# Does social determinants influence mental health?

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## Abstract

In this article, the social determinants affecting mental health have been highlighted and discussed. The article aims to enlighten people about mental illness and how they can prevent mental issues prevailing in society. An example is also given to ensure an understanding for the reader. Culture has a strong influence on mental health, and people need to be educated and rational to avoid the factors causing people to suffer from illness. The living standard and occupation allow people to stay happy in society, whereas the failure to achieve the desired lifestyle and career leads to depression and mental disorder. This article also recommends a way forward to prevent mental issues; focusing on educating society to support and help each other in the time of trouble.

## Introduction

Mental health encompasses physical, social, psychological, and emotional well-being. It is a state of being mentally fit where individuals are aware of their capabilities and know – how to use them productively for their own benefits and society at large. Simply put, it determines how individuals make decisions and handle tough situations.

Mental health is influenced by genetic, psychological, economic, spiritual, cultural, and social factors (Jain at el., 2015) – but the majority aspects of mental health are influenced by social factors. A lot of anecdotal evidence is present to validate the notion that social factors play a central role in shaping an individual's mental health. These factors include age, sex, occupation, education, race, ethnicity, etc.

This article will shed light on the social determinants of mental health and how these factors affect mental health of people in society. (Compton & Shim, 2015).

**Social determinants of mental health**

Social determinants of health encompass societal variables that influence mental health such as economic and financial position, standard of living, education, occupation, income, culture, and other societal norms. Mental health outcomes depend on how a person grows during early years of his life, how much education the person has grasped during his academic experience, how consistent he is at a job or how well he performs financially, his food security, financial status of his family, and his cultural values and beliefs that he grew up with.

Additionally, the turn of the millennium has added to the social determinants of mental health. A person's introduction to technology and mass media, norms and attitude of people living in the society, living condition like public safety or pollution, and healthcare are related to the mental health of a person. Studies has shown that ninety percent of our mental health issues arrive from our physical environment and social life (Fleitlich & Goodman, 2001). Out of this 90%, the habits and behavior of a person contribute a high share of about 40 percent effect on mental illness. These factors include poor eating habits, excessive eating, lack of sleep, drug abuse, smoking, high intake of salt, eating processed food, to name a few. Campton and Shim shows that less than 30 percent of the mental health relates to the genes, whereas remaining mental health is affected by the environment and behavior of others (Campton & Shim, 2015). The statistics speak for themselves and explains the importance of having insights in social determinants of mental health.

With the technological advancement and easy availability of information, we are getting better aware of the social determinants that lead to the bad mental health. Many countries have adopted various programs to educate the people and eliminate the factors causing mental health (Algeria et al., 2003).

**Understanding social determinants**

By looking around and focusing on people's health, everyone can understand the factors behind the worst mental condition. The example referred to is from a documentary named "Dirty John" in which the character of John Meehan is highlighted who married many women and left them at some stage of his life (Alegria et al., 2003). The glimpses of his life proved that he was a woman

abuser. The core purpose of Meehan's life was to attract women with his good looks and leave them after robbing them of their money. His personality was so threatening that his wives wanted to leave him but could not due to the threat of getting killed or hurt. John had coercive control in his relationship (Karlamangla, 2017). He used emotional abuse to gain power over the spouses and tried to isolate them from their family. The documentary conveyed that how mental illness poses a serious threat to society, in this case, the women whom he cheated underwent serious mental and emotional problems, and spirals into other ills as well.

When the documentary was launched, many researchers came forward to identify the reasons behind his personality. The researches soon recognized that he belonged to *a low-income family*, having family issues and he was grown seeing his father deceit others. *His terrible childhood affected his mental health*. It shows how the societal upbringing, household patterns, and adverse early life experiences affect the mental health of a child (Sereder, L. 2015).

Society plays a huge role in affecting the mental condition. It can worsen mental health and make it hard to recover. The worst thing is that a social stigma attached to people suffering from mental health particularly in low-income neighborhood or developing countries. The society that comprises families, friends, and coworkers with a bad attitude can negatively affect life.

**Cultural Opinions and Biases**

Established mores and folkways in a society also influence mental health of people. The cultural biases, taboos, and low values also set the stage for poor mental health. Every culture has different control over how an individual believes, acts, and responds to a situation – and questioning the established traditions – albeit irrational – is considered as crime in many societies.

A major indicator of mental illness due to societal norms is suicide. Suicide was considered a highly personal until the nineteenth century. Many researchers in the last two centuries have studied the underlying causes of suicide – and all of them are unanimous in terming social factors force a person to commit suicide. If a society forces a person to perform or achieve better – often more than his capabilities, and he is forced to leave the world due to the stigma of failure and depression.

Every culture has a different interpretation of mental health and the factors associated with mental illness. For instance, culture of many developing countries in Asia forces people to avoid discussing mental health problems, and it further worsens the mental condition. No wonder, visiting a psychiatrist or a psychologist is considered as a symbol of weakness in countries like India (Zutshi, 2020).

Furthermore, research have also proved that mental health is greatly affected by how society treats its subjects. In many societies, modernized women are seen as a disgrace and are alienated and socially boycotted – leading to high ratio of stress, depression, and other mental health issues among women of young age.

Similarly, "*racism in any form in any society*" has also attributed to discrimination and a sense of inferiority – and accentuates mental health issues among victims. To quote an example from the US, "the health survey found out that 28 percent of Latinos, 43 percent of African Americans, and five percent of white people stated that they were mistreated in the society because of their background" (Andarde, 2017). Inadequate health facilities, poor education, and low income make Latinos and African Americans as more mentally disturbed and unstable compared to fellow whites.

**Education effect on mental health**

There is enough anecdotal evidence to prove that people who are well-educated face less stress in life and are less likely to suffer from mental illness. Educated people survive better in society and are likely to be employed with high pay rather than unemployed – where the latter face depression and anxiety related issues (Dahmann, 2019). Even though education minimizes the potential mental health related issues, poor school and examination system play an essential role in negatively affecting the mental health of students. The highly competitive examination system and the social taboo attached with low grades, force, and stress young students to study more than their cognitive abilities allow to achieve good grades.

Here, families also pay a negative role in improving the mental well-being of a young student. Parents put undue pressure on their child to compete with other students and when he/she fails to

do that, he/she may suffer from inferiority that later leads to depression and other mental disorders (Tew et al,. 2012).

**Influence of Employment on Mental Health**

Employment and social status are important determinants of mental health. If a person fails to land a respected job or cannot bear expenditure of his/her family, it plunges him/her into mental health related issues. Also, having non-desired occupation negatively impact the mind of an individual. A recent survey showed that around 14.2 percent of young people doing jobs in non-desired occupation face mental issues, while it is 11.6 percent for old age, and the highest 17.2 percent for middle-aged people (Canivet at el., 2017).

Also, employment status effects mental state of males more than females. Studies also reveal that a person with higher education doing an ordinary job – underemployed – experience depression and poor mental health (Llena-Nozal et al., 2004).

**Social Support and Mental Health**

Social support is closely linked with mental health. Mental issues are found more common among people with disabilities, gay or lesbian, raped women, infertile couples, jobless individuals etc. as these people get the least support from society. They interact with less people and face discouraging or often hatred remarks that significantly affect their mental health.

On the flip side, the people having increased social support in various aspects of life enjoy better mental health. Feelings of attachment and encouragement greatly influences the mental health of individuals. Social support is the greatest population-based factor for improving mental well-being of people – particularly the lowest segment of society and people with disabilities. Social support reduces anxiety, depression, drug abuse, and criminal propensities – and leads to reduced psychological issues.

Throughout the world, the seminars are organized in educational institutions and training centers to teach students how to support and motivate each other to get rid of societal ills like depression,

anxiety, isolation, and suicide – that are direct reverberations of poor mental health. (Harandi, 2017).

**Conclusion and recommendation**

It can be argued that the mental health issues have become a global concern, with various social factors playing an active role in affecting the mental condition of individuals. The list of factors discussed above educates us on how to help people suffering from poor mental health. Mental health plays a vital role in all stages of life – from infancy to teenage to old age, and it is imperative to keep good mental condition to make rational choices. The promotion of a healthy lifestyle, quality education, equal employment opportunities, and social support is indispensable to ensure sound mental health. Putting it differently, optimizing public policies and altering the established antiquated mores and folkways in society will improve mental well-being of people.

The government should spearhead the awareness campaigns through seminars and workshops to prevent mental disorders. Society needs to be educated to accept people from any background, race, caste, culture, and who have different values. Parents should talk to their children and understand the problem they are facing in society. We should support each other in the community to make sure everyone stays happy and mentally fit. It is herculean task to eliminate mental health issues from society, but if we set our priorities right and use resources equitably, we can achieve our goal of a mentally healthy and sound society.

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