

As I See It: How Childhood Affects our Health

Op-Ed for *The Gazette-Times* by Joshua Strait, Medical Student, Lebanon

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“Yeah, yeah, I’ve tried to quit. ... I’m a dirt bag.”

This 45-year-old had smoked for over 30 years and felt frustrated talking to me about his health. When we took time to connect, he realized cigarettes helped him manage stress and anxiety built in childhood, and he was not a “dirt bag,” but instead a survivor who sometimes struggles.

Have you ever wondered why some of us have to work harder at relationships, addiction, self-confidence, sometimes becoming poor, ill, homeless? How does it all start? As a missionary in a California inner urban area and now as a 30-year-old medical student who volunteers for the Linn County Child Abuse Network, I am beginning to understand.

From 1995 to 1997, researchers working with the Center for Disease Control ran the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) study to find the relationship between childhood trauma and health risk later on. More than 17,000 adult volunteers were asked their history of childhood physical, sexual and psychological abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. Here is one of the questions asked: Did a parent or other adults 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?

The study showed that these experiences are common. The higher an ACE score, the higher the risk of addiction, prescription medication use, social problems, chronic mental or physical illness, and premature death. ACEs are “the main determinant of the health and social well-being of the nation,” according to this study.

We can prevent and curb effects of Adverse Childhood Effects — if we keep a strong social safety net and health care system that includes everybody. We can do this and come out ahead financially.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates national costs associated with childhood trauma across the lifespan as between \$124 billion to \$585 billion. Applying the ACE Score as a screening tool appears to be therapeutic — a screening of 135,000 patients showed a 35 percent decline in doctor’s visits the following year after simply talking about Adverse Childhood Effects.

Considering how common ACEs are and how they lead to human suffering, I am glad to learn of efforts in Corvallis to improve access to good housing, education, and medical care, all of which help counteract and heal these adverse events. Instead of turning to cigarettes or drugs, we can ensure survivors have a health care system and society overall they can approach for help.

Please do what you are able to ensure children young and old have a home where basic medical, physical and psychological needs are met. Today’s medical students and tomorrow’s doctors are counting on you and will be grateful for your efforts.

Here’s a link that readers can use to evaluate their own ACE score and anonymously submit the information: <http://goo.gl/VX83r9>

We will publish the pooled anonymous data from the community and for the community.

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