

What is it?

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study is one of the largest studies done to assess the connection between childhood maltreatment and later life health and well being. More than 17,000 members of a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) going through thorough physical exams provided information on their childhood experiences of abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction.

The ACE interview is also a series of questions about past physical, emotional and sexual abuses, household histories of alcohol or drug abuse, imprisonment, mental health issues, and parent(s) not being present.

The ACE study research states that certain risk factors from our childhood affect our later life through illness and death and poor quality of life. Understanding that adverse childhood experiences affect us helps provide information in preventing and recovering from our worst health and social problems. Many trauma-related problems include heart disease, cancer, lung and liver disease, and skeletal fractures, to name a few. Social issues such as homelessness, prostitution, delinquency and criminal behavior, failure to finish school or an inability to hold a job, stem from the effects of trauma. This study affirmed childhood trauma had later widespread affects on adulthood and that trauma was more widespread than thought previously. The impact was cumulative and this trauma hid a range of problems. Dr Vincent Felitti, a co-founder of the study states, "In our detailed study of over 17,000 middle-class American adults of diverse ethnicity, we found that the compulsive use of nicotine, alcohol, and injected street drugs increases proportionally in a strong, graded dose-responsive manner that closely parallels the intensity of adverse life experiences during childhood."

What does this mean for people with trauma histories who have used drugs, alcohol, and other coping mechanisms in their lives to deal with their pain?

With understanding of what happened in our past we find we no longer need to use these behaviors as coping mechanisms as they no longer fill that need. Other appropriate coping mechanisms are developed. We no longer need to linger in the past but can look at more positive ways to live our lives. With this understanding and research findings that the brain has elasticity, people are living healthier, happier lives.

This does not mean that trauma affects disappear. They will appear in other developmental stages as we grow and change, but we have found positive ways of living our lives.