

Adverse Childhood Experiences

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December 8, 2022

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Introduction

Adverse childhood experiences can be described as traumatic events that occur during childhood (before the age of eighteen) (Bellis et al., 2013). They have lasting effects into adulthood and can be challenging to overcome. It can affect one's mental and physical health, as well as their general well-being. Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, can leave lasting impacts throughout a person's life, without them knowing the cause of what it may have been (Bellis et al., 2013). These events can cause harm or distress in a child's life and therefore becomes detrimental to their developing physical and psychological health (Garrido et al., 2017).

The objective of this study is to explain the benefits of understanding what adverse childhood experiences are and how one may be exposed to them. As well as to show how common it is and helping those who suffer from them connect with those in their community who may relate to their trauma. Many children, and even families, do not know that there is a whole term and topic that can be used to describe what a vast majority of children go through. This study is to exemplify that there are risk factors, preventatives, and resources for those who suffer from adverse childhood experiences.

ACEs are events in a child's life that damage their sense of safety and stability. Some examples of adverse childhood experiences tend to fall under abuse, neglect, and household instability (Leonard, 2020). To be more specific, any type of emotional, verbal, physical or sexual abuse can be experiences at any age, however, when at a younger age, it is more likely to affect the development of a child. Another is those in the household along with the child (Leonard, 2020). This includes a divorce or separation of parents, parents who abuse drugs, someone who suffers from mental illness, and incarceration of a caregiver.

There are many risk factors present with ACEs that are typically amongst those who suffer. For example, those who are of lower socioeconomic status are going to experience things like higher levels of stress and food insecurity and therefore may subject their children to neglect or abuse (Sciamanna, 2022). Along with stress comes coping mechanisms for the parents, and they may not always choose the healthiest one. This is where substance abuse and mental illness may stem from in a parent or guardian (Sciamanna, 2022). Another risk factor is lack of resources (Sciamanna, 2022). The key point of this study is to illuminate the fact that those who suffer from ACEs are not alone and because it is not a commonly discussed topic, most go without knowing that there are available resources to them as they get older to cope with these adverse childhood experiences.

Learning to identify what may be happening in a child's life, or even what they may have been subjected to as a child, is crucial. Some key symptoms of suffering from ACEs are difficulty forming relationships, whether intimate or familial, diagnosis of depression, anxiety, or another mental illness, being subjected to early sexual experiences, which can in turn lead to early pregnancies and/or exposure to infections. Holding a stable job and financial incapability are also prime examples of symptoms experiences by those with ACEs.

The sole purpose of this study is to highlight that there are resources available and even ways to prevent this from happening more often. Some leading examples of prevention methods is to help increase financial security in low-income areas as well as expanding education on the topic and the prevalence of recovery programs. When it comes to coping with adverse experiences, it is important to recognize the resources around them. Therapists and social workers are available along with support groups. Also, lifestyle changes can be very beneficial such as meditation, healthier eating styles, and exercise.

Some key terms that play an important role in this research are trauma and stress. Trauma is described as an event or circumstance that an individual experiences, whether emotionally or physical, that has lasting effects on their functioning and well-being. Trauma can be broken down into three categories: acute, chronic, and complex. Acute trauma is typically a small or minor event while chronic is a recurrent event that continues to reappear in a person's life. Complex trauma, however, is a combination of multiple traumatic events that are apparent in one's life. Stress is the human reaction when an individual is under pressure or feels threatened; often occurs in situations where an individual may lack control.

ACEs were originally studied in 1995-1997. It was conducted through surveys and approximately 61% of the respondents reported at least one ACE. This research consistently found that adverse childhood experiences are common amongst all populations. Along with those who identify with low socioeconomic status, social status, and minorities are more vulnerable.

Knowledge and Application

As a Psychology major and a Medical Humanities minor, I have been exposed to many routes I may be able to take in my career options. As well as an abundance of information and topics that may help me to decide what I may or may not want my focus in my career to be on. I chose adverse childhood experiences for my HHUM 4100 capstone topic because it interests me in a way of learning and that I can relate to it on a personal level and therefore create examples in my own life.

Adverse childhood experiences alone opens up several job opportunities. For example, a school counselor. As a school counselor, I may be able to witness adverse childhood experiences

firsthand. As well as shed light on it in a school setting as this is the age in which classifies an adverse childhood experience to occur. A school counselor, or even any type of counselor, is responsible for creating positive and supportive environments for the kids in a place away from home where they feel comfortable (Tiffany Sauber Millacci, 2021). They can help with mental health concerns, behavioral disruption, and developmental issues. All in which are to help create responsive environments and strengthen families (Tiffany Sauber Millacci, 2021).

Another job I may be able to investigate is a family support specialist. They are responsible for promoting healthy childhood outcomes and it takes place in the home. Their intentions may include to help relieve stress of new parents and to help them find healthy ways to cope with the stress of being a parent (McQuerrey, 2018). They are also responsible for increasing protective factors within the family to avoid adverse childhood experiences (McQuerrey, 2018).

I could also consider a community mental health worker. This career choice may not be exactly for adverse childhood experiences, but I feel as if background in this research would be beneficial to this job. A community mental health worker is responsible for providing resources and support to clients in their area (Liana & Windarwati, 2021). They provide mental health services to those in need to ensure improved general well-being (Liana & Windarwati, 2021). This career is especially responsible for community outreach and informing those in the community that there are resources available to them and how to connect with them (Liana & Windarwati, 2021).

The process of learning more about adverse childhood experiences has been rather beneficial due to the courses I have taken over the last few years. Because of certain courses, I had already been exposed to the types of adverse childhood experiences separately, such as

neglect, parental separation, or substance abuse. As well as the risk factors and protective factors that come along with it. These all have been common topics amongst other things in the psychology and medical humanities field. Putting them altogether and having a term and subject to study related to all these things makes a lot of sense after learning about majority of them independently.

Working as any of the selected careers above, it is important to have a strong background in psychology and the common themes that appear within psychological research. Many of these topics and ideas have been taught over my last four years as a student and I could find many of them beneficial for my research. For example, a key term within psychology is social cognition. Social cognition is the ability and process of an individual to explain social contexts and understand others' behavior (Cherry, 2020). This could be beneficial to work as a school counselor. This is because it is important to be able to identify certain behaviors that the children may exhibit which may correlate to a series of adverse childhood experiences.

I also believe that the nature versus nurture debate is key in this job field as well. This is because this career field is centered around behavior. As a family support specialist or a community mental health worker, it would be beneficial to have a strong foundation in this topic because it helps to identify behaviors that can be created by genetics or by our environment. I feel as if ACEs are heavily environmentally based, however, being able to determine a difference for these could be key in promoting healthy childhood outcomes and promoting positive behaviors within the home. This is also important for identifying risk and protective factors.

Over the course of the last few years, I have been exposed to many classes that will further help me in my career. Throughout each of these classes, I have also been recurrently taught some of the same themes and ideas. Each of these recurring concepts is sure to help me in

my current and future coursework as well as in my career field. Using these specific courses, along with the information learned in my Psychology major and Health and Medical Humanities minor, I will be able to create a study that focuses on the Adverse Childhood Experiences and spreading the awareness of those who may be considered more vulnerable, as well as resources to those who have undergone any of the situations classified under Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Some of the key courses I feel like I will benefit from are from my general education credits. For example, my Research Methodology I & II courses. These courses were abundant in addressing key elements of research. From these, I was able to learn the best way of identifying and creating research questions and problems, conducting a purpose for my studies, and applying methods and procedures for collecting data. It was also beneficial in helping me in my writing and presentation skills, exposing me to the ethical principles of research and how to analyze other research in a critical manner. These essentials will be beneficial in me furthering my research on Adverse Childhood Experiences by allowing me to ensure that my research is done properly and analytically. As well as helping me in my conduction of collecting data. For my research project, I will be using a survey. These classes will have helped me to build a strong foundation in my questions and to ensure that they are proposed in an ethical manner, but also gathering the information needed for me to study. The critical analysis that was taught in these classes will also help me in my research as I will be able to interpret other studies on this topic and understand where I can learn and differentiate from their procedures.

I also enrolled in several developmental psychology courses. For example, Child Psychology, Adolescent Psychology and Psychology of Development and Aging. Each of these courses were able to break down key behaviors and traits at different individual stages of life.

This will help me not only in my current research on adverse childhood experiences and behavior, but also in my long-term career. These courses taught me the major transitions in human life from fetal development until old age and death. These courses will be beneficial to my research because they allow me to use information from all ages, especially when it comes to coping. I feel as if my Child Psychology course and possibly even my Adolescent Psychology course background will be most beneficial as Adverse Childhood Experiences take place before the age of eighteen. From these courses, I will be able to use my knowledge to understand why ACEs affect children the way they do and why individuals below the age of eighteen are the most vulnerable to this type of trauma.

Another Psychology course that I took was Psychology of Adjustment. The key focus of this course is to help understand the adaptation to changes in one's physical and social environment. It goes in depth to balancing conflicting needs and the challenges that are faced in doing so. It also discusses how to maintain a healthy well-being and quality of life as well as dealing with the consequences of natural stress and preserving happiness. This course is beneficial to my research as it specifically discusses coping skills and lifestyle changes at all ages. The information learned in this course will be helpful in my research to help implement ways for individuals who have undergone Adverse Childhood Experiences to actively take charge of their lives and to help them improve their adjustment to the common changes they have experienced and will continue to experience throughout their lives.

I also took a few courses in critical thinking. For example, Critical Thinking About Research and Critical Thinking and Communication. These were both useful in helping to learn cognitive skills and attention to detail in research and coursework. They also helped me learn how to reflect on my own knowledge and the information that was being presented to me in

these classes and how to apply these skills to other classes as well. It taught me how to understand my own point of view, as well as others' and how to understand and observe. Along with my Research Methodology classes, these will also be beneficial to my research conduction. From these courses, I will be able to critically think about how to help my community understand the importance of the awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences and therefore reinforce the risk factors and preventative measures that can be taken in a healthy and productive manner.

Body

Based off of my coursework and career goals, I strive to conduct a study that will help to explain the benefits of understanding what Adverse Childhood Experiences are and how one may be exposed to them. I want to show how common it is for individuals to suffer from them and how to connect with those within their community who can relate to their trauma and produce healthy coping strategies. The key focus is to highlight the risk factors, preventative measures, and resources available for those who may or may not know they are impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Through a survey combined of open- and close-ended questions, I wish to anonymously seek out those in my close community who may have been exposed to childhood adversity. Through these questions, I will examine whether they have been exposed to any of the most common ACEs, such as abuse, neglect, and trauma, and filter out the portion that may have already been able to seek help and the others who are not aware of the resources available to them.

In previous research, such as the Kaiser study from 1995-1997, researchers collected data from over 17,000 individuals through anonymous surveys related to their experiences from

childhood and their current health status (*About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study |Violence Prevention/Injury Center/CDC*, 2021). This original study found that there is a direct link from childhood adversity to adult life and challenges (*About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study |Violence Prevention/Injury Center/CDC*, 2021). From these findings, Adverse Childhood Experiences were then categorized into three groups: abuse, neglect, and household challenges. Each of these groups is these categorized into its own subsections. This research goes to show that these experiences are common amongst all populations (*About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study |Violence Prevention/Injury Center/CDC*, 2021), however some minority groups, based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status, do tend to be more vulnerable. There has been a questionnaire created to assess those who may think they have been exposed to childhood adversity. This questionnaire is a set of about ten questions asking about a youths' home life before the age of eighteen (*Adverse Childhood Experiences*, 2022). The results are then calculated based off of the number of questions that were answered "yes" (*Adverse Childhood Experiences*, 2022). In other words, as the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for negative outcomes in a person's life.

Although the sole purpose of this study is to help identify Adverse Childhood Experiences, it is also important to understand their impact on adult life. Stress is a key term that was defined early, but in brief, it is ones reaction to a state of pressure or a threat (*What is stress?*, 2022). Toxic stress from childhood adversity can change brain development and affect how an individual may in turn respond to stress (*What Are ACEs? And How Do They Relate to Toxic Stress?*, 2022).

It is rather common from adults who experienced one or more ACEs to suffer from physical illness, such as autoimmune diseases, cancer, or diabetes (*Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) - Child Welfare Information Gateway*, 2020). As learned from the

commonly discussed nature versus nurture debate, we know that some of our genes respond to the environment in which we are developing within. When our environment becomes toxic and stressful, our genes developed to manage stress become inhibited. Adults who identify with Adverse Childhood Experiences have a higher stress response and lack the ability to regulate their stressors (*What Are ACEs? And How Do They Relate to Toxic Stress?*, 2022). Being in such a stressful environment, over time, begins to deregulate our immune system and can compromise our physiological functioning (*What Are ACEs? And How Do They Relate to Toxic Stress?*, 2022).

Adults who suffer from effects of childhood adversity are also more likely to be mentally unstable (Nelson et al., 2020). The consequences of ACEs affect us mentally almost the same way that it does physically, it disrupts physiological functioning (Nelson et al., 2020). When exposed to unnecessary and abundant stressors, a change in the size of the brain may occur; this can lead to underdevelopment and deficits (Nelson et al., 2020). The biggest challenge when it comes to the correlation between Adverse Childhood Experiences and mental health is depression. Chronic stress and exposure in a child's developmental stages can lead adults to suffer from high rates of depression, anxiety, and are also more likely to have suicidal tendencies (Nelson et al., 2020).

Social stability and risky behaviors also increase positively with the number of ACEs recorded for an individual. Along with the disruption in development of the brain, comes lack of social stability and an increase in likeliness to engage in risky behaviors (Garrido et al., 2017). As discussed, the toxic stress experienced in one's childhood commonly affects the brain and therefore can negatively affect the decision-making centers, leading adults to engage in more unsafe affairs such as drug or alcohol misuse (Garrido et al., 2017). Along with these risky

behaviors, these same adults are more likely to fall short in work ethic and performance (Garrido et al., 2017).

However, even though you are more susceptible to some of these things as an ACE victim, it does not mean you are doomed to a life of unhappiness and instability. While you may have suffered one or more Adverse Childhood Experience, it is important to understand how to make something positive out of them; and that is the sole purpose of my study. Loving relationships with other family members that may have not resided in the home, teachers and friends are crucial when it comes to coping with childhood trauma. Entering adulthood, it is important to make yourself knowledgeable of these experiences and the detrimental behaviors that may accompany them. Many people with high ACE scores are able to live productive lives. However, it is common that they may become concerned that their ACEs may interfere with their desired lifestyle. That is why there are several resources available to help them achieve the life they want and help identify problematic behaviors that have arisen or may arise later on.

Therapists and counselors are a key resource in helping to not only uncover Adverse Childhood Experiences, but to help with the risk factors that may accompany them or the trauma that came along with them (*8 ways people recover from post childhood adversity syndrome*, 2016). There is nothing wrong with seeking back-up in unpacking your past. Partnering with a therapist or a counselor, whether in a school, work, or independent setting, can help bring out the positive healing process. Not only can therapy help to comfort us in a time of stress, or overcoming it, but it can also be beneficial in rebuilding our brain the way it was originally in route for (*8 ways people recover from post childhood adversity syndrome*, 2016).

While therapists and counselors may help with dealing with the results of Adverse Childhood Experiences, it is just as important to promote the preventative factors to help avoid a

child from these traumatic experiences. For example, a family support specialist can assist in creating a sustainable environment for children and their families to avoid ACEs such as neglect or abuse (*Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences |Violence Prevention|Injury Center|CDC, 2022*). They are also there to help promote parenting skills and relationships, strengthening financial support for families, and offering treatment to those who are already engaging in risky behaviors (*Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences |Violence Prevention|Injury Center|CDC, 2022*).

Results

Throughout a conduction of my own survey, I sought out responses to the exposure and common knowledge of adverse childhood experiences in my community (Braun et al, 2020). In a series of seven questions, I asked for responses regarding exposure to adverse childhood experiences as well as personal efforts to seek out help. The responses of 21 individuals were recorded through this survey and was conducted through snowball sampling.

Based off of the first question, what does the phrase “adverse childhood experience” mean to you, results showed that most respondents seem to have a general idea of what it may mean. Most answers followed suit through using the term “trauma” and noticing that they are apparent before the age of eighteen or occur in your childhood years.

In the second question, respondents were asked to identify their family financial situation before they were eighteen. They were given four answer choices ranging from less than \$35,000 annual household income to more than \$120,000 annual household income. Most of the recipients fell in the less than \$35,000 annual household income to \$35,000-\$75,000 annual household income range. This was a bit surprising as I expected one answer to be more

prominent than the other, however the only answer that stood out was that no respondents had an annual family financial income of more than \$120,000.

Question three asked the recipients if they had ever been exposed to insulting, degrading, or humiliating language in their household, whether directed at them or another member, before the age of eighteen. 86% of the results concluded that they were exposed to this type of language and tactics in their household. However, only 43% were actually experiencing it themselves. The others were directed at another member of the household, but in turn still had an effect on the respondent.

The fourth question goes on to ask if the respondent ever felt in harms way or unsafe in their household before the age of eighteen. Luckily, over half of the responses concluded that they were neither harmed nor felt unsafe in their home. However, there were a few responses that explained physical abuse to another member of the household or to the individual who responded.

Question five discusses the loss of a parent, whether it be by divorce, abandonment, or death. They also had an option to choose that none of these things happened before the age of eighteen. The most common response at 42.9% was divorce. The second most common response at 28.6% was that the respondent did not lose a parent to divorce, abandonment, or death before the age of 18. Abandonment and death both had a 14.3% response.

Question six and seven both take the previous questions into consideration. Question six asks that if you answered yes to any of the previous questions, have you taken any steps to cope with or understand the things that have happened and if so, what were those steps. Only 28.5% of the respondents did not seek out help or to take any steps. It is not clear whether this is because they did not experience any type of childhood adversity or whether they were not sure of the

resources available to them. Question seven goes into more detail for those who did reach out asking if they have ever reported any of these incidents to an authority figure as if so, who. They were given the option of a school counselor, therapist, family member, police, or could fill in a text box for another type of authority figure not listed. Family members, other, and therapists had the most responses being equal at 28.6%. The other box was used for several responses such as no authority figure, sports coaches, or a member of their church.

The purpose of this survey was to examine not only how common childhood adversity is but to understand how much those who responded have been exposed to and how many are aware of the resources available to them to help understand what they went through and that they are not alone.

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