

CONNECTIONS MATTER IN FAITH COMMUNITIES

A faith leader's guide to toxic stress

TOXIC STRESS


Stress is something we all experience to varying degrees. Experiencing some stress is a normal and healthy part of life. Moderate amounts of stress, like anticipating a move or paying taxes, help our minds and bodies develop positive responses, like preparing ahead of time. However, when a person experiences stress that is powerful, frequent, prolonged, and unpredictable, particularly in childhood, those experiences can be traumatic and impact their life-long health. Traumatic stress can stem from events such as loss of a loved one, experiencing or witnessing physical violence, homelessness, or prolonged unemployment. Traumatic stress, especially when experienced in the absence of supportive relationships and communities, can become toxic. Toxic stress is now commonly acknowledged to be a major determinant of poor physical and mental health outcomes.


TOXIC STRESS IN THE BRAIN AND COMMUNITY


Toxic stress exposure impacts the brain's ability to cope with common life situations. If a person, particularly a child, cannot predict where, when, or how much stress they will experience, their brains and bodies become hardwired to react more quickly and with a heightened fight, flight, or freeze response. That person may have trouble focusing on school or work, say or do things impulsively, lose their temper easily, or act uninterested or disconnected from others. The difficulty in regulating caused by toxic stress can have a negative effect on school performance and personal relationships and even result in physical illness and pain.


The impact of toxic stress on an individual may have even greater consequences. Research shows that the effects of toxic stress can be transferred intergenerationally, meaning that children and even grandchildren of a person who experienced toxic stress may exhibit physical or emotional symptoms.


THOSE EXPERIENCING FOUR OR MORE ACES COMPARED TO THOSE WITH ZERO ARE:

1.5x 
more likely to
smoke cigarettes

2x 
more likely to
have diabetes

2.3x 
more likely to report
poor health

3x 
more likely to
have heart disease

5x 
more likely to have
clinical depression



10 TYPES OF STUDIED ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

ACEs are traumatic events that can dramatically upset a child's sense of safety and well-being. Without supportive relationships and community, ACEs can impact lifelong well-being.

ABUSE

- 1 Physical
- 2 Psychological
- 3 Sexual

NEGLECT

- 4 Physical
- 5 Psychological

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION

- 6 Substance abuse
- 7 Parent with mental illness
- 8 Incarcerated parent
- 9 Divorce
- 10 Domestic violence

RESILIENCE AND PREVENTION

Faith communities can be excellent sources of support for those who have experienced toxic stress. Resilience, or the ability to thrive, adapt, and cope despite adversity, depends greatly on caring relationships and community. Research shows that communities working together to build relationships and model resiliency have lower rates of childhood trauma and health problems in the next generation. By providing support and fostering community, faith communities can minimize or eliminate children's exposure to toxic stress, thereby breaking the intergenerational passage of trauma. In addition, faith communities can help build resilience in those who have been exposed to toxic stress or are currently going through stressful events. Research shows that faith groups are often central to developing community identity and connection and are increasingly recognized to be crucial assets to individuals and communities under stress.

FIND YOUR CONNECTION

Faith communities and leaders equipped with an understanding of the impact of toxic stress can make profound progress not only in lessening poor health and social outcomes but also in preventing exposure to toxic stress by supporting individuals and families. As a faith leader, you are probably doing a great deal of work to achieve these goals already. Here are some ideas for how to delve further into this work:

1 INFORM LEADERSHIP

Encourage a trauma-informed environment in your setting. By creating an environment where people understand toxic stress and its impact, you can help create a safer, more stable environment for other faith leaders, staff, and community members. Consider adding a staff member or volunteer position specifically committed to serving as a community resource liaison. Become a Connections Matter advocate to teach staff and community members about how strong connections lead to positive outcomes. Consider other trauma-informed training opportunities such as Lemonade for Life, a model that helps professionals working with families have meaningful conversations about the impact of childhood adversity.

2 SUPPORT INDIVIDUALS

Foster resilience. Support individuals in your community by listening to their stories and having a conversation in a safe space about toxic stress. Help them discover sources of their resilience and respond to toxic stress by plugging them into community resources.

Develop opportunities for shared community learning and support. Designated committees or community groups focusing on toxic stress can help a faith community understand and develop a response that destigmatizes many people's experiences in dealing with toxic stress. Consider conducting an educational series on related topics using resources like the book From Neurons to Neighborhoods to foster important dialogue among community members about the importance of safe, stable childhoods on life-long health.

3 WORK IN COMMUNITY

Reach out to other faith groups and develop a collective response. Working with other faith leaders may provide you with more outlets for responses, more resources to respond, and more opportunities to impact your broader community.

Focus on a whole-family approach and integrate with other services in the community. Seek opportunities in your community to support children as well as their caregivers. Community partners could include health centers, family centers, violence prevention organizations, early childhood centers, schools, or parent engagement groups.

Learn more about The ACE Study at www.iowaaces360.org. Learn about the Connections Matter community effort at www.ConnectionsMatter.org.

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