

Prevention Community of Practice

The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on Substance Use Disorder: Implications for Prevention

Questions and Answers

Q1. How many people end up with a substance use disorder that do not experience trauma?

A1. We do not have the statistics on hand; however, we should utilize a trauma informed approach for everyone regardless of our knowledge of their trauma. We have to keep in mind that some people will never share their trauma or their past. Therefore, we must lead with a trauma informed approach.

Q2. Can you talk about the role of the brain's ability to rewire and form new networks for people that have experienced trauma? What are the best practices we can implement?

A2. The brain is able to create new neurons and new connections after breakdown due to trauma. A child is going to develop those neurons and have strong neurons based on survival skills, but may not have as strong skills in mathematics, arts, etc. As they feel safe and stable they can grow new neurons, but it has to be done in a safe and stable environment. Otherwise, the survival neurons will take over. The prefrontal cortex cannot work at the same time as the survival time. Safe stable homes, environments, and relationships are going to be the only thing that allows a child to think clearly and learn new things, and plan for the future. Our brain can develop new pathways throughout our whole life, there is no time that is too late for a person to learn new ways of coping. Whenever these people come into their lives that protect them and make them feel safe, people can start to change the way they cope with things and develop new pathways.

Q3. Historical and cultural trauma – if we normalize, it encourages silence. How can we safeguard against starting to normalize and thinking “everyone has ACEs it’s no big deal”

A3. Looking at someone and saying “I know you’ve had a lot go on, and things have happened to other people too. I hope you’re able to connect with them sometime. But even though a lot of people have had this happen to them, it shouldn’t have. And I want you to feel safe so that it doesn’t happen in the future.” When speaking with communities – consider historical and generational trauma and talk about stopping the cycle in order to have a better world.

Q4. What are direct strategies or environmental that people can implement for this type of work?

A4. Family Support Networks for families of young children should be utilized if a person has young children. Any sort of peer support programs for adolescents where they can find



something meaningful and feel that they have a skill, something that they can use for good. Consider superheroes – they and their enemies had adverse childhood experiences; but the difference is that the superhero has support from people that love them, and made a choice. But people can't make a choice if there aren't choices available to them. Prevention work is putting choices in place, and then letting people know what those choices are. And assuring that there are safe and stable people around to protect them.

Utilize strategies that start early – say something like - there will come a time when you're not going to want to come by anymore, or go to a meeting – because you're feeling so well. And that's completely normal. But consider that those moments may mean that you need more support and there will always be someone here to help you.