

Study finds traumatic life events biggest cause of anxiety and depression

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A study by psychologists at the University of Liverpool has found that traumatic life events are the biggest cause of anxiety and depression, but how a person thinks about these events determines the level of stress they experience.

Researchers from the University's Institute of Psychology, Health and Society analysed the responses of over 32,000 [participants](#), aged 18 – 85 years, who completed the BBC's 'Stress Test', an online survey to explore the causes and consequences of stress.

The study – the biggest of its kind in the UK- found that traumatic life events were the single biggest determinant of [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) followed by a family history of mental illness and income and education levels. Relationship status and social factors made smaller – but still significant – contributions to stress. However, the results revealed that a person's thinking style was as much a factor in the level of anxiety and depression a person experienced.

The 'Stress Test', which was launched on BBC Radio 4's 'All in The Mind' and available on the BBC website to complete, asked participants a range of questions about their family history of mental health problems, life events, income and education levels, [relationship status](#) and social circumstances. It also asked participants about how they responded to stressful situations, for example, did they talk to friends about their problems, did they turn to alcohol to reduce stress, did they blame themselves.

Professor Peter Kinderman, Head of the Institute of Psychology, Health and Society who lead the research, said: "Depression and anxiety are not simple conditions and there is no single cause. We wanted to find out more about what caused people to suffer from anxiety and depression and why some people suffered more than others.

"Whilst we know that a person's genetics and life circumstances contribute to [mental health problems](#), the results showed that [traumatic life events](#) are the main reason people suffer from anxiety and depression. However, the way a person thinks about, and deals with, stressful events is as much an indicator of the level of stress and anxiety they feel."

"Whilst we can't change a person's [family history](#) or their life experiences, it is possible to help a person to change the way they think and to teach them positive coping strategies that can mitigate and reduce [stress](#) levels."

Mental health problems affect one person in every four, making it the leading cause of disability. Its direct cost to England alone is approximately £41.8 billion per annum but the wider costs to in terms of the economy, benefits, lost productivity at work, is far greater.

Provided by University of Liverpool

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