

2-MINUTE TIP:

ACES: ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Understanding the Lasting Impact of Early Trauma

- Childhood should be a time of safety, nurturance, play, and discovery. But so often, it is marked by adversity and trauma that leaves long-lasting imprints on the mind, body, and relationships -- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Equally important is what can be done to interrupt this cycle and support healing, resilience, and post-traumatic growth.
- Identified in a study by V Felitti, ACEs are ten types of common childhood adversities grouped into three categories:
- **1. Household Dysfunction** - Parental separation or divorce, Household substance abuse, Household mental illness, Incarcerated family member, Domestic violence (particularly toward mother or stepmother)
- **2. Abuse** - Emotional abuse: frequent verbal belittling, humiliation, or emotional cruelty, Physical abuse: being hit, slapped, or physically hurt, Sexual abuse: any unwanted sexual contact or coercion
- **3. Neglect** - Emotional neglect: lack of love, support, or emotional presence, Physical neglect: not having enough food, medical care, or basic necessities
- Each "yes" to these questions scores as one ACE point. A person with four or more ACEs is significantly more likely to face mental and physical health difficulties later in life.

Mental Health & Behavioral Outcomes:

- Increased rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance use disorders
- Hypervigilance, easily overwhelmed, oppositional behavior
- Higher likelihood of self-harm, suicide attempts, and intimate partner violence
- Difficulty forming and sustaining healthy relationships

Physical Health Outcomes:

- Greater risk of chronic illness, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, autoimmune diseases
- Evidence of neurobiological changes, such as the body's central stress system, chronic hyperarousal, poor emotion regulation, and impaired executive functioning

Key Pathways to Healing:

- One stable, nurturing adult relationship has been shown to buffer children from the toxic effects of adversity.
- Trauma-informed therapy approaches—such as EMDR, somatic experiencing, DBT, parts work, and cognitive-behavioral interventions—are shown to help rewire trauma patterns and build internal regulation.
- Mindfulness practices, regular physical activity, creative outlets, and supportive communities are also critical in calming the nervous system and rebuilding identity.

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