

Where Does Mental Illness Come From? Vulnerability to Mental Illness Equals Stress, Risk and Protective Factors Creating the Perfect Storm

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

We don't really know for sure how most forms of mental illness get started. But, much like research on addiction, most professionals conducting research, making observations, and theorizing on this broad subject, believe that a variety of biological, psychological, and social factors come together to create a vulnerability to mental illness. A certain level of unmanaged stress seems to be highly influential in triggering symptoms of mental illness that are manifested to such a degree that a diagnosis would be warranted. These biological, psychological, and social factors seem to set the stage as "vulnerabilities", but other "protective" factors are also usually present. The impact of any one factor can vary, especially over time and circumstance.

Some of the vulnerabilities to developing mental illness include genetic predispositions, certain parenting styles, cultural factors, and traumatic/stressful events. Many people who come from a family of origin with other mentally ill family members, may want to believe that genetics and/or neurochemistry are the source(s) of their mental illness.

Certainly genetic predisposition and neurochemistry are believed to contribute to the vulnerability to develop some forms of mental illness. However, one vulnerability factor (i.e., genetics or neurochemical differences) alone is generally not sufficient to produce a particular type of mental illness (or mental illness in general). Genetic and biochemical factors alone do not completely explain how someone acquires a mental illness. Otherwise, every person who has genetic predisposition and certain neurochemical characteristics would display enough behavioral, psychological, cognitive and other symptoms to warrant certain mental health diagnoses. Although these "vulnerability" factors may figure heavily in the development and course of mental illness diagnoses, they are not exclusive determinants. Psychological, social, and cultural protective and vulnerabilities are also at work.

Some vulnerability is not amenable to correction or change. Some vulnerabilities or risk factors are able to be reduced by medication, counseling, behavioral or other changes. Neurochemical intervention (e.g. medication) for mental illness is a multibillion dollar industry and very much a part of our dominant culture. Unmanaged stress, which could be a biochemical, social, psychological, and/or cultural factor, is amenable to psychological and behavioral changes. There are many vulnerabilities or risk factors that can be remediated or reduced to reduce the probability that a vulnerable person would develop mental illness in the first place, or if s/he did develop a mental illness that the severity, impact, and durability of that illness would be reduced.

Personal abilities such as appropriate feelings management and expression, optimism in the face of adversity, and openness to ask for and receive assistance, can serve as protective factors. Having a social support system that loves and accepts you can be a

major protective factor. Appropriate nutrition, exercise, and other positive self-care behaviors can serve as protective factors.

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