

Indicators of Resilience in Family Members of Adults with Serious Mental Illness



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KEYWORDS

- Resilience • Family caregivers • Serious mental illness • Risk/vulnerability factors
- Positive/protective factors

KEY POINTS

- Resilient family members of persons with mental illness can overcome the stress and burden that may otherwise compromise their health and quality of life.
- Central constructs of resilience theory are risk/vulnerability factors, positive/protective factors, indicators of resilience, and outcomes of resilience.
- Seven indicators of resilience, including acceptance, hardiness, hope, mastery, self-efficacy, sense of coherence, and resourcefulness, have been studied in family members of persons with mental illness.

The most recent US census found that nearly 62 million adults had a diagnosed mental disorder and about 14 million were diagnosed with a serious mental illness.¹ Before deinstitutionalization and advances in the development of medications, persons with serious mental illnesses lived in institutions, apart from their families. Today, these individuals live in our communities. Although some adults with mental illness live independently, many live with family members, who care for them and help them manage daily activities.^{2,3} Even if they are not in the same household, family members are generally involved in their care and support.⁴ Family members of persons with serious mental illness may endure considerable stress and burden that can compromise their own health and quality of life and impair the functioning of the family. However, if family members are resilient, they can overcome stress associated with providing care for a loved one with a mental illness and preserve their own health and the health of their family.^{5,6} This integrative review summarizes current research on resilience in adult family members who have a relative with a serious mental

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disorder, including major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and panic disorder.⁷ Although some studies have included children and young siblings providing care for a relative with a mental illness, this review focuses on family members who are adults.

RESILIENCE

Early writings on resilience came from researchers who focused on its development in children and adolescents.^{8,9} More recently, there has been an increased interest in resilience in adults¹⁰ and families.¹¹ The concept of resilience was described by Rutter^{12(p119)} as “relative resistance to psychosocial risk experiences,” and by Luthar and colleagues¹³ as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity.” Richardson^{14(p308)} defined resilience as “the process of coping with adversity, change, or opportunity in a manner that results in the identification, fortification, and enrichment of resilient qualities or protective factors.” Definitions of resilience in caregivers vary,¹⁵ but they all share the characteristic of overcoming adversity to not only survive the day-to-day burden of caring for a family member who is mentally ill, but to thrive, that is, to grow into a stronger, yet more flexible and healthier person.¹⁶ Resilience theory focuses on the strengths possessed by individuals or families that enable them to overcome adversity. The central constructs of resilience theory are risk or vulnerability factors, positive or protective factors, indicators of resilience, and outcomes of resilience.

RISK/VULNERABILITY FACTORS

Risk factors have been conceptualized as events or conditions associated with adversity or factors that reduce one’s ability to resist stressors or overcome adversity.¹⁰ Vulnerability factors include traits, genetic predispositions, or environmental and biological deficits.¹⁰ Potential risk factors in caring for a family member with a serious mental illness include caregiver strain, feelings of stigma, client dependence, and family disruption; together, these factors can seriously compromise the caregiver’s resilience.¹⁷ **Table 1** lists examples of risk or vulnerability factors that were identified in studies of family members of adults with serious mental illness.

Having a family member with a mental illness in itself puts family members and the family unit at risk for experiencing negative outcome in terms of the physical and

Table 1
Risk/vulnerability factors, protective factors, and outcomes of resilience indicators identified in studies of family members of adults with mental illness

Risk/Vulnerability Factors	Protective/Positive Factors	Outcomes of Resilience Indicators
Family member with mental illness	Control appraisal ¹⁸ Positive appraisal ²⁵	Expressed emotion ³¹ Psychological well-being ^{18,32}
Lack of mental health services/support	Personal religiosity ²⁶ Psychoeducation ²⁷⁻²⁹	Family adaptation ³³ Family functioning ^{34,35}
Threat appraisal ¹⁸	Social support ¹⁹	Knowledge and understanding ³⁶⁻³⁸
Caregiver age ^{19,20}	Positive cognitions ¹⁷	Morale ³⁶
Education ^{19,20}	Length of time since diagnosis ^{20,30}	Satisfaction ³⁹
Caregiver burden/stress ²¹⁻²³	Age of care recipient ³⁰	Relationship to mentally ill person ³²
Caregiver strain ²³		Caregiver burden ^{19,24,39-41}
Family disruption ²³		Quality of life ^{20,22,23}
Stressful life events ²⁴		
Avoidance coping ²¹		

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