

## Stress across the lifespan, from conception through adolescence to adulthood, and depression/anxiety symptoms.

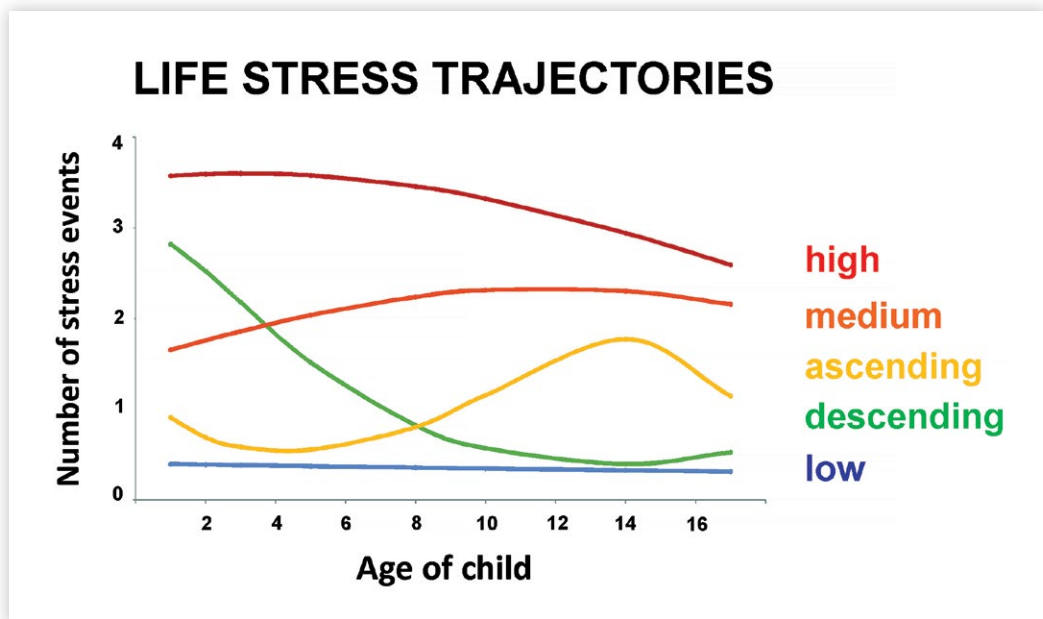
### Research overview

Recent estimates reveal that, over the course of our lives, up to 40% of us could suffer from an anxiety disorder or depressive illness. We know that depression and anxiety are strongly related to life stress and that some people suffer more from stress while others appear to be more resilient. This year, our research has focussed on family life stress events occurring from a child's early life through to adolescence. The patterns of these stress events may predispose people to later mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

### Research highlights

We examined the number, timing and patterns of life stress events experienced by over 1600 families from the Western Australian Pregnancy Cohort (Raine) Study at ages 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 14 and 17. Family stress events included things like death of a family member or friend, separation and divorce, financial problems, loss of employment, residential move etc. Symptoms of depression and anxiety at age 20 were measured using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS).

We found that the number of stress events in each participants' life from age 1-17 followed one of 5 stress trajectories. These are shown in the figure below. In females, the high, medium and ascending trajectories predicted depression and anxiety symptoms at age 20 whilst the low and descending trajectories did not. No significant associations were seen in males and all analyses took social disadvantage, risky behaviours and parental mental health into consideration.



These results suggest that adolescence is a critical time point in predicting associations with adult depression and anxiety. Girls appear to be more vulnerable to the negative effects of life stress than boys do, corresponding to the gender imbalance seen with affective disorders from puberty.

This work has the potential to guide interventions in two ways:

- [1] Driving pre-emptive strategies to reduce the negative effects of stress events at key points in childhood to reduce long term mental health issues.
- [2] Guiding the delivery of mental health support for adolescents at risk due to the recent experience of family stress events.

### **Research achievements**

Ms Herbison received a travel award from the International Society of Psychoneuroendocrinology (ISPNE) to give a presentation of these results at the ISPNE 2015 conference in Edinburgh. In addition, this work was invited to be presented at the University of Toronto.

## THE TEAM

### **Chief Investigators**

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