

# Mental Health

## Learning Outcomes

- Define mental health and social determinants of mental health.
- List the main mental disorders.
- Explain the impact of being diagnosed with a mental disorder.
- Explain the importance of culture and environment in relation to the diagnosis and the presence of mental disorders.
- Explain the importance of addressing the life course social determinants of mental health.

## Introduction to Mental Health and Its Importance

Mental health is a crucial aspect of overall wellbeing, especially highlighted by recent reports, including the 2024 national report card. These reports reveal that young adults experience the highest levels of psychological distress, emphasizing the importance of early life stages in building resilience and coping skills. The foundation for mental health is laid during childhood and adolescence, which influences how individuals manage stress and challenges later in life.

## Current Challenges in Mental Health

Recent data indicates a significant increase in financial stress among populations, which adversely affects mental health. Approximately 25% of people have delayed or avoided seeking mental health support in the past year, often due to barriers such as stigma, accessibility, or cost. Society aims to improve consumer rights, safety, and safeguards to ensure individuals feel secure and valued when seeking help. Timely access to appropriate mental health services is vital for effective management and future wellbeing.

## Definitions of Mental Health and Mental Illness

Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing where individuals realize their potential, cope with normal stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community. It is not merely the absence of disease but a positive state of functioning. Conversely, mental illness or mental health disorders are diagnosable conditions affecting thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and daily functioning.

## World Health Organization's Perspective

The WHO describes mental health as a state where individuals can realize their potential, handle everyday stresses, work effectively, and contribute meaningfully to society. Good mental health supports productivity, resilience, and overall life satisfaction.

## Types of Mental Health Disorders

- **High prevalence disorders:** Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health conditions affecting many people.
- **Severe mental illnesses:** Conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are less common but more severe.

Having a mental health disorder does not preclude leading an active and fulfilling life. The ability to cope depends on individual resilience and support mechanisms.

## Common Mental Health Conditions and Their Prevalence

Other prevalent disorders include dementia, substance dependencies, and alcohol misuse. These are more common in specific age groups and populations, often linked to social and environmental factors.

## Causes and Determinants of Mental Health Disorders

Mental health disorders are influenced by various factors, including genetics, environment, and personal experiences. A key concept is the threshold of stress—when stress exceeds an individual's coping capacity, mental health issues may develop. Sub-threshold disorders: Many experience poor mental health that doesn't meet the criteria for a formal diagnosis.

## Social, Economic, and Physical Determinants

Determinants of mental health encompass:

- **Physical environment:** Poor health, pain, or stressful surroundings can negatively impact mental health.
- **Economic environment:** Financial hardship, inability to afford essentials, and socioeconomic disadvantage increase mental health risks.
- **Social environment:** Childhood upbringing, social support, and community engagement influence mental resilience.

Disadvantaged groups, especially those in low socioeconomic brackets, often face higher stress levels and less access to mental health services. Early childhood experiences significantly shape lifelong mental health. Exposure to stress, supportive environments, and access to healthcare during childhood can either increase resilience or vulnerability to mental health issues later in life.

## Vulnerability and Resilience Factors

Vulnerability factors include economic instability, educational stress, poor housing, and lack of social support. Resilience is fostered through supportive upbringing, higher education, stable housing, and access to healthcare.

## Examples of Social Determinants Influencing Mental Health

1. **Economic stability:** Financial security reduces stress and mental health risks.
2. **Education:** Higher educational attainment correlates with lower mental health disorder prevalence.
3. **Supportive environment:** Mentorship, community support, and positive social connections promote mental wellbeing.
4. **Access to healthcare:** Early and appropriate healthcare reduces the risk of developing mental health conditions.
5. **Stable housing and community services:** Living in safe, supportive environments decreases mental health risks.

Overall, addressing these social determinants is essential for reducing mental health disparities and promoting mental wellbeing across populations.

## Definition of Stressors and Their Impact

Stressors are factors or events that cause stress in individuals. They vary widely among people, with some stressors exerting more influence on certain individuals than others. When exposed to stressors, biological changes occur in the body, which can lead to stress responses. Buffered by social support provided by loving, responsive and stable relationships building secure attachments between the child and caregiver that are essential for healthy social and emotional development.

## Physiological Responses to Stress

During stress, the body reacts through several physiological changes:

- Gastrointestinal system may become upset, causing stomach tightness or bowel issues.
- Heart rate and pulse increase, stressing the cardiovascular system.
- Muscles become tense, leading to fatigue.
- Overall physical functioning may decline, affecting energy levels and mental clarity.

Short-term stress can be beneficial or manageable, but prolonged or repeated stress exposure can be harmful, impacting long-term health and coping abilities.

## The Stress Bucket Analogy

The stress bucket analogy is a useful way to conceptualize stress management. It suggests that everyone has a "bucket" representing their capacity to handle stress. This capacity varies based on individual resilience, upbringing, and past experiences.

When stressors fill the bucket beyond a certain threshold, called the threshold point, it can lead to negative health outcomes or mental health issues. People use coping strategies—such as