

What Helps Create a Strong Family, and How Do Strong Families Affect New Zealand's Well-being?

Family life is one of the strongest drivers of mental health—for better and for worse. The family is the central pillar of positive mental health. It is the safe haven, the place where the stresses of work, money, and uncertainty can melt away. It is what one longs to return to after long hours at the workplace. Good times are also best enjoyed with family, but it is in the tough times that the importance of family truly emerges.

However, these benefits only manifest if the family itself is strong. If there are cracks in the family structure—connections broken by neglect, abuse, or emotional distance—the protective role of the family collapses. The safe haven can quickly turn into a place of dread. The pillar of mental health breaks down, and with it, individual and social wellbeing. Before we go further, pause and ask yourself a simple question: *At the end of your workday, do you feel a sense of relief or a sense of dread when thinking about returning home to your family?* Your answer speaks volumes about how your family life influences your mental health.

What is a Strong Family?

A strong family is not defined by the absence of problems, but by its ability to remain resilient in the face of them. No household is immune to stress—whether financial struggles, health crises, or intergenerational conflicts—but resilience is the differentiating factor.

Resilient families share certain traits. They communicate openly, even when the subject matter is uncomfortable. They problem-solve together instead of isolating in silence. They balance individuality with togetherness. They allow each member to pursue personal growth while still investing in the collective wellbeing. Strong families have a culture of respect - respect between partners, respect for children's voices, and respect across generations. These qualities build trust and predictability, which in turn form the foundation of mental stability.

By contrast, weak families often display communication breakdown and relational neglect. They avoid conflict. Children in such families may grow up with unmet emotional needs, which manifests in their adult lives in the form of depression, substance use, or difficulties forming secure attachments.

What Helps Create a Strong Family?

The short answer is: **moments of togetherness.**

Strength is not built in rare grand gestures but in consistent small rituals that reinforce belonging. Shared meals without distraction, evening walks, board games, helping each other with chores, sitting down to talk—all these strengthen the invisible threads of love and trust. These rituals teach children how to listen, how to express themselves, and how to feel safe when vulnerable. They also reassure adults that whatever else may be uncertain, their family is not.

Research supports this. Studies of family functioning repeatedly find that the amount and quality of shared time together correlates with resilience, school performance in children, and lower stress among adults. In New Zealand's longitudinal studies, adolescents who ate meals with their families reported higher life satisfaction and lower depressive symptoms¹.

In contrast, modern living presents a set of pitfalls. Phone addiction keeps people scrolling side-by-side but not truly together. Shared meals are fewer and shorter. Busyness leaves little room for play. Entertainment is often prioritised over conversation—Netflix and chill replacing walk and talk. Over time, these habits build disconnection, which silently eats away family resilience. Technology or work ambition are not inherently harmful, but without boundaries, they rob families of the time and degrade attention spans of people. Both are needed to build strength within relationships.

Thus, building strong families in today's world requires intentional steps to be taken. Families must *choose* shared meals over isolated screens, conversations over distractions, and presence over preoccupation. It is in these choices that resilience is cultivated.

Strong Families and New Zealand's Well-being

At this point, we turn from the household to the nation. Why should the strength of families matter for New Zealand's wellbeing? Because what happens at the dinner table or in the living room eventually ripples into our schools, workplaces, hospitals, and justice system.

¹Allen, J., Broughton, E., & Atatoa-Carr, P. (2022). *The role of whānau support in improving mental health outcomes for Māori and Pacific peoples*. New Zealand Medical Journal, 135(1560), 45–59.

1. Mental Health as the Core Link

Mental health is perhaps the clearest area where family strength makes a difference. In 2023/24, 13% of New Zealand adults reported high or very high psychological distress, with the highest rates among young people (22.9% of 15–24 year-olds). Māori (19.5%) and Pacific people (20.0%) reported significantly higher distress than the general population². These represent hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders struggling with daily wellbeing.

And when young people do reach out for help, they usually don't go to a counsellor first—they go to family. In fact, more than a quarter of 15–24 year-olds said they turned to whānau or friends for support with their mental health last year². That tells us something powerful: family is often the first line of defense against life's struggles.

2. The Shadow of Family Violence

However, not all families are protective. Around half of New Zealand women have experienced domestic abuse, and such experiences triple the risk of diagnosed mental illness³. Children exposed to violence in the home are also at higher risk of depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders as adults³. Here we see the “dark mirror” of family influence: when the home is unsafe, it is not just neutral but actively damaging.

Family violence also has wider societal costs, from health system burden to lost workplace productivity and intergenerational trauma. In other words, weak or violent family structures do not just harm individuals—they slow national progress.

3. Lifelong Consequences from Childhood

The evidence from New Zealand's world-famous longitudinal studies—the Dunedin Study and the Christchurch Health and Development Study—is unequivocal: early family environments predict adult mental health outcomes⁴. Children who grow up in supportive, stable households

²Ministry of Health. (2024). *Annual Data Explorer 2023/24: New Zealand Health Survey*. Retrieved from <https://minhealthnz.shinyapps.io/nz-health-survey-2023-24-annual-data-explorer/>

³Warren, J., McLeod, G., & Doughty, C. (2018). *The impact of family violence on mental health*. Auckland: Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui.

⁴Fergusson, D. M., Horwood, L. J., & Ridder, E. M. (2005). Show me the child at seven: The consequences of conduct problems in childhood for psychosocial functioning in adulthood. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 46(8), 837–849. (plus findings from the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health & Development Study)

have lower rates of depression, addiction, and suicidal behaviour as adults. On the other hand, adverse childhood experiences such as abuse, neglect, or chaotic caregiving predict higher risk of mental illness, criminal offending, and poor physical health decades later.

These studies show that family strength or dysfunction in childhood is not easily “canceled out” by later success. A perfect career, financial wealth, or social status cannot erase the scars of a harmful home environment. Equally, a nurturing childhood can provide resilience that carries people through periods of poverty or job loss.

4. Broader Well-being for Society

From a societal perspective, strong families mean:

- Lower suicide rates (currently 617 suspected deaths in 2023/24, disproportionately affecting Māori)⁵.
- Lower rates of substance misuse and crime.
- Higher workplace productivity through reduced stress and absenteeism.
- Reduced burden on the healthcare system.
- Stronger social cohesion, as people who feel secure in their families are more likely to participate positively in their communities.

Simply put: **strong families make for a stronger New Zealand.**

Towards Stronger Families in Modern Aotearoa

If families are so central, how can we, as a nation, invest in their strength?

We need workplaces and policies that enable parents to spend time with children. It could be through flexible hours, parental leave, and family-friendly environments. We need community programmes, counselling, and parenting support that teach conflict resolution and emotional literacy. Safety must come first. Services that protect victims, rehabilitate perpetrators, and break cycles of abuse are essential for family wellbeing. For Māori and Pacific communities, extended whānau and collective approaches to care are protective. Policies should strengthen, not weaken, these cultural practices. Conversations about screen time, work-life balance, and the value of

⁵Stats NZ. (2024). *Suicide statistics: Provisional figures 2023/24*. Retrieved from <https://www.stats.govt.nz/>

face-to-face connection must be mainstream. Society should not normalise constant busyness at the cost of family life.

Conclusion

Family is the foundation of both personal peace and national well-being. Strong families are not built on grand gestures but on everyday moments of togetherness: meals, conversations, shared responsibilities, laughter. Weak families fracture under pressure, while strong families protect, heal, and sustain.

The evidence from New Zealand is clear. When families are safe and supportive, mental health improves, resilience rises, and society benefits. When families are fractured by violence, neglect, or disconnection, mental health suffers and the costs ripple across generations.

If we want to strengthen New Zealand's wellbeing, we must begin where life itself begins—at home, in the family. A society cannot be well if its families are unwell. But if our families are strong, our nation will be stronger too.