

THEory into ACTION

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Developing an Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Philosophy:

Lessons for Community Psychologists

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Over the past decade Walla Walla, WA has gained national recognition for its efforts to disseminate, integrate, and implement information about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and resiliency into the Walla Walla community. ACEs include Abuse (emotional, physical, sexual), Household Challenges (mother treated violently, household substance abuse, mental illness in household, parental separation or divorce, and criminal household member), and Neglect (emotional and physical) during childhood. To community psychologists, the term ACEs may be new, but the idea of environmental factors mutually influencing children and family's behaviors is at the heart of our field.

At the heart of this work is the Children's Resilience Initiative (CRI) one of the leading initiatives in Washington State to sustainably disseminate and implement the ACEs philosophy into local youth service organizations. Walla Walla is also home to Lincoln High School (LHS), the first high school to create and implement a trauma-informed care curriculum based on the ACEs philosophy which gained national acclaim in a documentary entitled *Paper Tigers*. There is a lot for community psychologists to learn from the integration of the ACEs philosophy in Walla Walla.

The term ACEs came out of the public health arena, specifically a study by Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997 in Southern California with 17,000 Health Maintenance Organizations. The intent was to examine ACEs in relation to life-long health outcomes. Since then, other researchers including Suzette Fromm Reed (author) have examined ACEs through a strength-based lens with preliminary findings indicating that community resilience is key to understanding how to reduce the impact of ACEs on health and education outcomes for children and work outcomes in adults. For those outside of community psychology, the ACEs philosophy is an entryway to thinking like a community psychologist; viewing individuals in their context. For those in community psychology, the ACEs philosophy might offer a new frame to position our work.

One thing that helped Walla Walla move toward an ACEs philosophy, allowing them to make the shift from punishment to positive intent, was understanding brain science. The ACEs pyramid that came out of the Kaiser Permanente study shows that disruption in neurodevelopment leads to social, emotional and cognitive impairments that leads to adoption of health risk behaviors (negative coping mechanisms). The work being done by CRI with Teri Barila (author) as well as research done by Jennifer Gruenberg (author) with juvenile delinquency officers in Walla Walla indicates that this understanding is the first step for workers to stop taking the behavior personally and to respond in a less reactive, less punitive manner. It helps juvenile delinquency officers, community advocates, school workers and public health workers understand that each child wants to do the best they can, but not everyone has had the luxury of developing a healthy stress response system.

Jennifer Gruenberg's research explored what it takes to adopt an ACEs philosophy. She conducted fourteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews with experts who worked in the field of

youth services. The initial focus was on the community-level presence and manifestation of the ACEs philosophy in Walla Walla which is where most community psychologists would begin; however, it became clear that the ACEs philosophy was not emanating from the community itself. Instead, experts were shifting their understanding of youth behavior on an individual basis through their own work and experience with youth. For some experts the ACEs/community philosophy came easily while others had more difficulty.

A lesson for community psychologists is to focus on the mutual influence of the individual and community/organization. For the individual, Community psychologists might consider the steps Gruenberg found as necessary to adopting the ACEs/community philosophy: (1) exposure to experiences beyond your own; (2) feeling sympathy for others and their situations; (3) empathizing with other's situations and being able to imagine what it would be like to be in someone else's shoes; (4) reflecting on your own experiences and remembering what it was like to feel the way others feel, even though you most likely access that feeling from a different, personal experience; (5) understanding the full implications of the brain research, which states that the brain is shaped by one's social environment; (6) and when the ACEs philosophy is completely adopted as your individual framework, you truly understand that behavior is an outcome of the social environment in which you were raised, not an individual choice. While these steps undoubtedly tend to unfold in different ways for different people, this presentation most closely follows the experiences of the bulk of the experts interviewed.

For organizations/communities, seeds can be planted to help individuals move through the steps and also to reinforce learning along the way. Presence and awareness of ACEs in Walla Walla is moving towards a “critical mass” or a “tipping point,” but one that is coming about through individual exposure to and adoption of the ACEs philosophy. One interviewee who had fully

adopted the ACEs philosophy sums it up: “you can’t change anybody’s mind, but you can certainly plant lots of seeds and let them think about things.”

A second lesson for community psychologists is to consider a shift in the frame of issues. From the example in Walla Walla, this shift involved helping community workers understand the *impact of environmental influences on brain development and the connection to negative coping mechanisms*. It requires an understanding that safety is the starting point, that kids (or adults) from trauma have lost their sense of safety, trust, power and control. This foundation allows the community worker to recognize that those they are helping are not being manipulative, they are doing what their brain has learned keeps them safe.

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at underwoodtabitha@gmail.com.