

How a difficult childhood makes it more likely you'll have mental and physical health problems as an adult

23 April 2021, by Ziggi Ivan Santini Et Al.



Our childhood experiences shape our belief about ourselves, others and the world. Credit: pexels/alex green

Decades of [research](#) shows how negative childhood events—such as abuse or neglect—can have a detrimental impact on a person's long-term physical and mental health. It has been linked to [accelerated ageing](#), [chronic disease](#) and even [premature death](#).

Stress experienced in [childhood](#) may also influence our genes and be [passed on](#) to offspring. So unless the cycle is broken, it may continue from generation to generation.

When we talk about childhood [adversity](#), it can cover specific experiences, such as neglect, abuse, or trauma. It can also cover unfavourable socioeconomic conditions such as poverty, low education or unemployment. In a recent [study](#), we wanted to investigate two types of adversity.

We looked at the impact of serious conflict in the home—for example, tension, verbal arguments or

physical violence. We also looked at severe [financial difficulties](#) experienced during childhood. We analysed a large representative survey of European respondents and found that these two types of adversity significantly predicted various [health problems](#) in adulthood: physical, mental, and social. The impact was exacerbated if people had experienced both conflict and financial difficulties in childhood.

Financial strain

Experiencing severe financial strain in childhood can mean uncontrollable, chronic stress. This pattern of stress in a child's body can become an obstacle to healthy development and [effective learning later on](#). Financial strain can mean a child will [lack basic necessities](#) such as food, clothing and school books. And it means children are more likely to grow up in deprived and unsafe neighbourhoods.

Research shows this level of stress can inhibit a person's ability to make decisions, which can have [long-term implications](#). It also makes it less likely a person will achieve [positive outcomes](#) later in life.

Financial stress can directly affect [biological and physiological systems](#) that are important for staying healthy in adulthood. And these changes may persist even if a person [escapes disadvantage later on](#), which in turn can compromise their [health and behaviour in adulthood](#).

Conflict

Growing up in an environment characterised by serious conflict can also have a marked affect on [psychological and neurological](#) development. One reason is that a pattern of unpredictable, uncontrollable and [chronic stress](#) creates an

[overactive stress-response system](#) that readily triggers a person into alert or aggression. Altogether, it limits a person's ability to [regulate emotions and behaviour](#).

Such experiences predispose people to unhealthy lifestyles like substance misuse or comfort eating. It also disrupts the [immune, metabolic and autonomic nervous systems](#), meaning it has a direct, biological and enduring effect on a person's [ability to stay healthy](#).

Accumulating health problems

In [our study](#), we found that being exposed to financial strain or conflict during childhood is associated with heightened risk for a wide range of health and social problems in adulthood.

In terms of general health, we found that people who grow up in such environments are at increased risk of cancer, obesity or being hampered by physical health problems—such as cardiovascular diseases, breathing problems, physical pain, along with stomach or digestive problems.

We found that people who had difficult childhoods are more likely to binge drink, smoke, have a [poor diet](#) and tend to be less active—often engaging in sedentary behaviour.

Our results show a higher risk of depression, unhappiness, dissatisfaction with life, loneliness and feeling unsafe in one's local area. We also found that childhood adversity puts people at increased risk of social isolation. They are less likely to interact with others and have general distrust towards other people—and those who get married are more likely to get a divorce.

Damaging effects

All these health and social problems are likely to accumulate and intensify over time, ultimately reducing people's quality of life, while creating multiple, complex, costly care needs.

Our data revealed that 25% of the survey respondents had experienced financial strain or conflict during their childhood. This means that one

in four adults in Europe could be at increased risk of developing [health](#) problems due to these types of adversity.

Apart from the damage to people's lives, the economic burden of childhood adversity in terms of [excess healthcare costs](#) can take a huge toll on [government spending](#). Investing appropriately to combat [childhood adversity](#) would ultimately [save societal costs](#).

Part of the solution needs to involve [working with children and families](#) affected by adversity. But there also needs to be more awareness and understanding about the damaging effects of conflict and financial strain in the home. This is important because ultimately this will affect children who grow up in these circumstances for the rest of their lives.

The Samaritans can be contacted in the UK on 116 123. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Hotline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is on 13 11 14. Hotlines in other countries can be found [here](#).

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