MELODIC MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH CANCER

Co-funded by the European Union

MELODIC

Mental Health Support for Young Adults with Cancer

Project Number: 101101253

WP2: Needs assessment

Deliverable 2.4: Need Assessment Report

Authors		J Oliveira Lopes, M Tomás, M Portugal	
Version		V1.1	
Due Date		31.01.2026	
Work Package		WP 2	
Deliverable		D 2.4	
Dissemination level		PU	
WP Leaders		Erasmus MC	
Delivered		30.01.2026	
Version	Date	Comments	Modified by
V1.1	30.01.2026	The deliverable updated according to the comments from THCC.	J Oliveira Lopes, M Tomás, M Portugal

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA). Neither the

Executive Summary

This Deliverable (D2.4) presents a consolidated summary of the needs assessment conducted within Work Package 2 (WP2) of the MELODIC project. It integrates and synthesizes findings from the quantitative survey of healthcare professionals (Deliverable 2.2) and the qualitative interview study involving young adults (YAs) with cancer, their family members/caregivers, and healthcare professionals (Deliverable 2.3).

The report identifies key mental health needs of YAs with cancer and their families during the first year following diagnosis, as well as educational and systemic needs perceived by healthcare professionals. Importantly, it translates these findings into clear, practice-oriented conclusions that directly inform the development of the training programme in WP3 and the design of the intervention in WP4. The conclusions emphasize the need for person-centred, timely, coordinated, and accessible mental health support, as well as the importance of strengthening healthcare professionals' competencies in mental health screening, communication, and referral pathways.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The MELODIC project aims to promote mental health and well-being among young adults with cancer and their family members by improving screening, early detection, and person-centred management of mental health needs during the first year after cancer diagnosis. As outlined in the project description, WP2 constitutes the foundational phase of the project, generating empirical evidence to guide subsequent development work in WP3 (Training Programme) and WP4 (Intervention).

This deliverable provides a structured synthesis of the WP2 findings. Rather than repeating detailed methodological descriptions or full results already reported in Deliverables 2.2 and 2.3, D2.4 focuses on identifying overarching needs and translating them into actionable conclusions for the next work packages.

2. Overview of the Needs Assessment (WP2)

The needs assessment in WP2 comprised two complementary components:

1. Survey Study (D2.2): An international cross-sectional online survey targeting healthcare professionals working with young adults with cancer. The survey explored current practices and educational needs related to mental health screening, early detection, referral, and supportive interventions.
2. Interview Study (D2.3): A qualitative, multicenter interview study involving young adults (YAs) with cancer, their family members/caregivers, and healthcare professionals across six European countries. The interviews explored lived experiences, perceived mental health needs, and preferences for how support should be provided.

The survey was conducted between May and August 2025 and was completed by 271 healthcare professionals for at least 70% of the questionnaire, with 183 respondents completing all items. Respondents were predominantly experienced professionals (over half with more than 10 years of experience), mainly nurses and medical doctors, working in public cancer centers or university hospitals across several European countries. The interview study complemented these findings by providing in-depth qualitative insights from YAs, families, and professionals.

Together, these studies allowed triangulation of perspectives from service users, families, and professionals, providing a comprehensive understanding of unmet needs, gaps between perceived competence and actual practice, and system-level challenges in mental health support.

3. Key Identified Needs

3.1 Needs of Young Adults with Cancer

Findings from the interview study indicate that a cancer diagnosis in young adulthood has a profound psychological impact. YAs frequently described feelings of shock, fear, anxiety, loss of control, and diminished trust in their own bodies. These experiences were often accompanied by disruptions to developmental tasks typical of young adulthood, such as autonomy, identity formation, education, employment, and relationships.

Key needs identified include:

- Timely and age-appropriate mental health support, particularly during diagnosis and treatment transitions.
- Clear, honest, and tailored information, delivered at appropriate moments along the cancer journey.
- Recognition as individuals, rather than being treated solely as patients defined by a diagnosis.
- Practical and lifestyle-oriented support, often self-initiated due to perceived gaps in formal care.
- Access to supportive environments, including green and blue spaces, which were perceived as beneficial but often difficult to access due to physical limitations, urban settings, or lack of guidance.

YAs highlighted the importance of social relationships, valuing support from peers and close contacts alongside professional care. However, they also expressed uncertainty about where and how to seek psychological support within existing healthcare systems.

3.2 Needs of Family Members and Caregivers

Family members reported significant emotional and practical burdens following the cancer diagnosis of a young adult. Many described entering a “survival mode”, characterised by constant worry, emotional suppression, and prioritisation of the patient’s needs over their own.

Identified needs include:

- Psychological and emotional support for family members, which was often perceived as insufficient or absent.
- Support in managing practical challenges, including work-related difficulties and financial strain.
- Acknowledgement by healthcare professionals of the family's emotional burden and role in care.
- Accessible and affordable support services, as many reported needing to organise and finance support independently.

Family members generally reported positive perceptions of green and blue spaces as restorative and helpful for perspective-taking. However, lack of time, exhaustion, and competing responsibilities often prevented their use.

3.3 Needs Identified by Healthcare Professionals

Findings from both the survey and interview study highlight important discrepancies between healthcare professionals perceived competencies and their actual clinical practices.

Key needs and challenges identified include:

- The majority of respondents reported feeling capable of screening for distress, anxiety, and depression in YA with cancer, but the consistent use of validated screening tools in daily practice was low.
- Most of the professionals refer YA with mental health issues elsewhere; only some chose to provide advice and guidance.
- Limited awareness and structured use of social prescribing: most healthcare professionals were unfamiliar with social prescribing as a formal approach, despite recognizing the value of physical activity and nature-based (green and blue space) interventions and often recommending these informally.

The survey further demonstrated substantial educational needs, with between 50% and 70% of respondents indicating a need for additional training across all proposed topics. The highest priority areas identified were:

- Training in the use of mental health screening tools;

- Identifying typical cancer-related mental health problems in YA;
- Recognizing early signs of mental health problems;
- Training in addressing mental health during consultations and counselling;
- Training in the use of social prescribing, green and blue spaces, and physical activity to support mental well-being.

These findings underline the need for structured, skills-based education that bridges the gap between health care professionals perceived competence and evidence-based practice addressed to YA with cancer and their family members.

4. Cross-Cutting Themes

Across participant groups, several overarching themes emerged:

- Timing matters: Support needs change across the cancer trajectory, with critical periods around diagnosis, treatment transitions, and early survivorship.
- Coordination of care: Fragmentation of services leads to unmet needs, particularly for mental health and family support.
- Equity and accessibility: Access to mental health support and supportive environments varies across contexts and individuals.
- Person-centredness: All groups emphasized the importance of care that recognizes individual circumstances, preferences, and lived experiences.

5. Conclusions for WP3 – Training Programme

The integrated findings from the survey (D2.2) and interview study (D2.3) clearly demonstrate a need for a comprehensive and practice-oriented training programme for healthcare professionals. WP3 should directly address the gaps identified between current practices, perceived competencies, and evidence-based standards of care.

Based on the needs assessment, the WP3 training programme should:

- Strengthen competencies in systematic mental health screening and early detection, with a strong emphasis on the routine use and interpretation of validated screening tools for distress, anxiety, depression, and fear of cancer recurrence.
- Enhance professionals' ability to recognize early and cancer-specific mental health problems in young adults and to differentiate between expected emotional responses and clinically significant distress.
- Develop communication and counselling skills to support sensitive, age-appropriate, and person-centred discussions about mental health, lifestyle, and psychosocial concerns.
- Increase awareness of the mental health needs of family members and caregivers, including strategies for inclusion, support, and appropriate referral.
- Improve knowledge of referral pathways, interdisciplinary collaboration, and coordination of care, reducing fragmentation and delays in support.
- Introduce and operationalize social prescribing approaches, including the structured use of physical activity and green and blue spaces as complementary mental health support strategies.
- Use flexible, interactive, and case-based learning methods that reflect real-world clinical scenarios and the expressed preferences of healthcare professionals.

These conclusions provide a clear evidence base for the design, content, and pedagogical approach of the WP3 training curriculum.

6. Conclusions for WP4 – Intervention Design

The WP2 findings provide strong and convergent support for the development of an intervention that is person-centered, accessible, and responsive to the lived experiences of young adults with cancer and their families. The intervention to be developed in WP4 should be informed by both expressed needs and identified gaps in current practice.

Key implications for WP4 include:

- The intervention should address young adults and their family members as interconnected groups, acknowledging the reciprocal impact of cancer on mental health and daily functioning.
- A social prescribing–inspired model well aligned with participants' preferences and professionals' recognition of the value of non-clinical, supportive strategies.
- Structured facilitation of physical activity and engagement with green and blue spaces, with attention to accessibility, physical limitations, and contextual barriers.
- The intervention should be flexible and adaptable to different healthcare and community contexts, facilitating uptake and sustainability.
- Clear information, guidance, and coordination mechanisms are essential to ensure that young adults and families understand how to access and benefit from the intervention.
- Potential barriers, such as limited time, fatigue, lack of familiarity with nature-based interventions, and uneven availability of services, should be explicitly addressed in the intervention design.

These conclusions directly inform the conceptual framework and practical components of the WP4 intervention and its associated implementation guidance.

7. Final Remarks

This Deliverable consolidates the evidence generated in WP2 and provides a coherent set of conclusions to guide subsequent project phases. By grounding WP3 and WP4 in the expressed needs of young adults with cancer, their families, and healthcare professionals, MELODIC is positioned to develop relevant, person-centred, and sustainable solutions to improve mental health support in this population.