



Mental Health

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Tolerance, Tolerances, Complicity

Mental health has become a visible and widely endorsed theme within contemporary universities. This essay explores how mental health is shaped by relationships and silence in academic communities, in line with the *T4EU* Week 2026 theme “Community. Communities”, which highlights the role of universities in empowering diverse communities and prospectively shaping collective life.

Funding, institutional strategies, awareness campaigns, and support services increasingly signal a formal commitment to mental health and well-being. At the level of discourse, concern for mental health has become almost unavoidable. Yet visibility should not be confused with protection. In everyday academic life, there is often a sharp disconnect between what institutions and individuals claim to value and the ways people treat one another. This disconnect is not incidental but is sustained through daily practices that are rarely questioned.

Mental health does not reside solely within individuals. It is actively shaped through relationships. It exists in classrooms and offices, in corridors and online meetings, in emails, and silences. Academic communities are not neutral environments in which individual vulnerabilities simply unfold. They are relational systems that continuously produce conditions of safety or harm. Long before anyone seeks professional support, mental health is already being influenced by what is permitted, rewarded, ignored, or silenced.

Responsibility is often attributed primarily to structures: competitive cultures, productivity demands, precarious employment, or rigid hierarchies. These forces matter and should not be minimised. However, they do not operate independently of individual action. Structures are

enacted through people. Mental health within academic communities is therefore shaped not only by systems, but by the everyday decisions of those who inhabit them. Every member of a community contributes, actively or passively, to climates that either protect psychological well-being or steadily undermine it. Responsibility, in this sense, is shared, but never diluted.

There is an uncomfortable reality that frequently goes unaddressed in academic communities: harm is often inflicted by peers. In different moments (e.g., competition, perceived threat), some individuals may undermine others not through overt hostility, but through scrutiny, questioning of competence, or subtle disparagement (even when they have the least legitimacy to do so). These actions are often framed as professionalism or rigour. Such behaviours may seem small or isolated, yet they resonate within the community, affecting not only the target but also shaping what others perceive as acceptable. Their psychological impact can be deep and lasting, influencing self-confidence, sense of belonging, and emotional well-being.

Harm rarely occurs in isolation. Those who witness these actions yet remain silent (to protect themselves or avoid conflict) implicitly endorsing the behaviour. As Pope Francis reminds us in *Fratelli Tutti*, “When conflicts are not resolved but kept hidden or buried in the past, silence can lead to complicity in grave misdeeds and sins.” In academic communities, this idea resonates: unaddressed harmful actions and silence can reinforce the power of those who act and leave others exposed and unsupported. For those directly affected, the absence of intervention can be as damaging as the original act, reinforcing isolation and confirming that protection will not come.

Through such silence harm becomes normalised. When behaviours are not named, when discomfort is avoided, and when responsibility is consistently displaced, psychological safety deteriorates. Over time, people adapt, not by becoming resilient, but by becoming quieter, smaller, and less present. Mental health, in these contexts, is not abruptly broken, it is slowly worn down. This erosion aligns with the idea of a mental health continuum, in which people can languish or flourish depending on how far their environments support positive functioning, even when no formal mental disorder is present (Keyes, 2002).

A community that claims to care about mental health must be prepared to confront these dynamics directly. This does not require

eliminating disagreement or conflict, which are integral to academic life. It does require refusing to disguise harm as normal practice and resisting cultures in which silence is valued over accountability. Precisely here, what organisational psychology terms “psychological safety” becomes essential: the shared belief that one can speak up against harmful behaviours, admit limitations, or intervene without fear of retaliation, a fear that eventually makes people afraid of everything (Edmondson, 1999).

Universities occupy a distinctive position in this process. As formative environments, they shape not only knowledge production, but also ethical orientations and relational norms. They are spaces in which future professionals, leaders, and citizens learn what is acceptable, what is rewarded, and what can be ignored. What academic communities tolerate does not remain confined within institutional walls, since it is carried forward into wider social and professional contexts. Within European alliances such as Transform4Europe, these questions acquire an additional dimension, as universities collectively explore how to design academic cultures that actively protect, rather than quietly erode, mental health.

Ultimately, academic communities are defined not by what they declare, but by how they act. Mental health is shaped daily through interactions and responses to harm, not solely through policies or support structures. When silence replaces responsibility, psychological safety gets eroded. A genuine commitment requires collective accountability: what communities ignore or excuse does not just reflect their values, it actively shapes their consequences.

References

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