ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND ADULTHOOD

The early childhood experiences we have define the kind of adults we become.

The foundation of children in their earlier years impacts their entire life. Hence, for every child, the earlier moments and experiences matter. So what outcomes could children suffer in later life if they are exposed to adverse experiences at home?

Research by the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development, hosted at the University of the Witwatersrand, set out to investigate the link between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and psychological distress in a South African population. ACEs include, among others, physical and emotional abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, neglect, mental illness of a household member and parental divorce in the home environment. Using data from their Birth to Twenty Plus (B20+) study, which has been tracking the health and development of Soweto children from 1990 to date, the cross-sectional study assessed 1,636 young adults for prevalence of adverse childhood experiences and psychological distress.

Findings
The research found that:

- At least 87% of the young adults reported exposure to at least one form of ACE while 35% reported exposure to four of more forms of ACEs at home;
- A third of the young adults reported signs of psychological distress and 66% of those affected were women;
- Women who experienced at least one ACE were two and half times more likely to report psychological distress. What’s more, this effect increases with the inclusion of socioeconomic status and adult stress.
- These findings support other studies which found that adversity experienced early in life can disrupt not only the brain structure and function, but also cause dysfunction in other systems resulting in low stress tolerances that persist throughout life and increase the risk of stress-related disease or disorders.

Furthermore, individuals exposed to adverse childhood experiences such as neglect may be more likely to show greater distress in the presence of adult stressors compared to those not exposed in early life. According to the research, the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Theory (PARTheory) explains the consistent link between neglect and psychological distress in the population.

Perceived parental acceptance or rejection has an effect on psychological adjustment in childhood and adulthood.

Way forward
The researchers propose that identifying other forms of mistreatment and neglect when one adversity is reported is important to ensure a holistic approach in dealing with adversity in early childhood. Treatment of mental illness and promotion of mental well-being should not only focus on existing events but also on possible childhood abuse and adversity and efforts to support early childhood growth should include parental support and education.

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