



Recognising possible triggers of mental illness onset or relapse: The stress-vulnerability-coping model of mental illness

The stress-vulnerability-coping model of mental illness can help people with a mental illness, and their carers, to recognise important factors that influence the likelihood of mental illness recovery or relapse. Sometimes, it may also be useful in understanding how mental illnesses arise in the first place.

Whilst this model was originally devised to understand the onset and course of schizophrenia, it is now used to understand all major psychiatric disorders, including depression, bi-polar disorder, and psychosis.

According to the stress-vulnerability-coping model of mental illness, when a person is vulnerable to a mental illness, there are factors that make it more likely that mental illness symptoms will emerge (risk factors),

and factors that make it less likely that symptoms will emerge (protective factors).

Both risk and protective factors may include aspects of a person's biology, personal attributes, and/or environment. Importantly, it is the interaction of these risk and protective factors that influence the likelihood of symptoms occurring in a vulnerable person (see the diagram below).

Risk Factors

Biology

- A family history of mental illness (e.g. a family history of psychosis and certain personality disorders are associated with an increased vulnerability to psychosis)

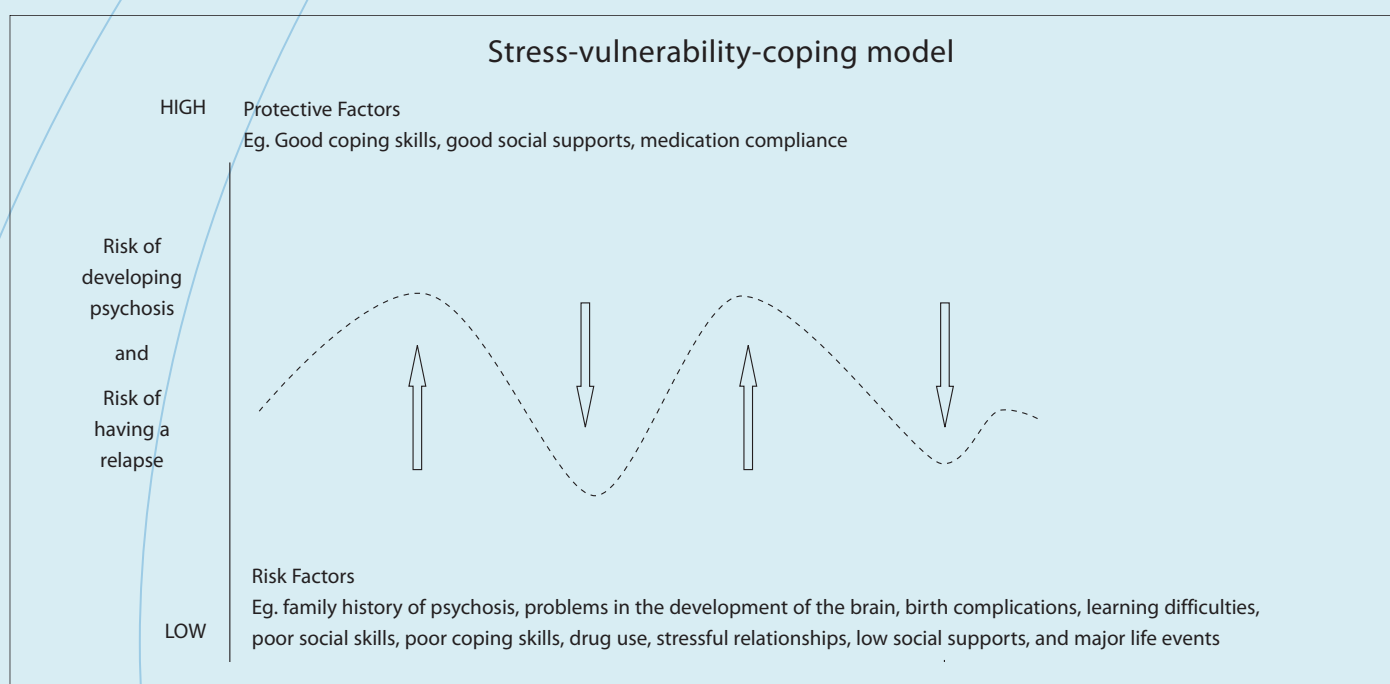
- Brain abnormalities
- Neuro-developmental problems
- Other diseases (e.g. cancer)

Personal attributes

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

Environment

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



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

More about risk factors...

- None of the risk factors are the whole cause of mental illness
- When there are a number of risk factors in the one person then that person is more vulnerable to mental illness
- When someone has all possible risk factors there is still only a 40 percent chance that they will develop mental illness.

Protective factors

When the following factors are present, a person is not only protected from suffering a relapse or their mental illness but they can be protected from developing an illness in the first place. These factors include:

- Good physical health
- No family history of mental illness
- Good coping skills
- Good communication skills
- Adequate social support
- Medication
- Talk Therapy (where appropriate)

Useful references

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
www.mifa.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



Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
08 8221 5072 www.mifa.org.au
Mental Illness Fellowship of Sth Australia Inc
08 8221 5160 www.mifsa.org.au



Mental Health Carers NT
08 8948 1051
www.mentalhealthcarersnt.org
Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc
02 9879 2600 www.sfnsw.org.au

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
03 8486 4200 www.mifellowship.org
Mental Illness Fellowship Nth Qld Inc
07 4725 3664 www.mifnq.org.au
ARAFMI (Tas) Inc
03 6331 4486

Schizophrenia Fellowship of Qld Inc
07 3358 4424 www.sfq.org.au
Mental Illness Fellowship of WA Inc
08 9228 0200 www.mifwa.org.au
Mental Illness Fellowship of the ACT Inc
02 6205 2021 www.mifact.org.au