

Recognizing and Healing Your Toxic Stress

You have a lot going for you as an adult. You have a good job. You might be in a relationship you are happy with. You might even be at the top of your field, recognized for the work you do and envied for the life you lead. Or you might just be making do. You think you are resilient because you came from humble, or a modest, background, and made it. You survived a rough childhood. Sure you feel down at times. And yes, you have certain feelings in your body and mind, but you have them under control. You are tough, and you power through obstacles, barriers and problems. Maybe you have a bit of an anger problem, but your family and friends understand. They give you some slack. And when you go out for an evening, you take a cab home instead of drive. You have pretty decent control of your life, and most of the time you believe you have it under control.

Or do you?

The science of life and living has advanced a lot in the past 30 years. We recognize that we can endure a lot of abuse during childhood, and survive. Do we have a choice? As children, we cannot change our environment. The parents we are born to are the parents we must rely on to raise us. And what happens to us as children matters. And what happens to us as children happens because we have the parents we have. Now this is not an attack on parents. What may have happened to you probably happened to them. And what happened to them is probably happening to you. You might be doing well as an adult, but you have issues. Well, they had issues too, so you grow up believing that the issues you share are issues faced by everyone. But they are not.

If you grew up with certain experiences in common with your parents, a combination of brain adaptation and culture leaves you with an approach to life that may not be ideal, or even satisfactory. You might have what the American Academy of Pediatrics refers to as Toxic Stress, or stress experienced at a time when your brain was developing rapidly. And if you have Toxic Stress, you probably don't know it. You think you are normal and just have bad luck. Or you have found a way to convince people that you are who you are and they need to accept you as you are. What is Toxic Stress, and how come you aren't aware of it if you have it?

In the 1990's, a ground breaking study was conducted at the Kaiser Permanente medical center in San Diego. 17,400 patients were asked questions about their childhood experiences. The results shocked the scientists who conducted the study. What they found was that 10 experiences that many children had while growing up had a strong impact on both their health and behaviors as adults. Here is one to the results. If you had 6 of the experiences asked about, your life expectancy was 20 years shorter than an adult who had none of them. Instead of living until your 80's, you only make it to your 60's. In scientific terms, the study showed both cause for the health and behavior outcomes, and significant correlation. What happened to you has a child was found to matter, a lot.

The study was called the Adverse Childhood Experience Study (or ACES). And the 10 questions that were asked leads to a profile of pretty common childhood experiences shared by many adults. Here they are. Remember. The question is, did you experience this during childhood?

- Did you have an absent biological parent
- Was one or both your parents an alcoholic

- Did you have a parent or family member in prison
- Was one of your parents or family members depressed or have a mental illness
- Did you witness your mother being treated violently in the household
- Were you a victim of contact sexual abuse
- Were you physically abused
- Were you emotionally abused
- Were you physically neglected
- Were you emotionally neglected

The results showed that the experiences were common among a significant portion of the studied population. And the population that participated in the study weren't just a troubled population. For the most part, they were white, employed and middle class, most with some college and middle aged (average age of 57). This was a group of successful people. But they often had dark sides because of what happened to them. Successful but damaged.

Let's examine how many people had ACE's by the number experienced. But first, let's make it clear that not everyone experiences every negative we discuss. The more ACE's you have experienced, the more likely it is that you will have a behavior or health outcome, but it doesn't mean that you will have them. Part of the population studied had no ACE's, but still have some of the poor health or behavior outcomes. And part of the population with 7 or more ACE's might not have any (although unlikely). And if you have health or behavior outcomes, how severe they become varies greatly. There is no common experience, and that makes it somewhat difficult to accept being a victim of Toxic Stress. The first step is to answer the questions about the 10 experiences listed above, and see how many you think you had growing up (birth through age 17).

Growing up with multiple ACE's has an impact on your growing brain. Each ACE represents a threat to a child and their brain develops with each threat in mind. We are all born with an instinctive response to threats. Your Threat Response is automatic. You don't really know about it. It's not triggered by the fear of emotion. In nature, if your brain waited to recognize fear and react to it, you might be injured or dead. The Threat Response prepares your body to "Fight, Flee or Freeze." To prepare your body, the Threat Response releases a chemical that starts a chain of reactions in your body. Oxygen and Glucose (energy) flow to your Prefrontal Cortex, the thinking part of your brain, is diminished. Cortisol is dumped into your blood and your body prepares for physical activity and healing from injury if that happens. Adults who have had multiple ACE's while growing up have a Threat Response that is more frequent than Adults who have not had ACE's. Because of what happened to you as children, you are different. But you don't know that because your life is the only one you are familiar with. You don't recognize if you have Toxic Stress. But your brain does. And your brain will do all it can to help you survive. That's its mission.

So let's assume you have multiple ACE's, and you have certain types of feelings. You feel afraid a lot. Or you are frequently angry and acting out. Perhaps you experience incredible anxiety and fear what might happen to you. Now you are feeling the Emotions that attach to what your body does. The two major emotions you feel are Fear (from experiences in your past) and Anxiety (worried about what might happen in your future). However your emotions develop, they are linked to the way you were raised. And that, too, is different from how others you know were raised. You are unique. No one else has either the same experiences you have, nor have they developed the way you did. And that's neither good nor bad. It just is.

With multiple ACE's, your brain is busy meeting the threats it believe it is experiencing. And it does so a lot. But because you aren't typically need to flee or fight, you spend most of your time in a freeze state. Your body is not using up the chemicals your brain produces to help you flee or fight. When you freeze, your body must find other ways of neutralizing the chemicals. So they are either stored, channeled into behaviors or dissipated in other ways your brain finds soothing. A lot of things have been happening because of your Toxic Stress, and this is just one of several way your body might react.

As a baby, there isn't much you can do to reach to activation of your Threat Response. You can fuss, cry and seek comfort in food. Perhaps your mother gives you a bottle with a sugary drink in it. Your brain recognizes an accelerated dose of glucose from the sugar and reacts positively. Your brain decides it wants more sugar, so it causes you to learn how to get more sugar. You might cry or fuss until you get it. Or you might seek it out when you learn how to crawl or walk. You may avoid certain foods in favor of the sugary foods. Your brain knows that sugar makes you feel better and it makes sure you learn how to get more of it.

And then you get a cold. Your parents don't happen to have a pediatric alcohol free cold formula around so they give you some of theirs to try and soothe you. The alcohol hits your brain and WOW, it feels great. You get some relief from your Toxic Stress. So the brain remembers the feeling and looks for every opportunity to get more. As you start walking, you might use the fight part of your threat response to take a toy away from a playmate. And your brain feels good. The little fight you have to get the toy gives you pleasure twice. You dissipate of the the Threat Response chemicals and you get something that makes your brain feel good—the toy. If you parents smoke around you, the brain remembers how the smoke makes it feel. As you grow older, some things make you feel better. There are many things that can make you feel better, but some are not available to everyone. Perhaps you are a good looking child and adults tell you how beautiful or handsome you are. That's more brain candy and pretty soon you start seeking our compliments. You start paying attention to how you dress and if you get a compliment about your clothing, your brain recognizes it and pretty soon you start thinking about clothing and what to buy. Do you get the idea now? Your brain finds something that makes it feel better, and helps you find ways to get more of it. Positive brain chemicals are chased by your brain and the behaviors it is teaching you to offset the Toxic Stress brain chemicals. And because positive brain chemicals don't last very long, the source of stimulating more of the positive brain chemicals is done more and more. In some, this is the start of addiction.

Now I hope to explain that there are differences in the types of stimuli your brain seeks. I refer to them as Positive, Neutral and Negative.

Negative behaviors are the ones that are either prohibited, frowned upon or punished. Smoking, drug or alcohol use, domestic violence or bullying, suicide, depression, promiscuity and other offensive behaviors provide stimuli that makes your brain feel good. So you keep doing them unless the consequences for doing them become severe and you stop.

Neutral behaviors are behaviors that people have no real judgments about. If you play Bingo or Pull Tabs, it excites your brain with the prospect of winning and having cash to get things your brain wants. But no one is really offended unless you reach the point of relentless gambling. Some women refer to "retail therapy" as a way to feel good. You dream of buying the jewelry, shoes or clothes that bring out compliments from those who are around you.

Positive behaviors are behaviors that help you succeed, but don't necessarily heal your Toxic Stress. And yes, very successful people suffer from Toxic Stress. A positive behavior is one you get praised for, and your brain tells you to repeat it frequently so you get more praise. When you are a teenager, being successful in academics, sports, arts and other very public involvements can earn you praise. Since the praise makes your brain feel better, you chase that success like an alcoholic chases the next drink. For many, Promiscuity is a Positive that can quickly turn into a negative. Being sought out by prospective partners can make you feel pretty good about yourself, but the reality of spending time with someone who eventually lets criticism take the place of what was once constant praise can be difficult for some people. And, of course, an addiction to one person can lead to domestic violence and stalking behaviors.

Most victims of Toxic Stress will combine all 3 types of behaviors in a mixture that keeps them out of too much trouble. But as I mentioned, a Positive can quickly turn into a Negative. A Neutral can become either. But our brain will seek out a mixture of behaviors that ultimately mould us into a distinct person. While being successful in our profession, we may have had multiple marriages and relationships. Perhaps we drink a lot after work, which isn't bad for careers until it slips into alcohol abuse. We may physically or emotionally abuse those we love, and start the process of transferring our Toxic Stress to the next generation. Maybe we cross the line and, despite our success, end up in jail. It happens to many people. And the sadness of it all is that justice is very selective. If 22% of the population studied during the ACE Study were sexually abused as children, then why isn't 22% of the U.S. population in jail. It's because law enforcement is selective.

What I hope you learn from this is that we are all unique and the circumstances of our birth control, in many respects, who we become. If we grow up with a heavy burden of Toxic Stress, we might end up on the street as a homeless addict. But we could just as well end up as a CEO, politician or successful professional—always just a step away from complete and total destruction of our lives. I have argued that we need to be more tolerant of those around us, and not judge, blame nor shame them for who they turned out to be. Instead, we should help everyone explore what made them the way they are today—successful or not—and let them make the choice about truly healing from whatever Toxic Stress they have experienced while growing up.

So I encourage you to explore your history and try to understand who you have become, without judging or criticizing yourself or those who may have inflicted the Toxic Stress on you. Doing so is important for your personal happiness. Not everyone has multiple ACE's. In the study, 6% of the 17,400 participants had 5 or more ACE's. That's just 1,050 people. But that is significant. In the U.S. population, 6% is more than 20 million people. If you have multiple ACE's, numerous Positive, Negative and Neutral Behaviors and are unhappy or family and friends are unhappy with you, you could benefit from healing from your Toxic Stress. That will be the topic for the next paper in this series.