

The family can play a positive role in developing and maintaining a person's mental health. Given that one in four people experience a mental health challenge, and most families contain more than four people, all families should understand the process by which mental illnesses develop, and what they can do to help at each stage. The following framework illustrates this in relation to some eating disorders, but the underlying principles apply to a wide range of mental health issues.

Risk factors There are many biological, psychological and sociocultural risk factors that make someone vulnerable to an eating disorder. Biologically, for example, adolescent females are statistically at a higher risk. Psychologically, for example, the trait of self-oriented perfectionism (placing unrealistically high expectations on oneself) is one of the strongest risk factors. Socioculturally, for example, certain activities which emphasise body shape and weight (such as ballet or athletics) significantly increase the risk.

Risk factors → **Stressors** The presence of risk factors does not inevitably lead to an eating disorder. But, if a person with a particular risk factor experiences a stressor, this can precipitate the development of the illness. For example, someone with self-oriented perfectionism might face exams which make them feel out of control.

Risk factors → **Stressors** → **Altered eating** This can then lead to altered eating. For example, they might start to control their food intake, binge to compensate for negative emotions, exercise excessively or purge through vomiting or laxatives.

If left unchecked this can become established as a pattern of dangerously disordered eating, which the person then feels unable to control.

Such disordered eating produces physical as well as psychological changes, such as a disturbance of interoception (how we experience internal sensations, like how we feel when we eat). And these can lead to, or intensify, comorbidities such as depression, anxiety, obsessions and compulsions. Together these can form a downward spiral with life-destroying consequences.

Many treatments are available, but they are often resisted, for various symptomatic reasons, such as the person's inability to gain insight into the destructive power of the illness, which they perceive as their friend.

But there is hope. It is possible for the person to break out of this process, and their family can play a crucial role at three key stages. With the right help, families can turn **risk to resilience** (enabling those with a particular risk factor to become less vulnerable to related stressors); **spot the signs** (identifying and responding appropriately to indicators of altered or disordered eating); and **change the focus** (coaching the person to gain insight, refocus on their life goals, and work with the professionals to fight against the illness).

