

Individual Resilience and Protective Mental Health: The Role of Psychological Resilience

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Abstract

This review examines the concepts of psychological resilience and preventive mental health, and their roles in individuals' mental health protection and improvement processes. Psychological resilience represents individuals' capacity to adapt to stressful and challenging life conditions, while the preventive mental health approach aims to strengthen individuals' internal resources and environmental support systems. Literature findings show that psychological resilience is effective not only in preventing mental health problems but also in increasing individuals' life satisfaction and subjective well-being. This highlights the importance of empowering and preventive approaches in addition to risk-focused approaches in mental health practices. It is emphasized that individual characteristics, social support, family, and environmental factors are decisive in the development of psychological resilience; and that the interaction between preventive mental health and psychological resilience plays a crucial role in protecting mental health at both individual and societal levels. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating programs that support psychological resilience into education, work, and community-based mental health services, and highlights the need for longitudinal and experimental studies in future research. This review demonstrates that psychological resilience is a fundamental building block in the preventive mental health perspective and contributes to strengthening mental health at both individual and societal levels.

Keywords: Individual resilience, protective mental health, psychological resilience.

Bireysel Dayanıklılık ve Koruyucu Ruh Sağlığı: Psikolojik Sağlamlığın Rolü

Öz

Bu derleme çalışmada, psikolojik sağlamlık ve koruyucu ruh sağlığı kavramları ele alınmış, bireylerin ruh sağlığını koruma ve geliştirme süreçlerindeki rolleri incelenmiştir. Psikolojik sağlamlık, bireylerin stresli ve zorlayıcı yaşam koşulları karşısında uyum kapasitesini temsil ederken, koruyucu ruh sağlığı yaklaşımı, bireylerin içsel kaynaklarını ve çevresel destek sistemlerini güçlendirmeyi hedeflemektedir. Literatür bulguları, psikolojik sağlamlığın yalnızca ruhsal sorunları önlemekle kalmayıp, bireylerin yaşam doyumu ve öznel iyi oluş düzeylerini artırmada da etkili olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu durum, ruh sağlığı uygulamalarında risk odaklı yaklaşımların yanı sıra güçlendirici ve önleyici yaklaşımın önemini ortaya koymaktadır. Psikolojik sağlamlığın gelişiminde bireysel özellikler, sosyal destek, aile ve çevresel faktörlerin belirleyici olduğu vurgulanmış; koruyucu ruh sağlığı ile psikolojik sağlamlık arasındaki etkileşimin birey ve toplum düzeyinde ruh sağlığının korunması için çok önemli bir rol üstlendiği gösterilmiştir. Çalışma, psikolojik sağlamlığı destekleyen programların eğitim, iş ve toplum temelli ruh sağlığı hizmetlerine entegre edilmesinin önemini ve gelecekte yapılacak araştırmalarda boylamsal ve deneysel çalışmaların gerekliliğini

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vurgulamaktadır. Bu derleme, psikolojik sağlamlığın koruyucu ruh sağlığı perspektifinde temel bir yapı taşı olduğunu ve bireysel ile toplumsal düzeyde ruh sağlığının güçlendirilmesine katkı sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Bireysel dayanıklılık, koruyucu ruh sağlığı, psikolojik sağlamlık.

Introduction

Psychological Resilience

The concept of psychological resilience is derived from the Latin root “resilire”¹, and the term “resilient” signifies flexibility and elasticity². Ramirez³ defines psychological resilience as the ability to recover quickly after illness, depression, change, or adverse life circumstances; to regain composure; to easily return to one's former state after injury or strain in other words, a kind of elasticity. Psychological resilience is considered the capacity of an individual to overcome these adversities and adapt to new situations despite extremely difficult circumstances. In addition to being considered a skill and psychological trait, it also encompasses various qualities such as contributing to the continuation of healthy development and effectively coping with adverse situations⁴.

There is no universally accepted definition of psychological resilience. Nevertheless, there are some important points common to all definitions of psychological resilience. These are that psychological resilience is a dynamic process; it involves successful coping, healthy adaptation, or the development of competence under trauma, challenging life events, or significant risk⁵⁻¹¹.

At the same time, psychological resilience represents a two-dimensional concept. In other words, for psychological resilience to emerge, the individual must be exposed to a risk or challenge, and at the end of this process, by adapting to the situation, they must achieve success in different areas of their life despite all the existing negative conditions. In short, "risk" is stated as the key factor for the emergence of psychological resilience. Individuals who have not been exposed to any traumatic life events but are successful in various areas of life are not considered resilient, but merely successful or competent individuals^{9,10}. In summary, when the existing literature is examined, three fundamental points are commonly expressed in various definitions of the concept of psychological resilience. These are; a) risk and/or difficulty, b) positive adaptation, coping, competence, and c) protective factors. In this case, psychological resilience is defined as "a phenomenon" that arises as a result of the significant interaction of protective factors, which are necessarily associated with healthy adaptation and contribute to the adaptation process, with existing risk factors¹². Risk and protective factors play an important role in the development of psychological resilience. Risk is a prerequisite for the formation of psychological resilience. Risk means the presence of one or more factors or effects that increase the probability of a negative outcome; in other words, any event, situation, or experience that increases the probability of a problem occurring,

continuing, or worsening^{13,14}. Protective factors, on the other hand, are factors that reduce or eliminate the negative effects of risks and adverse conditions³.

From a preventive mental health perspective, psychological resilience is considered not only an individual characteristic but also a developable capacity. Therefore, a key objective of preventive and empowering interventions in the field of mental health is to increase individuals' levels of psychological resilience¹⁵. In particular, programs that support resilience in community-based mental health services are considered an effective approach to improving individuals' quality of life.

In conclusion, psychological resilience is a central concept in the process of protecting an individual's mental health. It supports the individual's psychological adjustment by reducing the negative effects of stressful life events and is considered one of the fundamental components of preventive mental health approaches; this study aims to highlight the concept and importance of psychological resilience from a preventive mental health perspective.

Risk and Protective Factors in the Development of Psychological Resilience

When examining models and theories of psychological resilience in the literature, it is seen that the concept can be innate in an individual, as well as characteristics developed throughout life. A common point among theories in the literature on psychological resilience is that factors that increase resilience are developable, and elements such as family and society are also important¹⁶. Such an approach would lead to the inclusion of strength and competence-based models that focus not only on addressing psychopathology but also on prevention and building strengths¹⁷.

Risk Factors

Risk factors encompass biological, psychological, and social factors that weaken an individual's psychological resilience and increase their susceptibility to mental health problems. Within the framework of the concept of psychological resilience, many different risk factors have been studied, particularly concerning children and young people. When these factors are grouped as individual, familial, and environmental; examples of individual factors include negative life events and chronic illnesses; examples of familial factors include parental illness or psychopathology, parental death, or living with a single parent; examples of environmental factors include economic hardship and poverty, child neglect and abuse, and social traumas such as war and natural disasters¹⁸.

Protective Factors

The term protective factors describes situations that soften, reduce, or eliminate the impact of a risk or challenge, promoting healthy adaptation and improving an individual's competencies¹⁹. Protective factors may include individual characteristics, familial and environmental factors, or situations arising from the interaction of these

dimensions. The important thing is to determine how protective factors reduce or even prevent the existing risk, regardless of which of these dimensions are present²⁰. When the literature is examined, although many different age groups, different cultures, or different risk areas have been examined in psychological resilience studies, most studies have identified many common individual, familial, and environmental protective factors and detailed how these factors function under risk²¹⁻²³. Self-confidence, family support, positive and nurturing peer relationships, and the presence of a mentor in the environment can be given as examples of protective factors.

While some individuals show resilience and become more successful in the face of adverse conditions, others give up easily. Individuals who show more resilience to adverse conditions compared to others can be said to be more resilient. Psychological resilience means that adults exposed to a destructive event can maintain a relatively stable level of psychological and physical functioning²⁴. The different levels of resilience shown by individuals have been explained in the literature from two different perspectives. The first perspective focuses on the personality traits of individuals with psychological resilience, while the second focuses on how the resilience process develops²⁵.

The most important variable between individuals who maintain their development and life functionality despite experiencing similar risk factors and who demonstrate positive adaptation and coping methods, and individuals who cannot cope with risks and cannot adapt, is seen as "protective factors"²⁶. When the international literature is examined, variables such as high self-esteem, adaptable temperament, cognitive flexibility, effective social relationships, and emotional intelligence are seen as protective factors²⁷⁻³⁰. In addition, individuals with high psychological resilience utilize both internal and external resources when coping with negative life events³¹. When evaluated from the perspective of a preventive mental health approach, interventions aimed at increasing the psychological resilience of individuals aim to strengthen protective factors as well as reduce risk factors. This approach aims to prevent mental health problems before they arise and to improve the quality of life of individuals¹⁵.

Studies in the national literature also show parallels with international findings. In a study conducted on university students in Türkiye, it was stated that individuals with a high perception of social support have a higher level of psychological resilience and that the impact of stressful life events on mental health may be more limited³².

Overall, both national and international literature indicate that psychological resilience plays a critical role in maintaining mental health. Research findings suggest that psychological resilience is a construct that can be developed through individual and environmental factors, and should be considered a fundamental component of preventive mental health approaches.

Preventive Mental Health

Preventive mental health is defined as an approach aimed at preventing the onset of mental illnesses, reducing risk factors, and strengthening protective factors that support individuals' mental well-being. This approach treats mental health not merely as an area to be treated, but as a state of well-being that can be improved and sustained^{15,33}.

The foundations of the concept of preventive mental health are based on Caplan's model of preventive psychiatry. Caplan addressed mental health services within the framework of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention levels; emphasizing that supporting individuals before mental problems arise is more effective both individually and socially³⁴. Primary prevention focuses on preventing the onset of mental disorders; secondary prevention focuses on early diagnosis and intervention; and tertiary prevention focuses on reducing the functional losses caused by the illness.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines preventive mental health as a holistic approach that includes improving individuals' life skills, strengthening social support systems, and creating healthy environmental conditions. According to the WHO, protecting mental health is a shared responsibility not only of the health sector but also of numerous areas such as education, working life, and social policies^{15,35}.

The importance of a preventive mental health approach has become even more apparent with the increasing share of mental disorders in the global disease burden. Depression, anxiety disorders, and stress-related mental health problems reduce the quality of life of individuals and have serious effects on social functioning. In this context, preventive mental health practices are considered an effective and sustainable strategy in reducing the prevalence of mental illnesses³⁶.

In Türkiye, preventive mental health policies are addressed within the framework of national mental health plans and community-based mental health services. In national policy documents published by the Ministry of Health, strengthening preventive efforts to protect mental health and expanding community-based service models are among the main objectives^{37,38}. Consequently, preventive mental health represents an understanding that supports the mental well-being of individuals, aims to prevent the onset of mental illnesses, and prioritizes community-based approaches. This approach focuses on developing individual protective factors such as psychological resilience, offering holistic and sustainable solutions in the field of mental health.

The Relationship between Preventive Mental Health and Psychological Resilience

The relationship between preventive mental health and psychological resilience has become increasingly clear in recent studies. These two concepts have an overlapping and complementary structure in terms of preventing the emergence of mental health problems and increasing individuals' capacity to cope with stress.

The preventive mental health approach aims to strengthen the individual's internal and environmental resources, reduce risk factors, and support positive adaptation processes^{33,39}. Psychological resilience also acts as a protective mechanism in this process; it contributes to the protection of mental health by increasing individuals' ability to adapt and maintain their well-being in the face of difficulties^{40,41}.

International studies show that psychological resilience is directly related to preventive mental health practices. For example, it is stated that psychological resilience levels increase in individuals who participate in mental health education and support programs, and that this is a key factor in reducing the psychological effects of chronic diseases⁴².

It has also been reported in different sample groups that psychological resilience increases when preventive mental health interventions are carried out in risky living conditions. For example, in a study on adolescents diagnosed with chronic diseases such as leukemia, it was observed that psychological resilience levels were higher in individuals with strong family and social support; this emphasized the importance of environmental protective factors in both protecting mental health and developing psychological resilience⁴³.

These findings demonstrate that running preventive mental health programs in parallel with psychological resilience is an effective way to strengthen individuals' mental health and reduce the risk of psychopathology. Thus, preventive mental health services serve not only to prevent illnesses but also to improve well-being by increasing individuals' psychological resilience.

This study is a traditional narrative review of research addressing the concepts of psychological resilience and preventive mental health. In the review, national and international literature on individual resilience, psychological resilience, and preventive mental health was examined using a non-systematic but structured approach.

In this review, the concepts of psychological resilience and preventive mental health were addressed in light of theoretical and empirical literature; the reciprocal and complementary relationship between these two concepts was emphasized.

From a preventive mental health perspective, supporting individual strengths is paramount in preventing mental health problems. The World Health Organization's approach to promoting mental health lists strengthening individuals' life skills and psychosocial resources as one of its fundamental goals¹⁵.

The studies reviewed in this compilation reveal that environmental and social factors, as well as individual characteristics, are decisive in the development of psychological resilience. Family support, secure attachment relationships, and social support networks enable individuals to be more resilient in the face of stressful life events⁴⁴. This situation shows that preventive mental health practices should be addressed not only with individual-focused but also with community-based approaches.

However, some limitations in the literature are also noteworthy. There are differences in the definition of the concept of psychological resilience and in the tools used for its measurement; this makes it difficult to compare research findings. In addition, the fact that a significant portion of the studies conducted in the national literature have cross-sectional designs limits the establishment of causal relationships. This situation highlights the need for longitudinal and experimental research.

The findings of this review emphasize the importance of integrating interventions aimed at developing psychological resilience with preventive mental health policies. Widespread implementation of programs aimed at increasing psychological resilience in educational institutions, workplaces, and community-based mental health services is considered an effective and sustainable strategy in preventing mental health problems.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This review examines the concepts of psychological resilience and preventive mental health from a holistic perspective, discussing their roles in protecting mental health at both individual and societal levels. The literature reviewed reveals that psychological resilience is a fundamental element that enhances individuals' capacity to adapt to stressful and challenging life events and plays a significant role in protecting mental health.

Psychological resilience is considered not only as a mechanism that prevents the emergence of mental health problems, but also as a structure that supports individuals' psychological well-being and improves their quality of life. In this respect, it strongly overlaps with the concept of preventive mental health; it offers a perspective that goes beyond risk-focused approaches and centers on individuals' strengths and coping capacities. The preventive mental health approach represents a holistic understanding that aims to strengthen individuals' internal resources and improve their environmental support systems. Supporting psychological resilience can be considered one of the fundamental goals of this approach. Widespread implementation of practices aimed at increasing psychological resilience in educational institutions, workplaces, and community-based mental health services offers an effective and sustainable strategy for preventing mental health problems. Based on the findings of this review, it is recommended that preventive and protective programs in the field of mental health should include components aimed at improving psychological resilience. It is thought that early interventions, especially for children, adolescents, and at-risk groups, will contribute to reducing the burden of mental illness in the long term. Furthermore, it is important that mental health services are planned not only with an individual-focused approach but also with a multi-level approach encompassing the family and the community. Future research is recommended to increase longitudinal and experimental studies examining the developmental process of psychological resilience and the effectiveness of preventive mental health practices. Such studies will provide significant contributions to understanding how psychological resilience can be improved and how preventive mental health policies can be made more effective. In conclusion, psychological resilience is one of the fundamental building blocks of a preventive mental

health approach. Supporting psychological resilience at the individual and societal levels offers a strong, feasible, and sustainable approach to protecting and improving mental health.

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