

WHAT ARE ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES?

The term Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is used to describe a wide range of stressful or traumatic experiences that children can be exposed to while growing up in the home environment. They include, being physically, emotionally, or sexually abused as well as growing up in a house with domestic violence, mental illness, alcohol, or drug abuse.

Other factors outside of the home environment can also cause prolonged or extreme stress. Examples include critical illness or serious injury, bereavement, living in care, having caring responsibilities at a young age, prejudice, bullying, gang membership (county lines) and geopolitical factors such as war and pandemics.

WHAT IS THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF ACEs?

ACEs are common. It is estimated that half of all adults in the UK have suffered at least one ACE and at least 10 percent of adults have experienced four or more ACEs in England and Wales.

There is a growing body of evidence that adults who suffered trauma or prolonged stress during childhood are more likely to adopt health-harming behaviours in later life such as smoking tobacco, alcohol and drug misuse, which can lead to early onset of chronic disease. Adults in the most deprived communities are also three times more likely to have suffered four or more ACEs than their more affluent counterparts.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?

Trauma can affect people throughout their lives. Individuals can have difficulty controlling their emotions and can develop attachment difficulties and low self-esteem. Heightened emotional state can result in anxiety, always being on edge, impulsiveness, difficulties building relationships, poor learning experiences and life opportunities which can make it difficult to build and grow trusted relationships.

WHAT IS A TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICE?

In summary, a trauma informed approach is one that considers "what happened to you?" instead of "what's wrong with you?" This helps to facilitate understanding about the reasons behind the behaviour and break down barriers and build bridges. Every contact with someone affected by trauma is an opportunity to support his or her recovery. Being listened to and being treated with empathy and respect makes a big difference.

