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Glossary of Life Course Terms

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Life Course Terms

Critical or Sensitive Periods: The specific critical or sensitive periods of development during which adverse events and exposures can have the greatest impact (e.g. during fetal development, early childhood, adolescence, etc.).

Cumulative Impact of Stress: The impact of multiple stresses, routinely, accidentally, or otherwise released over time.

Health Development: The development of health over a lifetime is an interactive process, combining genes, environments, and behaviors. Throughout life and at all stages, even for those whose trajectories seem limited, risk factors can be reduced and protective factors enhanced to improve current and subsequent health and well-being.

Health Disparities: The potentially avoidable differences in health among groups of people who have different levels of social and economic advantage or disadvantage.

Health Equity: The study of differences in the quality of health and health care across different populations. This may include differences in the presence of disease, health outcomes, or access to health care across racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic groups.

Health Trajectory: Health development over a lifetime that can be positively or negatively impacted by protective and risk factors.

Life Course Model: A model that explains that social, environmental, health equity, and other factors which affect health development over a lifetime.

Life Course Perspective: A multidisciplinary approach to understanding the mental, physical, and social health of individuals, which incorporates both life span and life stage concepts that determine the health trajectory.

Life Cycle: The regular, predictable series of life stages or the reproductive cycle.

Life Span: The length of time a species is capable of living or the length of an individual's life.

Life Stage: A stage or phase in life—such as being single, independent and working, being a parent of young children, or being an ‘empty nester’ (those whose children have recently left home).

Population Health: The health outcome of a group of individuals. This approach to health aims to improve the health of an entire population.

Protective Factors: Factors that improve health and contribute to healthy development (e.g. conflict resolution skills, steady employment, good peer group, community engagement, etc.).

Risk Factors: Factors that diminish health and make it more difficult to reach one's full potential (e.g. low self-esteem, drug abuse, family distress, low literacy, etc.).

Social Determinants of Health: A model that proposes that health status is determined by the physical and social environment formed by the distribution of money, power, and resources at global, national, and local levels and by the policies that influence the distribution of these factors.

Many of the definitions included on this page were taken from resources provided by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau. For more information or additional resources, visit mchb.hrsa.gov/lifecourseapproach.html or auctd.org/lifecourse.