



MI Fact Sheet Series

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING MENTAL ILLNESS

The stress-vulnerability-coping model of mental illness

The onset and course of psychosis can be viewed in terms of stress-vulnerability. A variety of biological factors, personal history factors and environmental stress can influence a person's vulnerability to psychosis. Together, these can be viewed as risk factors (see below). Psychotic disorders appear to result from an intersection of high stress and high vulnerability. Similarly, many of these risk factors, if not present, can be seen as protective factors and can interact to protect against psychosis.

Factors which increase vulnerability to mental illness

Biological factors

- Family history
- A family history of psychosis and certain personality disorders are associated with an increased risk of vulnerability

to psychosis. For example, the risk of developing schizophrenia is one percent in the general population versus thirteen percent for the children who have one parent with schizophrenia and 35-45 percent for children who have both parents with schizophrenia

- Brain abnormalities
- Neuro-developmental problems.

Personal attributes

- Development of poor social skills
- Development of poor coping skills
- Communication problems.

Environmental/social stress

- Substance abuse
- Work/school problems
- Rejection by others
- Stressful relationships
- Low social supports
- Major life events.

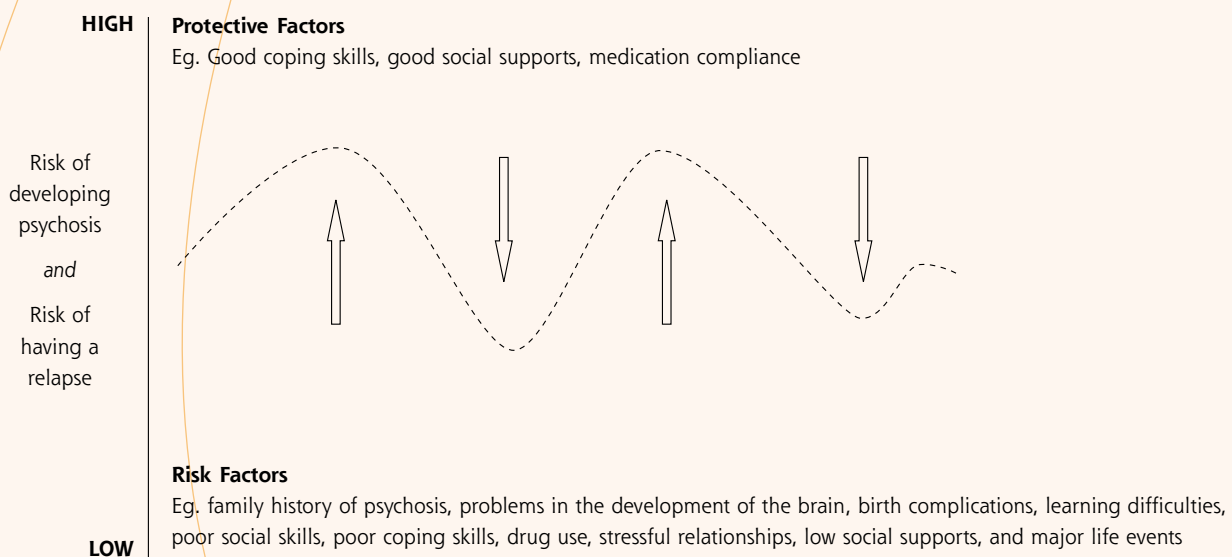
Factors that protect individuals from developing mental illness

- Good coping skills
- Good social supports
- Medication.

Other factors

- None of the risk factors are the whole cause of mental illness
- When there is a number of risk factors in the one person then that person is more vulnerable to mental illness
- These risk factors are particularly interesting in relation to recovery and the prevention of relapse – people and families can actively work to increase the protective factors and reduce the risk factors when a history of mental illness exists
- When someone has all possible risk factors there is still only a 40 percent chance that they will develop mental illness.

Stress-vulnerability-coping model



The stress-vulnerability-coping model of mental illness continued...

Useful references

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
www.mifellowship.org

Mental Health Services Website (Vic)
www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth

National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) (USA)
www.nami.org

Mental Health Council of Australia
www.mhca.com.au

SANE Australia
www.sane.org

Beyond Blue
www.beyondblue.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia fact sheets

Understanding psychosis

Family and carer supports and services

What can friends and family do to help a person experiencing mental illness?

Understanding schizophrenia

Understanding bipolar disorder



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