Long Lasting Effects of Childhood Trauma

by Gary Cavalier

It’s rare that the homeless folks we try to help share stories of their childhood. When they do, they’re usually so sad and terrifying that I couldn’t imagine enduring one day of what they went through. It’s heroic that they have survived into adulthood.

I was helping a man find a weekly apartment a few years ago when the manager gave us a second floor apartment. We walked up the stairs and I got to the door, but didn’t see him. I turned around to find him profusely sweating with a look of terror on his face, slowly inching his way along the inside wall with his hands outstretched, leaning on the wall and staying as far away from the outside railing as possible. I asked if he was afraid of heights, but it turned out his father had held him out over the railing as a toddler to punish him. Fortunately, we were able to get another small room on the first floor.

During my 35 years of working with the homeless, I have heard many similar shocking stories. The U.S. Government Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has new emergent research on how Adverse Childhod Events (ACEs) have impact throughout someone’s life. According to the CDC, “Children with toxic stress live much of their lives in fight, flight or freeze mode. They respond to the world as a place of constant danger. With their brains overloaded with stress hormones and unable to function appropriately, they can’t focus on learning. They fall behind in school or fail to develop healthy relationships with peers or create problems with teachers and principals because they are unable to trust adults. Some kids do all three. With despair, guilt and frustration pecking away at their psyches, they often find solace in food, alcohol, tobacco, drugs, inappropriate sex, and frustration pecking away at their psyches, they often find solace in food, alcohol, tobacco, drugs, inappropriate sex, and/or work and over-achievement. They don’t regard these coping methods as problems. Consciously or unconsciously, they use them as solutions to escape from depression, anxiety, fear and shame.”

From infancy to 18 years, some ACEs commonly occur, regardless of race, economic class, and geographic region; however there is a much higher prevalence among those living in poverty. While some stress in life is normal—and even necessary for development—the type of stress that

Common Forms of ACEs

(Adverse Childhood Events)

Experiencing one or more of these “events” can elevate stress to a toxic level in the mind and body of a child:

**Abuse**
- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse

**Household Challenges**
- Domestic violence
- Substance abuse
- Mental Illness
- Incarcerated parent
- Parental separation/divorce

**Neglect**
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect

4 or more ACEs lead to:
- 3x the levels of lung disease and adult smoking
- 11x the level of intravenous drug abuse
- 14x the number of suicide attempts
- 4x as likely to have begun intercourse by age 15
- 4.5x more likely to develop depression
- 2x the level of liver disease

It was enlightening for me to hear Fr. Greg Boyle speak at UNLV a few weeks ago and share the stories of recovery of L.A. gang members he has helped through the largest gang intervention program in the world. Most of the gang members had suffered tremendous trauma as children. Through his Homeboy and Homegirl Industries, Fr. Greg has helped many with his “Jobs not Jails” program and now they offer an intense therapy program to address those early childhood traumas.

In my work at the soup line and other projects, I do not excuse bad behavior, but having heard so many tragic childhood stories among the homeless and studying this research lead me to be more compassionate with those we serve. These children are born into our society and through no fault of their own suffer neglect, beatings and terror; then as adults, their traumas can lead to homelessness, incarceration and dysfunction.

Research has shown that there are things we can do as a community to build resiliency for children undergoing crisis. These include strengthening economic supports to families, providing quality care and education early in life, enhancing parenting skills, and intervening to lessen harms and prevent future risk. With community support, we can reduce the impact of ACEs among those suffering the consequences.

†Center for Disease Control and Prevention CDC.gov ‡From the Fall 2019 La Puente article by Lance Cheslock of La Puente Homes in Alamosa, Colorado.
Reach
by Robert Majors
Take me how I am
Imperfect to your plans
But deserving of your hand
I know it’s hard to reach it out
For fear that I may pull you down
or that you couldn’t pull me up
But the compassion is the touch
Where that leads is in the grey
The dirty rough where diamonds lay
all the faults that time has made
All the pleasant things I see
Are shared but not to keep
Unless you choose to take that seed
to cultivate all that it means
that purpose traces back to love
Back to the good in life to come
A hopeful act for what could grow
That every life has come to know
But some are harder to let go
and like my hand must be released
So that my hope too, will be free
free to grow and free to sink
Like the pulse my heart will beat
losing breath and breathing deep
Where each step is taking me
It is a trust that life will teach by the
We Will Not Forget
Where each step is taking me
It is a trust that life will teach by the

No Camping Ordinance is the REAL Crime!
by Julia Occhiogrosso
In November 2019, the City of Las Vegas, amidst much opposition, passed a no camping ordinance. This ordinance does nothing to effectively address the housing crisis. It only serves to place the burden of anxiety and hassle on people who are already struggling to make it from day-to-day. As Gary discussed in his article, many of the people on the street suffer the consequences of early trauma. The criminalization of the homeless is a brutal policy that causes harm to people that are hurting already. In order for any intervention to have a sustainable and far reaching positive effect, it must start with a willingness to look thoroughly and empathetically at research and models that have made some inroads and invest resources in creating permanent housing and supportive services for the extremely low income.

This crisis did not arrive overnight. It is the result of decades of defunding affordable housing, mental health and other support services. It is from inflated housing prices and an unwillingness to increase a living wage.

It is time to stop blaming and punishing the victims of the failures of governmental

On January 21, approximately 200 protesters gathered in front of city hall and then marched through the Fremont Street Experience to protest the city’s no camping ordinance. Robert Majors joined thirteen other protesters who were arrested for blocking the street as they set up a mock encampment to illustrate the injustice of the ordinance.

ROBERT MAJORS BEFORE ARREST
and corporate establishments that have not lived up to the decency of investing in the well being of the most vulnerable ones in our society. This is the real crime.

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