

# Risk and Protective Factors

Assessing the risk and protective factors that contribute to substance use disorders helps practitioners select appropriate interventions.

Many factors influence a person's chance of developing a mental and/or substance use disorder. Effective prevention focuses on reducing those risk factors, and strengthening protective factors, that are most closely related to the problem being addressed. Applying the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF) helps prevention professionals identify factors having the greatest impact on their target population.

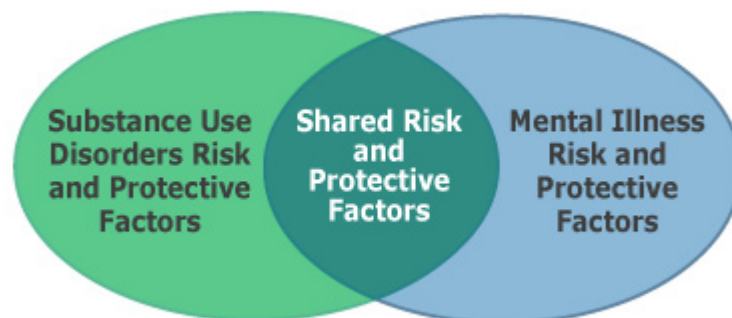
**Risk factors** are characteristics at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precede and are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes.

**Protective factors** are characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes or that reduce a risk factor's impact. Protective factors may be seen as positive countering events.

Some risk and protective factors are fixed: they don't change over time. Other risk and protective factors are considered variable and can change over time. **Variable risk factors** include income level, peer group, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and employment status.

**Individual-level risk factors** may include a person's genetic predisposition to addiction or exposure to alcohol prenatally.

**Individual-level protective factors** might include positive self-image, self-control, or social competence.



## Key Features of Risk and Protective Factors

Prevention professionals should consider these key features of risk and protective factors when designing and evaluating prevention interventions. Then, prioritize the risk and protective factors that most impact your community.

## Risk and Protective Factors Exist in Multiple Contexts

All people have biological and psychological characteristics that make them vulnerable to, or resilient in the face of, potential behavioral health issues. Because people have relationships within their communities and larger society, each person's biological and psychological characteristics exist in multiple contexts. A variety of risk and protective factors operate within each of these contexts. These factors also influence one another.

Targeting only one context when addressing a person's risk or protective factors is unlikely to be successful, because people don't exist in isolation. For example:

- **In relationships**, risk factors include parents who use drugs and alcohol or who suffer from mental illness, child abuse and maltreatment, and inadequate supervision. In this context, parental involvement is an example of a protective factor.
- **In communities**, risk factors include neighborhood poverty and violence. Here, protective factors could include the availability of faith-based resources and after-school activities.
- **In society**, risk factors can include norms and laws favorable to substance use, as well as racism and a lack of economic opportunity. Protective factors in this context would include hate crime laws or policies limiting the availability of alcohol.

## Risk and Protective Factors Are Correlated and Cumulative

Risk factors tend to be positively correlated with one another and negatively correlated to protective factors. In other words, people with some risk factors have a greater chance of experiencing even more risk factors, and they are less likely to have protective factors.

Risk and protective factors also tend to have a cumulative effect on the development—or reduced development—of behavioral health issues. Young people with multiple risk factors have a greater likelihood of developing a condition that impacts their physical or mental health; young people with multiple protective factors are at a reduced risk.

These correlations underscore the importance of:

- Early intervention
- Interventions that target multiple, not single, factors

## Individual Factors Can Be Associated With Multiple Outcomes

Though preventive interventions are often designed to produce a single outcome, both risk and protective factors can be associated with multiple outcomes. For example, negative life events are associated with substance use as well as anxiety, depression, and other behavioral health issues. Prevention efforts targeting a set of risk or protective factors have the potential to produce positive effects in multiple areas.

## Risk and Protective Factors Are Influential Over Time

Risk and protective factors can have influence throughout a person's entire lifespan. For example, risk factors such as poverty and family dysfunction can contribute to the development of mental and/or substance use disorders later in life. Risk and protective factors within one particular context—such as the family—may also influence or be influenced by factors in another context. Effective parenting has been shown to mediate the effects of multiple risk factors, including poverty, divorce, parental bereavement, and parental mental illness.

The more we understand how risk and protective factors interact, the better prepared we will be to develop appropriate interventions.

## Universal, Selective, and Indicated Prevention Interventions

Not all people or populations are at the same risk of developing behavioral health problems. Prevention interventions are most effective when they are matched to their target population's level of risk. Prevention interventions fall into three broad categories:

- **Universal preventive interventions** take the broadest approach and are designed to reach entire groups or populations. Universal prevention interventions might target schools, whole communities, or workplaces.
- **Selective interventions** target biological, psychological, or social risk factors that are more prominent among high-risk groups than among the wider population. Examples include



prevention education for immigrant families with young children or peer support groups for adults with a family history of substance use disorders.

- **Indicated preventive interventions** target individuals who show signs of being at risk for a substance use disorder. These types of interventions include referral to support services for young adults who violate drug policies or screening and consultation for families of older adults admitted to hospitals with potential alcohol-related injuries.

For more information, please visit SAMHSA at [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov) and SAMHSA's Evidence Based Practices Resource Center [www.samhsa.gov/ebp-resource-center](http://www.samhsa.gov/ebp-resource-center)