Why working with adult caregivers with a high ACE Score changes the lives of children

DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA IN ADULTS
Topics today…

- Why working with children isn’t enough.
- Understanding unresolved developmental trauma in adults.
- Recognizing unresolved developmental trauma in adults (emotional, coping, and physical symptoms).
- Helping adult survivors of developmental trauma heal.
Definitions:

- Complex trauma
- Developmental trauma
- CPTSD
- Developmental Trauma Disorder
What’s your ACE Score?

Adverse Childhood Experiences

How Knowing About ACEs HELPS

Dr. Burke Harris describes one woman’s reaction to learning about ACEs:

“These are tears of pure, unadulterated joy.” “Why joy?” … “Because I understand now why I am this way. I understand why my siblings are this way. I understand why my mother raised us the way she did. I understand that I can break this cycle for my children and I understand that I’m not a victim, I’m a survivor.” p. 178

Nadine Burke Harris, MD  The Deepest Well  p 178

Educate Your Doctor

Free Downloadable ACEs Fact Sheet

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Chronic Illness Trauma Studies.com
Why focus on caregivers?

- Children learn to regulate their behavior by anticipating their caregivers’ responses to them.
- When trauma occurs in the presence of a supportive, if helpless, caregiver, the child’s response is likely to mimic that of the parent – the more disorganized the parent, the more disorganized the child.
- Being left to their own devices leaves chronically traumatized children with deficits in emotional self-regulation.
Common misconceptions about all trauma:

- Talking about it means you aren’t over it.
- If you are strong, you can push through.
- Adults know they have unresolved trauma.
- Trauma is UNresolvable.
What causes developmental trauma?

- Abuse – emotional, physical, sexual
- Neglect – emotional, physical, abandonment
- Medical or surgical procedures
- Family or caregiver dysfunction – family drug abuse, witness someone in home being physically abused, addiction in the home
- UNRESOLVED CAREGIVER TRAUMA
Loss of Life Force:

- Complex disruptions of affect regulation
- Disturbed attachment patterns
- Loss of autonomous strivings
- Aggressive behavior against self and others
- Failure to achieve developmental competencies
- Loss of bodily regulation in the areas of sleep, food and self-care
- Altered schemas of the world
- Anticipatory behavior and traumatic expectations
- Multiple somatic problems, from gastrointestinal distress to headaches
- Apparent lack of awareness of danger and resulting self-endangering behaviors
- Self-hatred and self-blame and the chronic feelings of ineffectiveness
What happens emotionally when we have unresolved developmental trauma?

We have “stuck” core fears that are the basis of every decision we make. Our core beliefs:

- There is something fundamentally flawed about me
- If people really knew me they wouldn’t like me
- If I show you who I really am, you won’t love me
- I am afraid of being a failure
- Helplessness/weakness/dependency
- If I express my needs I will be abandoned and rejected
- If I start to feel, I will die or fall apart
We get stuck emotionally…

- We keep making the same mistakes
- We tend to have at least one area of our life that we just cannot work out
- Some people do all of the “right” things and look for the needle in the haystack without any luck.
It's no fun playing hide & seek with you if you're just going to keep jumping into the middle of that stupid haystack every time it's your turn!
What happens to our coping skills when we have unresolved developmental trauma?

- Don’t let people close – reject people first
- Self-esteem is based on appearances and image
- Perfectionism
- Overly nice/sweet/compliant – Good girl or boy
- Proud of how much they can take on – “I can handle it all!”
- Strong and in control
- Successful/Larger than life
- Betrayer/User
- Giver (never takes)
- Takes pride in being overly rational and non-emotive (disdainful of others who are emotionally driven)
- Overly spiritual – pride in other-worldly orientation
What happens to our bodies when we have unresolved developmental trauma?

- Psychological trauma turns on gene expression:
  - Chronic inflammation
  - Auto-immune diseases
- We unequivocally know that there is a highly significant relationship between ACEs and depression, suicide attempts, alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, domestic violence, cigarette smoking, obesity, physical inactivity, and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, skeletal fractures, and liver disease. For example, a Canadian study showed that when traumatized children grow into adults, that the risk of cancer goes up nearly 50%.
- Speechless terror.
Examples of developmental trauma in adults:

- People with childhood histories of trauma, abuse and neglect make up almost our entire criminal justice population
- Drug addict or alcoholic – it is almost impossible to become an addict without a history of developmental trauma
- Burnout – working too much
- Dead eyes – closing eyes to human suffering
5 principals of healing developmental trauma:

- Connection
- Attunement
- Trust
- Autonomy
Simple ways to help survivors of developmental trauma:

- Make sure your words and body language match
- Respect the space of others but be open with your body language
- Use a gentle tone
- Be honest and authentic
- Don’t make promises you can’t keep
- Communicate what you truly appreciate about the person and communicate it honestly
- Remember the aggravating behaviors helped them survive
- Share opportunities to laugh, have joy, and encourage playfulness
Welp, now what?

Within the limits of our current jobs, how can we best address the needs of adult survivors of developmental trauma in the families with which we work?
References and Resources

- ACEs Test: https://acestoohigh.com/got-your-ace-score/
- *The Body Keeps The Score*, Bessel van der Kolk
- *Healing Developmental Trauma*, Heller & LaPierre
- *Waking the Tiger*, Peter Levine