

AN INTROSPECTION ON ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND TRAUMA

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences?

Everyone knows pivotal experiences shape our childhood. What everyone does not understand is how traumatic events impact our childhood. According to child psychologist Hilit Kletter, trauma is indicated by any combination of ten Adverse Childhood Experiences including (1) alcoholism or drug abuse, (2) a family member in prison, (3) divorced or separated parents, (4) mental illness or suicide attempts, (5) sexual molestation, assault, or rape, (6) an adult swearing at or degrading them, (7) making them fear or experience physical harm, (8) witnessing their mother being physically abused, (9) a feeling they are not loved or important to their family or their family showing no emotions toward one another, or (10) their parents were unable to care for them properly, so they often had to wear dirty clothes and didn't have enough to eat (https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/michael_bricker_acesassessment_ac16_ho.pdf). Depending upon cultural or socio-economic background, or neighborhood demographics, exposure to traumatic events may vary. I, for example, experienced two of the ten ACEs, but believed my score would be higher, given my timid and fearful behavior around peers.

The ten-question assessment lets someone know whether the anxiety a child demonstrates is due to having been exposed to abuse whether physical, emotional, or sexual through experience or observation, physical or emotional neglect, exposure to substance abuse via drugs or alcohol, treated or untreated mental illness, or an incarcerated parent.

The Many Layers of Trauma

Trauma is simple, yet complex. The simplicity of trauma is understanding it is a severe event which negatively impacts and forever changes the landscape of one's life. The complexity of trauma is in survivors, at times, thinking they have healed because they forget trauma has no cure and is not an event one just gets over. Trauma is multifaceted; it encompasses multiple triggers which continue to present throughout a survivors' lives, especially during times of extreme stress or distress.

Treatment is essential and needs to be ongoing; broken or incomplete therapy makes one vulnerable to other traumatic events. It is imperative to remember that trauma recovery is a lifelong process. Support networks are essential to have in place for youth exposed to childhood traumatic experiences.

How Life Circumstances Can Create Balance with Traumatic Experiences

I use my experiences to put ACE into perspective. At age four, I witnessed my close friend's sexual assault; the memory was suppressed but was recalled when I was raped in college. Additionally, we lived with my grandmother and great uncle; they were alcoholics, had a contentious relationship with one another, and screamed at each other full volume the majority of every day. However, their issues were not with the rest of us. So, at the same time, I grew up with a tremendous amount of love, despite my family not talking about serious or difficult issues. Being surrounded by an extended family provided support and brought balance to the trauma. As such, those around me did notice the signs of trauma.

Had my parents or school system known the signs and symptoms of trauma and implemented Social and Emotional Learning, the fabric of my life would have been different. Society must understand our responsibility to foster growth and development in children. Empowerment

strategies help survivors of adverse childhood experiences move through their trauma and thrive. It can also teach them to identify and break patterns of future abuse.

The Importance of Social & Emotional Learning to Adverse Childhood Experiences

I spent the first sixteen years of my professional career teaching vulnerable and underserved youth, and wish I knew about ACE and Social & Emotional Learning during that time. Given current events and the rise in violence over the past several years, it is imperative that schools throughout the country implement Social and Emotional Learning curriculums.

Prior to taking the ACE Assessment for a volunteer assignment with Fly By Nature Foundation in DC, I was unfamiliar with the indicators. Because I experienced multiple traumatic events throughout my life, I believed my score would be high rather than a 2 out of 10. Despite some of my traumas happening as an adult, I recall my childhood persona. I was isolated, had trouble with academics and socialization, and was extremely timid and afraid of everything and everybody.

According to the CDC, "Adverse Childhood Experiences can have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity" (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>). My unaddressed childhood trauma of witnessing sexual assault at age four, certainly impacted my life, making me a future victim of violence and perpetration, and created lifelong health issues and struggles with successful opportunities. Had I gotten into therapy from a young age, I would not have experienced future abuse such as victimizing relationships including one with a narcissist, or rape.

We see evidence of this in youth today; they are suffering across the nation. Our youth are victims of bullying and harassment unlike that of generations ago, and sexual assault. Some youths have been so broken down by their traumas they are perpetrating school and community shootings. It is imperative we all start standing up and paying attention. Everyone in a child's life needs to start looking at trauma and assessing their children so they can get the necessary assistance. By active investigating, we can prevent isolation, future victimization, and the perpetuation of violence that is pervading our society and taking on its own momentum.

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