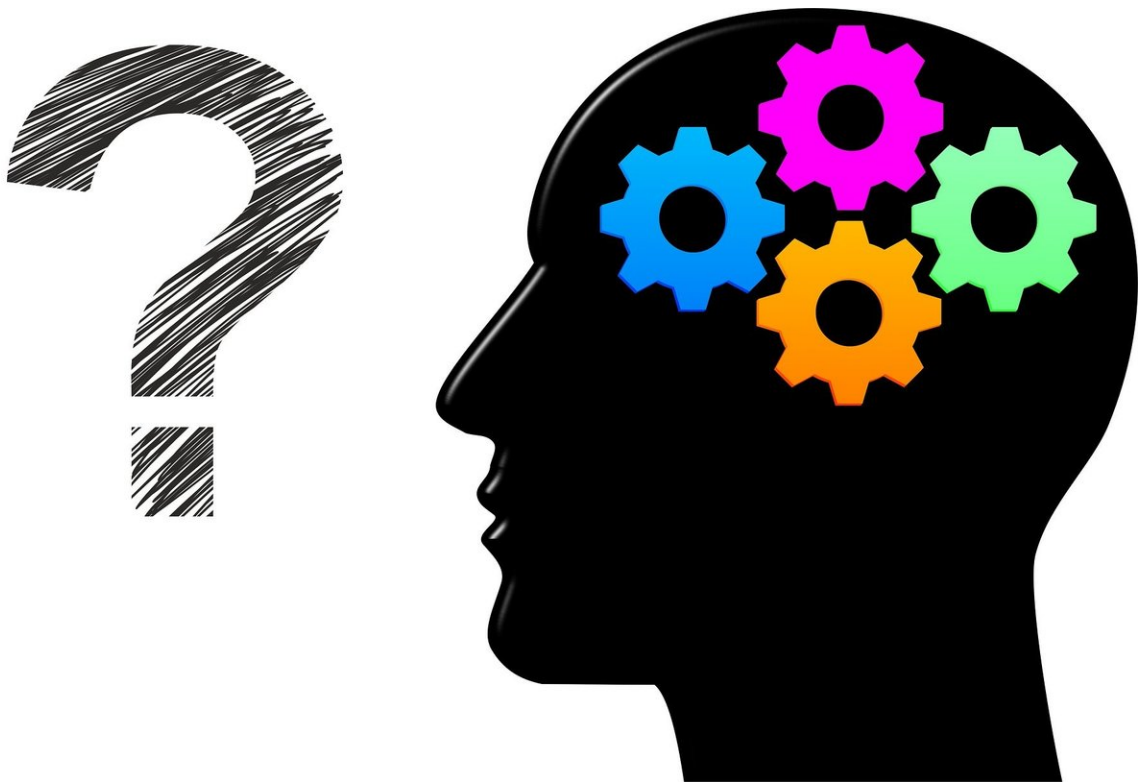


# Early-life hardship linked to decline in memory and thinking

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Researchers have found that early-life adversity can have long-term effects on people's memory and thinking in later life. Dr. Ruby Tsang from the University of Oxford showed that experiencing family financial hardship in early life, and poorer childhood health predicts

greater memory and thinking decline in later life. She presents the research today (Tuesday 24 March) at the Alzheimer's Research UK Virtual Conference. Although the charity's annual Research Conference in Wales was canceled due to the coronavirus outbreak, the event is being recreated online to allow scientists to share the latest dementia research findings.

Research suggests that [early-life](#) experiences play an important role in mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, with exposure to early life adversity linked to a range of aspects of our lifestyle. There's limited research, however, on the influences, early-life experiences have on how [memory](#) and thinking skills decline later in life.

Now, using information from the Dementias Platform UK (DPUK) Data Portal, Dr. Tsang studied 15,309 volunteers, including over 5,000 ex-civil servants. Using questionnaires, the study volunteers answered questions about their childhood concerning their family socioeconomic status, their own health and whether they were the victim of abuse.

The researchers then looked at volunteer's scores on a wide range of memory and thinking tests, including verbal fluency in mid-to later life.

Dr. Tsang examined the association between early adversity factors and a decline in memory and thinking. The analysis was carried out using the [Dementias Platform UK \(DPUK\) Data Portal](#).

Dr. Tsang found three different patterns of memory and thinking, which reflect resilience to cognitive decline, gradual age-related decline and rapid cognitive decline. The results showed fewer years of education, having experienced family financial hardship in early life, and poorer childhood health predicted a greater decline in memory and thinking skills.

Dr. Ruby Tsang said: "Our socioeconomic status is closely intertwined with many aspects of our lifestyle and is particularly associated with our risk of various health conditions as we age. This research suggests that even in childhood, these experiences have a far-reaching and important influence on our cognitive performance. We found key differences between men and women, with women more likely to be in the resilient group for commonly used screening tests that measure a range of memory and thinking skills.

"It's fantastic to still be able to share this research funded by Dementias Platform UK in these times. It is important that we continue to communicate our research findings, and a virtual conference like this allows the work of early-career researchers like me to reach more people out there."

Dr. Carol Routledge, director of research at Alzheimer's Research UK, said: "While we can't change our past, keeping mentally and physically active, maintaining a healthy weight, not smoking, only drinking within recommended guidelines, eating a healthy diet, and keeping blood pressure and cholesterol in check can help to support brain health as we age.

"While this study didn't investigate whether people went on to develop dementia, understanding the risk factors for declining memory and thinking could help us to design better strategies for keeping people's brains healthy. This research adds to growing evidence that suggests we need to protect brain health throughout life, just as we do with heart health.

"By considering life-long risk factors that influence cognitive health, we can support measures to help keep people's brains healthy at any age. With greater understanding of the factors influencing brain [health](#) and dementia risk, we will be better able to make breakthroughs that could

make a real difference to people's lives."

Provided by Alzheimer's Research UK

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