

2. Mental Health Promotion

2.1. What are the risk and protective factors?

The **promotion of good mental health** in all members of society is an important objective of contemporary societies. According to the WHO (2001), mental health – which has not received the attention it deserves for too long – is fundamental to the general well-being of individuals, societies and countries, and must be addressed throughout the world from a new perspective.

The promotion of mental health should be present from the beginning of life, reflected in the adaptation and satisfaction with which the individual grows, develops and in the ability to deal positively with adversity. But, mental health is not watertight or static, and there may be imbalances throughout life. **Mental health** exists on a **complex continuum**, with experiences ranging from an optimal state of well-being to debilitating states of great suffering and emotional pain. At any one time, a diverse set of individual attributes and behaviours, social and economic circumstances and environmental factors may combine to protect or undermine our mental health and shift our position on the mental health continuum (Figure 2). It is important to emphasize that these different **determinants of mental well-being** interact with each other in a dynamic way, and that they can work for or against a particular individual's mental health state (WHO, 2012).



Figure 2. Contributing factors to mental health and well-being

Because the **factors determining mental health** are multisectoral, interventions to promote and protect mental health should also be delivered across multiple sectors. **Table 1** provides an illustrative set of factors that may threaten or protect mental health.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Adverse factors</i>		<i>Protective factors</i>
Individual attributes	Low self-esteem	↔	Self-esteem, confidence
	Cognitive/emotional immaturity	↔	Ability to solve problems and manage stress or adversity
	Difficulties in communicating	↔	Communication skills
	Medical illness, substance use	↔	Physical health, fitness
Social circumstances	Loneliness, bereavement	↔	Social support of family & friends
	Neglect, family conflict	↔	Good parenting / family interaction
	Exposure to violence/abuse	↔	Physical security and safety
	Low income and poverty	↔	Economic security
	Difficulties or failure at school	↔	Scholastic achievement
	Work stress, unemployment	↔	Satisfaction and success at work
Environmental factors	Poor access to basic services	↔	Equality of access to basic services
	Injustice and discrimination	↔	Social justice, tolerance, integration
	Social and gender inequalities	↔	Social and gender equality
	Exposure to war or disaster	↔	Physical security and safety

Table 1. Mental health determinants

Protective factors occur throughout our lives and serve to strengthen resilience. They include our individual, social and emotional skills and attributes as well as positive social interactions, quality education, decent work, community cohesion, among others.

People who are exposed to unfavourable circumstances – including violence, poverty, inequality, disaster/pandemic/war, difficulties or failure at school – are at **higher risk** of experiencing mental health conditions. An example of this was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global crisis for mental health, fuelling short and long-term stresses and undermining the mental health of millions of people. Estimates put the rise in both anxiety and depressive disorders at more than 25% during the first year of the pandemic (WHO, 2022). Risks can manifest themselves at all stages of life, but those that occur during developmentally sensitive periods. **Figure 3** presents a schematic overview of some of the main individual, social and environmental risks presenting themselves over the life course.

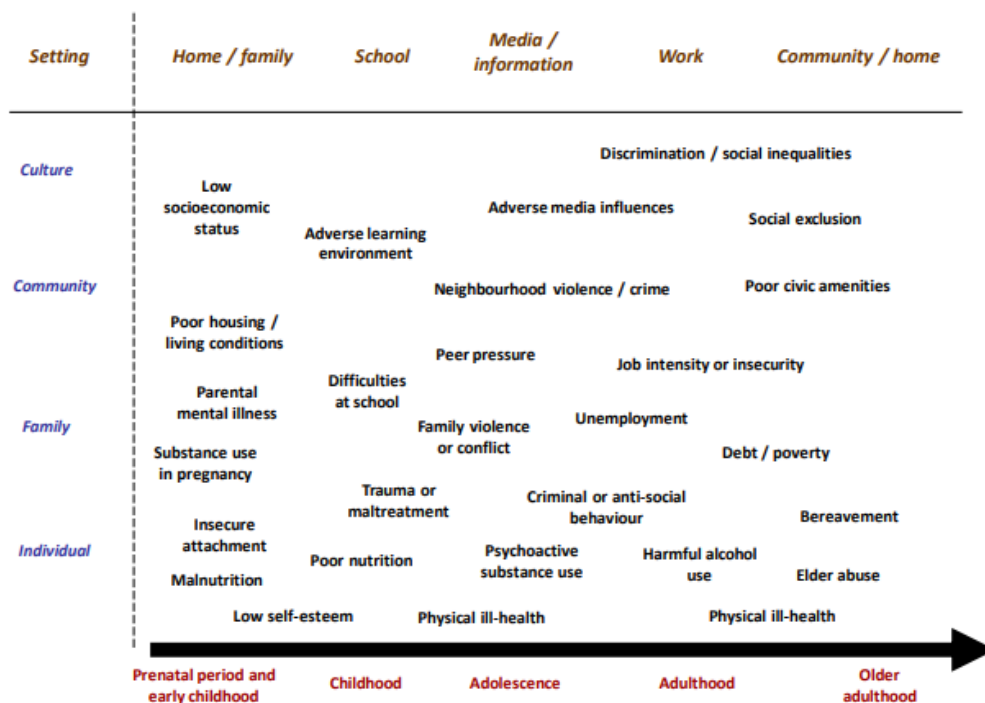


Figure 3. Schematic overview of risks to mental health over the life course (WHO, 2012)

Infancy and childhood are ages of both vulnerability and opportunity in mental health. These years are vital for developing life skills. 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 (Kieling et al., 2007).

Adolescence also constitutes a critical formative stage in life, marking as it does the passage from childhood to adulthood. 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. In addition, there are a number of other significant risks that have particular pertinence to this life stage. According to WHO, 14% of the world's adolescents (aged 10–19 years) lived with a mental disorder in 2019 (WHO, 2001). Between adolescence and early adulthood, entering university can be a risk factor for many higher education students. This topic will be explored in the next section.

In **adulthood**, individuals who have a secure and supportive period of adolescence and childhood behind them, and who are able to exercise emotional control and social aptitudes, are better equipped to deal with the set of choices and challenges that inevitably present themselves in adulthood. A determining factor in the well-being in adulthood concerns the balance and conciliation between professional and personal life and the management of anxiety and stress in their daily lives. Unemployment is a well-established risk factor for mental ill-health.

Older age is the single most important predictor for cognitive decline and dementia and these conditions have an important impact on mental health. Older adults are also particularly at risk of social isolation, as they withdraw from the labour market and become more susceptible to chronic disease. Social and family isolation and also bereavement are significant predictors of mental illness, such as depression, a very common disease in old age.

At all stages of life, promotion and prevention are required to enhance mental well-being and resilience, prevent the onset and impact of mental health conditions, and drive down the need for mental health care. There is increasing evidence that promotion and prevention can be cost-effective. Promotion and prevention interventions work by identifying the individual, social and structural determinants of mental health, and then intervening to reduce risks, build resilience and establish supportive environments for mental health. Interventions can be designed for individuals, specific groups or whole populations. Individuals, governments, care providers, nongovernmental organizations, academics, employers, civil society and other stakeholders all have a part to play. It will take the combined efforts of us all to transform mental health.

2.2. What Are Mental Health Problems?

It's Ok, to NOT be Okay!

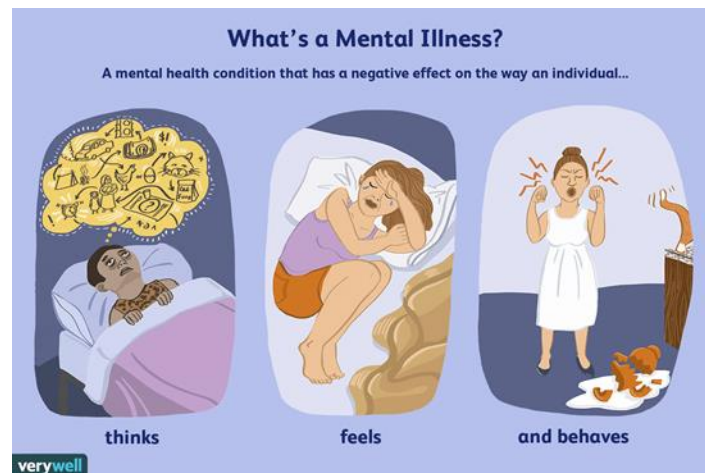
All forms of personal suffering can translate into a mental health problem in need of specialist assessment and treatment. Mental health problems are diverse and can include changes in thinking, mood and behavior. When these alterations acquire severe intensity or persist over time and are associated with suffering and/or dysfunction, they can be diagnosed as a **mental disorder**. Mental disorders include anxiety disorders (anxiety attacks, phobias), mood disorders (depression, bipolar disorder), obsessive-compulsive disorder, psychoses, schizophrenia, among others. Knowing the signs and symptoms, promoting the search for early help and a good and informed decision about treatment modalities is essential. More and more is known about mental disorders and treatment has evolved to be safer and more effective. In the next video "Let's Talk About Mental Health and Wellness" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWs-AswW398>



2.3. Signs and symptoms of mental disorders

What signs and symptoms should we be concerned about?

Signs and symptoms of mental illness can vary, depending on the disorder and its specificities, circumstances and other individual factors. Mental illness symptoms can affect thoughts, emotions and behaviors.



Examples of signs and symptoms include:

- Loss of interest or abandonment of socializing with the usual people, or apathy;
- Significant tiredness and low energy;
- Feeling sad or down, tense or nervous;
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows;
- Decreased ability to concentrate, memory, or logical thinking;
- Change in the usual way of functioning (at school, work or at home);
- Excessive negative emotions, such as anger, hostility or violent behaviour;
- Feeling disconnected from yourself or others;
- Detachment from reality (delusions), paranoia or hallucinations;
- Problems sleeping;
- Major changes in eating habits;
- Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt;
- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress;
- Problems with alcohol or drug use;
- Sex drive changes;
- Suicidal thinking.

See this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FB49AezFJxs> and know more about "How to spot the signs of mental illness".

2.4. Who can be affected by a mental illness?

Mental disorders are **universal**, not concentrated in any particular group. Mental disorders affect people in all regions, all countries and all societies. They are present at all stages of the lives of men and women, whether they are rich or poor, living in urban or rural areas (WHO, 2001). Throughout life, we can all be affected by mental health problems, of greater or lesser severity. Some stages of the life cycle, such as starting school, adolescence, entering university, leaving home with children, menopause and aging, or traumatic events, such as the loss of a close family member, divorce, unemployment, retirement and poverty can be the cause of mental health disorders. It is essential to pay attention and be vigilant to the signs and symptoms and ask for help if necessary, as well as to break the myths associated with mental health.



People are often afraid to talk about mental health because there are so many **myths about mental illness**. It is important to know the reality to combat discrimination against people with mental illness. People affected by mental health problems are often misunderstood, stigmatized, excluded or marginalized, due to false concepts that need to be clarified and demystified. Meet some of them in the following videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=021ZPGYeczU> e <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1DgYCi9IDI>

These videos show that myths associated with mental disorders lead to postponement of seeking help, thus postponing treatment and psychological recovery. These myths, along with the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness, make many people afraid to ask for help. Treatment should always be sought, since recovery is more effective the earlier the treatment. Even in the most serious diseases it is possible to control and reduce the symptoms and, through

treatment or rehabilitation measures. On the other hand, we can all help: not stigmatizing, supporting, rehabilitating and integrating people with mental illness.

2.5. What are the most common mental health problems?

According to the WHO (2001) **one in four people in the world** will be affected by **mental or neurological disorders** at some point in their lives. Around 450 million people currently suffer from such conditions, placing mental disorders among the leading causes of ill-health and disability worldwide. In the general population, the most frequent mental health problems, generally responsible for significant disabilities, are **depressive disorders** - severe depression is today the leading cause of disability worldwide -, those due to the use of psychoactive substances (dependence on alcohol and other drugs), schizophrenia, epilepsy, Alzheimer's disease (dementia), mental retardation, and disorders of childhood and adolescence. Additionally, **anxiety** and **continuous harmful stress** (distress) are also frequent. The management of specific disorders comprises intervention measures in the areas of prevention, treatment and rehabilitation (WHO, 2001).

In this link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_y97VF5UJcc you can access the video "Mental Health: In Our Own Words" and you can watch the testimony of 13 people, aged 18-25 talk about what it's like to live with a mental health problem, and what helps them cope.

