

Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences

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Trauma exposure, particularly child maltreatment (e.g., neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse), has been established as one of the main determinants of emotional dysregulation and is also a known risk factor for psychiatric disorders, especially depression and PTSD (McLaughlin et al., 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2013). Moreover, several prior studies have shown that trauma exposure is clearly associated with profound deficits in emotional regulation across the entire lifespan, including during preschool (Langevin, Hebert, Allard-Dansereau; Bernard-Bonnin, 2016), adolescence (Shields & Cicchetti, 1997; Vetteese, Dyer, Li, & Wekerle, 2011) and even adulthood (Briere & Rickards, 2007; Thompson, Hannan, & Miron, 2014; Dunn et al., 2018).

Trauma occurs when we are faced with an experience that overwhelms our ability to process incoming information both at the time of that experience and in future situations (Barta, 2018). Dr. Michael Barta suffered from trauma himself as a child which led him to addictions that ultimately landed him in jail and almost destroyed his life. In his book, *T/NSA*, he wrote that trauma occurs when our natural defenses are unable to keep us safe from physical, emotional, or mental threats or harm (Barta, 2018).

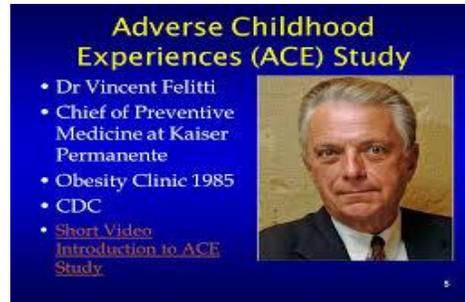


In the mid-1980's, Dr. Vincent Felitti noticed a puzzling and paradoxical trend in the obesity clinic he was heading. Specifically, many of his participants who were having the most success in losing weight were dropping out only to gain the weight back. He interviewed the nearly 300 participants and discovered a surprising pattern: almost all of the dropouts had suffered some form of childhood trauma (Kain & Terrell, 2018). This initial study grew into a major public health study with Dr. Felitti teaming up with Dr. Anda at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that continues to this day, involving more than 17,000 individuals. This research came to be known as the **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)** Study (Felitti et al., 2014). In this study, people were asked about ten different types of traumatic events that happened to them when they were children to include physical and sexual abuse, family problems, and neglect.

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The **ten reference categories** experienced during childhood or adolescence are as below, with their prevalence in parentheses (Felitti and Anda, 2009):

Abuse

- Emotional – recurrent threats, humiliation (11%)
- Physical - beating, not spanking (28%)
- Contact sexual abuse (28% women, 16% men, 22% overall) •

Household dysfunction

- Mother treated violently (13%)
- Household member was alcoholic or drug user (27%)
- Household member was imprisoned (6%)
- Household member was chronically depressed, suicidal, mentally ill, or in psychiatric hospital (17%)
- Not raised by both biological parents (23%)

Neglect

- Physical (10%)
- Emotional (15%)

Somewhat surprising in the Felitti studies was that emotional abuse was more likely to cause depression than any other kind of trauma – even sexual abuse. This suggests that the kind of treatment children receive from parents is a tremendously powerful predictor of positive outcome and when that trust is broken, devastation surely ensues.

Dr. Michael Barta (2018) defines ACEs a little differently as summarized below:



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- Sexual assault or abuse
- Physical assault or abuse
- Psychological or emotional trauma
- Serious accidents, medical procedures, or illnesses
- Manmade or natural disasters
- Witnessing violence to include domestic abuse
- School violence to include bullying
- Traumatic grief or unwanted separation
- Terrorism or war
- Betrayal by others to include relational trauma

The experts in the field divide trauma into two categories:

- [Big T trauma](#): Traumas that are associated with horrific single events such as natural disasters, terrorism, and war.
- [Little t trauma](#): Trauma that are smaller in nature such as bullying, neglect, and betrayal.

BIG T	little t
• War	• Emotional abuse
• Disasters	• Neglect
• Childhood sexual abuse	• Failure experiences
• Physical abuse	• Phobia related experiences
• Car wreck	• Losses
• Crime victimization	• Stress at work or school
• Witnessing death	• Bullying
• Domestic violence	• Domestic violence

Examples of small t traumas as noted by Barta (2015):

- They were not attuned to by their caregiver
- They were invalidated for the child they were
- They were not recognized emotionally
- They were rejected
- They were subjected to parental separation or divorce
- They were made to feel inadequate
- They were made to feel responsible for making the family feel good
- They were sexually abused
- They were punished for being authentic
- They were controlled by a parent's anger
- They were made to feel responsible for regulating the feelings and emotions of others
- They were not taught how to deal with their own emotions and/or were punished when trying to do so
- They were made to feel unsafe
- They were inappropriately disciplined/punished – kicked, slapped, or violently shaken
- They experienced the loss of a pet, young love, or friendship

In my work as a pediatric psychologist, far more of my patients have been subjected to “little t” traumas and I agree with Barta that these experiences have a tremendous impact on how children view

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themselves, their relationships, and their place in the world. Moreover, the long-term consequences of these traumas are tremendous and often lead to a total inability or impaired ability to access appropriate responses to threatening events and can lead to chronic hyperarousal, intense anxiety, panic, mood instability, poor emotional/behavioral regulation, feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, shame, and even immobility. Of all traumas, relational (or loss of connection) trauma is particularly devastating.



Trauma changes the brain neurologically

As Dr. Felitti in a 2009 lecture points out, studies reveal many shocking long-term horrible outcomes when we are exposed to ACEs and this raises exponentially according to how many of them, we have been exposed to. The results indicate that for every category of traumatic experience we have had as a child, we are dramatically more likely to be depressed as an adult. If we have ACE scores of four or higher, we are 260% more likely to have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease than someone with a score of 0, 240% more likely to contract hepatitis, 460% more likely to experience depression, and 1,220% more likely to attempt suicide. If we have had six categories of traumatic events as a child, we are five times more likely to become depressed as an adult and if we have had seven categories, we are a terrifying 3,100 percent more likely to attempt suicide as an adult (Felitti et al., 2014; Felitti 2004; Felitti and Anda, 2009; Felitti et al., 1998). In the 2009 lecture, Dr. Felitti offered the following graphs which nicely detail the dramatic impact that ACEs have on our society:



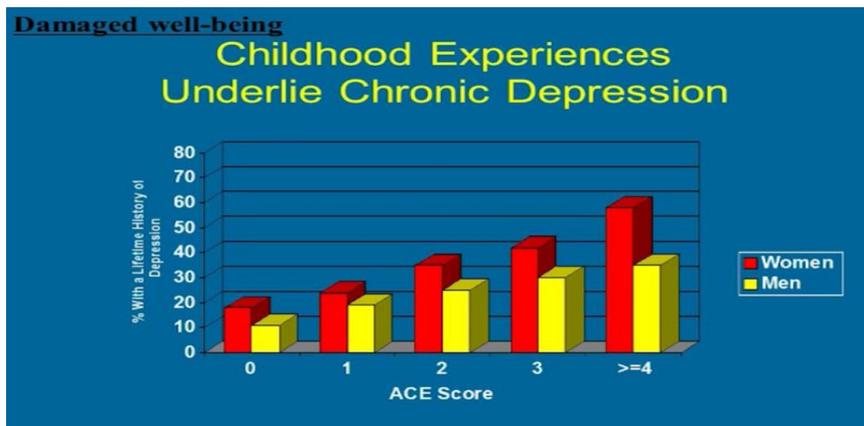
Dr Vincent Felitti (2009) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEFFThbAYnQ> (Accessed February 17, 2020)

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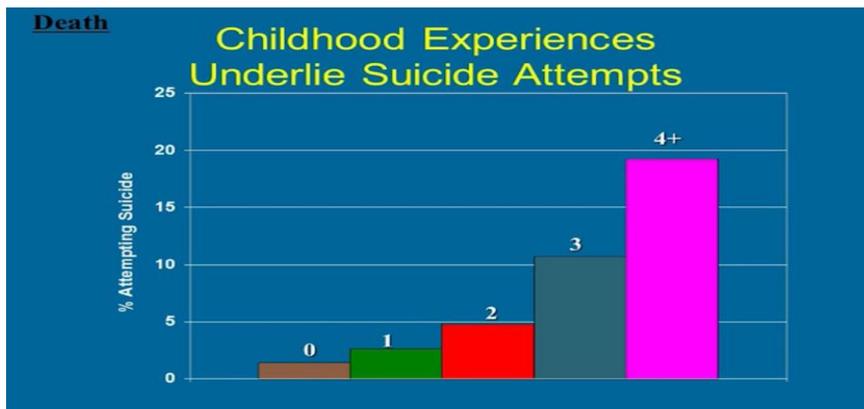
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Dr Vincent Felitti (2009) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEFFThbAYnQ> (Accessed February 17, 2020)



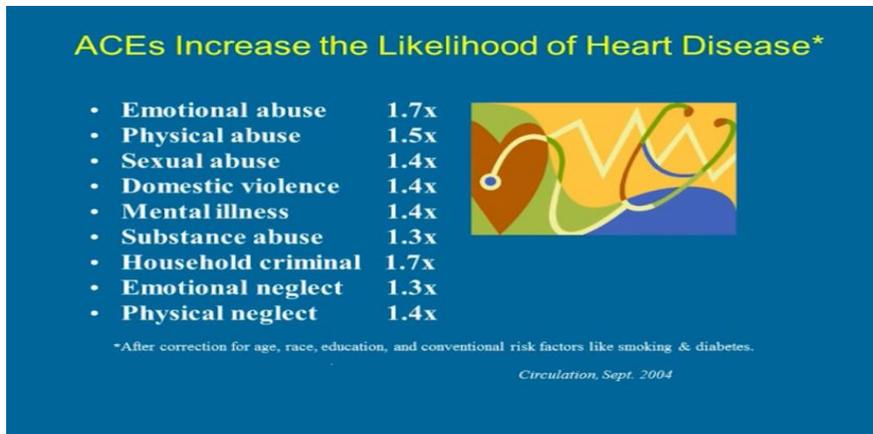
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My own clinical experience suggests that the most common forms of trauma are due to a lack of attunement or connection with parental or adult figures while growing up. As Barta (2015) writes, “These deficiencies are not about bad parenting but about a parent’s inability or diminished ability to respond to the child’s emotional needs. Most parents are doing the best they can with the tools they have, but whether deliberately or inadvertently, the traumas of our childhood can have tremendous impact on our lives” (Barta, 2018, p. 17).

As trauma expert Dr. Peter Levine notes in his book, *Healing Trauma*, “Trauma is much about loss of connection – to ourselves, to our bodies, to our families, to others, and to the world around us. This loss of connection is often hard to recognize because it doesn’t happen all at once. It can happen slowly over time, and we adapt to these subtle changes sometimes without even noticing them. These are the hidden effects of trauma, the ones most of us keep to ourselves...Our choices become limited as we avoid certain, feelings, people, and situations. The result of a gradual constriction of freedom is the loss of vitality and potential for the fulfilment of our dreams” (Levine, 2008, p. 9).

Most important to normal development is “**social engagement**” which is the ability to know, understand, regulate, and express emotions in the present moment. Even though everyone is born with a social engagement system (i.e., a neurological system that promotes human connection), we know that early trauma can disrupt its normal development. Anda et al (2018) note, “Early adverse experiences may disrupt the ability to form long-term attachments in adulthood. The unsuccessful

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search for attachment may lead to sexual relations with multiple partners with resultant promiscuity and other issues related to sexuality.” As a result of adverse developmental trauma, the ensuing loss of connection with our inner self, our bodies, others, and the world around us, we are predisposed to engage in addictive behaviors to relieve the emotional dysregulation that torments us.

[You might want to take a moment and take the ACE quiz yourself to see where you fall.](#)



The ACEs Quiz

For each “yes” answer, add 1. The total number at the end is your cumulative number of ACEs.
Before your 18th birthday:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever... Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
4. Did you often or very often feel that ... No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
5. Did you often or very often feel that ... You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
6. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?
7. Was your mother or stepmother:
Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? or Sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?
9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide

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10. Did a household member go to prison?

Total ACE score: _____

Source: NPR, ACEsTooHigh.com. This ACEs Quiz is a variation on the questions asked in the original ACEs study conducted by CDC researchers. (cited in Shonkoff, 2015).

The implications here are enormous. Specifically, in order to promote healing, we must be able to pinpoint where in the lifespan people hurt us physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually, whether intentionally or accidentally. If we can resolve our developmental wounds, we can move on and experience a more fulfilling life. Hope can be rekindled and ignite within us a burning fire of joy and passion for life.

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