



What causes anxiety and depression?

There's no simple answer as to why people develop anxiety or depression – it's different for everyone, and there are lots of different factors in our lives that affect our mental health.

Risk and protective factors

When it comes to mental health issues in children, it can help to think about things in terms of risk and protective factors. Every child and family will experience difficulties and challenges (risk factors) and each will have some resources and strengths to help through difficult times (protective factors).

Life is full of challenges for everyone, but some of us face more challenges than others. Generally speaking, the more risk factors there are in someone's life, the higher their chances of developing a mental health condition.

This doesn't mean that every child who faces challenges will experience mental health difficulties. Different combinations of risk factors affect us in different ways, and support from family and friends can help kids **build resilience** – the ability to cope with life's difficulties.

The effect on mental health

Being able to identify risk factors means you can address or counter them by building protective factors to support your child's resilience and development.

Promoting the positive aspects of children's lives can mean challenges are less likely to get in the way of leading a happy, healthy and successful life.

Risk and protective factors can be identified in three main areas of a child's life:

- within a child (eg their temperament, natural abilities, family history of mental health conditions)
- within a child's family circumstances and living environment (eg relationships with parents or carers, experiencing discrimination, family poverty)
- specific life events (eg important transitions, family breakup, loss).

Internal factors

We know that people with certain personality traits or temperaments – people who are perfectionists, easily flustered, or have low self-esteem, for example – are more likely to develop mental health conditions.

Examples of behaviour that might suggest a child has these personality factors include:

- feeling anxious
- withdrawing from or avoiding new situations
- being irritable or aggressive
- not being able to follow rules or instructions
- displaying behaviour that is difficult to manage
- lacking an understanding of consequences
- having difficulty understanding or using language.

Most children will behave this way from time to time – for example, many children avoid new situations purely out of shyness.

And while we can't change our internal make up or personality, parents and carers can help by focusing on positive attributes, building resilience and creating a supportive environment.

Protective factors

- an easy-going temperament

- positive expectations of themselves
- hopefulness about the future
- a sense of independence
- good communication, problem-solving and social skills
- an ability to identify, express and manage their behaviour and emotions
- an ability to develop positive and lasting relationships with friends and family.

Family and environmental factors

Often the family and environmental risk factors a child experiences are beyond the control of any one person. Recognising when these situations are happening and providing additional support and security can protect your child or young person's mental health and wellbeing.

Risk factors may include:

- **family conflict** or violence
- unsupportive or neglectful relationships
- harsh or inconsistent parenting
- lack of supervision by adults
- family separation
- forced migration to a new state or country
- cultural and social isolation
- racism and discrimination
- being affected by natural disaster
- family financial difficulties, homelessness.

Creating a supportive environment

Close, stable relationships at home, school and in the community help to protect kids' mental health and wellbeing and are key to developing resilience. Support from adults helps children

develop a sense of trust and optimism – that they are cared for and that regardless of what else is going on, things will be all right.

If your family is going through a tough time, it's important to try and protect your children from the stresses of the situation.

Other family members can also step in and provide some stability and reassurance if there's a lack of support at home.

Specific events

While we all hope our kids don't have to go through traumatic or distressing events, these are sometimes an unavoidable part of life. It's important to realise that just because children experience a challenging time, this doesn't mean they will automatically develop mental health issues. Caring, supportive adults play a really important role in helping kids cope with tough times.

Children need lots of reassurance from caring adults to help them cope with major loss or change. If parents or carers are closed off or only give vague answers, children are likely to make up stories to try and make sense of what has happened. Sometimes those stories can cause more confusion, worry and anxiety – that's why clear, consistent communication and reassurance is so important.

Some examples of specific risk factors are:

- death of or illness in a family member, friend or pet
- separation of parents or carers
- change of preschool or moving house
- loss of a friendship
- moving to a new country
- being affected by natural disasters
- being diagnosed with a disability or medical illness
- experiences of abuse or neglect

Seeking support

A distressing event or ongoing challenges can mean big changes for children. Parents and carers may also be struggling with stress or grief, which can make it difficult to support their child.

When this is the case, it's important to seek support from friends, family, school staff or health professionals. This support can help to reduce the distress your child is feeling, and strengthens their resilience to deal with challenges in the future.

Support options for children

Support options for children

So, you've noticed changes in your child's moods, emotions or behaviour that are worrying you. What next? Well, the best thing you can do for your child's wellbeing is to speak to a health professional about what's going on.

Taking the first step

Your local GP is often a good starting point when your child needs help. Depending on the situation, the GP might provide ongoing care or suggest that another [mental health professional](#) or support service get involved.

Mental health professionals who specialise in working with children can be accessed through your GP, community health centre, public mental health services, and private health clinics. Your child's school may have a counsellor or psychologist who can help, or the school's staff might be able to suggest other local services or health professionals.

What happens next?

Your GP or other health professional will need to get an accurate picture of what's going on so they can provide tailored treatment for your child's needs. This is done through a mental health assessment.

As part of this assessment, the health professional will look at your child's difficulties, background and current needs. They're likely to ask questions about your child's early history, progress and difficulties at school, and your family situation.

The discussion might cover:

- the situations your child finds difficult
- how they get on with other children and family members
- whether they have any learning difficulties
- how your child and family have tried to manage difficult or stressful situations up until now
- their strengths and interests.

You may also be asked to keep a record of your child's behaviour – usually for a week or two, or until your next appointment.

Based on all of this information, the health professional will decide what kind of support will be most appropriate for your child and family.

Find out more

- [Learn about psychological treatments](#)
- [Supporting children and young people](#)
- [Complete our child mental health checklist](#)