

Are your parents to blame for your psychological problems?

August 2 2017, by Darya Gaysina And Ellen Jo Thompson



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Psychologist Sigmund Freud famously proposed that our personal development is pretty much determined by events in our early childhood. While many of his ideas are now outdated, some modern psychological theories also suggest that childhood experiences [play an important role](#) in shaping our lives.

But is there really any evidence that difficult childhood experiences can cause common psychological problems such as anxiety or depression later in life? And if that is the case, will blaming our parents for it help us heal?

There's no doubt that parents and other main caregivers are critical figures in a child's development. We know that family-related early experiences have profound and long-lasting effects on children – many of which are positive. Adverse childhood experiences, however, can cause harm or distress and [may disrupt](#) the child's physical and/or psychological development to some extent. Examples of such experiences include poverty, maltreatment, [parental divorce](#) or the death of a parent.

These experiences are extremely common worldwide. In England, nearly a half of adults [have gone through at least one](#). Almost one in ten has experienced four or more such negative experiences in childhood. Studies have found links between specific experiences and various negative outcomes, with effects lasting into adulthood. For example, experiencing parental divorce, separation or loss – or living with a mentally ill carer – increases the risk of developing [mental health problems](#) across the lifespan.

Our research group recently [conducted a study](#) showing that parental divorce leads to increased lifelong risk of depression in offspring. For this research, we combined data from 18 studies published in the last 35 years, with more than 24,000 participants in total. The findings demonstrate that those who experienced parental divorce in childhood were 56% more likely to have depression in adulthood than those who didn't experience divorce.

It is also known that [childhood adversities](#) are often interrelated. For example, parental divorce can lead to a change in socioeconomic status

for many families. Studies have shown that accumulating adverse circumstances raises the [risk of various mental health problems](#) – and [even suicide](#).

Vulnerability versus resilience

But how can a few traumatic [childhood experiences](#) have a lifelong effect? One possible explanation is that exposure to such events increases a person's vulnerability to the effects of later stressful events. For example, divorce is a difficult experience for most adults – it's linked with symptoms of anxiety and depression. But people who have also experienced early adversities [suffer an even higher risk](#) of developing such conditions as a result of [divorce](#).

But experiencing adversities in childhood doesn't necessarily make people more vulnerable. Indeed some children never suffer negative consequences even in the face of severe multiple adversities – a trait psychologists call resilience. In these circumstances, the negative experience strengthens resistance to later stress. Resilient people get to know themselves when they go through tough times – learning how to best manage their behaviour and successfully cope with the stress in the future.

Just how a child reacts to stressful experiences seems to depend on a complex mix of factors that differ between individuals, including their genes, temperament and cognitive ability. Researchers are currently investigating to what extent each of these help determine whether someone develops resilience. We may see results soon. With continuing advances in human genomics, the [complex interplay](#) between genetic and environmental factors is starting to get uncovered.

It's important to remember that negative outcomes of childhood traumas are not unavoidable. Even in adulthood, it is still [not too late to prevent](#)

[or reverse](#) outcomes – even from severe ones such as physical or emotional abuse and neglect.

Specifically designed selective intervention programmes for those who experience multiple childhood adversities – such as cognitive behavioural therapy or mindfulness training – can be particularly beneficial.

Blame game

Many people, however, find it easier to simply blame their parents for their problems. It may seem that finding a root cause for your pain can be helpful – surely it is better to blame your parents than blaming yourself. However, a large study of more than 30,000 participants from 72 countries showed that [blaming parents does not help](#) people move away from the negative consequences of difficult experiences.

The study found that those who dwelled on negative experiences like abuse, blaming others or themselves, had a greater risk of suffering from [mental health](#) problem than those who didn't. The study therefore suggests that psychological processes such as blaming parents can be more dangerous for mental health than the past experiences themselves.

If we want to overcome the burden from our past and thrive, we need to stop blaming [parents](#) and our past, and instead focus on our present and take control of our lives. Positive adult experiences, such as [regular physical activity](#), [higher education](#) and [social support](#), have been shown to improve psychological outcomes – including cognitive function, mental health and well-being. And for severe, persisting [mental health problems](#), seeking help – ranging from talking therapy to medication – could also be a way forward.

So whatever your background, don't forget it is never too late to enhance

your life with positive [experiences](#), moving away from the long shadow of [childhood](#) adversities. A bit of work can help you unlock your inner resilience.

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