

What is stability?

The Full Frame Initiative (FFI) defines stability as *the degree to which a person can expect her or his situation and status to be fundamentally the same from one day to the next; where there is adequate predictability for a person to concentrate on the here-and-now and on the future, growth and change; and where small obstacles don't set off big cascades*. Stability, therefore, includes both an external reality and the individual's interpretation of that reality based on her or his past experience and context.

Instability is often triggered by abrupt or unexpected changes in a family, living arrangements, economic or employment status, or physical or psychological health.

Why is stability important?

Stability provides a foundation for health, productivity and wellness. Stability interacts with all facets of an individual's life and can lead to a sense of control and predictability that is vital for individuals *and* communities to thrive. Because stability impacts individuals, families and communities, stability (or instability) can have cascading effects. This means that stability (or instability) in one area of life may positively (or negatively) impact stability in other areas of life, including physical wellbeing.¹ The stability (or instability) that is present in a person's life may also add to or decrease the stability of those around her or him.²

What are the health and other implications of instability?

Instability impacts individuals at many levels such as physical and mental wellbeing, worldview and interactions with others. However, stability in one context can buffer the overall impact of a significant harmful event. For example, children who can depend on a stable caregiver often are less negatively impacted by a parent's incarceration than children with no stable caregiver.³

- ✦ Chronic instability or unpredictability makes it difficult to concentrate on long-term goals, pursue a life purpose, or maintain connections with others. People in this situation often can only focus on meeting their most immediate needs.⁴
- ✦ Economic instability often results in stress. This stress results in significant changes to an individual's metabolic functioning, which then leads to chronic illness such as heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.⁵ Psychological distress and chronic illness are also associated with employment instability, creating a cycle of distress that significantly impacts an individual's wellbeing.⁶
- ✦ People often cope with stress from instability in ways that can harm their health (e.g., smoking or substance use).⁷

Related Terms, Concepts & Definitions:

ADVERSITY: Events that cause distress or hardship.

CERTAINTY: Knowing without any doubt.

CONTROL: Exercising authority and influence over one's own life.

PERMANENCY: When something continues without any fundamental changes.

PREDICTABILITY: The ability to forecast, without uncertainty, what tomorrow will bring.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS: Factors that enable positive outcomes or protect an individual in the presence of risk.

RESILIENCE: The presence of positive adaptation or outcomes in spite of adversity.

RESOURCE: Something (economic, material, emotional) that can be used for support or to help cope with a difficult situation.

SAFETY NET: A safeguard against future adversity.

STRESS: A natural response to demands or pressures that exceed a person's capacities or threaten the person's wellbeing.

STRESSOR: A person, situation or condition that provokes a stress response.

- ✦ Residential instability may have as much of a negative impact on domestic violence survivors' health as does their own drug and alcohol use and the level of life-threatening violence perpetrated against them.⁸
- ✦ People with low-incomes often have unstable and temporary jobs, leading to unstable health coverage.⁹ These individuals may also have health problems, such as diabetes and hypertension, that can be attributed to lack of health coverage, poor access to care, and significant levels of stress that exacerbate the development of chronic diseases.¹⁰
- ✦ Living in an unstable environment, where crime *and* vandalism are high, results in feelings of depression and anxiety even when a person is not directly victimized.^{11 12} Persistent depression and anxiety also result in physical health instability.
- ✦ Disruptions and changes in family structure negatively impact a child's wellbeing and are tied to depression, anxiety, and attention problems.¹³
- ✦ The stability of a family's traditions and rituals (e.g., eating together, playing together, established rules and structure) is related to better school performance, and to positive child wellbeing and development. This stability also helps children adjust to major changes in family structure such as divorce or new siblings.¹⁴

How is stability related to other Domains of Wellbeing?

For comprehensive wellbeing, stability must be experienced along with social connectedness, safety, mastery, and meaningful access to relevant resources. For example:

- ✦ **Stability and Safety:** In some contexts, stability can promote safety. For example, a predictably safe home environment where individual needs are met can counteract the negative effects of neighborhood violence.¹⁵ Similarly, providing stable and nurturing families to children in foster care can bolster resilience and can lessen negative impacts on their developmental health outcomes.¹⁶ Compromised safety and instability can also be tightly linked. For example, women experiencing domestic violence often face significant employment instability.¹⁷ Batterers may sabotage their partners' employment, which may result in lost hours, lost wages and, eventually, lost employment.^{18 19} And in some contexts, becoming safer can actually compromise stability. For example, when domestic violence victims leave their abusers, they often have to move frequently to stay safe and have insufficient financial resources to make ends meet.²⁰
- ✦ **Stability and Meaningful Access to Relevant Resources:** When people lack resources, such as access to health insurance, mental health services, or permanent housing, their resource stability and mental health are often compromised. For example, unstable access to housing or health care creates stress, which further compromises a person's ability to cope with and adapt to the instability she or he is experiencing.²¹ Having meaningful access to resources can promote feelings of stability. Likewise, when an individual experiences a sense of certainty and predictability, she or he may be more likely to seek resources.

*This fact sheet is one of a series on the Full Frame Initiative's Five Domains of Wellbeing — **social connectedness, stability, safety, mastery and meaningful access to relevant resources** — the universal, interdependent and non-hierarchical essential needs we all have. The Full Frame Initiative's mission is to change systems so that people and communities experiencing poverty, violence and trauma have the tools, supports and resources they need to thrive.*

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Endnotes

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