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

# DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA IN ADULTS


# Topics today...

- ① Why working with children isn't enough.
- ① Understanding unresolved developmental trauma in adults.
- ① Recognizing unresolved developmental trauma in adults (emotional, coping, and physical symptoms).
- ① 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**

 Veronique Mead, MD, MA  
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