

Attachment and Adverse Early Childhood Experiences

The experiences we have early in our lives and particularly in our early childhoods have a huge impact on how we grow and develop, our physical and mental health, and our thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Two important factors to think about when considering our mental wellbeing, are the quality of our attachment relationships and our experience of ACEs.

What is Attachment?

Attachment refers to the pattern of the relationships we have had with our parents or carers early in our lives. It is the emotional bond that forms between a parent and child from birth and has a huge impact on our development. The way a parent or carer responds to their child will impact on the child's attachment style. This attachment style becomes a template for how we build future relationships with others in our lives, and also a template of how we feel about ourselves and other people. If we have experienced a relationship with a parent or carer which has been positive, we will develop a positive template for other relationships as well as positive feelings about ourselves and others. But sometimes how children are cared for is not so positive, for various reasons, and this can make it harder for people to make and maintain positive relationships in the future, manage their feelings and behaviour, or feel good about themselves or others. When our early attachments have been negative and these lead us to go on to have difficulties with relationships and our mental wellbeing, this can sometimes be described as attachment difficulties.

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are “highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. They can be a single event, or prolonged threats to, and breaches of, the young person's safety, security, trust or bodily integrity.” (Young Minds, 2018).

Examples of ACEs:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Living with someone who abused drugs
- Living with someone who abused alcohol

- Exposure to domestic violence
- Living with someone who has gone to prison
- Living with someone with serious mental illness
- Losing a parent through divorce, death or abandonment

How Common are ACEs?

In a 2014 UK study on ACEs, 47% of people experienced at least one ACE with 9% of the population having 4+ ACEs (Bellis et al, 2014).

Impact of ACEs

Just like attachment, experiencing ACEs can have an impact on our future physical and mental health, and often ACEs can be barriers to healthy attachment relationships forming for children. Some of the effects of ACEs on our physical and mental health are:

- An increase in the risk of certain health problems in adulthood, such as cancer and heart disease, as well as increasing the risk of mental health difficulties, violence and becoming a victim of violence.
- An increase in the risk of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. 1 in 3 diagnosed mental health conditions in adulthood directly relate to ACEs.
- The longer an individual experiences an ACE and the more ACEs someone experiences, the bigger the impact it will have on their development and their health.

Some of the other things exposure to ACEs can impact, are:

- The ability to recognise and manage different emotions.
- The capacity to make and keep healthy friendships and other relationships.
- The ability to manage behaviour in school settings.
- Difficulties coping with emotions safely without causing harm to self or others.

If you recognise the impact of difficult early experiences in your own life or are struggling with relationships, emotional wellbeing, or self-esteem, it can be helpful to explore these patterns in a safe and supportive space.

Psychotherapy can offer a chance to make sense of your past experiences, understand how they may still be affecting you, and begin to develop healthier ways of relating to yourself and others. If you would like support with any of

the issues raised in this article, please feel free to get in touch to find out more about how I work and whether therapy might be helpful for you.