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Catching the Quiet Signals: Can Technology Help Us Notice Mental Health Strain Earlier?

Few people wake up one morning in the grip of burnout. It usually builds slowly: a few weeks of poorer sleep, a growing sense of dread on Sunday evenings, a patience that wears thinner than it used to. Each change seems minor, so each is easy to dismiss, and by the time the pattern is obvious it may already be taking a toll on health, relationships and work.

The Erasmus + project H.A.R.M.O.N.Y. is exploring whether digital tools could help people notice that drift sooner and feel prompted to act on it.

The trend matters more than the moment

Everyone has rough patches. A deadline-heavy week or a nerve-racking presentation can leave anyone feeling stretched, and that is not a cause for concern. What is harder to judge is when a temporary reaction is turning into a lasting pattern.

That question is at the heart of the work carried out in Work Package 3. The team is not building a diagnostic instrument. It is developing a framework for a tool that could flag patterns linked to a higher risk of future difficulties, closer to an early warning system than a medical test. The underlying insight is that one reading of how you feel today says little, while the direction of travel over weeks and months says a great deal.

Built on what people tell us themselves

The proposed approach rests mainly on standardised self-report questionnaires covering areas such as stress, anxiety, depression symptoms and loneliness, alongside other factors research associates with well-being. The value lies in comparing results over time rather than reading any single score.

Consider someone whose stress ratings creep upward over several weeks. Their numbers may still look unremarkable, but the trajectory is worth attention.



The same is true of a sharp rise in anxiety, or several unfavourable trends appearing together. In such cases the tool could suggest that extra support might help.

Why not wearables, phones or cameras?

Public discussion of AI and mental health often conjures up continuous surveillance: smartwatch data, phone usage, even facial analysis. The project team weighed these options carefully and concluded that low-burden, self-reported measures should come first. Wearable data is treated as optional and only acceptable under strict conditions of consent, proportionality and privacy. Two things drove that choice. First, passive signals are hard to interpret. Disrupted sleep or reduced activity can stem from countless things unrelated to mental health. Second, gathering such data raises serious privacy questions. Information that people knowingly choose to share is more transparent, easier to understand and leaves them with more control.

People stay in charge

Control over personal information is a core principle of the framework. Taking part is voluntary, and individual results are not passed on to employers. The aim is to support employees, not to assess them.
Results are also meant to be easy to grasp, expressed in plain terms such as "your stress ratings have been rising for several weeks" or "your anxiety score is higher than at your last check-in."

A supportive tool, not a substitute for professionals

The team made a deliberate decision to position AI as a support rather than a clinician. The system would not diagnose depression, anxiety or any other condition, and it would not influence treatment decisions. Its job is to raise awareness of changes and encourage timely action, which might eventually mean pointing to self-help resources, wellbeing materials or a recommendation to speak with a qualified professional.

Where things stand

H.A.R.M.O.N.Y. is currently refining a foundation, not launching a finished product. The framework sets out what information could be collected, how it would be processed, how privacy would be safeguarded and how results could be communicated responsibly. Different scenarios have been tested to check that the approach is logical, practical and ethically sound. The next stage is to develop it further with input from experts and stakeholders. The ambition is simple: to help people spot early warning signs, understand their own wellbeing better and reach support before things become overwhelming. In mental health, noticing sooner can change what happens next.