

ACEs and Resilience...

What does all of this mean? And why should you care?

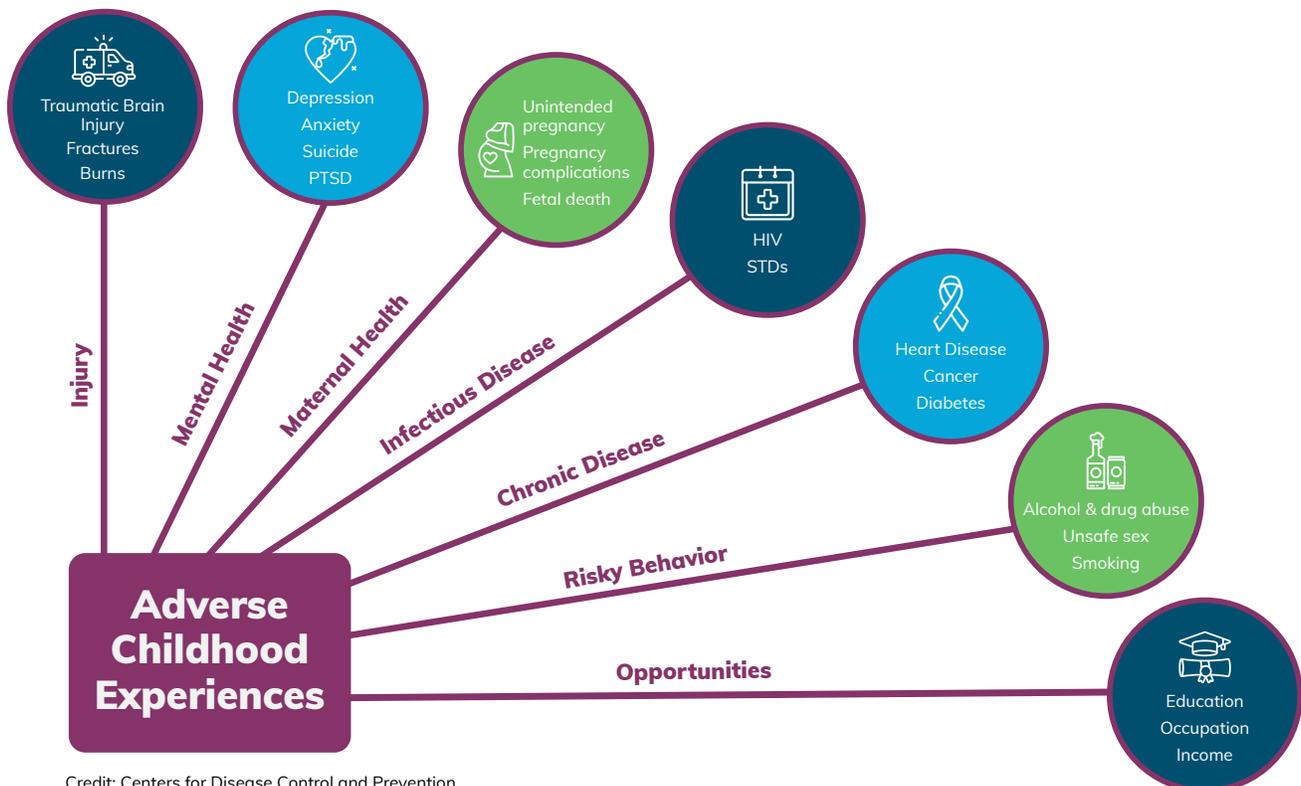
Let's break it down.

What are ACEs?

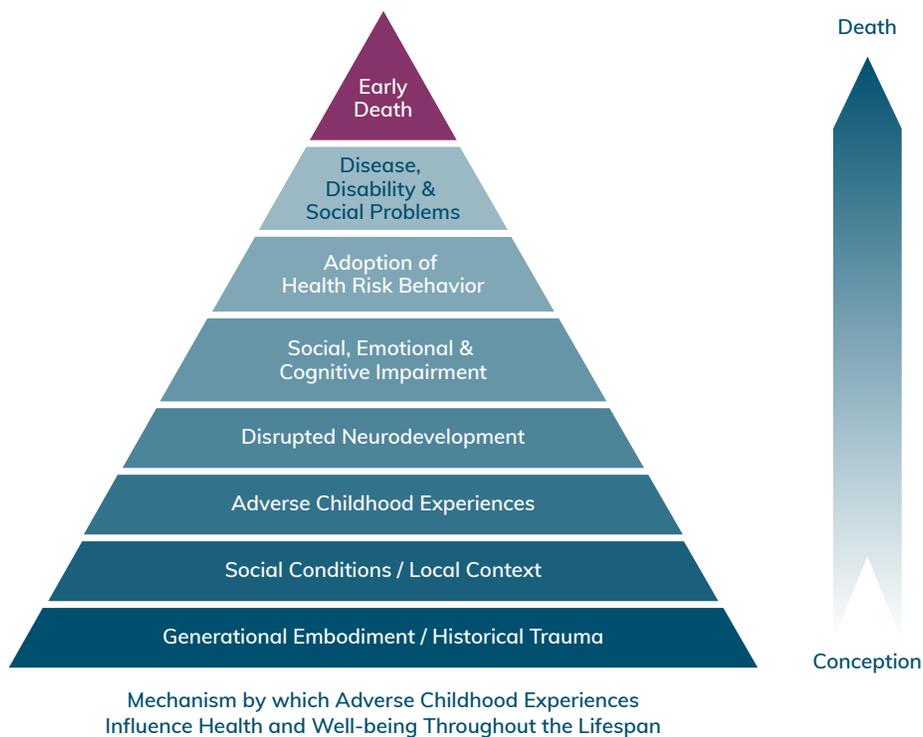
"ACEs" stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences or Adverse Community Environments

Study after study shows that ACEs (such as abuse, neglect, violence, and poverty – to name a few risk factors) cause toxic stress and can lead to significant health, behavioral, and societal issues.

ACEs are Adverse Childhood Experiences. The term comes from a 1998 study by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which studied 17,000 people to better understand how abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction during childhood affect adult health outcomes and behaviors. While we've always had a hunch that there's a connection between childhood trauma (a high ACE score) and adult struggles (not just health- moods and relationships, too), we now have the science of ACEs to explain its reach.



The study established a framework for viewing behaviors as adaptive responses to stress. In other words, behaviors are symptoms, and symptoms can become habits. The study also shows that ACEs are really common, tend to occur together, and are risk factors for a number of health and behavioral issues. In fact, people with four or more ACEs face significantly higher risk for seven out of the ten leading causes of adult death, including heart disease, stroke, cancer, COPD, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, and suicide.



Credit: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

While this original study was a powerful starting point, it was limited in many ways. The participant pool was mostly white, college educated, middle class, and covered by health insurance. The study also didn’t look at other sources of adversity, like community violence, poverty, and inter-generational trauma.

To build on the original study, the Building Resilience Initiative expanded the understanding of ACEs to include both Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adverse Community Experiences. The RYSE Youth Center also expanded this framework to acknowledge the impact of intergenerational trauma.

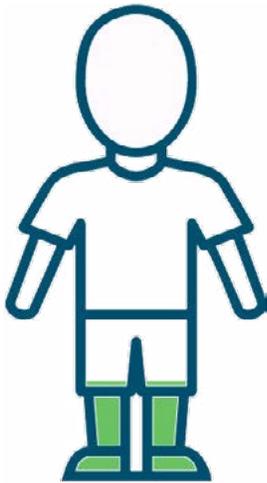
Understanding that adversity affects all of us and the people we serve helps us peel back the onion and get to the core so we can address the root causes of the challenges we’re experiencing, build more resilience, and achieve higher quality outcomes.

What is Resilience?

Resilience is the ability to think clearly, make intentional choices, communicate, and connect with others during stressful situations.

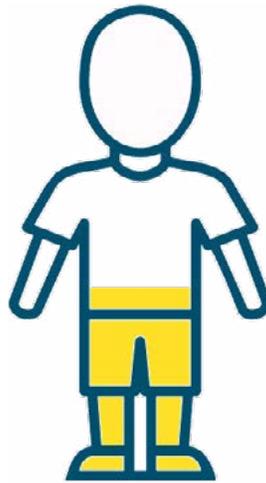
Our resilience can be affected when we have frequent or long exposure to toxic stress from ACEs, especially when we don't have protective factors to act as our "adversity buffer."

There are several types of stress that affect our brains, bodies, and resilience. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University describes three types: positive, tolerable, and toxic stress.



POSITIVE

Positive stress can be motivating. It can get us out of bed in the morning and can help us prepare for a test or meet a deadline. It is typically a short term feeling that might activate our body to spring out of bed or to run away from something that is dangerous. It might help us focus on a task we need to complete or on a potential dangerous person in a crowd. While we may feel nervous or anxious, these feelings are short-lived and appropriate for the situation.



TOLERABLE

When we experience tolerable stress, we might notice that we sweat more and we can feel our heart race. We might feel uncomfortable in our bodies. As stress hormones increase, we experience more intense physical and emotional reactions than we do with positive stress. Tolerable stress is short-lived, but if it happens frequently or over a long period of time, it may develop into toxic stress.



TOXIC

Toxic stress occurs when we are overwhelmed by exposure to adversity or stress without protective buffers in place. Due to the cumulative effects of exposure to stress, a person can develop toxic stress physiology as a result of a single intense experience, shorter and more frequent episodes, or even small doses of exposures over time. This means that although a person could have exposure to lots of adversity, with protective factors in place, their ACEs are not their destiny!

In addition to different types of stress, we each have different windows of tolerance, which dictate if and how we handle stressors.

The goal is to stay in the “Resilience Zone,” where we can think clearly, make intentional choices, communicate, and connect with others. When our bodies perceive fear and we feel unsafe, we often get pushed outside our Resilience Zone. In those moments, our only priority is to survive, so we have an adaptive response: fight, flight, or freeze.



Extended exposure to toxic stress from Adverse Childhood Experiences, Adverse Community Experiences, or intergenerational trauma can make someone’s Resilience Zone smaller, leading to more fighting, fleeing, and freezing. To build up our “resilience muscle” so we can respond better to stress and achieve higher quality outcomes, we must increase our awareness of when we’re inside and outside of our Resilience Zone. That way, we can practice skills to get ourselves back into the zone and reconnect with the thriving world.

Additional Resources

If you feel like you are an immediate threat to yourself, please call 911. You can also contact the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or text HOME to 741741 to talk with a counselor.

Relationships heal trauma and build resilience. The resources offered below each offer access to diverse communities that you can connect to for support.

ACES CONNECTION

<https://www.acesconnection.com/groups>

Supporting communities to accelerate the use of ACEs science...to solve our most intractable problems. We are the human and digital catalyst that unites the people, organizations, systems and communities in the worldwide ACEs movement. We are its main information exchange and resource. And we are a support for hundreds of local, state and national ACEs initiatives.

HEALTHFUL CHAT

<https://www.healthfulchat.org/>

HealthfulChat is dedicated to the philosophy that medical attention combined with peer support in the case of illness, disorder or condition, both physical and/or mental, helps to make the healing process more attainable. That philosophy is why this eclectic peer support network was created. We are offering you health related Chat Rooms, health related Forums and a health related Social Network; all in the name of this online peer support society.

HEALTH UNLOCKED

<https://healthunlocked.com/healmyptsd>

The Heal My PTSD forum is a safe, supportive and informative space where survivors and their caregivers can connect to others with similar experiences. It is run by volunteers, who are PTSD survivors themselves.

MY PTSD.COM

<https://www.myptsd.com/>

PTSD Forum launched on the 06th Sep, 2005, with one simple aim, to provide quality PTSD information and support to all concerned. Our aim is easy when simplified, yet when viewed in depth it comprises a little more work, such as vetted references to quality information that won't send you round in circles, combined with quality support for those who suffer PTSD, support PTSD and family of affected PTSD sufferers. This community is a global, social, PTSD hub providing a means of communication, an outlet, a place where people understand what you're going through.

TRAUMA & CO.

<https://www.traumaandco.com/>

Trauma & Co. aims to give voice to and supports those living and working with trauma and the complex intersections trauma holds with our human experience – including intersections such as mental health, chronic illness, grief, loss, identity, relationships, culture, oppression, life and death (and everything in between that intersects with trauma). We provide one-to-one services to those living with trauma, along with offering both long term and short term community groups. We also support professionals who work with trauma (if you work with humans, you work with trauma), including in an ongoing community group for professionals and one-to-one support services.

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