# What causes mental health problems?

There are many opinions about what causes mental health problems. This is part of a wider debate about whether personality is shaped by life experiences, or determined by genes. The following are some of the factors that may impact on the development of mental health problems.

## Difficult family background

Coming from a difficult background where you have experienced neglect, violence, and abuse or been overprotected can make people highly insecure and more vulnerable to mental health problems.

## Stressful life events

These may be traumatic events, such as the death of someone close, or longer-term struggles, such as being the victim of some form of harassment or oppression. In recent years, research has shown that being made redundant or spending significant periods out of work can also have an impact on your mental health.

## Biochemistry

Your body chemistry can affect your mind. For example, if you are frightened, it triggers the body's 'fight, flight or freeze' response to produce a hormone called adrenalin. If physical activity doesn't use up all the adrenalin, the body remains tense and the mind stays over-active.

## Genes

There are genes that cause physical illnesses, so there may be genes that play a role in the development of mental health problems. Research suggests that genes might make certain people more vulnerable to mental health problems than others. For example, if you have a parent with schizophrenia you are more likely to develop it yourself. However, most people with schizophrenia do not have a parent with this diagnosis, so it seems unlikely that a gene can be said to cause a mental health problem.

## Physical health problems

If the brain is physically damaged by a head injury or a condition such as epilepsy this can have an impact on behaviour and mood, and lead to symptoms that mimic some mental health problems. Long-term physical illnesses have also been shown to put people at greater risk of depression and anxiety.

## Social problems

Social factors such as: poverty, domestic violence, isolation, poor housing, substance misuse and addiction have been associated with mental health problems. It is not always clear whether these factors trigger the problems, or whether having a mental health problem can lead to social problems you might not otherwise experience.

DR. LOU V GHOLSON