Reviewer's report

Title: Development of mental disorders one year after exposure to psychosocial stressors in primary care patients with a physical complaint; a cohort study

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Reviewer: Aartjan Beekman

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This is a clearly written account of a study demonstrating that the exposure to psychosocial stressors precedes the onset of common mental disorders in primary care patients who present with a physical health complaint in Switzerland. The strength of the prospective association is clinically relevant and the authors have taken care to control for confounding and explore effect modification. The research question is highly relevant both for psychiatry and for primary care.

Besides the above, the large sample size, use of established research instruments and the prospective design are additional strengths of the study.

I have only a few remarks, which may help strengthening the paper.

(i) The authors state that this is an area of research with paucity of previous findings. There is a vast literature on the association between life events and common mental disorders. This includes both cross-sectional and longitudinal work. Although comparable studies carried out in primary care may not be abundant, I would suggest the authors acknowledge the fact that this is one of the most studied fields within psychiatric epidemiology. The finding that life events precede the onset of common mental disorders is not at all new. The replication of this in patients presenting with a physical health complaint may be the most salient novel aspect of the study (although there are a great many studies looking at the effect of life events on depression and anxiety in patients with chronic physical illness - this should also be acknowledged)

(ii) In studies looking at the effects of life events on mental disorders there are two lines of thinking with regard to how life events should be assessed. The first is that events should be assessed taking into account the impact they have on the person experiencing the event. The authors have chosen to assess life events using this line of thinking. Opposed to this are authors stating that one should measure events without taking into account their meaning or the subjective experience of the person involved. Including the subjective experience of the participant may be contaminated by all sorts of factors (such as subthreshold symptoms of anxiety/depression, personality and previous experiences with events). This contamination may inflate the associations found with the onset of especially anxiety and depression.

The authors may be able to analyse their data with and without taking account of the subjective experience of the event. That would strengthen the paper
considerably.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests