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When might having four ACEs predict a lifetime filled with medical, emotional and addictive issues?

When those ACEs represent Adverse Childhood Experiences rather than a great poker hand, as evidenced by a 1990s study conducted as a collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego.

The study involved detailed interviews with more than 17,000 adults of middle to upper income. Nearly three quarters of them attended college. Participants were racially, age and ethnically diverse, but gender balanced.

Questions covered 10 types of childhood adverse experiences, including physical, sexual and psychological abuse; household violence, substance abuse and mental illness; parental separation or divorce; family member incarceration and physical and emotional neglect.

It was discovered that ACEs were common. The more adverse childhood experiences, the stronger their influence on addictive behaviors, mental and physical health and stability in relationships.

The study's initial findings were generally rejected and considered unexplainable, according to Skowhegan Family Medicine physician Dr. Ann Dorney, until further brain research disclosed a connection between the toxic childhood stresses that caused a sustained release of excessive cortisol, and its subsequent impact on the developing

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DR. ANN DORNEY, SKÓWHEGAN
FAMILY MEDICINE PHYSICIAN



brain and neuroendocrine system.

Cortisol produces a "fight or flight" response — good for saving you from an approaching tiger; not good when it triggers constant hypervigilance. Side effects of this extended toxic stress can include higher blood pressure and increased risk of diabetes, Dorney said. Suicide and IV drug use are also well documented in people with multiple ACEs, she said.

But there's hope. The more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) an individual has, the higher the risk of many diseases, but "the interesting thing is that many people who experience ACEs do fine," Dorney said. Much research, including brain MRIs, is now devoted to what makes people bounce back from trauma, according to Dorney. When toxic stress is reduced, the brain can recover.

The Maine Resilience Building Network (MRBN), an organization dedicated to promoting resiliency, attracted Dorney's attention a few years ago, motivating her to incorporate the ACEs questionnaire into her family practice.

She uses the questionnaire with patients who have difficult medical histories, as well as with women in their sixth month of pregnancy — often a time when expectant mothers reflect on their own childhoods.

A large segment of her practice involves narcotic addiction issues. Dorney discovered that once she began using the ACEs questionnaire, "it changed the conversation" when addicts saw the connection between adverse childhood experiences and their current addiction.

"Having someone listen to your story is very therapeutic," she said.

"Children are like wet cement. Whatever falls on them makes an impression."

HIAM G. GINOTT

Adverse childhood experiences add up over a lifetime

ACE study discloses how health is affected

Dorney personally sees the ACEs questionnaire as a way to help her patients and to help herself better understand her patients.

After she completes an ACEs questionnaire with a patient, her next question is "what things still bother you?" She then works with that patient to develop appropriate coping strategies to eliminate those stressors.

As a broader public health issue, implementing the knowledge gained from ACEs research is even more important.

Of local concern is a Maine DHHS Office of Child and Family Services report entitled "Child Maltreatment Trends in Somerset County, Maine 2010 – 2014," showing that the rate of child maltreatment in Somerset County is the highest in the state.

Babies under the age of 1 year old comprise, by far, the largest victim group; and the number of cases nearly doubled from 2010 to 2014. Other findings determined that children are most often abused by their parents, most abusers were in their 20s, and the highest risk factor was a prior history with Child Protective Services.

"This (ACEs) is the same level of consequence as immunizations (and) clean water as far as health effects," Dorney said. "The more aware we become of ACEs the more we, as a society, hopefully can reduce them in the next generation."

For more information contact either the MRBN website at www.maineaces.org or Ann Dorney, M.D. at 474-6201 or by email at andorney@gmail.com. Skowhegan Family Practice office hours are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.