

ADVERSITY

Adversity can take many different forms for people and is sometimes interchangeably used with trauma. In general, if an experience is difficult for you emotionally, threatens your safety, or frightens you extremely, then that experience is a trauma. SAMSHA defines trauma as an event, series of events or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as harmful or threatening with lasting adverse effects on a person's functioning and well-being. Chronic stress is seen in people who have experienced an ongoing trauma that causes their fight or flight response to be consistently activated. This is often damaging when it occurs in childhood.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is often associated with the concept of adversity. ACEs are defined as emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and neglect in the home, witnessing violence in the home or community, mental illness/suicide attempt in the home, having a household member incarcerated, and parental divorce/separation prior to the age of 18. Some research also adds the experience of losing a parent or important figure and/or the experience of discrimination based on an aspect of identity prior to 18 to the list of ACEs. Many ACEs are experienced as a series of events that lead to chronic stress in children. Discrimination based on an aspect of identity can also lead to biological changes over time and trauma-like symptoms in a person.

The impact of ACEs can be devastating to children and have lifelong impacts on health. It is important to note that every experience with ACEs is different. There is no exact science stating how a childhood experience will impact a life. There is evidence showing the definite relationship between adversity prior to 18 and the impact on health (eg., increased risk for suicidal ideation, mental health concerns and difficulties within relationships). Trauma may cause very strong emotional reactions that vary from person to person as each individual is unique in the way we view the world. Understanding typical reactions to adversity can help you cope effectively with your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in order to process the trauma in the healthiest way possible. Research regarding neuroplasticity and resilience is encouraging with data supporting the potential for people to rewire brain paths that may have been impacted by ACEs through learning/engaging in mindfulness, movement, healthy sleep, healthy relationships, therapy, and healthy eating. More resources on the impact of adversity and changes we can make can be found below.

Handouts/Websites

Preventing ACEs- CDC (PDF)

Trauma Resource Institute

SAMSHA Trauma and Violence

The Impact of Discrimination - APA

Intergenerational Trauma - APA

Resilience-APA

Trauma-APA

Five Science-Backed Strategies to Build Resilience

Podcasts/Videos

TED Talk: Nadine Burke Harris, “How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime”

TED Talk: Benjamin Perks, “How Do We Stop Childhood Adversity from Becoming a Life Sentence”

TED Talk: Valerie Anderson, “Resilience in a Traumatic World”

Podcast: The Grass Gets Greener: Overcoming Childhood Trauma and Thriving in Life Through Inspiring Stories

[Podcast: What Trauma Have You Inherited?](#)

Podcast: The Trauma Therapist

Books

Resilient: How to Grow and Unshakable Core of Calm, Strength, and Happiness, by Rick Hanson

Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal, by Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Life After Trauma Workbook, by Dena Rosenbloom

It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle, by Mark Wolynn

My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hears and Bodies, by Resmaa Menakem