

PICK AN ACE

Rahi Popat explores the value of working with adverse childhood experience markers with clients who haven't reconciled their past



How often do we speak about the impact of our childhood on our adult years? How much importance do we put on ensuring that our young people have the best possible childhood so that they aren't shaped negatively?

How do we minimise and mitigate the trials and tribulations outside the norm of being a child and be confident that we are nurturing functioning, dependent and self-sufficient adult human beings? These are just some of the key components of my questioning that made me realise how important childhood is and the visceral impact that is felt as we grow up.

A friend once told me, 'Every child deserves the best possible childhood.' It really stuck with me as I was grieving the loss of my dad and grandad while training to be a counsellor. His statement made me sit up and realise just how prevalent my childhood was to who I am now (and still becoming) and what my childhood really represented.

Shuffling the pack

I began exploring my understanding of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and what this actually meant for me.¹ I felt I owed it to myself to explore each 'marker' in detail as to how it applies to me.

Admittedly it wasn't easy. It took courage, time, support and deep reflection. I had to ask awkward and difficult questions of my childhood and unpick parts of it so that I could truly understand what went on for me. It still brings me both joy and sadness when I reflect on how the story unfolded for me and influences the work I do today in wanting to change the narrative for my clients and future generations.

The hand you're dealt

How do I now 'play the hand' I have been dealt and start the journey to understanding how ACEs have (consciously and unconsciously) become a part of my life? This yielded many thoughts and feelings as I began the

arduous journey into exploring each part and how they translated into parts of self and the congruence I was able to afford both to myself and those around me.

First, I understood quickly that I needed to appreciate the nature of each 'marker' of ACE and what these represented. I owed it to myself to deepen my knowledge into what they meant for me personally and not just let it be a generic part I attach to my life because it feels 'safe'. It took patience and honest conversations around *how* each marker represents who I am. Common questions I found myself reflecting on were, 'When did this happen to me?', 'How did this happen to me?' and 'Where can I recall this occurring?' I needed to ask these in order to understand how they shaped me.

I wanted to be at peace with however many markers I ended up with and to be comfortable that this was an accurate representation of my childhood and the life I lead today. Equally I wanted to use this in a positive manner and not let it define and weigh me down. Just because this is the hand I was dealt did not mean I was doomed to live the rest of my life like this. I was always motivated to change this script, but even more so when I began my counselling journey and working with clients.

Cards on the table

Seven. That is the number of cards I laid on the table to show how many markers I had. The seven markers were: verbal and physical abuse, emotional and physical neglect, household mental illness, domestic and substance abuse. This was a stark realisation at first, and one that was deeply upsetting to comprehend. I had gone through my childhood experiencing various forms of

adversity yet was completely oblivious that it was categorised in such a way. I felt it was somehow the norm to go through those aspects as this was 'life' as a family member called it. But it was not normal in the slightest. It was painful, disheartening and ripped away the joys of what a child should experience growing up.

And I was determined to use this new-found knowledge to my advantage. I trained to become a counsellor and began to see clients, both during placement and in private practice. It was starting to be more apparent in how my knowledge impacted them in the room, and how their childhood adversely affected who they were.

Claire,* a woman in her 40s, was a client I had seen for a prolonged time. She came to me to understand her current thought patterns, how her relationships were formed and wishing to be 'better' for everyone around her. She'd come to realise she needed support because she wasn't able to function in everyday life, and things she was doing at work, home and in her friendships were fast becoming strenuous and difficult to manage.

While the sessions were slow to begin with she was heavily focused on the narrative of her life each week and what she had done or not done. It was becoming clear that she was avoiding key areas of her life and was understandably apprehensive and cautious to lay all her own cards on the table around what had happened to her in childhood. She would fleetingly make references to her parents, her upbringing and how she navigated life as a child, but it was often short and sharp.

Pick a card

Gentle curiosity opened the door to many hidden areas of Claire's childhood and the adversity she had gone through.

'I had to ask awkward and difficult questions of my childhood and unpick parts of it so that I could truly understand what went on for me'

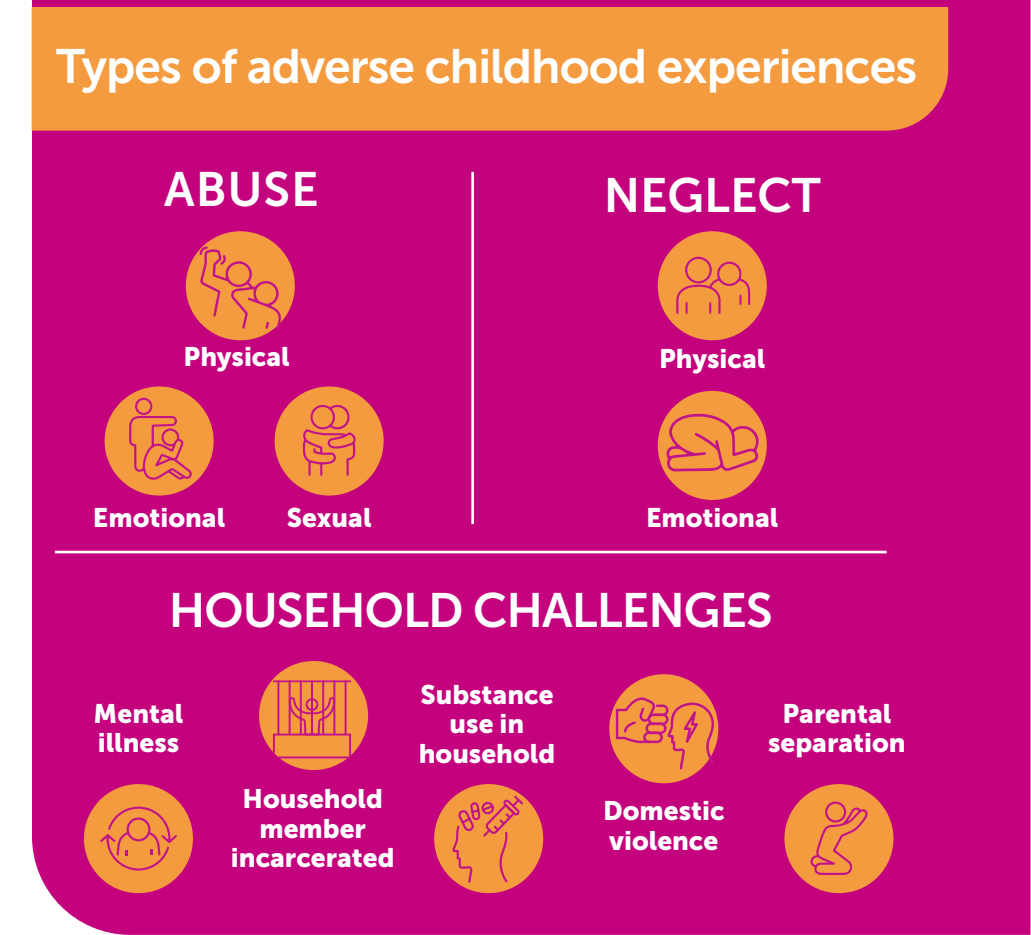


The striking ‘marker’ apparent in almost all her sessions was Claire’s relationship to her parents. Emotional neglect was something she spoke about with such sadness and hurt. It was an area that had caused huge amounts of distress: how her parents would often not be present, leave her alone for hours and not attend to her. ‘I was left outside the pub for hours on end as my dad drank with friends inside. I tried to knock on the window but nobody saw me. I was eight years old and it was cold outside,’ she painfully shared with me as she explored memories of her parents, namely her dad.

Shame around the blame and responsibility she placed on herself became a massive part of our work together. Simply picking one card to work with helped me to better understand what was happening for Claire in the room as she took herself back to her eight-year-old self. I could see the resentment, anger, hurt, confusion and lack of understanding as to how her dad could do this. It left her with so many questions unanswered as she was now estranged from her father. But this was just the beginning; what transpired was that there were many more instances of emotional neglect she began to reveal.

Working with this sensitively and allowing her to go to her childhood memory, which took a while for her to do as she traced her years back, meant that she was able to go at her own pace. This wasn’t work to be rushed or simplified. She had to work out what happened and make connections. Working with this, as well as exploring her mother’s mental illness, she connected further dots around not only the emotional neglect but her dad’s heavy reliance on alcohol and subsequent separation from her mum. I recall experiencing one session as though dominoes were in play – connections being made in succession so quickly.

With my own self-awareness and knowledge around ACEs and how they can show up in adult life, I offered



the concept of ACEs to Claire, psychoeducating about there being these markers to explore when somebody has gone through traumatic events. Claire showed a willingness to understand herself better throughout the process, and in this moment she started showing greater compassion to herself when she started joining up the dots between her experiences and what had happened to her as a girl. She showed some acknowledgment that things that had occurred in her childhood were no fault of her own but her parents’

responsibility to have offered safe enough conditions for her to grow up in, which often did not materialise.

Ace up your sleeve
What I learned from working with Claire and many other clients of differing cultural backgrounds was the notion that ‘my childhood was perfect’ and there was nothing wrong. As a counsellor this both frightens and frustrates me – especially given that a report by UCL Institute of Health Equity indicates that approximately half of the

English population have experienced at least one or more ACEs, which is backed up by my research too.² Some research has even showed that around 11% of adults in England and Wales have experienced four or more.

If the statistics are backing up the prevalence of the issue why are we so sceptical, unaware and misinformed around this? Are we educated about the long-term consequences of this? A Public Health Wales study found that more than eight in 10 (84.1%) of prisoners surveyed had experienced at least one ACE, and 45.5% reported four or more, while the World Health Organization estimates that 30 adult mental illnesses in 21 countries could be attributed to ACEs.^{3,4}

Could this knowledge and understanding in fact be the real ace up our sleeve as therapists? I believe so. Clients will present with a myriad of problems at times in a session and, while we will all strive to offer the core conditions, it would benefit us to start looking to address some of the deep-rooted issues our clients have experienced in childhood through this lens of ACE markers, which are a powerful way into the conversation.

Exploring how each marker shows up and presents itself and working with the client’s ability to notice and navigate the implications of this can be rich work for the therapeutic relationship. From my own experience it can be hard to bring such awareness into the room in a vacuum, to gently challenge or offer immediacy, but piecing together the fragmented parts of a client’s childhood through ACE markers can offer direction and safety to navigate the content through; something that clients who have experienced ACEs won’t have received growing up.

In spades
Hope is one of the most beautiful and kindest qualities one can offer anybody, whether to yourself or your clients. We must, as practitioners, use our skill sets professionally and personally to offer warmth and safety. While research at

times overwhelmingly points to the negative consequences of having one or more ACEs, exposure to good protective factors during traumatic events has also shown to yield positive outcomes in later years.⁵

In my additional role as a registered trauma-informed practitioner I see real benefits of these solid individual, family and community protective factors. Research backs up that people who have at least one person or family around helps them take action on the causes, prevalence and impacts of an ACE.⁶

It is my view that if we are to look at ACEs holistically and understand the various strands they can affect (such as life expectancy, health, unemployment, inequalities, disadvantaged communities, mental illness), then we need to become braver in naming and bringing ACEs more explicitly into the room with our clients in a sensitive, time-appropriate way to support the therapeutic relationship.

While at times we are not able to prevent or reduce ACEs occurring we can help to support clients as they come to terms with how their childhood played out and the ripple impact of this in their adult lives. Working together with my client to tackle the risk factors associated with ACEs has proven effective for beneficence in my therapeutic journey with them.

Full house
Understanding the intergenerational transmission of ACEs is also key because it can act as a starting point for some clients in becoming aware of their origin. Unpicking the history of their life helps to understand where the issue originated from, and although this may bring some comfort it does not take away the event itself for the client.

Carefully observing the link between ACEs and how that is playing or played out in a client’s life and helping them link together may prove to be significant because it gives the courage to name what has happened for them. With curiosity and compassion we have a real chance to make a difference in a person’s life and introduce positive change.

Often many clients will be the victim of circumstances they had no control or say over. As professionals working in this privileged space we have an opportunity to shine a light on ACEs and help prevent them having a stronghold over a person for a second longer than needed. We have the power to leave our clients with a full house of cards where ACEs are in the pack but don’t win the hand, and we have the ability to defy odds to make the world a better place for our clients and their future generations. ●

**Real name not used.*

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