Prevention—Risk and Protective Factors

As young people grow up there are factors that can contribute to good or poor outcomes. These factors are frequently referred to as Risk and Protective factors. Risk factors can contribute to poor outcomes and protective factors protect against poor outcomes.

The presence or absence and various combinations of protective and risk factors contribute to the mental health of youth. Identifying protective and risk factors in youth may guide the prevention and intervention strategies to pursue with them. Protective and risk factors may also influence the course mental health disorders might take if present.

A protective factor can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes.”

A risk factor can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precedes and is associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes.”

**PROTECTIVE FACTOR EXAMPLES**

- Positive attitudes, values or beliefs.
- Conflict resolution skills.
- Good mental, physical, spiritual and emotional health.
- Positive self-esteem.
- Success at school.
- Good parenting skills.
- Parental
- Strong social supports

1 https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-mental-health/risk-and-protective-factors-youth
RISK FACTOR EXAMPLES

- Negative attitudes, values or beliefs.
- Low self-esteem.
- Drug, alcohol or solvent abuse.
- Poverty.
- Children of parents in conflict with the law.
- Homelessness.
- Presence of neighborhood crime.
- Early and repeated anti-social behavior.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Environmental factors are related to a person’s surroundings and the influences he or she lives with. Environmental factors that can contribute to someone’s risk for drug abuse and addiction include:

- **Home and family.** The home environment has an important impact on a person’s risk for drug abuse and addiction. Teens are at greater risk if they live in chaotic homes where there is little parental or adult supervision. This type of home environment can be the result of parents or older family members who suffer from a mental disorder, engage in criminal behavior, or abuse drugs or alcohol. On the other hand, a nurturing home environment, as well as clear rules of conduct at home, can be protective factors that reduce the potential for drug abuse.

- **Availability of drugs.** Research has clearly shown that the availability of drugs in a person’s home, school, or community is one of the key risk factors for a person developing drug problems. For example, the abuse of prescription drugs, which has been on the rise for the last several years, is occurring at the same time as a sharp rise in medical prescriptions. This increased availability, combined with a lack of understanding about the dangers of misusing prescription drugs, affects the risk of addiction.

- **Social and other stressors.** Stress, and particularly early exposure to stress, is linked to early drug use and later drug problems. For example, stressors such as physical or sexual abuse, or witnessing violence, may contribute to someone’s risk for addiction. In addition, poverty is often linked to stress, and to chaotic lifestyles, which may increase the risk for drug abuse. In contrast, involvement in social networks that are supportive, and where disapproval of drug use is the

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norm, can protect against drug use. These groups might be sports teams, religious groups, or community groups.

- **Peer influence.** Associating with peers who engage in risky behaviors and who use drugs is another key risk factor, especially for teens. Choosing friends who do not use drugs can protect a person from drug abuse and addiction.

- **School performance.** Academic failure may be a sign that a teen is currently abusing drugs and is in need of intervention, or it may be a risk factor for later drug abuse. On the other hand, teens who are successful in school, have positive self-esteem, and develop close bonds with adults outside their families (such as teachers) are less likely to abuse drugs.

For more information on Prevention services, please check here: [https://oasas.ny.gov/prevention](https://oasas.ny.gov/prevention)