

Summary: The Social Determinants of Mental Health

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What Are Social Determinants of Mental Health?

Social determinants of health are societal problems affecting communities, families, and individuals that interfere with achieving optimal health and that increase risk for illnesses. Extensive research documents the social determinants that underpin diseases like diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and sexually transmitted infections. The same societal problems that comprise social determinants of health are also social determinants of mental health. That is, the determinants that increase risk for diabetes, for example, also increase risk for psychiatric disorders such as major depressive disorder, and for substance use disorders like alcohol use disorder and opioid use disorder. While the social determinants are seen as “the causes of the causes” (predating and predicting onset of illness), they are also drivers of poorer course and outcomes among those with existing conditions.

Before further defining the social determinants of mental health, three conceptual points are noteworthy. First, the social determinants are responsible for health inequities—defined as differences in health status that are the result of unjust, unfair, and avoidable social and economic policies—as well as mental health inequities. Thus, effectively working to address the social determinants of mental health will not only reduce risk and prevalence, but will lead to the reduction and ultimately the eradication of mental health inequities. Second, the social determinants perspective gives us a path for pursuing prevention. That is, in addition to the usual categorizations of prevention (primary, secondary, and tertiary, as well as the more recent framework of universal, selective, and indicated preventive interventions), the social determinants framework gives the mental health field an additional set of lenses for understanding how to engage in the prevention of mental illnesses and substance use disorders, and the promotion of mental health. Third, although it is difficult to prove, it is likely that the social determinants have a more potent effect on mental health and mental illnesses than they do on physical health and physical illnesses. This is partly because the mechanism is relatively easy to trace (e.g., from ongoing psychological stress that the social determinants cause to altered physiologic functioning). It also relates to the unfortunate fact that, because of stigma and discrimination against individuals with serious mental illnesses, those individuals tend to experience the very social outcomes (e.g., unemployment, housing instability, poor access to healthcare) that are the social determinants of course and outcomes of both mental and physical conditions.

Enumerating the Social Determinants of Mental Health

- ▶ In considering the social determinants of mental health more specifically, at least 16 different types of social determinants (although many are interconnected and interact closely with one another) can be identified, which can be placed into four broad categories. The first includes pervasive, highly detrimental U.S. societal problems that should be top priorities, from a health perspective, of policymaking and policy change:
 - » Adverse early life experiences (traumatic events) and childhood maltreatment
 - » Discrimination (based on race and ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ status, religion, immigrant status, disability, age, etc.) and the related social exclusion and social isolation

- » Exposure to conflict, violence, shootings, war, forced migration, immigration trauma, and related issues
- » Involvement and interaction with the criminal justice system
- ▶ Another category pertains to socioeconomic status and is intimately related to opportunities for accruing wealth (and thus for optimizing health):
 - » Low educational attainment, poor quality of education, and educational inequalities
 - » Unemployment, under-employment, and job insecurity
 - » Poverty, income inequality, and wealth inequality
 - » Area-level poverty and concentrated neighborhood poverty
- ▶ Yet another category relates to basic needs in terms of housing, food, transportation, and health care:
 - » Homelessness, poor housing quality, and housing instability
 - » Food insecurity and poor dietary quality
 - » Poor or unequal access to transportation
 - » Being uninsured, being under-insured, loss of insurance, and poor access to health care
- ▶ The final category concerns the immediate and global physical environment:
 - » Adverse features of the built environment (e.g., the transportation infrastructure, the energy infrastructure, building design, city planning, extent of access to natural environments and green space)
 - » Neighborhood disorder, disarray, and disconnection
 - » Exposure to pollution (air, water, and soil pollution)
 - » Exposure to the impacts of global climate change

The social determinants underpin physical health and mental health conditions through diverse mechanisms. For example, at the individual level, struggling with social needs (such as food insecurity) leads to chronic psychological stress, which can impact upon physiological stress response systems. They are also associated with reduced options (which are sometimes naively referred to as “poor choices”); food insecurity is associated with a reliance on an energy-dense, micronutrient-deficient diet (as limited food dollars are used to purchase the most calories in the most efficient and cost-effective way). In addition to their direct effects, social determinants likely interact with genetic constitution in complex ways, including gene-by-environment interactions and epigenetics.

Understanding the Underpinnings of the Social Determinants of Mental Health

Each of the 16 types of social determinants can have a negative impact on health, can increase risk for illnesses, and can worsen outcomes among those with existing illnesses; each can also make it harder to attain optimal mental health, which is more than just the absence of mental illness. The social determinants of mental health increase risk for and prevalence of mental illnesses and substance use disorders, and among those living with a behavioral health disorder, they complicate the course and worsen outcomes. As noted, the social determinants of mental health are interconnected—individuals, families, or communities are often affected by multiple social determinants at the same time. That co-occurrence suggests common underlying factors that, if addressed at a deeper level, would likely help to address many social determinants rather than one at a time. Based on one conceptualization (Compton & Shim, 2015), the common, unifying foundation setting the stage for each of the social determinants is unfair and unjust distribution of opportunity. Opportunity pertains to power, empowerment, voice, access to resources, and advantages. At an even deeper level, two

fundamental elements consistently drive the unfair and unjust distribution of opportunity: public policies (those societal conventions that are codified, such as laws, ordinances, rules, regulations, and court decisions), and social norms (those societal conventions that are imprinted upon minds rather than being printed on paper: the attitudes, biases, and opinions that groups of people have toward other groups of people). Addressing the social determinants of mental health ultimately requires changing public policies and changing social norms. Importantly, public policies shape social norms, and social norms shape public policies. As such, although both must be addressed for us to achieve most robust results, changing one is likely to have some impact on the other.

Reference:

Compton MT and Shim RS, Ed. *The Social Determinants of Mental Health*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing; 2019. ISBN-13: 978-1-58562-477-5.