



SOCIAL COOPERATIVE  
ACTIVITIES FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS



## MENS PROJECT AND BEYOND

Dear representatives of the official sector,  
Dear partners, old and new friends

I would like to thank all of you for your presence here, for sharing with us a great moment of a long journey that started since two thousands fourteen (2014) when the MENS proposal has been firstly submitted to the Sport call of the ERAMUS + Programme. It was then when we started to think on a overall initiative that would exceed the national framework and respond in wider EU level challenges, based on the long tradition of the PANATTICI Sport Event, organized by EDRA since two thousands seven (2007). There are times during which high targets, especially in case that they seem bigger than the size of the initiator, act as a spring: loaded with a tension that corresponds to the value of the goal and exceeds the available potential at the moment.

This was MENS case. Our first step led to the next one and then to the next one. Within a continual process, we were transforming and enriching our core ideas as well as the operational approach also, until we elaborated in details the innovative final concept and our effort has been awarded by the EU institutions.

It seems that it was not a coincidence that in that very moment, early beginning of two thousands seventeen (2017), the first state psychiatric hospital, using exclusively physical activities and arts in the place of medicine treatment, has been put in operation. The Norwegian National Mental Health System "seals" in the most official way the effectiveness of factors that, up to that moment, even their supplementarity was argued.

A path hardly opened had to become a highway.  
This was our mission and it is well served as you will see.

The inspiration for the acronym "M.E.N.S." came up from the famous Latin quote: "Mens Sana in Corpore Sano" in which not only the word itself but also its content directly refers to the core of the initiative.

This core is no other than the link between Sport & Physical Exercise with Mental Wellbeing. If this connection itself seems to be a cliché or self-evident, unfortunately the review of the evolution of relevant policies and actions proves that we are **far** from integrating this fundamental truth into our daily life as well as in the wider therapeutic approaches.

It is rather characteristic that, until the time of this initiative, any such effort, if and when was manifested, was framed in contexts that are weakly related or not related at all to Mental Health like well established sporting events, scientific documentation, advocacy on rights, etc.



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In fact this requested link actually consists of five thematic ones which they do result when work in unison. And these are:

- **prevention**
- **therapy**
- **rehabilitation**
- **anti-discrimination**
- **community action**

This initial belief was the trigger to design of a strategy in such a way so to develop all the required components towards the realization of this approach at a European level.

Thus, the main pillars of the MENS project, which is co-funded by the European Commission under the ERASMUS + / Sport Program, are:

### **Policy, Awareness, Institutional approach**

1. First comes the development of a structured policy background aiming to effectively connect physical activity and sports to mental health.

This goal is addressed by the collective volume of 12 Policy Papers included in the folder you already have at your hands. These papers have been conducted by individual partners or group of them under the significant supervision of the School of Physical Education and Sport Science of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. We hope that the happy ending of this specific work would be an official Recommendation of the European Commission establishing a specific policy on the field.

But besides the content, the extended bibliographic references, the comprehensive presentation of European policies and the collection of a large number of relevant practices provide an extremely useful tool for researches, professionals and decision makers at European and national level.

2. The second of the aforementioned pillars was the raise of awareness amongst

- **mental health services users,**
- **public and private stakeholders,**
- **sport and mental health professionals and**
- **the general public**

The aim of the campaign is to promote the value and the benefits provided from the connection of Sport & Physical exercise with Mental Health.

The change, that we are working for, can't come solely by the enrichment of the scientific knowledge. This knowledge needs to become accessible and familiar to the general public and motivate everyone who is functionally involved in this process.

This is what the "Life is like a bike" European Campaign stands for, aiming to give flesh and blood to the second pillar.



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But a communication campaign in order to be effectively designed must be evidence-based. So, we feel very proud of the fact that that, before the Campaign, a European Research has been conducted in twelve (12) countries aiming to identify the current status and the perceptions of the European population on the connection of the two fields.

This is the second scientific contribution of the MENS project which will be presented during the sessions that will follow.

3. The last pillar is the foundation of an institutional tool in order to achieve our main goal. We need actually an instrument able to overcome the limited duration and spatial scope that usually projects have. Thus, the strategic planning of MENS is accomplished with the establishment of the European Network of Active Leaving for Mental Health (ENALMH) which holds an institutional role in the continuous promotion of the objectives of this initiative at a European level.

That is why we located ENALMH in the very front line as it is legally seated in Brussels, it runs under the Belgian Law and will develop its activities closely to the policy and decision making European institutions.

However, besides any theoretical processing, communicational intervention or institutional reinforcement we need the inner power and value of direct experience.

So, the organization of the 1st European Sport Event for Mental Health that will take place in Athens in September two thousands eighteen (2018), within the framework of the "EVENTS" project, twin sibling of "MENS", provides the opportunity to test our perceptions in the field and spread the messages.

But mainly it will work as the floor to make an open call for a wider Movement of Active Living for Mental Health to be developed. All respective groups are invited to participate and contribute however they can: recipients and providers of mental health services, policy makers, educational and research institutions, professional as well as amateur athletes and players, the private sector of sport, health and welfare systems, and, finally, the society as a whole, either individually or collectively.

Living in a contradictory environment...

- we can't ignore the ever-worsening statistical picture of the spreading numbers of mental illnesses.
- we can't ignore the privatization trend that appears stronger day by day and affects the overall health sector.

On the other hand

- we can't forget the given, from now on, contribution of sport and physical activity to the prevention of mental disorders
- we can't also forget their importance on combating stigmatization of mental illness.



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Thus, the Movement of Active Living for Mental Health is something that should concern everyone, gain its official recognition within EU policies and must meet the active support by the related institutions of the European Union.

In the sessions that follow we will present in details the completed project's outcomes but not only. Further steps already done will be also presented.

And beyond these, we will share plans on new available opportunities for common actions. I hope that now is clear why the title of this speech is "MENS and beyond".

The good start has been done.  
More are coming.

But, it is people who make things happen.  
Without people personally concerned and physically involved, ideas seem to be shadows and visions could be reduced to politics.

On behalf of K.S.D.E.O. "EDRA" a warm thanks to all wonderful fellow travelers in this long journey.

