

Adverse Childhood Experiences: What happened to you is not who you are.



Childhood trauma impacts adult development.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are more than just unpleasant occurrences that happened to someone when they were young. ACEs include traumatic events like physical or emotional abuse or neglect, sexual abuse, caregiver mental illness, household violence, or parental incarceration. The original research about ACEs surveyed over 17,000 people, and the results revealed that ACEs are common across **all** populations.

Children that grow up exposed to toxins are harmed, both in the short and long term. This is true whether the toxin is literal, like lead-tainted water, or metaphorical, like physical abuse or emotional neglect. We now know that the chronic, ongoing toxic stress of ACEs can act like a slow-release poison.

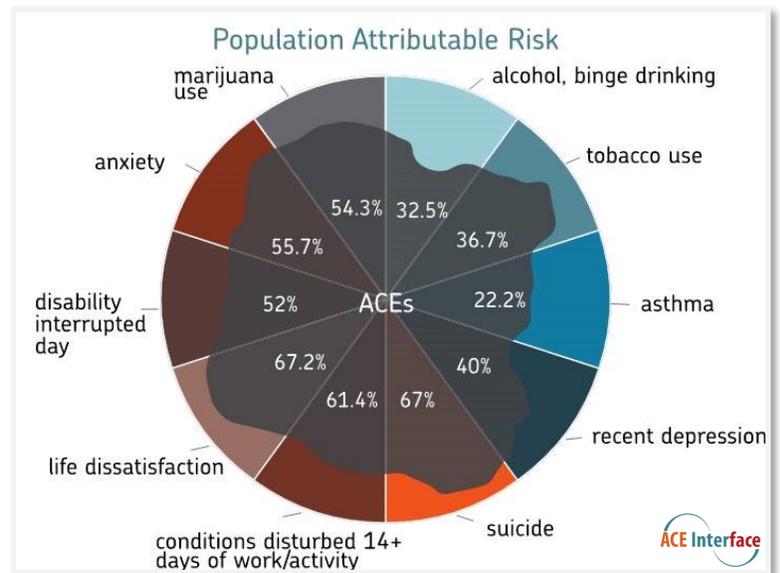
Experiencing a high number of ACEs in childhood means that a young person is growing and developing with their stress response constantly in high gear. This causes the body to continually pump out stress hormones, and while this can be helpful for survival in the short-term, it's hurtful in the long run. Just like revving a car's engine for days would damage the engine, the constant stress overload caused by ACEs can lead to long-lasting harm. In the same way that a physical injury in childhood can cause bodily damage that impacts someone throughout their lifetime, emotional trauma can change the way that a child's brain develops. These changes can show up in an adult's life as thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that hurt themselves or others.

There's what's called a "dose-response" relationship between the number of ACEs that a person experiences and negative health outcomes. This means that as the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk of developing problems, such as:

- Injuries (Fractures, Burns...)
- Depression & Anxiety
- Suicide
- Post-Traumatic Stress
- Unintended pregnancy & complications
- Unsafe sex
- HIV & other STDs
- Cancer & Diabetes
- Alcohol & Drug Abuse
- Lower educational, income, & occupational attainment

Because ACEs touch so many areas of people's lives, and because such a large part of negative health outcomes are directly attributable to them, ACEs are considered the most powerful determinant of public health. One of the most important ways that we can impact the health of individuals, as well as communities, is to prevent adverse childhood experiences from happening in the first place.

Adversity is not destiny, though. Strong connections with caring people can provide the support that's needed to heal and build a resilient, happy life. Post-traumatic growth is both real and possible.



ACEs are only part of the story...



PREVENTION - Communities help prevent ACEs when they:

Strengthen families' economic supports and security.

Institute family-friendly work policies.

Using public engagement to shift the community's idea of "normal" parenting from punishing to positive and respectful.

Introduce and enforce policies to reduce physical punishment.

Ensure access to quality childcare and education.

Provide new parents with home visits and support.

Make parenting help (classes, coaching...) affordable, accessible, and socially acceptable.

Enhance primary health care.

Intervene when something is going wrong.

- Provide support and treatment options for families when there has been abuse and neglect.
- Provide support and treatment when children are engaging in problem behaviors or violence.

For more information, visit

<https://acestoohigh.com/aces-101/>

Ways to Counter the Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences - <https://bit.ly/2Wqudeq>

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/>



Buffer - Communities help reduce the harm of ACEs when they:

Ensure that schools are places of education, growth, acceptance, and support.

Provide opportunities for all children to have fun.

Provide resources for families to learn to develop home routines that reduce chaos and increase predictability.

Focus on ways that people can find and develop their strengths and become comfortable in who they are.

Ensure that children have a circle of safe, caring adults that they can turn to for support.

Provide ways for children and adults to identify and plug into supportive groups (churches, service organizations, hobby groups...)

Create opportunities for individuals on streets, in neighborhoods, and in the community as a whole, to get to know each other and build relationships.

Move toward becoming "trauma-informed" by switching from asking, "What's wrong with you?" to asking, "What happened to you?"

Help people identify and strengthen the "bright spots" in their lives: what's working and how to build on those areas.

Avoid stereotyping people that have faced adversity or equating the trauma that they've experience with who they are.

...because adversity is not destiny.