

Social Determinants of Health

A Common Language for Collaborating Across Sectors

By Carolynn Spezza

The Changing Landscape

The landscape of the substance use disorders prevention (SUD Pv) field is changing. At the federal level, there is a new emphasis on how SUD Pv aligns with overall community health. At state and county levels, departmental shifts are resulting in Pv professionals working alongside new colleagues grounded in the mental health and public health systems. Gradually, siloes of Pv work are being eliminated. As our paths merge with other sectors such as public health, mental health, child development, law enforcement, or education, health professionals must advance our expertise in collaborating across sectors.

The changing landscape brings opportunity to collaborate in innovative ways with new colleagues to solve complex community concerns. As our professional cultures merge, we need to become fluent in the terminology and paradigms used by colleagues and funders from multiple sectors. A common language will equip us to align our goals with the goals of other sectors.

This tactic will help Pv professionals employ the language of social determinants of health (SDH) as a means of grounding SUD Pv work in the broader cross-systems Pv dialogue. This tactic will define the *Social Determinants of Health* and explain how this terminology ties into language currently used in SUD Pv. Finally, it will outline how the Social Determinant of Health Framework relates to three key Pv approaches: 1) youth development, 2) environmental Pv, and 3) cross-sector collaboration.

Determinants of Health

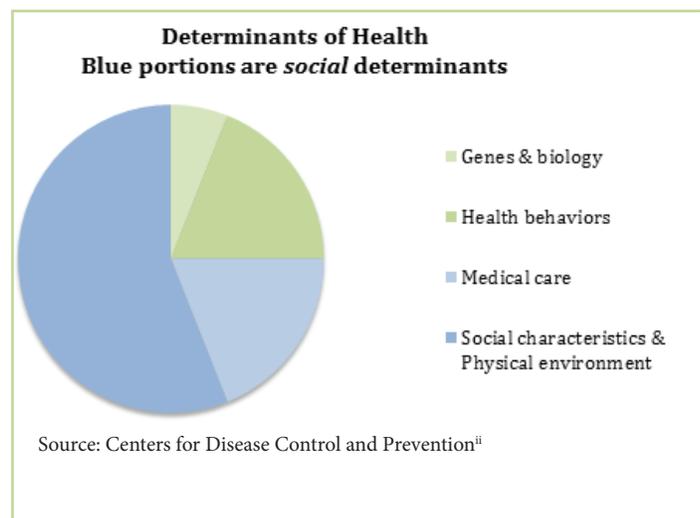
Over the past two decades, there has been a growing awareness of how the environment in which a person lives influences their health. Factors in a person's life that potentially influence health are referred to as determinants of health. Determinants of health create either assistance or barriers to wellbeing or good health. The determinants can be correlated with the risk and protective factors framework commonly used in the SUD Pv field.

The five determinants of health are:

- Genes and biology
- Health behaviors
- Medical care
- Social characteristics
- Physical environment

Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the types of determinants. The green portions illustrate how genes, biology, and health behaviors determine roughly 25% of population health. The remaining 75%, or blue portion, is determined by the world we live in. This 75% consists of medical care, social characteristics, and our physical environment. Together, these blue portions are referred to as *social determinants of health*.ⁱ

Figure 1



Social Determinants of Health

SDH is a framework for understanding how diverse factors in society influence health and it is an invaluable concept as the Pv field moves forward in this changing landscape. Colleagues and funders from multiple sectors are using the SDH framework to systematically reduce disparities and address root causes behind health issues. Pv professionals can be more effective in cross-system collaboration by understanding the framework and language used by colleagues and funders from other systems.

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The Value of the Social Determinants of Health Framework

Growing attention is being focused on SDH. For instance, the federal initiative *Healthy People 2020* places new emphasis on SDH while continuing to address the full range of determinants.ⁱⁱⁱ Examples of social determinants include, but are not limited to:

- Access to health insurance and a family doctor
- Quality of schools
- Social support
- Availability of resources to meet daily needs
- Type of employment
- Access to nutritious food
- Perceptions of discrimination and equity

SDH are a Priority at State, Federal, and International Levels

The SDH framework is used to develop policies and strategies at state, federal, and international levels. At the state level, for instance, the California Department of Public Health's (CDPH) *Wellness Plan 2014* uses SDH as a theoretical foundation. The *Let's Get Healthy California Task Force Report* highlights social determinants and outlines steps to eliminate disparities to improve health across the lifespan.

Multiple federal initiatives emphasize the importance of addressing SDH.^{iv} *Healthy People 2020*, *The National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy*, *National Partnership for Action to End Health Disparities*, and *SAMHSA's Leading Change 2.0* underscore the necessity to focus resources on social determinants. Internationally, the World Health Organization shares this emphasis. In 2008, its Commission on Social Determinants of Health published *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on Social Determinants of Health*.

As figure 2 illustrates (following page), Social Determinants of Health can be further broken down into five categories. Consider how some of these SDH categories may influence health. For instance, under the Health and Health Care category, a child with health insurance and an empathetic family doctor will receive greater benefits than a child without healthcare. Under the Neighborhood and Built Environment category, a child living in a high crime neighborhood without a safe place to play has a higher probability of encountering social and environmental challenges than a child that lives in a safe neighborhood.

Social Determinants of Health

1. Economic Stability

- Poverty
- Employment
- Food Security
- Housing Stability

2. Education

- High School Graduation
- Enrollment in Higher Education
- Language & Literacy
- Early Childhood Education & Development

3. Social & Community Context

- Social Cohesion

- Civic Participation
- Perceptions of Discrimination & Equity
- Incarceration/Institutionalization

4. Health & Health Care

- Access to Health Care
- Access to Primary Care
- Health Literacy

5. Neighborhood & Built Environment

- Access to Healthy Foods
- Quality of Housing
- Crime & Violence
- Environmental Conditions

Figure 2



Source: Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.^v

Decades of rigorous research indicate social determinants are closely tied to health outcomes. As a result, federal agencies, state departments, and international bodies such as the World Health Organization are concentrating resources to improve SDH among vulnerable populations. SUD Pv practitioners can relate the SDH framework to paradigms within the SUD Pv field. To assess how the SUD Pv field can map onto sectors using the SDH framework, it may be helpful to employ the metaphor of health as a journey. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recommends this metaphor for communicating SDH across sectors because this technique creates common ground across diverse audiences and supports communication that resonates across systems.^{vi}

Health as a Journey

Each person must journey through childhood and adolescence to arrive at adulthood. The journey may look a bit different for each individual. Everyone is born

into a specific family context consisting of particular cultural and physical backgrounds. The environment from which each individual comes from and the environments that they encounter will influence their health along their journey. The resources accumulated, the people they encounter, and with whom they associate will make-up the individual person and influence their journey. Each young person is impacted by the choices they make, how they respond to the roadblocks they encounter, and their resiliency to overcome challenges along the way.



Resources

Each person begins their journey with available resources and more resources must be found along the way. Theoretically, some youth are given a backpack outfitted with boots, warm clothes, a GPS device, a tent, and all the freeze-dried food they will require. Other youth are given a portion of these items and must assert effort along the way to either find these items themselves or complete the journey without them. The accessible resources will make their journey more or less challenging, and the resources they access will affect their health.

Environmental Influences

The environment in which a young person is raised, as well as the environment in which he or she moves throughout childhood will exert an impact on their health condition throughout their journey. Environmental influences include the safety of home, access to drugs and alcohol, a good education, nutritious food, and quality healthcare services.

Social Influences

Social influences also impact the journey to health. These influences relate to a young person's ability to connect with people along the way who will help or harm their journey. Caring adults and peers can provide essential navigation support, while people who engage in high-risk behaviors have the potential to disrupt the journey to becoming a healthy adult.

The Individual

The individual needs to consider physical health (disease or disabilities), mental health, and character traits (attitude, talents, and resourcefulness). Even if all things were equitable in terms of resources and environment, individual variations will impact the journey. For example, genetic factors may create predispositions to physical and mental health, including addiction. These factors play a role in how the individual responds to their environment and the opportunities and challenges they face along life's journey.

The Challenges

Every young person will face challenges and roadblocks to good health. The challenges can be heightened by a lack of basic resources or social supports. The make-up of the individual can present challenges depending on physical or mental illness.

Additional factors present roadblocks that must be avoided or overcome to stay on a path to good health. Roadblocks may include limited access to medical care, nutritious food, educational opportunities, or social supports.

Many sectors concerned with health share the goal of ensuring that all youth arrive in robust physical and mental health. One key strategy for collaboration is finding a common language to communicate goals and strategies across sectors. The journey towards health is described in the SUD Pv field through the interplay of risk and protective factors. This journey can also be understood in the context of the SDH. By paying attention to shared goals that are described differently, health professionals can better communicate and collaborate across sectors.

What Makes for Good or Ill Health Throughout the Journey?

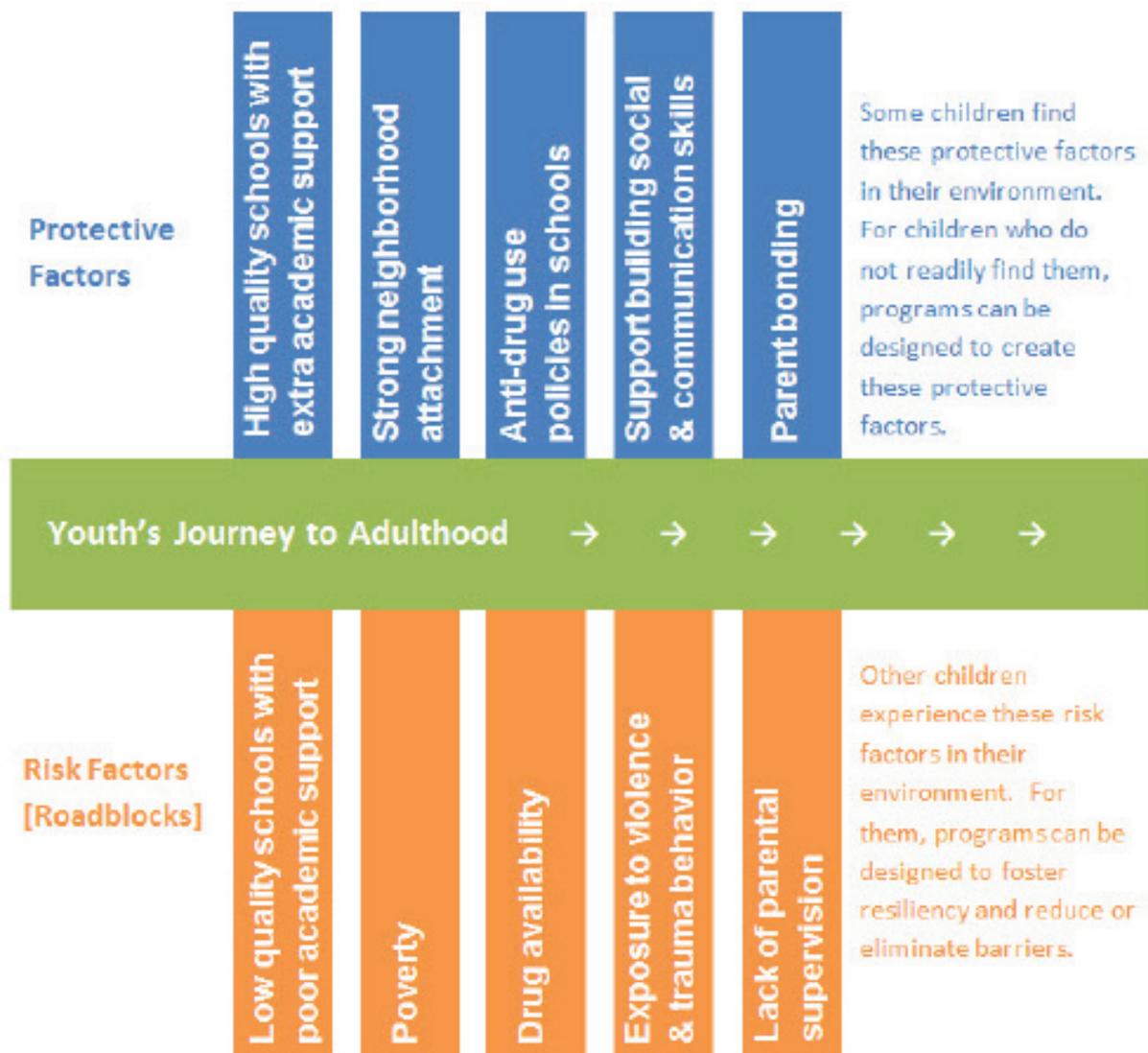
SUD Pv, mental health, public health, education, and juvenile justice share key concerns that can be conceptualized through this journey metaphor. Cross-sector collaborations can be supported through the strategic utilization of the SDH language to answer similar questions across systems.

- What can we do to ensure that all young people are equipped for a successful journey towards health?
- How can we prepare young people for exposure to drugs and alcohol?
- How do we identify youth who experience heightened risk for substance abuse?
- What can we do to improve the environment for all youth?
- How can we best identify and provide access to resources that alleviate health disparities?
- What strategies can we implement to help the individual gain the knowledge, skills, and behaviors to overcome obstacles?

Prevention Language: Risk and Protective Factors

Figure 3 illustrates a combination of risk and protective factors that youth may encounter on their health journey. The field of SUD Pv has spent years analyzing research to develop a comprehensive list of risk and protective factors that affect the prevalence of substance use disorders. Risk and protective factors bring clarity to why some youth fare better than

Figure 3



others on their journey and assists professionals in strategically coordinating assistance along the way. (See the *Resources* section for link to a detailed list of Risk and Protective Factors.)

Many SDH correlate with the risk and protective factors used in the SUD Pv field. This overlay creates an opportunity to work collaboratively with other fields to create long-term solutions to an array of complex challenges that youth experience.

Towards a Common Language

The SUD Pv field has established that risk and protective factors affect the prevalence and consequences of substance use. For instance, youth arrested for substance use-related offenses may experience different consequences based on their

communication skills, their parents’ education, prejudice in the justice system, or the extent of their parents’ resources to mitigate potential outcomes.

An understanding of risk and protective factors brings clarity to why certain youth struggle more than others, as well as why certain youth face more adverse consequences than others. The understanding of risk and protective factors assists professionals in planning how to effectively support youth on their journey. **Addressing risk and protective factors supports prevention professionals to improve overall youth health outcomes by translating prevention language when speaking to colleagues and funders using the language of SDH.**

Figure 4 presents an abbreviated list of risk factors for substance use among youth. Each of these risk factors can correlate to social determinants that create hazards or roadblocks for youth. The SUD Pv field alone cannot solve these complex issues. However, partners from other sectors are also working to reduce or eliminate the same disparities. SDH can be used to expand the scope of SUD Pv by working with partners from multiple sectors.

Figure 4

Examples of Substance Use Risk Factors Linked to the Social Determinants of Health Framework

- High unemployment
- Residents at or below the poverty level
- Lack of strong social institutions
- Residents feel little sense of “connection” to community
- High numbers of students who fail academically

Social Determinants of Health Connect with Prevention Strategies

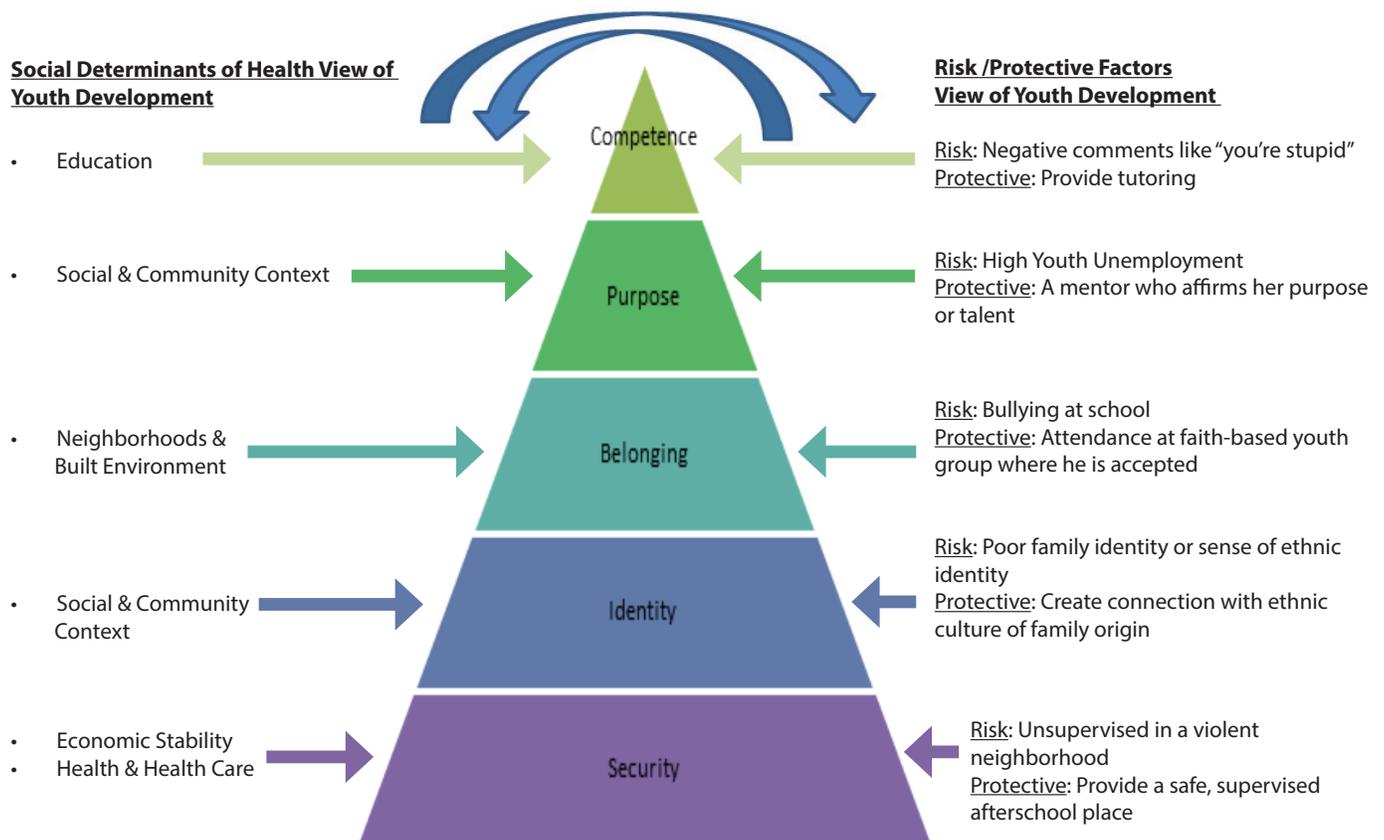
Key Pv approaches include those that target individuals and those that seek to improve the environment in which individuals live. Individual strategies focus on helping young people grow and develop healthy lives free from substance abuse. Environmental approaches seek to affect change by modifying risk factors in the environment. Both micro-level and macro-level approaches are congruent with SDH. This section draws concrete parallels between the frameworks employed by micro-level youth development approaches, macro-level environmental Pv approaches, and the SDH Framework.

Youth Development

A micro-level approach focuses on supporting individual youth and may target universal, selective, and indicated youth populations. The goal of micro-level approaches is to build protective factors and minimize risk factors. A key micro-level approach

Figure 5

Concern for Youth Development Becomes a Bridge for Communication



used in SUD Pv is based on youth development theory. According to Kathy Koch, author of *Finding Authentic Hope and Wholeness: 5 Questions That Will Change Your Life*, there are five core needs to be provided for youth to mature into healthy, well-functioning adults.^{vii} According to figure 5 on the previous page, the five core needs are security, identity, belonging, purpose, and competence. At each level of this pyramid, Pv practitioners might focus on seeking ways to reduce the risks and increase protective factors in each area of need. The diagram below shows how each area of need builds upon one another. The SDH framework maps onto this pyramid in slightly different ways than the risk and protective factor framework, but both can be used to discuss positive youth development. One benefit of the SDH framework is that it can be used to promote the relevance of evidence-based models like youth development across sectors with shared goals of improving health for youth.

Environmental Prevention

SDH can also be closely aligned with SUD Pv's primary macro-level approach of environmental Pv. Environmental Pv "recognizes that problems are often not found within individuals, but in the environment."^{viii} Thus, environmental Pv focuses efforts on reducing substance use by modifying factors such as policy and enforcement, access and availability, and community norms. Some partners who focus on how social determinants affect individual health may seek to increase services such as mentoring, counseling, and other direct services that support youth. Other partners who think in terms of environmental Pv strategies may focus on coalition building, policy work, and reducing health disparities.

Social Determinants of Health and Prevention Strategies Coincide

Many risk and protective factors outlined in the substance use Pv field align with SDH garnering emphasis at state, federal, and international levels. Risk and protective factors also correspond with work being completed in schools, childcare centers, violence Pv programs, medical offices, and public health agencies. The SDH framework overlaps with the dynamic Pv work of these diverse fields.

Different fields specialize in supporting the needs of children and youth in our communities in different ways. One sector may use academic education as its

primary tool to support youth. Another sector may use parent bonding and responsive infant care, while another uses access to health insurance. The common link is that each sector is working to strengthen the social determinants that support child/youth development and reduce the presence of roadblocks along the way. The language of SDH can help determine where our work overlaps and where cross-sector collaboration is strategic.

Influential organizations, agencies, and sectors are using the SDH framework to strategically propel Pv work. The concept of SDH is meaningful because it provides a common framework that can be used to develop and communicate strategic responses to health disparities across sectors with stakeholders, partners, and funders.

Working together across sectors to reduce health disparities, contribute resources, improve environmental factors, connect people, and help youth develop the abilities they will need to navigate their journey leads to improved health overall. Health professionals can work together in a variety of ways to make the conditions of good health achievable for everyone. Merging the goals of the SUD Pv field with the larger Pv movement is supported when all Pv professionals invest in creating shared paradigms. SDH represents an opportunity to build a language that can be used across Pv efforts, ultimately supporting broader efforts to sustain the health and wellness of all youth.

Figure 6

The World Health Organization outlines 10 influential social determinants of health in its *The Solid Facts* publication. Many of these correspond with both risk and protective factors, as well as priorities of potential partners in our communities.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Early life experience | 6. Social gradient |
| 2. Social exclusion | 7. Unemployment |
| 3. Addiction | 8. Social support |
| 4. Stress | 9. Food |
| 5. Work | 10. Transportation |

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Detailed List of Social Determinants of Health Healthy People 2020 website. Social Determinants of Health webpage. Available at <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health>

Detailed List of Risk and Protective Factors Massachusetts Health and Human Services website. Risk and Protective Factors webpage. Available at <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/programs/substance-abuse/providers/prevention/risk-and-protective-factors.html>

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Introductory Article & Video: Empathy and Appreciation for the Impact of the Social Determinants of Health. Hammer, G. (November 2013). Human Capital Blog, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Available at http://www.rwjf.org/en/blogs/human-capital-blog/2013/11/empathy_and_apprecia.html

Webinar: County Spotlight Series: The Marin County Prevention Hub: A Story of Evolution, Collaboration, and Prevention Center for Applied Research Solutions presentation (September 2013). Available at http://www.ca-cpi.org/training/webinars_past.php

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- ^{viii} North, D., with Coulter-Bracey, M., and Barrera, A. (2014) Culturally responsive environmental prevention. *Prevention Tactic*. Center for Applied Research Solutions; Community Prevention Initiative.



708 College Avenue
Santa Rosa, CA 95404

prevention *Tactics*

Prevention Tactics are published periodically by CARS under its Community Prevention Initiative contract with the California Department of Health Care Services, Substance Use Disorder Prevention, Treatment & Recovery Services Division (DHCS). The purpose of this publication is to help practitioners in the prevention field stay abreast of best practices emerging from current research and to provide practical tools and resources for implementing proven strategies.

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Edition 9:13
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