

Understanding ACEs

A Tool to Reflect,
Cope, and Connect



**TAKE
ACTION**

FOR MENTAL HEALTH

[TakeAction4MH.com](https://www.TakeAction4MH.com)



What Are ACEs and Why Do They Matter?

Our past doesn't define us. But it can shape how we think, feel, and cope today.

ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) are tough or traumatic things that happen before age 18 — like growing up in a household that experienced mental health challenges, substance misuse, violence, parental separation, and neglect. Or experiencing other traumatic experiences that impacted your health and well-being, such as not having enough food to eat, experiencing homelessness, discrimination, or unstable housing.

The impacts of ACEs and other stressors from our childhood can build up in our bodies and brains and keep us in survival mode, even when we're safe. This impacts our mental and physical health long after the ACEs we've been through are over, and can show up as physical health issues, mental health struggles, substance use, challenges at school or work, or challenges in our relationships.

You might not always see the connection, but it's worth exploring. As young adults, we can [take the ACEs screener¹](#) to learn more about our own experiences, learn how they may be impacting us, and most importantly, take steps to heal so we don't repeat any harmful patterns in our own lives. Check out additional ACEs toolkits for more support, based on your community: [AAPI Toolkit²](#), [Black/African American Toolkit³](#), [Latiné/Hispanic Toolkit⁴](#).

Tools That Help You Feel and Heal

ACEs and other trauma can shape how we regulate our emotions, respond to stress, perceive ourselves, and form relationships. We developed ways to adapt to our situations, stressors, or traumas we experienced, and while they may have served us when we were younger, they may not be healthy or serving us now. The good news is there are tools to help us check in with and better understand ourselves, handle stress, and build stronger connections and relationships.

You might have heard of “emotional intelligence” (EI or EQ, for emotional quotient) before; **EI or EQ is about understanding your feelings, managing stress, and connecting with others.**

These four skills can help if you’ve had tough experiences growing up:

Self-Awareness: Noticing what you’re feeling, where you feel it in your body (e.g. aches in your neck, butterflies in your stomach), and what might be triggering it.

Self-Management: Learning how to regulate your emotions, stay calm, handle stress, and pause before reacting.

Social Awareness: Observing rather than absorbing other people’s emotions, without taking them personally or assuming the worst.

Relationship Management: Building safe and trusting relationships by setting boundaries, communicating honestly, and choosing people who feel supportive.

Developing these emotional intelligence skills can help you:



Understand your emotions and the emotions of others



Notice and speak up when you need support



Set boundaries



Improve relationships with friends, loved ones, and yourself in real, healthy, supportive ways



Learn new ways to connect with people and handle your feelings, and work towards healing from trauma and ACEs



Self-Awareness and the Mental Health Spectrum

One of the first steps in developing emotional intelligence is self-awareness, and understanding how you're doing mentally and emotionally. **Our mental wellbeing exists on a spectrum and we all move along it at different times in our lives.** Knowing our current spot on this spectrum is important for our own self-awareness, and can help us figure out how to care for ourselves.



THRIVING

You feel balanced, connected, and able to handle life's ups and downs.

Signs:

- Sleeping and eating well
- Feeling connected to others
- Enjoying things you care about
- Able to handle stress when it comes up

Try:

- Keeping routines that work for you
- Helping others who might be having a harder time
- Noticing what makes you feel good and making space for more of it

COPING

You're dealing with stress, but still managing your day-to-day life.

Signs:

- Feeling low energy or overwhelmed sometimes
- Needing more rest or alone time than usual
- Stressing over school, work, or relationships

Try:

- Talking with someone you trust
- Taking breaks and getting outside
- Using healthy ways to cope (journaling, movement, music)

STRUGGLING

Things are getting harder to manage. You may feel stuck, isolated, or emotionally exhausted.

Signs:

- Withdrawing from friends or daily life
- Feeling hopeless, anxious, or numb
- Trouble sleeping or eating
- Using substances or other habits to escape

Try:

- Reaching out to a counselor, peer support, or mental health service
- Letting someone close to you know what's going on
- Reminding yourself you don't have to figure it out alone

CRISIS

You feel unsafe, out of control, or in danger of hurting yourself or others.

Signs:

- Thinking about self-harm or suicide
- Feeling like there's no way out
- Unable to function at home, work, or school

Try:

- Call or text 988 for 24/7 confidential support
- Reach out to a trusted adult, professor, or mentor
- Go to a local urgent care or emergency service

When We Need More Support: Having Conversations With People You Trust



Our past experiences can still affect us and show up in ways we don't expect — like how we deal with stress, how we relate to people, or how we feel about ourselves. **These prompts can help you open up to someone you trust or start a conversation with a mental health professional.**

Ways to reach out to trusted friends and family:

"Hey, I've been thinking a lot about stuff from growing up and I think some of it's still affecting me. Can I talk to you about it?"

"Lately I've been feeling off, and I'm wondering if some things from my past might be part of it. Have you ever felt that way?"

"I'm trying to be more honest about how I'm really doing. Can we talk for a bit?"

How to talk to with a therapist, peer support, or counselor:

"I think some things from my childhood are still affecting me, and I'm not sure what to do about it."

"I've been noticing patterns in how I handle stress and relationships, and I'd like help making sense of it."

"I don't always know how to talk about my mental health, but I'm trying to figure it out. Can we start there?"





Need Professional Support? Here Are Places to Start:

California Youth Crisis Line

Call or text 800-843-5200 for 24/7 crisis and emotional support for youth and family.

Teen Line

Speak with a trained teen listener who understands what it's like to be a teen.

Call 1-800-852-8336 (6 PM-10 PM PT)

Text TEEN to 839863 (6 PM-9 PM PT)

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988 to speak to a trained counselor who will listen without judgment and provide free support 24/7 for any mental health, substance use, or emotional crisis.

Foundation for California Community Colleges — Student Health & Wellness

California Community College students can connect with trained crisis counselors by texting "COURAGE" to 741-741. Support is free and confidential.

Links

1. <https://www.numberstory.org/explore-your-number>
2. <https://takeaction4mh.com/toolkit-categories/aces-aapi/>
3. <https://takeaction4mh.com/toolkit-categories/aces-black-africanamerican/>
4. <https://takeaction4mh.com/toolkit-categories/aces-latine-hispanic/>



CalMHSA
California Mental Health Services Authority



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