



Developing Compassionate Workplaces in Europe for the digital and green work environment to protect employees' mental and physical health and wellbeing

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1 Own organized events

1.1 Compassionate Week @ Vrije Universiteit Brussel

In the week of **18 November 2025**, **VUB/COCO** organized the Compassionate Week @ Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The Compassionate Communities centre of expertise (COCO) is an interdisciplinary research consortium of 8 research groups across 4 VUB faculties. It is led by a supervising committee consisting of the two leading partners – the End-of-Life Care research group (EoLC) and the Society and Ageing Research Lab (SARLAB).

On 18 and 19 November, COCO invited everyone (including their colleagues and students) to engage in a diverse range of activities centered around the topics of serious illness, grief, care, and loss, both on-campus and online. They offered an array of free workshops, seminars and get-togethers. As part of COCO, the EU-CoWork project specifically led a session on what Compassionate Workplaces for family caregivers would look like (see Session Family Caregivers).

1.1.1 Program Monday, 18 November 2025

Open class Compassionate Communities

This open class took a deeper look at what exactly Compassionate Communities are and how these initiatives seek to normalize and discuss serious illness, grief, and loss. This class was taught by professor Liesbeth De Donder (SARLAB (VUB)).

Compassionate Cards

This session focused on writing a thoughtful card to someone you miss or someone you want to encourage. The cards were provided and sent for free through the university. Participants could also make a symbolic gesture by leaving a ribbon in the university's comfort tree. This event was in collaboration with [Rouwcollectief](#) and [Lost&Co](#).

We care – workshop for students

This workshop focused on boosting students' wellbeing and togetherness at the university. Students could learn about interesting insights and handy tools to better support each other and create a positive environment.

The workshop offered following aspects:

- **Get insight:** Find out more about students' mental health and discover how it affects academic performance and well-being.
- **Skill up:** Get tips on how to recognise signs of mental health problems in yourself and others and learn how to have good conversations when you are worried.
- **Create a warm environment:** Receive tips on how to create an inclusive and supportive environment where everyone feels welcome and safe.
- **Self-care:** Learn why self-care is so important and how to monitor your own boundaries while caring for others.

Creative Workshop with SmallStories

In this workshop, Karen Maenhout (SmallStories) guided the participants in making a pop-up greeting card and writing their own haiku. The workshop focused on comfort and sending someone comfort.

Session Family carers

During this interactive session, VUB's HR department, researchers from the EU-CoWork project and COCO, and family carers at the VUB and their colleagues went into conversation. They shared insights from research and practice on family caring at work, discussed what a "compassionate workplace" means, and explored the needs and preferences of family carers to give them the right support.

Voices of Compassion

This evening event was dedicated to mourning and healing through texts, poems, stories, songs, in any language. Members of the VUB community and beyond shared their work or the work of others that promotes compassion in the face of loss. Poet Paul Stephenson closed the event with a reading and reflection on his latest collection *Hard Drive* which explores processes of grieving.

1.1.2 Program Tuesday, 19 November 2025

Compassionate Cards

This session focused on writing a thoughtful card to someone you miss or someone you want to encourage. The cards were provided and sent for free through the university. Participants could also make a symbolic gesture by leaving a ribbon in the university's comfort tree. This event was in collaboration with [Rouwcollectief](#) and [Lost&Co](#).

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Webinar Grief Literacy by Susan Cadell

The original conceptualization of grief literacy included vignettes to illustrate the answer to the question: How would we know if we lived in a grief literate world? This presentation discussed the original vignettes as well as ways in which they have been used since.

Susan Cadell, PhD, RSW (she/her) is a social work researcher and Professor of Social Work. Susan's research concerns death, dying, and bereavement, particularly positive outcomes of caregiving and grief. Susan's most recent projects concern grief in Canada, after Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD), queering grief and healing tattoos. She is co-founder of Grief Matters.

Moment of comfort

Every year, VUB students and staff gather around the Monument of Comfort to commemorate everyone from the VUB community who has passed away in the past year. This subdued moment is accompanied by texts, music and the placement of flowers.

Compassionate Café

Talking about illness, grief, and loss can be incredibly challenging, leading many of us to avoid them altogether. However, these conversations can also be deeply meaningful and connecting. Compassionate Café provided a safe and approachable space to engage in these discussions together. The evening began with a brief introduction by Missing You, followed by a comforting consolation concert performed by Lost&Co.

2 Co-organized events

2.1 Inspiration lunch

Traumatic events: the importance of implementing a support process within your organisation

On Friday **25 April 2025**, **IDEWE** together with Htag organized an inspiration lunch that focused on the importance of implementing a support process within organisations. Participation in the inspiration lunch was free of charge. This inspiration lunch was reserved for people in Human Resource Development and HR managers working in a private company or an organisation in the public or non-profit sectors. It was open to members of the Htag Community and guests of the partner. This event was in French. The event was co-organised by EU-CoWork partners IDEWE and included a keynote presentations from EU-CoWork PI Joachim Cohen (VUB).

2.1.1 Program

12:00	Welcome and lunch
12:30	Presentation by: • Joachim Cohen, Professor of Public Health at the VUB • Yvan Cogo, Regional Risk Management Coordinator at IDEWE • Testimonial from Edith Jonkers, Team Leader Interpersonal relations management at Infrabel (partner organisation in the project). <i>There will also be time for discussion with the participants</i>
14:00	End of inspiration lunch

2.1.2 Event description

Traumatic events often happen unexpectedly. An accident at work, a hold-up, a suicide, an assault... come to mind. Sometimes, it can happen when there are warning signs - such as when a colleague has a serious illness that cannot be treated. The emotions felt by “affected” workers can have serious consequences, both individually and collectively (increased workload, absenteeism, even - in “extreme” cases - post-traumatic stress).

When faced with such a situation, it makes good business sense to implement a support process - ideally in advance. Aware of this need, Groupe IDEWE has, for several years now,

been developing a programme to support organisations in their reflections and the implementation of intervention procedures after a traumatic event, but also to ensure the training of the workers who make up the front-line psychosocial intervention team. Today, IDEWE is going one step further by taking an active part in a European project directly linked to this theme: Developing Compassionate Workplaces in Europe. In this project, IDEWE is working with the VUB and a number of organisations to develop interventions aimed at supporting workers faced with loss, care responsibilities, serious illness and bereavement in the workplace. (Translated from French to English with online translation tool)

3 Sessions or workshops within external events

3.1 Inspire health&care

Your meeting hub for healthcare and welfare.

On **Wednesday, 23 April and Thursday, 24 April 2025** *in4care*, *Porbis* and *Easyfairs* organized 'Inspire health&care' in Nekkerhal, Mechelen. The event was a meeting hub for professionals in the healthcare and welfare sector. The two days were dedicated to connecting, inspiring, and being inspired. The event brought together stakeholders from all levels of healthcare and had about 3800 visitors.

EU-CoWork co-PI, professor Deborah De Moortel (VUB) held a 45-minutes session on the second day of the event: '**VUB – Compassionate Workplaces: How to Better Support Employees Facing Caregiving Responsibilities, Serious Illness, and Grief**'.

Professor De Moortel elaborated on the practice of compassionate workplaces and gave an in-depth presentation about the EU-CoWork project and how workplaces can support employees during difficult times, such as serious illness, caregiving, and grief. She also gave tools and insights on setting up a compassionate workplace.