



# ON CALL

Lay Community Health Advisors

## Risk factors for Mental Health

Mental disorders are increasingly recognized to be chronic and disabling, belonging to a group of serious medical illnesses including heart disease, cancer and diabetes. The Global Burden of Disease report has revealed that neuropsychiatric conditions account for a quarter of all disability-adjusted life years. Furthermore, the burden of mental disorders is likely to be underestimated because of inadequate appreciation of the link between mental illness and other health conditions. Several health conditions increase the risk for mental disorder and co-morbidity complicates help-seeking, diagnosis and treatment and can affect prognosis. An often underestimated risk factor for mental health has to do with exposure to maternal or nutritional perinatal conditions, as well as exposure to early stress.



## WHAT INFLUENCE THE MENTAL HEALTH ACCORDING TO WHO

### Determinants of mental health and well-being

A commonly used definition of mental health is "... a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community". Reference to this definition makes it clear that mental or psychological well-being is influenced not only by individual characteristics or attributes, but also by the socioeconomic circumstances in which persons find themselves and the broader environment in which they live :

#### Individual attributes and behaviours:

These relate to a person's innate as well as learned ability to deal with thoughts and feelings and to manage him/herself in daily life ('emotional intelligence'), as well as the capacity to deal with the social world around by partaking in social activities, taking responsibilities or respecting the views of others ('social intelligence'). An individual's mental health state can

also be influenced by genetic and biological factors; that is, determinants that persons are born or endowed with, including chromosomal abnormalities (e.g. Down's syndrome) and intellectual disability caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol or oxygen deprivation at birth



### **Social and economic circumstances:**

The capacity for an individual to develop and flourish is The wider sociocultural and geopolitical environment in which people live can also affect an individual's, household's or community's mental health status, including deeply influenced by their immediate social surroundings – including their opportunity to engage positively with family members, friends or colleagues, and earn a living for themselves and their families – and also by the socio-economic circumstances in which they find themselves. Restricted or lost opportunities to gain an education and income are especially pertinent socio-economic factors.

### **Environmental factors:**

The wider sociocultural and geopolitical environment in which people live can also affect an individual's, household's or community's mental health status, including levels of access to basic commodities and services (water, essential health services, the rule of law), exposure to predominating cultural beliefs, attitudes or practices, as well as by social and economic policies formed at the national level; for example, the on-going global financial crisis is expected to have significant mental health consequences, including increased rates of suicide and harmful alcohol use. Discrimination, social or gender inequality and conflict are examples of adverse structural determinants of mental well-being.

## RISKS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

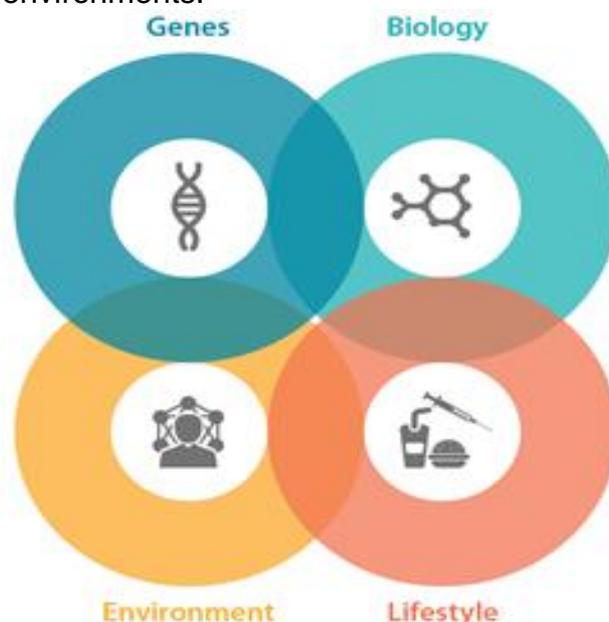
### Infancy and early childhood

There is a strong body of evidence to show the importance of attachment by neonates to their mothers or another primary caregiver for subsequent social and emotional development. Separation from the primary caregiver - due for example to parental absence or rejection – leads to anxiety, stress and insecurity. Parents who have difficulties in bonding, have limited skills or exhibit negative attitudes place their children at increased risk of exposure to stress and behavioural problems. Other important risks to physical is: maltreatment and neglect (by parents and other caregivers), malnutrition and infectious or parasitic diseases.

### Childhood

Negative experiences within the home or at school - due to family conflict or play-ground bullying, for instance - have a damaging effect on the development of these core cognitive and emotional skills. Supportive parenting, a secure home life and a positive learning environment in schools are key protective factors in building and protecting mental well-being or capital at this stage of life.

Risks to mental health include family violence or conflict, negative life events, and a low sense of connection to schools or other learning environments.



### Adolescence

Adolescence is also the period where mental disorder is more likely to develop or become apparent. The adverse experiences, conditions or environments that affect the mental well-being of younger children apply equally to adolescents. Tobacco/alcohol/drug use is one such risk, the onset of which typically occurs during adolescence.

Substance use is particularly hazardous and harmful for adolescents because the brain and body are still developing at this age. Adolescents are also susceptible to peer pressure and, increasingly, media influences

that may encourage substance use. In addition to these risks to health, substance use in adolescence is linked to lowered educational outcomes, more risky sexual behaviour and heightened violence

## Adulthood

One of the most critical choices to be made in adulthood concerns the 'work-life balance'; in economic terms, the allocation of time between production (whether paid for or not) and consumption (including leisure time with family and friends). Stress and anxiety are a frequent outcome for persons spending too much time working, caring for others or operating in a difficult / insecure work environment, as it is for those able and willing to work but unable to do so because of adverse socio-economic circumstances.



## Other risks (affecting any age group)

In addition to the risks that typically present or manifest themselves at different points over the life course, there are other potential threats to mental health that can impact on persons at any age or stage in their lives, depending on the broader sociocultural and geopolitical context into which they are born and/or within which they exist. Since even the most basic socio-demographic characteristics of individuals are framed by social norms or customs, a person's gender, ethnic grouping or place of residence may influence their chances of developing a mental health condition. Racism or discrimination towards a particular group in society, for example, raises that group's exposure to social exclusion and economic adversity, thereby placing them at a higher risk of stress, anxiety and other common mental disorders. Substance use disorders are more common among men, influenced in part again by social attitudes or norms.



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