

Same genes could make us prone to both happiness and depression

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The same genes that make us prone to depression could also make us prone to positivity, two psychology researchers have suggested.

Professors Elaine Fox, from Oxford University, and Chris Beevers from the University of Texas at Austin reviewed a number of studies for their paper in *Molecular Psychiatry*. They say that there is a need to combine studies in [mental health](#) genetics with those that look at cognitive biases.

Professor Beevers said: 'Cognitive biases are when people consistently interpret situations through particular mental 'filters'—when people have a cognitive bias that emphasises negative aspects or thoughts, they are more at risk of [mental health disorders](#). There is a lot of research about these biases, and a lot of research about [genes](#) that may make people susceptible to [mental ill health](#). However, we suggest that it could make more sense to bring together these two areas of research.'

Professor Fox said: 'If you take a gene that is linked to mental illness, and compare people who have the same genetic variant, it becomes clear that what happens to their mental health is based on their environment. We suggest that while no gene 'causes' mental ill health, some genes can make people more sensitive to the effects of their environment - for better and for worse.

'If you have those genes and are in a negative environment, you are likely to develop the negative cognitive biases that lead to mental disorders. If you have those genes but are in a supportive environment, you are likely to develop positive cognitive biases that increase your mental resilience.'

Professor Fox is currently carrying out further research into this combined genetic and environmental effect on our mental filters, which she has dubbed the 'CogBIAS project', in a programme of work funded by the European Research Council.

She intends to see how sets of genes may affect mental health outcomes and how these are moderated by people's environments. The hope is that

such research may enable us to understand people's underlying genetic sensitivity and deliver more tailored support to deliver the best possible mental resilience and health for each person.

More information: Differential sensitivity to the environment: contribution of cognitive biases and genes to psychological wellbeing, *Molecular Psychiatry*, [DOI: 10.1038/mp.2016.114](https://doi.org/10.1038/mp.2016.114)

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