Mental Health and Cerebral Palsy: A Global Perspective That Cannot Be Ignored

Lead: Mental health is increasingly recognised as a critical issue for people with cerebral palsy, yet it remains underrepresented in policy, research, and services worldwide.

About the author

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Introduction

Mental health is no longer a peripheral issue—it is central to how people experience life, health, and inclusion. For persons with cerebral palsy (CP), mental health intersects with physical, social, and environmental challenges in complex ways. Drawing on European and global developments, this article highlights why mental health in CP deserves urgent and sustained attention.

Summary of the main idea

Despite growing awareness, mental health in people with cerebral palsy remains overlooked in major policies and funding frameworks. A more inclusive, life-course approach is needed—one that recognises both the specific risks and the broader rights of persons with disabilities.

A growing but incomplete recognition

There is increasing awareness that mental health affects individuals with CP across all stages of life—from daily experiences to major transitions such as adulthood and times of crisis. Families are also deeply affected, facing emotional strain, coordination challenges, and, in some cases, breakdown. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed these vulnerabilities.

However, awareness alone is not enough. Terminology and framing remain contested. While everyone has mental health, there is a risk that mental health conditions are either narrowly categorised as "psychosocial disabilities" or deprioritised within broader disability discussions. Both approaches can unintentionally marginalise people with CP.

Gaps in European and global policy

At the European level, initiatives such as the 2023 Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health have mobilised significant funding and attention. Yet, persons with disabilities are not consistently identified as a priority group, and dedicated projects on disability and mental health are lacking.

At the global level, several concrete frameworks already exist. The WHO *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030* calls on countries to develop community-based mental health services, strengthen prevention, and improve data and research systems. The WHO *Mental Health Atlas* shows, however, that only around 2% of health budgets are spent on mental health globally, and relatively few countries systematically involve people with lived experience in shaping services.

In September 2025, the UN held a High-Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases and Mental Health, where governments formally recognised that persons with disabilities face increased mental health risks and committed to reducing stigma and improving inclusion. This includes

strengthening primary healthcare systems so that mental health support is available closer to people's everyday lives.

These initiatives provide a clear direction—but they are not yet translating into consistent, disability-inclusive action on the ground.

Why this matters

Mental health is not an "add-on" to physical disability—it is integral to wellbeing, participation, and quality of life. People with CP may face social isolation, stigma, and barriers to services, all of which can negatively affect mental health. At the same time, families often carry a significant emotional and practical burden. Failing to address mental health in this context risks reinforcing inequality. It also limits the potential of individuals to fully participate in society.

A way forward

There are encouraging developments. Work is underway towards a World Health Assembly resolution on cerebral palsy, which aims to promote an integrated, person-centred approach across the life course—from early identification to ageing. If adopted, this would give countries a concrete policy framework similar to existing WHO resolutions on autism and epilepsy.

At the same time, initiatives such as Cerebral Palsy Europe's Voice4All.eu project will bring together people with disabilities, policymakers, and researchers through workshops and conferences across Europe, focusing on areas like inclusive education, employment, and independent living. These platforms are important because they turn policy discussions into practical collaboration and lived experience.

To build on this momentum, we must:

- Recognise mental health as a core component of disability policy
- Involve persons with CP and their families in decision-making
- Invest in community-based and accessible services
- Ensure global commitments are implemented nationally

Final reflection

What I hope others understand is simple: mental health is inseparable from the lived experience of cerebral palsy. It affects not only individuals, but also families and communities.

Global strategies already point us in the right direction. The challenge now is to make them real—so that people with cerebral palsy can access the mental health support they need, when and where they need it.