

## Unit 3: Factors Influencing Mental Well-Being

### *The Four Key Influences on Mental Well-Being*

Mental health is not determined by one single thing; it is shaped by many factors that interact with each other. These can be grouped into four categories:

1. Biological factors
2. Psychological factors
3. Social factors
4. Cultural factors

# I. Biological factors

Biological factors are physical and genetic influences on mental health. These can include:

- Genetics: A family history of mental illness (e.g., depression, schizophrenia) may increase vulnerability.
- Brain chemistry: Imbalances in neurotransmitters (like serotonin or dopamine) can affect mood and behaviour.
- Physical health conditions: Chronic illness, disabilities, poor sleep or malnutrition can lead to emotional distress.
- Hormonal changes: Particularly relevant in adolescence, pregnancy, postpartum and menopause.
- Substance use: Alcohol or drug use can alter brain chemistry and trigger mental health issues.

***Example: A person with diabetes and ongoing pain may also experience depression, even without other stressors.***

## 2. Psychological factors

These relate to a person's internal thought patterns, emotional resilience and coping strategies. Important elements include:

- Personality traits: Optimism, flexibility and emotional intelligence can protect mental health.
- Self-esteem: How a person sees themselves affects how they manage stress or setbacks.
- Coping mechanisms: Some people use healthy coping (e.g., talking, exercise), while others may turn to avoidance or substance use.
- Early life experiences: Neglect, abuse or unstable environments can deeply affect emotional development and future mental health.
- Attachment and trauma: Experiences of separation, violence or unsafe caregiving in childhood can shape emotional responses in adulthood.

***Example: Someone who has experienced trauma may find it hard to trust others or regulate their emotions, even in a safe environment.***

### 3. Social factors

Social factors are external conditions related to a person's environment, relationships and access to resources. These include:

- Family and peer relationships: Supportive relationships can boost well-being; conflict or isolation can worsen mental health.
- Social support: Feeling connected and supported in one's community is a strong protective factor.
- Economic stability: Unemployment, poverty and food insecurity can cause chronic stress.
- Housing and safety: Unstable or unsafe living conditions can worsen anxiety or trauma.
- Access to education and healthcare: Barriers here can reduce opportunities for recovery and empowerment.

***Example: A refugee who is unemployed and socially isolated may feel hopeless and worthless, even if they were highly educated in their home country.***

## 4. Cultural factors

Cultural influences include a person's belief systems, traditions and social norms, particularly in how mental health is understood, expressed and treated. They include:

- Cultural identity and belonging: A strong sense of cultural identity can increase self-esteem, while disconnection can cause confusion or grief.
- Stigma and taboos: In some cultures, mental illness is viewed as a sign of weakness, spiritual failure or something to be hidden.
- Language and communication barriers: Limited language skills can lead to isolation, frustration and feeling misunderstood.
- Discrimination and racism: Experiencing prejudice based on ethnicity, religion or immigration status can harm mental well-being.
- Traditional beliefs: Some cultures may interpret mental illness as a spiritual issue, needing traditional or religious intervention rather than psychological help.

***Example: A woman from a culture where depression is seen as “laziness” might avoid speaking about her symptoms, fearing judgment or shame.***



## How These Factors Interact

***These domains are deeply connected. For example, a person with a biological vulnerability (e.g., family history of anxiety) who also experiences trauma (psychological), lacks social support and comes from a culture where mental illness is taboo may be at higher risk for developing mental health issues and less likely to seek help.***

There are key principles we can have in mind to understand better the interaction:

- Cumulative Effects: Risk factors can build up, making individuals more vulnerable. For example, chronic stress due to poverty (social) may worsen existing anxiety (psychological).
- Buffering Effects: Protective factors in one area can balance or reduce the impact of difficulties in another. For example, a supportive community (social) can help someone cope with trauma (psychological).
- Triggers and Timing: Life events (e.g., migration, loss, illness) can act as triggers. The impact often depends on the timing, intensity and support systems available.
- Cultural Interpretation: A person's culture may shape how symptoms are expressed (e.g., physical complaints vs. emotional language), how help is sought and how family and community respond.



## Why This Matters

As a lay advisor or support worker:

- You may notice behavioural signs (e.g., isolation, anger) that are connected to underlying psychological or cultural stressors.
- It's important to look beyond the symptom and try to understand the context. What else is going on biologically, socially and culturally?
- You don't need to "diagnose"; but understanding the whole picture allows you to respond with empathy and guide someone to appropriate help.

**Practical Tip:** When working with migrants or refugees, ask yourself:

- What are the person's current strengths or supports?
- What stressors or past experiences may still be affecting them?
- What cultural beliefs might influence how they see or talk about their mental health?

# The Impact of Stigma and Discrimination on Mental Health

## What Is Mental Health Stigma?

- Stigma is a negative attitude or belief that leads people to fear, avoid or treat others unfairly because of a specific characteristic; like having a mental health condition.
- In the context of mental health, stigma can lead to shame, silence, discrimination and lack of access to care.

| Different Types of Stigma |                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Public Stigma             | Negative stereotypes in society:<br>“People with mental illness are dangerous”                                                                |
| Self Stigma               | When a person internalises these messages:<br>“I have depression, so I must be a failure.”                                                    |
| Institutional Stigma      | When systems or policies create barriers:<br>Lack of funding for mental health care or employers refusing to hire people with mental illness. |



# Why Stigma Matters

Stigma can lead to:

- Fear of speaking up or seeking help.
- Delays in diagnosis and treatment.
- Social exclusion or isolation.
- Lower self-esteem and hope.
- Worse mental and physical health outcomes.

Migrants and refugees can face cultural stigma in their communities (mental illness = shame or spiritual failure) or fear of being labeled as “unstable”. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with the mental health services and discrimination based on immigration status, ethnicity or religion are also among the barriers to seeking help and worsens suffering.

***Stigma is not just a personal belief; it's a social problem. It affects entire communities and prevents healing. But with awareness, empathy and education, lay advisors can play an important role in breaking the cycle.***