



Toxic Stress and Trauma

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) describe a range of childhood adversities that can threaten a child's physical and psychological well-being and negatively influence healthy development (e.g., physical, sexual, and mental abuse; living with a substance abuser; having an incarcerated household member). Current research has expanded on the seven categories of childhood adversity and now includes adversities such as parental divorce, neglect, and social disadvantage. People experience adversity differently depending on individual, family, environmental, and protective factors (e.g., presence of a caring adult; genetic vulnerabilities). Therefore, adversity increases risk but does not guarantee that a child will have future negative outcomes, especially if appropriate support is provided. ACEs and adversity responses can be categorized into two groups: toxic stress and trauma.

Toxic stress is when a child experiences adversity in a pervasive, severe, and extreme manner (e.g., chronic neglect, domestic violence). This intense, lasting exposure to adversity overstimulates the stress response system. The biological effects can lead to problems into adulthood.

Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically and/or emotionally harmful or threatening (e.g., a tornado or school shooting). Trauma causes strong emotions (e.g., fear or helplessness) and physiological symptoms (e.g., rapid heartbeat). Trauma can have lasting effects on physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

For more distinctions between these terms, read this blog post:

<https://www.childtrends.org/adverse-childhood-experiences-different-than-child-trauma-critical-to-understand-why>.

Examples of Traumatic Events

- Sexual abuse
- Physical abuse
- Domestic violence
- Medical trauma
- Natural disasters
- Motor vehicle accidents
- Acts of terrorism
- War experiences
- Death of a family member
- Community or school violence

Toxic Stress and Trauma Outcomes

Various factors influence reactions to adversity and trauma. Such factors include age, culture, ethnicity, familial and peer support, mental health, perpetrator characteristics, temperament, etc. An individual's previous experience with trauma might also be a factor. Trauma can have significant long-term negative effects on youth and lead to difficulties in adulthood. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has identified some potential negative outcomes in the following areas:

- Alcoholism and alcohol abuse
- Depression
- Health-related quality of life
- Illicit drug use
- Ischemic heart disease
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Liver disease
- Poor work performance
- Financial stress
- Suicide attempts
- Adolescent pregnancy
- Risk for intimate partner violence
- Multiple sexual partners
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Smoking and early initiation of smoking
- Early initiation of sexual activity
- Unintended pregnancies
- Fetal death
- Risk for sexual violence
- Poor academic achievement

Responses to Trauma

- Development of new fears or concerns for safety
- Separation anxiety in young children
- Sleep difficulties
- Pervasive feelings of sadness, anxiety, or anger
- Feelings of guilt or shame
- Loss of interest in normal activities
- Reduced concentration
- Destructive behaviors
- Decline in attendance, schoolwork, and overall academic performance
- Somatic complaints and irritability
- Heightened sensitivity to physical touch, sound, comments, criticism, and other stimuli

Resources

- American Psychological Association, *Trauma*
 - <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>
- CDC-Kaiser ACE Study
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html>

Resources continued

- CDC, Infographics on ACEs
 - https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/communicationresources/infographics/index.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fviolenceprevention%2Fpub%2Ftechnicalpackages%2Finfographic.html
- Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, *Resilience*
 - <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>
- Psychology Today, “How to Heal the Traumatized Brain”
 - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/workings-of-well-being/201703/how-to-heal-the-traumatized-brain>
- Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, *Trauma Informed Care*
 - <https://gucchd.georgetown.edu/TraumaInformedCare/>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), *SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*
 - <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>
- SAMHSA, *TIP 57: Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*
 - <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/TIP-57-Trauma-Informed-Care-in-Behavioral-Health-Services/SMA14-4816>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
 - <https://www.nctsn.org/>

For more information or a list of references, please contact the CYFAR PDTA Center at cyfarpdta@umn.edu.

