

Article 5: Human Development and Mental Illness

Mental illness can affect a person's body, mind, and social environment throughout their whole life. Thus, it can also shape how individuals develop and grow over time (Wade & Halligan, 2017).

Following that lead, **mental illness** has been shown to cause disruptions in **human development** across different life stages, including **cognitive dysfunctions** (Gillespie et al., 2024; Grasset et al., 2024; Kraaijenvanger et al., 2020; Schumacher et al., 2024), **emotional dysregulation** (Aslan et al., 2024; Igra et al., 2023; Yalvaç & Gaynor, 2021), and **social adaptation challenges** (Prizeman et al., 2023; Copeland et al., 2021).

Mental Illness and Cognitive Dysfunctions

Research has found that mental illness can often lead to (or worsen) cognitive dysfunctions such as short attention span, memory loss, lack of self-awareness, misreading of social cues, and difficulties to process information, among other issues (Gillespie et al., 2024; Grasset et al., 2024; Kraaijenvanger et al., 2020; Schumacher et al., 2024).

For instance, a study looked at the relationship between cognitive characteristics and psychiatric illnesses with a focus on cognitive training. Thus, the researchers conducted a systematic review of fifteen studies from 2017 to 2023, featuring a total of 1,075 participants experiencing psychiatric symptoms. Findings indicated that certain cognitive functions—like verbal memory and visual attention—were linked to various symptoms across depression, anxiety, and psychosis (Gillespie et al., 2024). This finding supports the notion that cognitive dysfunctions are oftentimes not attributed to one but several mental disorders.

Another study looked at the relationship between early life adversities and developmental alterations in the brain. For this purpose, researchers conducted a meta-analysis of articles from 2001 to 2019. Furthermore, they examined 68 relevant studies containing 3,685 unique participants. Findings showed that adverse childhood experiences—such as abuse or neglect—significantly disrupted developmental processes. Particularly, such adversities led to changes in areas of the brain that help regulate coping mechanisms and cognitive developmental processes. Researchers concluded that early life adversities alter neurocognitive systems that could potentially increase vulnerability to mental health problems in the future (Kraaijenvanger et al., 2020).

On that same note, a meta-analysis study looked at the link between depression and cognitive dysfunctions in children and adolescents. 17 studies were examined featuring a total of 13,567 participants between 10 and 17 years old. Findings revealed that individuals with depression underperformed their non-depression peers on tests of working and long-term memory, attention, executive function and language (Schumacher et al., 2024). Similarly, A longitudinal study with over 3,000 U.S. adults (starting at age 30) found that those with persistent depressive symptoms over 25 years performed worse on memory, processing speed, and executive tests in midlife. Moreover, impact was particularly strong among participants of color (Grasset et al., 2024).

Mental Illness and Emotional Dysregulation

Emotional regulation is the ability to properly manage and respond to emotional experiences in a healthy manner. Furthermore, mental illnesses such as depression, panic disorder, and anxiety are often linked difficulties with emotional regulation throughout different life stages (Aslan et al., 2024; Igra et al., 2023; Yalvaç & Gaynor, 2021). Thus, the studies cited below provide further insight on this phenomenon.

A study looking at the association between emotional regulation and psychotic disorders examined difficulties experienced by 543 young adults aged 18 to 29. Thus, researchers assessed standard deviations from the mean distribution of participants in order to gain insights. The study found that participants experienced emotional regulation difficulties across multiple mental health conditions, with depression, panic disorder, social anxiety, and generalized anxiety showing moderate to large difficulties. Moreover, individuals experiencing ADHD and intermittent explosive disorder showed particularly high emotional dysregulation (Aslan et al., 2024).

Other studies have shown that U.S. adults experiencing mental disorders may rely more on negative strategies like rumination (the process of repeatedly focusing on negative thoughts, often replaying past events or dwelling on potential future problems), and expressive suppression (the action of voluntarily repressing emotions and detracting from emotional displays) resulting in maladaptive behaviors and psychological distress. Furthermore, researchers discussed potential repercussions of emotional dysregulation and negative appraisals of emotion on mental illness and overall wellbeing (Igra et al., 2023; Yalvaç & Gaynor, 2021).

Mental Illness and Social Adaptation challenges

Mental illness can negatively impact social development in individuals, often leading to social isolation, challenges in developing or maintaining social relationships, and limitations in community engagement opportunities.

For instance, a study looked at subjective experiences linked to public and internalized stigma, and their effects on social loneliness, relationship quality, and social isolation in young adults dealing with depression. Thus, the researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 young adults aged 17 to 25, who reported high symptoms of depression (Mood and Feelings Questionnaire (MFQ) score > 27), or who had been previously diagnosed by a medical professional. Thematic analysis was implemented to analyze the data (Prizeman et al., 2023).

According to the results, participants indicated that both public and internalized stigma linked to mental illness disrupted their social relationships, and elicited loneliness, isolation, and depressive symptoms. They also stated that lack of understanding from peers reduced the quality and quantity of their relationships, social bonds, and interactions. Furthermore, stigma reduced participants' self-esteem and confidence. Hence, the study concluded that these insights should be taken into account for the development of targeted interventions in order to help individuals dealing with mental disorders (Prizeman et al., 2023).

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Mental health problems in childhood and adolescence may also continue into adulthood. In order to better understand this phenomenon, a study looked at the effects of childhood and adolescent depression on adulthood. Hence, researchers recruited 1,420 participants:

Who were assessed with the structured Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment interview up to 8 times in childhood (ages 9 to 16; 6,674 observations; 1993 to 2000), and respectively screened for DSM-based depressive disorders associated with psychiatric and childhood adversities. Henceforth, those participants were followed up 4 times in adulthood (ages 19, 21, 25, and 30; 4,556 observations of 1,336 participants; 1999 to 2015) with the structured Young Adult Psychiatric Assessment Interview for psychiatric outcomes and functional outcomes.” (Copeland et al., 2021. p.1)

Results showed the following key findings:

- 7.7% of participants met criteria for a depressive disorder in childhood/adolescence.
- Childhood and adolescent depression were associated with higher levels of adult anxiety and illicit drug disorders.
- Childhood and adolescent depression were also associated with worse health, criminal, and social functioning.
- These associations persisted when childhood psychiatric adversities were accounted for.
- Timing of depression mattered: Individuals with adolescent-onset (age 12 -16) depression had worse outcomes than those with child-onset (ages 9 - 11).
- Average depressive symptoms throughout childhood and adolescence were associated with more adverse outcomes in adulthood.

In spite of the detrimental effects observed, findings revealed that access to mental health services were protective against adult diagnostic outcomes. Therefore, researchers concluded that use of specialized services may help minimize such effects (Copeland et al., 2021).

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