

Let's Talk About
Adverse Childhood Experiences

ACEs

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Action**

FOR MENTAL HEALTH

TakeAction4MH.com

Let's talk about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The things that happen to us as children and teens shape who we are and can affect our well-being. Many of us may have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences, also known as ACEs.

ACEs are potentially stressful or traumatic events that can happen to us before we turn 18.

They include (but are not limited to) things like having a parent or caregiver struggle with mental health or substance use, being separated from a parent or caregiver through divorce, death, incarceration or abandonment, or experiencing neglect or abuse.



ACEs are common, with **nearly 3 out of 5** Californians experiencing at least 1 ACE.

You can learn more about your ACE score by taking a confidential screening [here](#).



Other adversity — such as being separated from family due to immigration obstacles, experiencing food insecurity or ongoing financial instability, witnessing community violence, or experiencing racism or discrimination — can also be traumatic, potentially threatening our sense of safety, causing emotional dysregulation, and creating stress that can be harmful to our minds and bodies.

But there's good news: healing from ACEs and trauma is possible. Read on to learn more.

How can ACEs impact us?

ACEs can impact our physical, mental, emotional, and relational health. Prolonged exposure to multiple ACEs — or traumatic experiences — increases the chance we may experience what's known as "toxic stress." Toxic stress occurs when high levels of stress over time affect the body and nervous system, and this can be especially harmful for a child's developing brain. Toxic stress can have lasting effects on our physical and mental health, our relationships, and more, even as adults.

The impacts of ACEs and toxic stress can show up in our lives in different ways, such as:

Having trouble developing meaningful relationships

Throwing ourselves into work to avoid feelings of loneliness or unworthiness

Feeling isolated or alone even in a crowd

Being on high alert even when "relaxing"

Having behavior or performance issues at school or work

Overreacting or reacting disproportionately, which can negatively impact relationships

Frequently falling into patterns of negative thinking

Thinking about self-harm or having done self-harm to release feelings

Experiencing illness or ailments such as chronic headaches, recurring stomach aches, etc., that cannot be otherwise explained by existing medical conditions

Using alcohol and/or drugs to cope

You may not have connected these feelings or patterns to adversity or trauma you may have experienced as a child or teen, but they could be related.

I think I've experienced ACEs. What does this mean for me?

Many people have experienced one or multiple ACEs, and it's important to remember that what happened to you doesn't define you. **ACEs are NOT your fault.**

You have the strength and ability to move forward and address the parts of your past that may still be causing you stress, difficulty, or pain.

So, if you're asking yourself if you can overcome what happened, be encouraged! You're managing your life the best way you can. Healing is a journey that looks different for everyone.



You can heal from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

We all may need some extra support and help to overcome the impacts of ACEs. Whether it was something that happened in the distant past or something that you're currently dealing with, understanding ACEs and toxic stress, and their impacts on our lives, is the first step in learning how to heal from them. And remember, we can all define the future we want, and we are all more than the worst thing that's happened to us.

There are lots of ways to take action and begin healing. Here are a few ways to start:

Acknowledge your stress, address your emotions

If you grew up with ACEs, you may not have had the time to process and begin healing. Too often, we tell ourselves "I can handle it" or "It's not that deep" or "No one else cares...why should I?" The problem is, when you ignore or avoid acknowledging that you are feeling off, you internalize the emotion as a normal part of life. This can impact how we react to the world — and the people — around us. Instead, we should identify and acknowledge how we're feeling, and what it may be about or linked to, so that we can manage our emotions and know how to respond rather than react. There are many ways to begin doing this.

Visit [TakeAction4MH.com](https://www.takeaction4mh.com) for a guide and tips to help you manage stress with some tried and true healing habits.

Prioritize your 'real' self-care

Self-care is a phrase that gets tossed around a lot, but in its truest form, it's about ensuring that you are taking care of yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually, if need be. Prioritize time focusing on reclaiming, repairing, and maintaining your physical health, circles of friends, and checking in with your emotions and mental state. This genuine self-care can help you know yourself better and have a transformative effect on how you show up in the world. Remember, caring for yourself isn't selfish. When you're rested and less stressed, you're better able to engage with, and even help, the people in your life.

Speak with trained pros

Getting mental health support can help you deal with what you experienced as a child. At the end of this ACEs resource, you'll find resources to find someone, like a therapist or counselor, who is trained to help you process your experiences, and who understands your perspective. (We find it helps if they look like you or share your background.) If you don't want to dwell on the past, that's okay — many therapists will focus on helping you with your path to the future. In addition to traditional therapy, consider support groups or other peer counseling options to share and learn with others who are healing from ACEs, trauma, or other obstacles.

Connect with the people you care about

Your support network is important, and relationships can help sustain us in the long run. Get together with friends and family members you trust, because supportive relationships can be healing. Even if you didn't grow up in a supportive family, you can always seek out and build new relationships, or your own chosen family. Over time, these trusted friends can be another source of support to help us unpack and process our feelings.

Support the next generation

By healing ourselves and supporting others, particularly children, teens, and young adults, we'll also reduce the chance that the next generation experiences ACEs. By being a supportive, safe, and nurturing presence in their lives, we can help buffer them from the negative effects of adversity or trauma they may experience. In doing so, we're helping each other heal.



Learn More

Expand your knowledge of ACEs and get support from these resources.

Community Resources

- **Black Mental Health Alliance** – blackmentalhealth.com
- **The African-American Wellness Project** – aawellnessproject.org
- **California Black Women’s Health Project** – cabwhp.org
- **California Black Health Network** – cablackhealthnetwork.org

General ACEs and Real-time Resources

- **ACEs Aware directory of providers who understand ACEs** – acesaware.org/learn-about-screening/clinician-directory
- **CalHOPE Connect Peer Support Warmline/Chat** – devcalhope.calmhsa-members.com
- **Live Beyond, Office of the California Surgeon General’s ACEs and toxic stress awareness campaign** – livebeyondca.org
- **First 5 California supports for young children experiencing ACEs or toxic stress** – first5california.strongerstarts.com
- **BrightLife Kids app, free mental health coaching and resources for parents/caregivers and children ages 0–12** – hellobrightline.com/brightlifekids
- **Soluna app, free mental health coaching and resources for teens and young adults** – solunaapp.com
- **Learn more about the original ACEs study, done in California, and CDC resources here** – cdc.gov/aces/about

