



Action plan for  
**better mental  
health**  
2019-25

Action plan extended to 2025



**Enjoy life, copenhagensers**  
City of Copenhagen Health Policy

**Action plan for better mental health 2019-25**

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**City of Copenhagen**

Sundheds- og Omsorgsforvaltningen

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By adopting the City of Copenhagen Health Policy, "Enjoy life, Copenhageners 2015 - 2025", we have put physical and mental health on equal footing. And there is a very special reason for doing so.

Mental health issues constitute equally serious consequences for our well-being and quality of life as is the case for somatic illnesses.

For this reason the City of Copenhagen is the first in the country to establish facilities such as municipal stress clinics and anxiety clinics.

We have blazed the trail and shown new ways for municipalities to enhance citizens' mental health. As Health and Care Mayor, I am proud of that. And we need to go further along that road - because we are still far from the goal.

We have not yet managed to bend the curve. More and more Copenhageners develop stress, anxiety and depression. We must reverse that trend.

It is in no one's interests that the number of citizens with mental illness keeps growing because the right preventive measures are not taken in time.

With this action plan for improved mental health, we are taking the next step, setting the direction for how to promote well-being and mental health among Copenhageners of all ages.

I hope you will appreciate and support the action plan. It is going to serve as a framework for our initiatives in the area over the next four years.

Our overarching ambition is clear: All Copenhageners must receive the help they need - whether they break a leg or their mental condition deteriorates.

On behalf of the Health and Care Committee

Sisse Marie Welling (Socialist People's Party), Mayor

## Better mental health in Copenhagen

By adopting the City of Copenhagen Health Policy, "Enjoy life, Copenhageners 2015 – 2025", we want to contribute to better and longer lives for Copenhageners. Besides, the importance of lending equal significance to mental and physical health is one of the central principles of our health policy.

Too many Copenhageners' daily lives are affected by poor mental well-being and illness, and the number of Copenhageners who are struggling is increasing. At the moment, 16% of Copenhageners, equivalent to 75,000 people, are faced with poor mental health. This is reflected in high levels of sickness absence, and many people experience frustration and sadness in their everyday lives and have low quality of life.

The purpose of the action plan 2019-25 is to have an improved mental health among Copenhageners. It will contribute to greater well-being and improved health for the individual and will have an impact on family life, learning at school, the chances of completing an education and finding and maintaining employment as well as social life for older people.

The previous action plan laid the groundwork for the work of promoting the Copenhageners' health and taking an integrated approach to physical and mental health.

The plan has for instance contributed to the development of stress clinics and has delivered an enhanced focus on well-being

in primary and lower secondary schools, psychological support for vulnerable young people in youth education programmes, supportive programmes for young people and adults displaying symptoms of anxiety and better detection of somatic illness in Copenhageners with mental disorders. The action plan expired in 2018, but focus and initiatives in this area are still needed.

The action plan prioritizes children's and young people's well-being and mental health in view of the increasing percentage of children and young people with poor mental health. Another purpose of the action plan is to strengthen efforts in relation to psychological consequences of chronic illnesses.

To meet the huge challenges in terms of Copenhageners' mental health and well-being, the city's Health and Care Administration will establish a Mental Health Centre in early 2020. Based on a strong professional profile, the centre will bring together the Health and Care Administration's combined activities to promote mental health, and the centre will also serve as a knowledge centre by providing expertise to other entities of the Health and Care Administration for their mental health promotion work.

The action plan is aligned with the other strategies and plans of the local authority, for instance the "The Social Strategy" and "Our children – our collective responsibility", which also have an impact on Copenhageners' mental health. Coordination and

cooperation across the boundaries of administrative departments are therefore an essential element in the realisation of the action plan, ensuring that citizens experience a cohesive strategy in line with the specific needs of the individual.

### Action plan tracks

The action plan is divided into four tracks to create better mental health for those Copenhageners who need it most. Each track provides a description of the health challenges, potential causal links and the measures the City of Copenhagen will launch to improve mental health. The four tracks are:

#### Track 1:

Promoting well-being and mental health among children

#### Track 2:

Promoting the self-esteem, social competences and well-being of young people

#### Track 3:

Promoting mental health among adults in Copenhagen

#### Track 4:

Promoting mental health among citizens living with a chronic illness

### Definition of mental health

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life and is able to participate in social communities with others.



## Track 1

# Promoting well-being and mental health among children in Copenhagen

Most children in Copenhagen have a sense of well-being. They have secure adult attachments, leisure-time activities, good playmates and friends and a daily life with a balance between challenges, learning and security.

However, a growing number of children fail to thrive and have poor mental health. It manifests in diverse ways, depending on the personality and temperament of the child. Typical signs of poor mental well-being in children are that they are sad, do not sleep well, withdraw from social communities, become silent or display extrovert behaviour. Some children will experience physical symptoms such as stomach pain or headache. For some children, the symptoms will indicate stress, anxiety or depression. For others, the symptoms are less severe.

There are numerous reasons why more children are having a difficult time. Increased attention to the well-being of children could be a contributory factor to explaining why we spot more children in distress today than earlier. But surveys suggest that other possible causes may be that more children live under more stressful and difficult living conditions, combined with the cultural changes we have seen in children's lives, involving less play and increased use of digital media.

### Living conditions in the family

The mental health of children is strongly influenced by the family's living conditions. Children may react by displaying anxiety,

concern and symptoms of stress if their parents are absent or stressed, for instance due to excessive work pressure or in connection with a divorce. Children may experience outright distress if their parents or siblings are seriously ill, if they grow up in a family with misuse problems, or if their parents are under a financial pressure caused by, for instance, long-term unemployment. It is important that children and families receive the necessary support and advice to address poor mental well-being and prevent actual mental illness.

In Copenhagen, we need more early initiatives and new measures to extend existing

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5-10% of children suffer from anxiety. Anxiety is the most common mental disorder in children.

The percentage of children suffering from symptom stress, for instance headache and stomach pain, has been rising since 2009.

One in every five 11-year-olds does not sleep the recommended number of hours.

Between 2009 and 2017, a growing proportion of children – especially girls – changed schools due to poor well-being.

*Alma plays a computer game every day after school while her parents clean up and cook. The games are fun, but sometimes she does not feel like part of the family, and she misses talking to her dad and mom.*

services and facilities that can partly support children, partly support parents in helping their children and preventing poor well-being from developing into actual mental illness.

#### **Less play and increased use of digital platforms**

Digital platforms play a dominant role in the lives of children and parents, and Denmark is the European country where children log the highest amount of screen time.

Surveys indicate that the increased use of digital media affects children's well-being and sense of presence and community because families do more things separately rather than together, and children spend less face-to-face time with their peers after school because they communicate with each other through social media instead. Denmark is among the five countries in Europe where children spend the least face-to-face time with their peers.

Another cultural change that is prevalent today, is the children's engagement in more sedentary activities in their leisure time than before. Leisure-time activities and communities of a creative or physical nature can be instrumental in strengthening children's well-being. At the same time, surveys show that children spend half as much time in nature as their grandparents did when they were young.

Social presence, communities and creative activities, for instance in nature, are of vital importance to children's well-being. Several surveys point out that active use of nature contributes to both physical and mental health. Nature has the ability to relax and stimulate senses of children, which has a positive effect on their learning abilities, level of attention and intellectual skills.

#### **Conditions in day-care facilities and schools**

Institutions that provide the setting for children's daily lives can promote children's mental health by giving children time and tools to make them capable of feeling themselves and mastering challenges. This will help prevent bullying, low self-esteem and stress.

Close cooperation between Copenhagen's day-care facilities and schools and families is essential to ensure the well-being of children and to take early action if the child shows any signs of distress. Accordingly, it is important that all staff are adequately equipped to detect symptoms of poor well-being and that special attention is given to stressful events in the child's life to ensure that targeted preventive measures can be taken to help the children who need additional support.

### **With this action plan, the City of Copenhagen wants to give priority to:**

#### **Offering enhanced opportunities for support and counselling to children in distress and their families by:**

- Extending existing and developing new services and facilities for children who fail to thrive and/or show symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression\*; and
- Offering parent or family courses that enable families to help children who show vague symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression\*.

#### **Furthermore, the City of Copenhagen wants to:**

##### **Create environments in day-care facilities and schools that promote children's mental health by:**

- Strengthening anti-bullying efforts at schools. All schools must work actively on the basis of their anti-bullying strategy and, among other initiatives, offer training courses that can prevent bullying – physically as well as digitally. Furthermore, schools must conduct interviews with pupils about their well-being and development; and
- Offering additional competence development of front-line staff in day-care facilities and schools to support early detection of poor well-being, including symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression in children. Local teams are involved in supporting the efforts\*.

##### **Promote play, presence and a healthy balance between indoor and outdoor life by:**

- Developing and implementing measures to promote healthy digital habits and conditions for the use of digital media by children and their parents\*;
- Working to ensure that more children use green spaces and gain access to experiences in nature; and
- Promoting versatile motor development for all children in day-care facilities and schools, for instance through "Children and movement".

*Initiatives marked by an asterisk (\*) require an injection of funds.*



## Track 2

# Promoting the self-esteem, social competences and well-being of young people

Young people aged 13-25 are at a place in life where they are faced with major changes and decisions. This may be the transition from lower secondary school to a youth education programme, the choice of study programme, leaving home and gaining a foothold in the labour market. At the same time, the close relationships change from a strong bond with the parents to a bond with friends and girlfriends/boyfriends that grows increasingly stronger. Such transitions call for strong social relationships and adult support.

There are signs that young people, in some ways, find it more difficult to thrive than they did before. The percentage of young people in the Capital Region of Denmark with a high stress level has risen from 25% in 2013 to 32% in 2017, and the percentage of young people developing anxiety and depression has increased sharply during the past 10 years. Young women in particular stand out as a relatively large percentage of these experience mental challenges.

Every one in five young people has self-harmed through bruising, burning with cigarettes, hair-pulling or cutting. Selfharm can be a way in which young people with poor well-being attempt to control the emotion of shame, inadequacy or frustration.

The reasons for the increasing poor well-being among young people are complex, and the contributing factors seem to be numerous. As is the case with children, the living conditions of the family are of great

importance to the well-being of young people. The pattern of reaction of young people will be similar to those described for children if the lives they are living in the family are stressful and under pressure.

Furthermore, the environment at youth education institutions is of great significance to the well-being of young people, and it is important that teachers, counsellors and fellow students help spot signs of poor well-being.

Tendencies are also witnessed in youth that seem to have an impact on the well-being of young people, including a feeling of increased demands, expectations of online presence and increased focus on body image through growing exposure.

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Twice as many young women aged 16-24 experience poor mental health as their male counterparts.

32% of 16 to 24-year-olds have a high stress level.

22% of 16 to 24-year-olds have poor social relationships and feel lonely.

25% of 11 to 15-year-olds spend more than four hours a day on weekdays on digital media.

Every one in five young people has self-harmed.

*Viktor was feeling empty inside and worthless. He did not have anyone to share his thoughts and feelings with. When the feeling of loneliness became too much for him, he dropped out of his studies. It only got better when he met other young people at the voluntary social organisation "Ventilen".*

### **Demands, expectations and presence**

Many young people feel a pressure of expectation from the educational sector and the labour market and from their parents, and they also make huge demands on themselves in terms of getting good marks and a good job. This may cause them to believe that they will not be successful if they do not pursue a higher education qualification and a well-paid job.

Young people in Denmark are heavy consumers in terms of video and music streaming, not to mention the social media. Many young people live a great part of their social lives via social media platforms, and some consider this to be a constant pressure for a social presence, which may boost the feeling of stress.

Young Danes are also the ones spending the least amount of time with their friends after school. A large number of young people have a poor social network, and nearly one in 10 young people feel lonely. Being part of social communities helps make a person feel wanted and appreciated, and this is essential in order to develop a positive self-esteem. Surveys indicate that this cannot be achieved in the same way through virtual communities, and, physiologically speaking, a person does not release the substances that make him or her really happy when he or she is sitting in front of a screen.

### **Increased focus on body image**

In addition, the digital media as an integral

part of youth means that images are posted online and on social media platforms as never before and that the focus on the body has increased. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat greatly expose young people to edited picture-perfect images of what the body and life can look like, and surveys indicate that this exposure can have an adverse impact on the self-esteem of young people. Nearly every other young person is unhappy with his or her looks.

### **Health-promoting environment at schools and youth education institutions**

Several surveys indicate that the well-being of young people has become poorer, but we have no specific knowledge about what is required to increase their well-being. With their cultural and institutional environment, schools and youth education institutions can help ensure that young people are given the optimum conditions for physical and social well-being. In this context, it may be important to relieve the pressure that many young people feel, e.g. by focusing less on results and marks and more on cooperation, enhanced feedback and learning conversations.

A need exists to support, to an even higher degree, the introduction of recovery breaks in everyday life and support social communities that can facilitate the possibilities of young people of achieving a balance between peace and activity and of achieving a greater physical presence and preventing loneliness. At the same time, the youth education institutions can help young people develop an online behaviour that prevents cyberbullying, sharing of images without consent and a healthy balance between life in the online and real worlds.

In addition to structural preventive measures in the lives of young people, young people who have a poor well-being and experience symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression or self-harm need to be detected at an early stage and offered targeted help and support.

## **With this action plan, the City of Copenhagen wants to give priority to:**

### **Ensuring early action in relation to young people with poor well-being by:**

- Continuing to offer individual or group-based support to young people showing symptoms of stress and anxiety;
- Developing, for the first time, services and facilities for young people showing signs of depression and young people who self-harm\*<sup>\*</sup>; and
- Offering preventive self-help courses to young people showing vague symptoms of stress.

### **Creating an environment at youth education institutions that promotes the health of young people by:**

- Relieving the pressure of expectation both academically and in relation to looks and fostering a good feedback culture at school and youth education institutions.

## **Furthermore, the City of Copenhagen wants to:**

### **Establish transitions and environments promoting the mental health of young people by:**

- Promoting the well-being of young people by increasing the focus on well-being in everyday life and strengthening the transition from lower secondary school to a youth education institution;
- Teaching young people good matters and helping them acquire healthy online habits\*<sup>\*</sup>; and
- Boosting physical activity among young people, for instance through association sports at educational institutions after school.

### **Prevent loneliness and promoting a physical presence and communities among young people by:**

- Designing and establishing new outdoor spaces that appeal to young people – especially girls – and encourage them to take more part in outdoor communities in order to prevent loneliness and promote mental well-being\*<sup>\*</sup>; and
- Facilitating the development of inclusive communities and trust among young people, for instance by means of eating groups and trust exercises at schools and youth education institutions.

*Initiatives marked by an asterisk (\*) require an injection of funds.*





### Track 3

## Promoting mental health among adults in Copenhagen

A large number of adults in Copenhagen have poor mental health. Stress, anxiety and depression are common health problems that have been on the increase for a number of years. Loneliness is another large problem for many Copenhageners.

Mental challenges very much affect the quality of life and can, at the very worst, destroy a person's ability to function in everyday life. Many people who develop stress, anxiety and depression can have difficulty maintaining employment, and some have to be reported absent due to illness for short or long periods, while others risk losing employment altogether or having difficulty gaining a foothold in the labour market.

Poor mental health also has an impact on the well-being among the people who are closest to a person. Family life and social networks may suffer during long periods of stress or mental illness as a person will have less time and energy to be a good parent, partner or friend.

Stress, anxiety and depression also have considerable societal consequences. Poor mental well-being is a considerable cost to society as a result of production loss in connection with a high degree of absence due to illness, long-term unemployment and disability pensions. Some costs are also associated with poor mental health for care and treatment in the healthcare system.

According to surveys, mental health problems are the cause of 50% of all persons being reported absent due to illness for a long period and 48% of all people taking disability pension, and the percentage of people taking disability pension due to nervous and stress-related conditions has been increasing since 2001. Poor mental well-being is also the cause of 1.1 million additional contacts with GPs and 2.1 million additional days of long-term absence due to illness every year.

### Stress

A large number of adult Copenhageners have a stressful everyday life. The National Health Profile shows that 27% of Copenhageners have a high stress level. The level is highest among young people and among Copenhageners who are not in employment.

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133,000 Copenhageners have a high stress level.

Every year sees an additional 45,000 somatic admissions to hospitals and an additional 6,500 psychiatric admissions among people with poor mental health.

Poor mental health is the cause of a reduction in the average life expectancy of four months for men and six months for women.

*When Kristina developed an anxiety disorder, she experienced multiple panic attacks and grew increasingly concerned about being around other people. She started keeping more and more to herself at home and had at the end to be reported absent due to illness.*

Stress is not an illness in itself, but long-term stress is a burden that can lead to various illnesses. Stress symptoms include headache, sleeplessness, palpitations, difficulty remembering and irritability.

### Anxiety

Anxiety is the most common mental disorder and 350,000-400,000 adult Danes are estimated to develop symptoms of anxiety within one year.

Anxiety can be a consequence of long-term stress. The symptoms of anxiety are restlessness, panic attacks, exaggerated worry, a tendency towards shying away from certain situations and social contexts, muscular tension, palpitations and a weight on the chest.

Long-term stress and anxiety can develop into depression, and surveys show that 150,000-200,000 Danes are living with depression. The prevalence of depression increases with age. Symptoms of depression include extreme fatigue and no motivation or interest in everyday life and surroundings.

### Poor social relationships and loneliness

Loneliness is also a major problem in Copenhagen. According to the latest National Health Profile, every one in five Copenhageneers, or about 100,000 Copenhageneers, says they have poor social relationships. Half of these, about 50,000 Copenhageneers, have a feeling of being lonely.

Loneliness is a major problem, and it is most common among young people (aged 16-24) and the oldest Copenhageneers (above 80) and people who are not in employment. People who feel lonely experience a poorer quality of life and an increased risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and metabolic syndrome.

### The City of Copenhagen wants to improve the mental health of Copenhageneers

The City of Copenhagen has taken the lead in the endeavours to prevent stress. In 2015, the City of Copenhagen opened the first stress clinic where Copenhageneers can come for an anti-stress programme after having been referred by their own GP or the local job center.

Like many other health facilities, the stress clinics have learned that more women than men make use of the clinics. This being the case, the City of Copenhagen has a special offer for men where the programmes are completed in nature. A campaign for the purpose of informing men that their well-being problems can be due to stress was also completed in 2018.

In 2019, the City of Copenhagen opens new anxiety clinics to which young people and adults can turn for help in connection with symptoms of anxiety, and, in 2020, the City of Copenhagen will open its first therapy garden offering nature-based health programmes. For several years, the City of Copenhagen has also been striving to reduce the feeling of loneliness among older people in Copenhagen.

However, the local authority still needs to undertake strategic work to promote mental health, and new preventive services and facilities must be developed to help Copenhageneers improve their mental health and quality of life.

The mental health is also affected by the environment and circumstances surrounding the Copenhageneers every day. So the solutions to improving the mental health of Copenhageneers must also be found across the administrative departments in Copenhagen. For instance, greater attention must be paid to detecting mental challenges – not only among general practitioners, but also teachers, managers, health and safety representatives and home care workers. Mental health promotion must also be taken into consideration in the design of urban

spaces, offering optimum possibilities of community, recovery and peace and in the development of workplaces and educational institutions that promote well-being.

The services and facilities provided by the City of Copenhagen should be seen as a supplement to the treatment services and facilities in the capital region, individual psychological treatment and civil society's supporting services and facilities for citizens suffering from a mental illness.



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## With this action plan, the City of Copenhagen wants to give priority to:

### Offering targeted preventive initiatives to adult Copenhageners showing signs of poor mental health by:

- Maintaining the preventive services at the local stress clinics and introducing new services based on culture, nature and online solutions, including programmes in the City of Copenhagen's future therapy garden\*;

- Offering supportive programmes for young people and adults showing symptoms of anxiety and, long term, increasing the local services in relation to poor mental well-being\*;

- Offering individual sessions with a psychologist to older citizens with mental challenges\*;

- Working systematically to detect and prevent loneliness and depression among older Copenhageners aged 65 and over, for instance under the auspices of clubs for senior citizens, voluntary association activities, housing, the home care service and at care homes\*; and

- Promoting and supporting, to a higher degree, volunteers and associations providing meaningful and social activities to prevent loneliness and offer membership to more vulnerable Copenhageners who have participated in the local authority's health programmes.

## Furthermore, the City of Copenhagen wants to:

### Establish grief support groups and self-help groups that can:

- Help Copenhageners receive offers of participation in grief support groups and existential self-help groups if they have lost a close family member or experience serious illness first-hand in cooperation with civil society\*.

### Establish a healthy environment that promotes mental health by:

- Promoting more green urban spaces and a quiet breathing space paving the way for relaxation and recovery from a busy everyday life and increased use by Copenhageners of the existing green urban spaces;

- Working strategically to reduce noise in continuation of the City of Copenhagen's new noise action plan in the areas of the city that suffer the most from noise nuisances\*;

- Creating an environment at youth education institutions and workplaces that promotes mental health to prevent stress, anxiety and depression; and

- Offering new supportive programmes to the long-term unemployed and socially disadvantaged people who are mentally vulnerable and have other complex problems\*, including developing targeted services that promote physical activity or strengthen the participation by the target group in associations.

*Initiatives marked by an asterisk (\*) require an injection of funds.*





#### Track 4

## Promoting mental health among citizens living with a chronic illness

Nearly half the adult population aged 16 and over is living with one or more chronic illnesses, the prevalence having increased in the Capital Region of Denmark in recent years. It is important that citizens living with a chronic illness are seen as whole people and that they, in addition to receiving support for their illnesses, have the possibility of receiving support in relation to the mental implications that may be the result of an illness so that they stand a chance of living a good daily life in spite of the illness

#### Emotional response

People being diagnosed with a chronic illness may experience a lot of emotional response such as worry, sadness, insecurity and anger at the illness. The response can be particularly serious if the illness is a life-threatening illness, and they can develop into symptoms of stress, anxiety or depression.

Moreover treatment, medicine and changed living conditions can limit the opportunities for development and prevent a person from living the life he or she did prior to the illness. This may have a severe effect on the quality of life of the individual.

#### Support in connection with chronic illness

It is important that citizens suffering from a chronic illness are offered support and the tools needed to cope with the mental implications of their illness. The support must prevent citizens living with a chronic illness

from developing an intercurrent mental illness and improve their possibilities of taking care of themselves and benefit the most from a rehabilitation programme.

The support must be tailored to the individual citizen and his or her life situation and to the specific chronic illness and the barriers to the potential for self-expression that characterise it.

In addition, the impairment of mental health in connection with a chronic illness can often be limited by forming social relationships and participating in social communities with others in the same situation.

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Just under 40% of people with diabetes experience illness-related stress.

25% of people with heart failure experience depression or anxiety.

35% of Copenhageners with COPD experience a high stress level.

Nearly 50% of people diagnosed with cancer develop anxiety or depression.

*Bo is living with COPD on a daily basis and with feelings of guilt, helplessness and anxiety accompanying the illness. Bo has benefitted significantly from meeting others in the same situation and obtaining the tools to reduce his anxiety.*

When a chronic illness has mental consequences in the form of stress, anxiety or depression, the individual is at great risk of not being able to maintain his or her attachment to the labour market. In order to help Copenhageners living with a combination of chronic illness and mental implications, initiatives must be developed that, in addition to lending support in relation to the physical and mental health challenges, can also lend support in connection with social, financial and family-related problems as well as problems related to the labour market.

### **With this action plan, the City of Copenhagen wants to give priority to:**

#### **Increasing the focus on mental health in its rehabilitation services by:**

- Employing staff with competent profiles in the health centers. This will ensure that citizens suffering from chronic illnesses are met by staff with professional skills in health- and psychological care. Thus, citizens will be supported and will learn tools needed to cope with the potential mental health implications of living with chronic illness; and
- Helping ensure that Copenhageners with a chronic illness in particularly difficult life situations or enrolled in illness and treatment programmes are given the opportunity to talk to staff with professional psychological support to relieve the symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, etc.

### **Furthermore, the City of Copenhagen wants to:**

#### **Increase interdisciplinary cooperation in favour of citizens suffering from a chronic illness and having mental challenges by:**

- Strengthening the cooperation with patient societies to improve the possibility of receiving social support and experiencing a feeling of belonging in relation with chronic illness;
- Helping ensure that the local health services and facilities and voluntary association activities are better able at accommodating citizens with special and complex needs; and
- Helping ensure that citizens with a chronic illness are offered support in relation to the social, financial and labour market-related problems that may be caused by the illness\*.

*Initiatives marked by an asterisk (\*) require an injection of funds.*



