g.: female, from 20% depressed in 1995 to 45% in 2019).
- ▶ **Evidence** has shown there is a high correlation between the reduced prevalence of depression among the population the implementation of the ABC model. In addition, ABC promotes well-being and subjective health.
 - Consequence: ABC as a recognised tool to enhance mental health and mental health literacy among Norwegians
- ▶ Managed to get on the national political agenda with the Norwegian Minister of Health who wanted to spread the ABC regional experience in Norway nationwide with the funding of a national pilot through the national budget.
 - Direct impact: all municipalities in Norway can now apply for money to launch new regional campaigns.

Sweden: [Östergötland. ABC for god psykisk halsa](#)



CASE STUDY ABC in Region Östergötland - promoting mental health in the population

- ▶ **Spreading the ABC Message** – The region provides health advice and self-help tools to enable residents to strengthen their own and others' mental health.
- ▶ **Creating conditions for meaningful activities and social connections** – The Region fosters collaboration among ABC partners in the region by actively engaging with the community.
- ▶ **Offering ABC conversations** – The region supports organisations that help individuals increase the degree of ABC in their lives, both on an individual and group level..

Each country provides unique perspectives and adaptations of the ABC's of mental health, reflecting their specific cultural and societal contexts.

Chapter 3: How to advocate for mental health

Reaching a shared level of awareness and understanding

To effectively promote mental health in practice and across organisational and professional boundaries, there is a need for a common understanding of mental health and a shared, simple language – a common framework for understanding and action.

CASE STUDY



This need for a shared understanding and higher awareness was highlighted in an evaluation of Danish municipalities' efforts to implement "prevention packages" developed by the Danish Health Authority.

These prevention packages contain recommendations for municipal health promotion and prevention and aim at guiding the prioritisation and planning of initiatives in various areas.

The evaluation, published in April 2018, revealed that the package on mental health was more challenging to implement in practice compared to those for tobacco and alcohol due to its less concrete and tangible nature.

Many people know how to take care of their physical health. In many countries, there have been national campaigns focusing on diet, smoking, alcohol and exercise. Less focus has been placed on taking care of and promoting mental health.

The ABC's of Mental Health can be seen as the counterpart to recommendations on physical health, representing recommendations for promoting mental health.

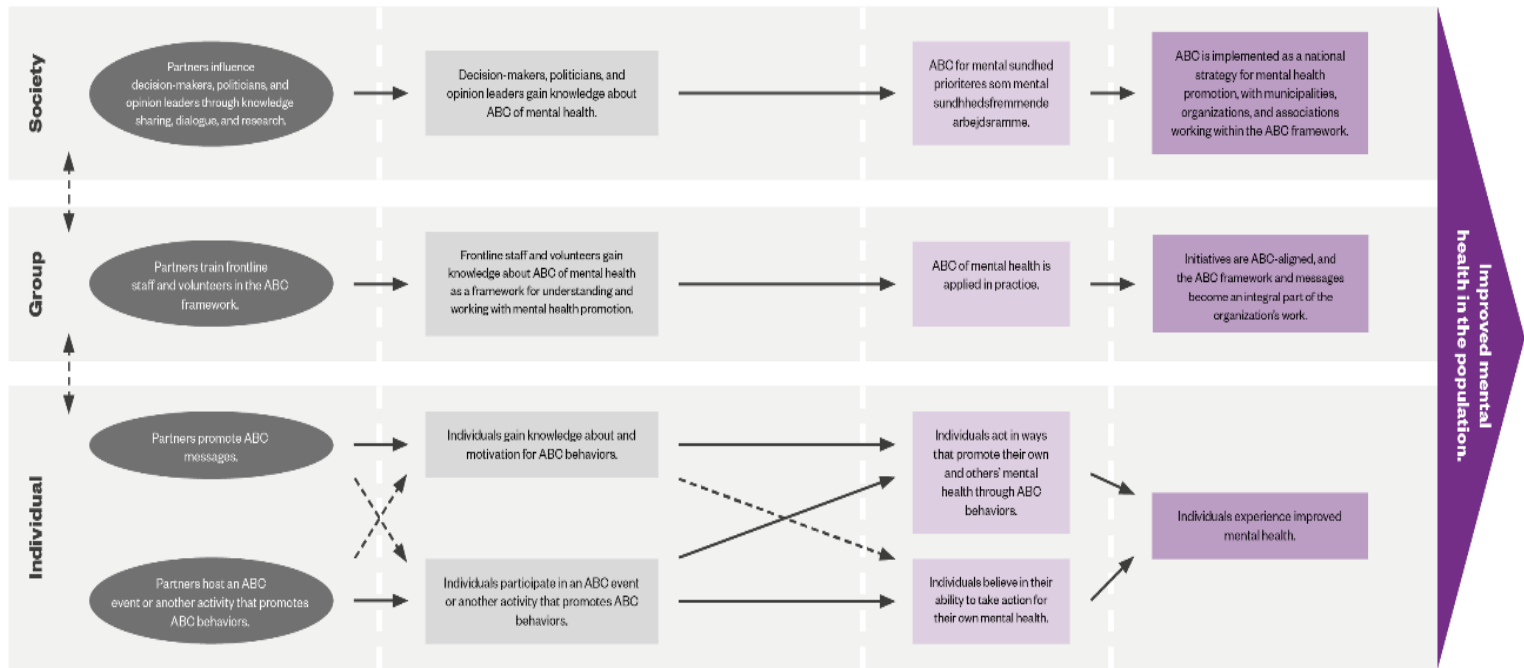
The Theory of Change for the ABCs of Mental Health

The theory of change for the ABC's of Mental Health, illustrated below (page 15), outlines the assumptions underlying the impact of the ABC's of Mental Health at three levels: individual, group, and societal.

A fundamental assumption is that all three levels are crucial for the optimal effectiveness of the ABC's of Mental Health, and that efforts at these levels mutually influence each other.

By working at all three levels, there is a more significant potential for the ABC messages to reach as many people as possible, increasing the likelihood of the ABC framework being adopted and creating synergy between efforts at different levels.

This aligns with research on the effectiveness of campaigns, which indicates that the likelihood of achieving behavioural changes through information campaigns is significantly increased by simultaneously employing multiple intervention elements – for example, combining campaigns with community-based initiatives and policies that support the desired behavioural change.



The figure above illustrates the Theory of change for the ABCs of mental health and shows that efforts at three levels work towards the shared vision of the ABC partnership to promote mental health within the population. The arrows indicate the connections between the different levels and elements of the theory of change.

- ▶ At the individual level, the ABC's of Mental Health partnership actively works to inform the population about what they can do to promote their own and others' mental health (dissemination of the ABC messages: do something, do something with someone, and do something meaningful), and to create opportunities for everyone to become part of one or more communities and participate in mental health-promoting activities (e.g., ABC activities and events). Information and participation in ABC activities and events can lead individuals to gain knowledge and motivation to maintain or initiate ABC behaviours (mental health-promoting behaviours). Participation in ABC events and activities can result in individuals beginning to act in ways that promote their own and others' mental health and strengthen their belief that they can do something for their own and

others' mental health, which in the long term leads to better mental health.

- ▶ At the group level, employees and volunteers in each organisation within the partnership are trained in the ABC framework, providing them with knowledge of the ABC's of Mental Health as a framework for understanding and practising mental health promotion. This creates opportunities for the ABC's of Mental Health to be applied locally by frontline staff and volunteers. Subsequently, this can lead to existing and new local initiatives being adapted using the ABC-lens, and the ABC framework and messages becoming an integrated part of the organisation's work and engagement with end users (citizens, members, etc.).
- ▶ At the societal level, efforts are made to influence policies and practices through knowledge sharing and dialogue with decision-makers, politicians, and prominent opinion leaders. The aim is to increase awareness of the ABC's of Mental Health and the importance of working to promote mental health and wellbeing, which in turn will increase the likelihood of the ABC's of Mental Health being prioritised as a mental health-promoting framework at the societal level. Greater awareness and knowledge of the ABC's at the societal level will lead to more

municipalities, regions, organisations, and associations basing their work on the ABC framework. The goal is for the ABC's of Mental Health to be used as a national strategy for mental health promotion.

Suppose the ABC framework is prioritised at the societal level and national campaigns are developed to spread awareness of the ABC messages, this will likely also lead to greater dissemination and use of the ABC framework at the group level.

Greater dissemination at the group level will lead to greater awareness of the ABC's of Mental Health at the individual level, resulting in more people acting to promote their own and others' mental health.

Thus, working with the ABC's of Mental Health at all three levels will ultimately contribute to the vision of promoting mental health and well-being within the population.



The proven benefits of ABCs

The ABC's of Mental Health provide a concrete framework for mental health promotion, which all ABC partners adapt and implement locally, depending on their specific target groups and settings. This framework underpins all activities, communications, and training programs.

With 20 years of implementation in Australia, 10 years in Denmark and further implementation other countries, the benefits of ABC are well demonstrated and can be summarised below:

TYPE OF EVALUATION CONDUCTED / SOURCE OF INFO	DEMONSTRATED BENEFITS
<p>Process Evaluations: In Denmark since 2016, continuous research within the ABCs of Mental Health tracks the partnership's progress. Formative evaluations, conducted through interviews, case studies, and annual surveys, provide insights into the partnership's development.</p>	<p>Overall, the feedback is highly positive. Partners appreciate the common language the ABCs provide for mental health promotion, making cross-sector collaboration, such as within municipalities, more seamless.</p> <p>The messages are intuitive, easy to understand, positive, and non-stigmatizing.</p> <p>The research-based framework also legitimizes mental health promotion efforts within organisations.</p>
<p>Longitudinal studies</p>	<p>Data from the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) showed that behaviours aligned with the ABCs are linked to a lower risk of depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline.</p> <p>Data from Norway (Source: Haug MA, Sund ER, Santini ZI, Koushede V, Krokstad S. ABC (Act-Belong-Commit) for bedre psykisk helse hos voksne i Norge. En HUNT-studie. Tidsskrift for psykisk helsearbeid. 2021;18(2):175-87) corroborated this finding.</p> <p>Furthermore, additional surveys conducted in Ireland indicated that the ABCs are associated with better quality of life, self-rated health, and life satisfaction.</p>
<p>Surveys among end users and the general population through a YouGov survey of the Danish population</p>	<p>Those familiar with the ABCs gained new insights into promoting their and others' mental health. This knowledge encouraged open discussions about mental health and led some to change their behaviour towards mental health promotion.</p>

<p>A longitudinal mediation analysis using three consecutive waves of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)</p>	<p>Social Participation and Chronic Disease Prevention.</p> <p>Published in 2020, the survey focused on formal social participation (e.g., volunteer work, evening classes, sports clubs, political organizations) and its role in preventing chronic diseases. Results showed that frequent social engagement is linked to a lower risk of developing chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, ulcer, lung diseases, cancer, and dementia.</p>
<p>Using data from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD)</p> <p>Santini ZI, Meilstrup C, Hinrichsen C, Nielsen L, Koyanagi A, Koushede V, et al. Associations between multiple leisure activities, mental health and substance use among adolescents in Denmark: A nationwide cross-sectional study. <i>Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience.</i> 2020;14(232).</p>	<p>The study using data from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) involving Danish schoolchildren aged 15-16 explored the impact of hobbies on mental health and substance use.</p> <p>The findings revealed that participating in various hobbies at least once a week is associated with better mental health and a lower risk of substance use, including tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis.</p>

Go further and get access to all publications: [ABC for mental sundhed - Publikation](#)

Chapter 4: Key Messages of the ABC's of Mental Health

The vision of the ABC's of Mental Health is to promote mental health and well-being in the population. Mental health is integral to a fulfilling life, and is just as important as physical health. Good mental health and wellbeing are essential components of overall health.

With three research-based messages: A) **Do something**, B) **Do something with someone**, and C) **Do something meaningful**, we can enhance and strengthen our mental health.

These messages can be applied in various ways, such as helping others, joining a cooking club, reading, playing games, starting a cycling group, following a passion, volunteering, going for a walk, chatting with neighbours, playing football, taking time for rest and reflection, or participating in local sports associations. The goal is to find what brings meaning, joy, and value to each individual's life. Essentially, mental health is supported by having something and someone to look forward to each day. Below, the messages are unfolded.



Act - Do something

It is possible to be active in various ways and at multiple levels. Doing something to promote your mental health can include physical activity but should be seen even broader and include social, mental and spiritual activities.

Research supports the idea that maintaining physical, mental, social, and spiritual activity contributes to better mental health. For example, a [study published in Psychology Today](#) highlights the importance of a holistic approach to health, emphasizing the interconnectedness of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. [Another study available on Academia.edu](#) discusses the strong correlation between physical, mental, and spiritual health, noting that spiritual well-being can enhance both mental and physical health. Staying active enhances happiness and makes it easier to handle daily challenges. Additionally, regular activity can alleviate

mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. It is important to recognize that these benefits can manifest at different levels and may vary from person to person. Additionally, while an active lifestyle generally promotes mental well-being, it does not guarantee that an individual will always be mentally healthy. Factors such as stress, trauma, and genetic predispositions can still impact mental health despite an active lifestyle.

- ▶ Physical activity can range from walking to playing football, gardening, swimming, dancing to your favourite song, or tidying up the shed.
- ▶ Social activity can be maintained by spending time with family, friends, and colleagues, chatting with neighbours, singing in a choir, joining a club or association, or participating in social events.
- ▶ You can do things that require focus and concentration to stay mentally active. For example, you could read a book, solve a sudoku puzzle, play a game, go to the cinema, visit a museum, or repair a bicycle.
- ▶ Spiritual activity can be achieved through meditation, taking a quiet walk in the park or by the water, practising tai chi or yoga, or discussing life's big questions with a friend. It is about finding peace and depth.

Belong - Do something with someone

Feeling a sense of belonging and being part of a community is crucial to mental health. Participating in social activities increases our chances of meeting new people and becoming part of a community. It is not necessarily about having many friends but the quality of our relationships. One or two close relationships can help an individual cope with life's challenges. Close and secure relationships can provide practical AND emotional support, whether life is going well or facing difficulties.

Social relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours positively impact mental health by providing a sense of

belonging. Being part of various communities contributes to identity and self-esteem. These communities can range from small to large groups and from local to national and international networks.

Engaging in local activities, associations, and organisations fosters a sense of community and contributes to mental health. Examples include a cooking or book club, a group of colleagues, friends from the neighbourhood, a local sports association, or an online community.

Commit - Do something meaningful

Engaging in meaningful activities means doing something that provides a sense of purpose and meaning in life. This can range from completing a task to volunteering and helping others.

Accomplishing something that makes you proud builds confidence and self-esteem. It doesn't have to be a significant achievement but could be anything from baking a delicious cake, fixing a toy, repairing a chair, performing well at work, or learning a new language.

The more we immerse ourselves in a project, cause, interest, or group, the greater our sense of self-worth and joy in life becomes.

Setting challenges and achieving goals, even small ones, provides a sense of accomplishment, efficiency, and a stronger sense of self — all of which are crucial for mental health. Similarly, volunteer work and activities that help others and contribute to the community positively impact our happiness.

What is meaningful to one person can differ significantly from what is meaningful to another. What activity you do is not vital. What is essential is that it is meaningful to you and increases your sense of meaning and purpose in life.

IMPORTANT NOTE

- ▶ It may seem artificial to distinguish and divide the three messages.
- ▶ This can sometimes be beneficial when communicating messages, as it ensures that all three are considered and taken into account when planning initiatives and promoting well-being literacy in populations.
- ▶ In practice though, it is possible to Act, Belong and Commit in one activity.

Chapter 5: The five principles of ABC's of Mental Health in the European context

Background

The ABC's of Mental Health applies a principle-based approach. This means it is not a standardised, manual-based intervention with specific procedures that must be implemented uniformly across all settings. Instead, it involves working with guiding principles for putting the ABC's into practice to promote mental health. The initiatives undertaken are therefore not fixed in form but created and developed collaboratively among the partners - and, importantly, in interaction with citizens, members, etc., as all partners are experts in their organisations and the citizens/members are all experts in their own lives.

The guiding principles are consistent, regardless of whether initiatives are developed for schools, senior centers, or residences for individuals with mental health problems. The principles guide the local adaptation and implementation of the ABC's of Mental Health while maintaining the core elements.

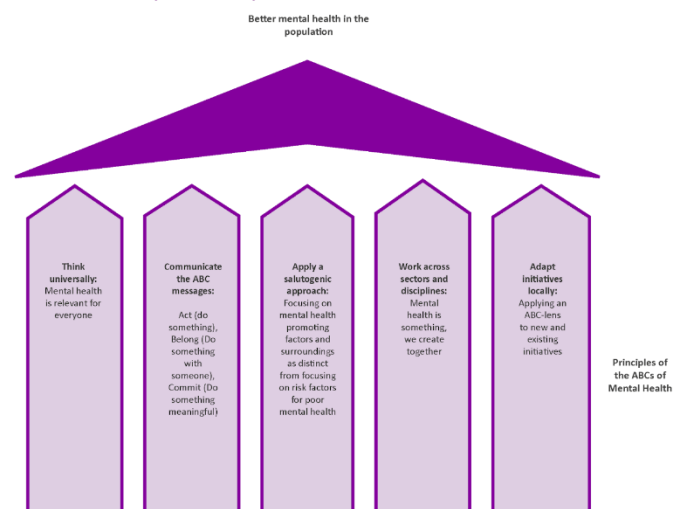
Background for developing guiding principles

Even though the ABC messages are easy to comprehend, the lack of a manual and guidance for implementation has made it difficult for some partners to implement them in their local settings. Therefore, the researchers responsible for the ABCs of mental health in Denmark have elicited

five principles guiding their implementation.

Using principles to guide Mental Health Promotion (MHP) efforts allows for a flexible approach that can be adapted to and applied across various settings and target groups. The development of the principles builds on ten years of practical experience adapting the Act-Belong-Commit framework to the Danish context underpinned by comprehensive research and the evaluation of results.

The five principles of ABC's



All principles are equally important. They have been derived from the work and experiences in Denmark and were validated as a valuable framework of action in the European context by the project partners.

Principle 1. Think Universally: Mental Health is Relevant for Everyone

The first principle emphasises the importance of thinking universally and broadly in mental health promotion, as mental health concerns everyone. It is just as essential to strengthen and maintain as physical health.

The ABC's of Mental Health is the first research-based universal mental health promotion initiative targeting the entire population. Within the ABC's of Mental Health partnership, we strive to ensure that everyone, regardless of their starting point, has something and someone to look forward to each morning. Just as it is essential to maintain our physical health, it is equally important to continuously strengthen and sustain our mental health. This applies to everyone, whether young or old, healthy or ill, wealthy or poor.

Throughout life, we all experience periods where we thrive and periods of distress, moving along what we call the “mental health spectrum.” At one end of the spectrum, we flourish and are in good mental health, while at the other end, we may experience distress, depression, and mental illness. Mental health is thus a continuous process that evolves and changes throughout life. Many factors influence where we are on the mental health spectrum. Social beings depend on and influence one another at group and societal levels. Well-being is contagious, and our actions impact both ourselves and our surroundings.

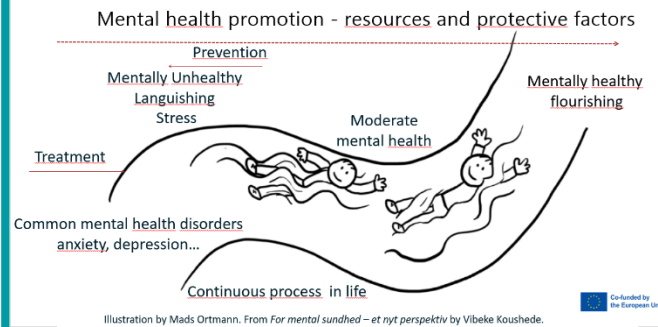
Initiatives and activities taken as part of the ABC's of Mental Health can target the general population or focus on specific groups. Depending on the target group, what feels meaningful to engage in and the promoting factors and barriers to participation can vary.



EXAMPLE FROM DENMARK

In Denmark, the river metaphor illustrates the difference between mental health promotion, prevention and treatment.

THE MENTAL HEALTH SPECTRUM



The river metaphor illustrates how people move through different mental health states in life.

At one end, the water is shallow, representing those who are mentally healthy and flourishing, with surplus energy and altruism. Further down, the water deepens and the current strengthens, symbolizing moderate mental health where people feel okay but struggle with life's stressors.

As the current intensifies, it becomes harder to stay afloat, indicating mental unhealthiness and a lack of energy for self-care or caring for others. This part of the river represents those who are languishing or experiencing stress symptoms. Near the waterfall, people may face common mental health disorders like anxiety and depression.

Life's ups and downs affect everyone, and one's position in the river can change. People are born in different parts of the river, and their resources influence their ability to stay in the healthier sections when challenges arise.

Because we are all in the river of life, it is essential to promote mental health across the whole mental health spectrum - no matter a person's mental health status.

Principle 2. Communicate the ABC messages

The second principle of the ABC's of Mental Health is to apply the ABC messages.



This involves increasing the population's knowledge AND competencies regarding what can be done to strengthen one's own and others' mental health.

The messages are research-based and action-oriented recommendations to promote individual and collective mental health. They can be seen as a mental health counterpart to the European Union's recommendations for maintaining physical health, such as being active for at least 30 minutes a day or eating five pieces of fruit and vegetables daily (Source: [EU Physical Activity Guidelines](#) from 2008 and [Food-Based Dietary Guidelines in Europe](#)). The ABC messages are simple yet broad, as it is possible to do something, do something with someone, and do something meaningful in many different ways.

Applying the ABC messages involves spreading knowledge and awareness that doing A, B, and C can contribute to better mental health and well-being. The intention is to engage people in behaviours that promote and maintain good mental health and well-being.

Actively spreading the ABC messages through campaigns, events and initiatives helps increase the population's knowledge about and awareness of what can be done to promote their own and others' mental health e.g. promoting wellbeing literacy. The more people that explicitly use the messages, the greater the likelihood that they will reach the entire population. Additionally, widespread use of the messages can help create a synergy effect - meaning that the overall impact of the activities is greater than the sum of the individual activities because the end user will encounter the ABC messages in multiple contexts.



EXAMPLE FROM DENMARK

In a Photovoice project at the University of Copenhagen, students connected photos of mental health-promoting resources on campus to the three ABC messages. The pictures taken and the texts written by students were displayed at an exhibition, and the ABC messages were visually communicated to students and employees on campus.



In campaign materials, the ABC messages are also explicitly communicated through social media directly from the ABCs and the partners' channels (Facebook, Instagram, websites, etc.). Some partners also feature the campaign materials on buses (small videos and posters) and on information screens in public places.

Principle 3. Apply a salutogenic approach

The third principle focuses on developing a salutogenic understanding of mental health. It emphasises the promotion of factors, conditions, and surroundings that create good mental health and well-being.

In short, adopting a salutogenic approach means prioritising factors that create and promote health rather than merely preventing those that lead to illness (pathogenesis). This perspective is inspired by Antonovsky's work.

By adopting a salutogenic approach to mental health, the focus is on doing more of what works well. Recent studies suggest that incorporating small, positive actions into daily life can have a meaningful impact on the mental health of the whole population. For example, [“The impact of positive activities on mental health: the mediating role of positive emotion”](#), a study published in *Frontiers in Public Health* in Dec 2024 found that engaging in positive activities significantly improves mental health. The study highlighted that positive emotions mediate in this relationship, suggesting that activities that elicit positive emotions can enhance mental well-being.

Focusing on mental health-promoting factors and surroundings rather than concentrating on risk factors for poor mental health!



EXAMPLE FROM DENMARK

As a concrete example, as part of the ABC's of Mental Health, 'day journey' movies emphasising micro-actions have been developed in Denmark.



[“Day Journey” video in the life of teens \(with English subtitles\)](#)

Micro-actions are small during the day, such as turning off someone else's forgotten bike light or bringing coffee to a colleague.

It might seem like small actions that wouldn't have an enormous impact, but summing up many positive micro-actions during a day can have a significant effect.

Micro-actions embody the same values as volunteering and doing good for others – and can be an easy first step towards a new behaviour.

Principle 4. Work across sectors and disciplines

The ABC's of Mental Health aims to bridge the gap between international recommendations, research, policy and practice concerning mental health promotion. The fourth principle encourages cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary collaboration and underscores that mental health promotion is a collective endeavour. This principle is crucial for ensuring a broad and cross-cutting implementation of MHP efforts throughout society.

Mental health promotion should be considered broadly across professional boundaries, sectors, and levels – from macro policy to local practice. Widespread use of the ABC framework across organisations and sectors can also help create a synergy effect – meaning that ABC's overall application and dissemination for mental health is strengthened.

Each partner in the ABC's of Mental Health partnership will have knowledge and experience in how best to reach and work with different target groups. While partners focus on various groups, the ABC framework unites these efforts, providing a foundation for training, activities, and communication.

Mental health is something we create together!



EXAMPLE FROM DENMARK

To support this principle, in Denmark, the ABC's of Mental Health are organised as a national partnership, where researchers, associations, organisations, and municipalities collectively carry out efforts.



In a local context, this might involve coordinating mental health promotion efforts across different municipal departments or collaborating across municipalities, organisations, and local associations, involving the end users targeted by these efforts.

It also involves placing mental health promotion high on the agenda of local decision-makers and authorities so that it receives political and managerial attention and priority.

Principle 5. Adapt initiatives locally

The fifth principle encourages the adoption of new and existing initiatives in the local context and the development of ABC activities and initiatives with local conditions in mind. Using the ABC lens strengthens the mental health-promoting focus in activities and initiatives, creating good conditions for overall mental health and well-being.

Working with mental health promotion often depends on various local factors, such as the target audience, resources, and the specific goals of the initiative. Partners in the ABC's of Mental Health develop and implement local initiatives to influence individual behaviour and create supportive environments to enhance and maintain good mental health. The content of these local initiatives can vary depending on the organisation or municipality in which they are carried out, but they must be adapted to the local contexts.

It is recommended to link the work with the ABC's of Mental Health to existing priorities and goals within organisations and to view practice through the so-called ABC lens to identify where and how the ABC framework can be integrated and where adjustments can be made to the A, B, or C.

By adopting the “ABC lens,” the focus on mental health promotion in activities and initiatives can be strengthened, thus creating better conditions for mental health and well-being.

Applying an ABC lens to new and existing initiatives!



EXAMPLE FROM DENMARK

Experiences from the Danish partnership indicate that to anchor the ABC's of Mental Health in a municipality or organisation, it is essential to ensure co-ownership among management, employees, and/or volunteers.

This can be achieved through peer training or working from an action-learning mindset.

Similarly, widespread knowledge and co-ownership of the work with the ABC's of Mental Health can help make local implementation culture-driven rather than person-driven.



CONCLUSION

What to keep in mind?

The ABC of Mental Health approach emphasises the importance of being active, belonging to a community, and committing to meaningful activities as key components of mental well-being.

This holistic framework encourages individuals to engage in activities that promote mental, social, and spiritual health, fostering a sense of purpose and connection. By focusing on these elements, the ABC approach aims to enhance overall mental health and resilience.

The framework developed to ensure quality and effective transfer of the concept to other European countries revolves round 5 equally important principles:

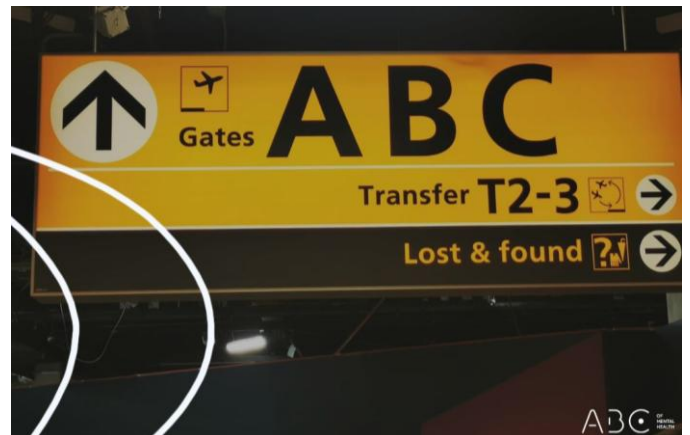
- | Principle 1. Think universally: Mental Health is relevant for everyone
- | Principle 2. Communicate the ABC messages
- | Principle 3. Apply a salutogenic approach: Focus is on mental health-promoting factors and surroundings as opposed to focusing on risk factors for poor mental health
- | Principle 4. Work across sectors and disciplines: Mental health is something we create together
- | Principle 5. Adapt initiatives locally: apply an ABC lens to new and existing initiatives

What's next?

The ABC's of Mental Health project is currently working on the development of an implementation guide. Due to be published in Spring 2025, this guide will provide more practical guidelines and strategies to help individuals and communities effectively integrate the ABC principles into their daily lives, further supporting mental health promotion effort across Europe.

For more information, visit our project website:

<https://abcmmentalhealth.isca.org>



The ABC's of Mental Health Europe – Concept Description

Partners



Supporter



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