

# Mental health is intergenerational

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The mental health impacts of trauma and emotional distress may extend from parents to their children. Yet a positive history of well-being could also cross generations.

Your parents' mental health likely shaped your early social and

[emotional development](#), say researchers from Deakin University's Center for Social and Early Emotional Development (SEED).

And mounting evidence suggests that your parents' experiences across their whole lifetimes could have influenced your development. Traumatic or distressing experiences your parents had even decades before your birth may still affect you, found a recent review by SEED researchers.

"This may be because trauma and distress could have lasting biological and [social impacts](#), influencing future reproductive processes and parenting," says lead study author Dr. Liz Spry.

Your tendency to experience distress is influenced by complex factors including genetics and how you were raised. Many social and financial conditions are also slow to shift. If your parents have experienced [racial discrimination](#) or poverty, you may be more likely to experience these too while growing up. Effects like this can shape the continued experience of adversity between generations.

Extreme stress due to [traumatic events](#) including genocide, combat and forced displacement can also shape future generations.

"But there is also potential to shift outcomes for parents and their children. We should provide appropriate support for expectant and new parents who have experienced trauma, adversity and distress," Dr. Spry says.

Positive experiences may also have a multigenerational impact. Recent SEED research found that children showed more positive behaviors when their parents had a history of well-being during adolescence and young adulthood. Their children were also less fearful or restless.

Dr. Spry says we need a greater focus on preventing trauma and [psychological distress](#) in young people.

"Young people today face increasing and unprecedented challenges including COVID-19, climate change and other ongoing humanitarian issues both in Australia and internationally," says Dr. Spry.

"Acting now to prevent trauma and support the mental health of young people may have benefits not only for young people themselves, but also for future generations."

Related research is published in *Child Development* and *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*.

**More information:** Primrose Letcher et al, Parental history of positive development and child behavior in next generation offspring: A two-cohort prospective intergenerational study, *Child Development* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13839](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13839)

Elizabeth A Spry et al, The developmental origins of stress reactivity: an intergenerational life-course perspective, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cobeha.2021.10.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2021.10.005)

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