**Minding Mendocino**

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**Ace Scores**

There was a sixteen year old girl I worked with in a past career position, as her therapist of course. She would often cry when she was laughing, and smile despite how she was feeling inside. You may know the type, or the feeling. Anyways this young lady was a star student, editor of her school yearbook, and champion for lost dogs at her local animal shelter. What people didn’t know was the level of her resiliency and the strength of her mask. “Shelby” (not her real name) struggled with extreme anxiety and bouts with depression. She had survived two divorces, the incarceration of one of her father-figures, the witnessed physical violence against her mother, and the death of a sibling. Shelby always seemed to be asking herself, “What bad thing is going to happen next”, and because of this was constantly over-achieving in the areas of her life she could actually have some control in. Psychoanalysis aside, Shelby really needed someone in her corner at the very least. Shelby had an ACE score of five, which put her at risk for more adverse experiences. Fortunately, she was able to learn some skills and resiliency tools in therapy to counteract these risk factors.

Part of my work with teenagers was to figure out their ACE score. ACE stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences, and the higher a child’s ACE score the more at-risk they can be for other adverse experiences in early and later life. This pattern can, possibly, be altered with family and community supports and healthy expressive outlets. Some of the factors that will earn someone an ACE point are: “Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? Or Act in a way that made you afraid you might by physically hurt?”; “Did you often or very often feel that you didn’t have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, or had no one to protect you?”; “Were your parents ever separated or divorced?” A version of the full scale can be found at: <http://www.acestudy.org/the-ace-score.html>.

As you can see, gaining an ACE point or two is not a difficult thing. The higher the ACE score the more likely a person is to experience depression, adult alcoholism, perpetrate domestic violence, be a victim of domestic violence or sexual assault, attempt or complete suicide, participate in underage smoking or teenage sexual behaviors, and even have physical health issues as an adult. The other part of my job, then, became to assist someone with a higher ACE score to learn how to avoid these negative consequences. This is most often accomplished in therapy by teaching assertiveness skills, self-care, helping the individual change negative beliefs about themselves, and instilling positive experience so that the brain can begin to rewire away from a sometimes chronic survival state. Learning resiliency factors is also extremely important, and these include: making realistic goals and achieving them, knowing and building confidence in one’s strengths and abilities, self-regulation of emotions, and building strong social and communication skills.

Resiliency, meaning literally “to stay intact despite pressure”, is a term used by helping professionals to describe someone’s ability to maintain themselves in the face of adversity. Some of the similarities in people who are deemed “resilient” are supports like: healthy role models, supportive relationships, stable home environments, a larger community network or extended family, and access to education, health and community services. Having a high resiliency factor can possibly counteract many or all of the negative impacts of a high ACE score. The good news is that the resiliency factors are often areas that are more in our realm of control than the adverse childhood experiences are (or were). As children we are often not free to choose, where as adults it is entirely up to us to build that resiliency around us necessary to heal, grow, and find wholeness.

Shelby, for your information, was able to make progress on her healing journey. She did this by practicing some difficult conversations with her therapy team, and then having them with her mom. You see, when Shelby was overachieving in school and in the community everyone just assumed that she was fine. But, when she actually learned how to communicate that she was not “fine” she was able to get the recognition and acknowledgement she needed to truly become “fine”. When she graduated from her relationship with me, she reported feeling that she could trust her mom again with her difficult feelings. Their relationship was much improved. While Shelby cannot ever change her ACE score, she did increase her resiliency by figuring out how to let a very important loved one back into her corner.

If you, or someone you know is at risk, it is important to ground into the larger community for support. Most of us are more resilient when we have a network, regardless of how small or large. For many people who are struggling, one person can mean the difference between isolation and healing. Thanks for reading and have a great week! Remember, if there is a topic you would like to read about then you may send inquiries to Long Valley Health Center Attn: Jessi Maness.