

WHEN IT COMES TO MENTAL HEALTH, OUR CIRCUMSTANCES MATTER

Our genes alone don't decide if we'll have problems with our mental health. Biology plays a part, as does the health care we receive. But the circumstances we live in play an even bigger role in our mental health. These circumstances include the social and economic conditions of our everyday lives. The technical term for these is **“the social determinants of mental health.”**¹

It might be surprising, but our circumstances influence our health even more than health care does. Even more than genes do.

Much more in fact.



by **biology** and **genetics**



of health is determined by **physical environments**



of health is determined by **clinical health care**



of health is determined by **social and economic conditions**

So, what are these social and economic circumstances that can affect our mental health – either by protecting it or putting it at risk?

Basically, these are our living conditions. It's about our **income**, our **housing** and **employment** situations, and our **social connections**. It's also about how much **violence**, **racism** and **discrimination** we face. Decades of extensive research have concluded that these conditions influence mental health and substance use health.

¹WHO 2014; Keleher, H & Armstrong, R 2005, Evidence-based mental health promotion resource, Report for the Department of Human Services and VicHealth, Melbourne. CMA (2013). Health Equity and the Social Determinants of Health: A Role for the Medical Profession. <https://cma.ca/sites/default/files/2018-11/PD13-03-e.pdf> ²Whitman, A., De Lew, N. Chappel, A., Aysola, V., Zuckerman, R. Sommers, B. (2022) Addressing Social Determinants of Health: Examples of Successful Evidence-Based Strategies and Current Federal Efforts. retrieved from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/e2b650cd64cf84aae8ff0fae7474af82/SDOH-Evidence-Review.pdf>



When our social and economic conditions are good, we are much more likely to have **good mental health**. Here are the “prerequisites” for good mental health:



Enough **money**



A **safe and affordable** place to live



Employment and educational opportunities.



Social supports and connections with other people and feeling like we genuinely **belong**.



Living free from violence and discrimination.

It boils down to this: we simply have a better chance of **being well** when our **basic human needs** are met.

SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

While having good access to education, employment opportunities, stable housing, and social support networks can all buffer us against mental health and substance use health problems, social inequalities are at the top of the list of what puts our mental health at risk.

Poverty

Poverty and **economic inequality** can be devastating for our mental health.

If you live in poverty, you are more likely to experience ongoing stress related to your everyday living circumstances. If you don't have housing, or enough food, your mental health will be at risk. It is no wonder that rates of depression are higher among people with low incomes.^{3,4}

At the same time, having a mental illness **reduces income** and **employment opportunities**, which makes poverty even more likely. It is a vicious cycle.

There are drastic income inequalities in our society. Many people face social and economic inequality, including **women, people with disabilities** and **racialized people**.

Discrimination

Discrimination affects many groups in Canada, and it can be extremely harmful to mental health. People may be targets of discrimination based on **sex, race, colour, or ethnic origin**, on **language** or other features. Discrimination can also be based on **sexual orientation, gender, disability**, and on having a **mental illness** or **substance use disorder**.

³WHO commission on SDOH ⁴Matthew Fisher and Fran Baum, “The Social Determinants of Mental Health: Implication for Research and Health Promotion,” Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry (2010): 2.





Black, Indigenous people and other racialized people face extreme pressures that can negatively affect their mental health.⁵ Racism is built right into our society through **historical** and **continued colonial** and **racist** policies. It causes **trauma** and **distress** for people who are racialized. And because racism creates barriers to education and employment, people from racialized communities often have low incomes, which adds further stresses.



People who identify as 2-spirit, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex or asexual (2SLGBTQIA+) and non-binary struggle disproportionately with their mental health.⁶ They are at a higher risk for **depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety,** and **problematic substance use** compared to other people.⁷ **Transgender** and **gender-diverse youth**, in particular, are at greater risk of mental health problems because they may face family and social rejection, as well as homelessness and violence.

INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES:

Each of us belongs to many social groups. The risks to our mental health are even greater if we face multiple forms of **injustice** or **inequality** all at once.

For example, being **racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+** and living in a **rural area** makes experiencing mental health concerns more likely. Having many inequalities simply compounds one's risk of anxiety and depression.⁷

ALL OF THIS CAN CHANGE

The very good news is that the conditions of our everyday lives are not set in stone. While social inequality may seem fixed in place, we can dislodge and correct it. We can **end racism, colonialism,** and **discrimination,** as well as **homelessness** and **poverty.** It will take action like **changing laws and policies,** as well as **education** and **raising awareness.** We need to step up as a society and make these changes. To learn more and to take action, visit actformentalhealth.ca.

⁵Alegría M, NeMoyer A, Falgàs Bagué I, Wang Y, Alvarez K. Social Determinants of Mental Health: Where We Are and Where We Need to Go. *Curr Psychiatry Rep.* 2018 Sep 17;20(11):95. doi: 10.1007/s11920-018-0969-9. PMID: 30221308; PMCID: PMC6181118. ⁶MHRC Poll 16 ⁷In Alegría et al: Khan et al: Multifactorial discrimination

