



The Domestic Violence Awareness Conference and The Impact of Complex Trauma

By Alice Ellison



When you think of your early years, what comes to mind? It might be things like being drenched by water from a fire hydrant on a hot summer day, giggling with friends, biking around the block with your siblings, or eating crabs with the whole family. Or you may be among the many people who do not have these lovely childhood memories, or who have darker memories that crowd out the happy ones.

Most of us can recognize what trauma looks like. When we think of trauma, we often think of momentous, life-changing events. We think of horrific instances of physical or sexual assault, car accidents, natural disasters, 911 and COVID-19 -- events that divide a person's life into "before" and "after." These are the experiences that often plague victims in the form of flashbacks and nightmares.

In October, the Yasha Circle Ministry hosted its Domestic Violence Awareness Conference. This year's theme was, "You Got the Power to Be Made Whole." TPCBC's Deacon Norman Jones and former professional football player Vance Johnson each made powerful presentations about trauma. I thank them for their authenticity and transparency. From them, I learned about complex trauma. Complex trauma is a subtle, "slow burn" type of childhood experience that affects a person just as profoundly as traumatic incidents do. It is often difficult to pinpoint, describe, and recall. The experiences might appear as "snapshots" from childhood, like waiting at the window late into the night for an often-absent parent to come home. They could appear as a general feeling of distrust or detachment, a feeling that later sneaks into the person's adult relationships, even when those relationships are with people who are not harmful.

Deacon Jones explained that complex trauma is not always about what *happened* to a person; it is also about what *did not happen*. Perhaps the person was not given basic respect or a sense of reliability from the adults in their lives. He went into detail about the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. Here are a few excerpts from the study: 1) Trauma can burrow down deep into the body, contributing to diseases like heart, liver, lung, and autoimmune disease, and chronic headaches. 2) Trauma can be harmful to a person's relationship with their own sexuality. 3) Even a person's understanding of time and reality can be distorted by complex trauma. I believe that knowing the link between ACEs and these long-term symptoms is extremely important. We all have our baggage and our fears, but those who have experienced complex trauma have holes in both their past and their future. If you are not familiar with this study, you can learn more about it [here](#). It is life-changing!

This year's Conference was intense and heartfelt. It profoundly affected me and provided answers to questions I did not know I had. That's why it's imperative that we continue to increase awareness about Domestic Violence — in ways similar to public health initiatives about how seat belts save lives, smoking causes cancer, and hand-washing prevents flu and coronavirus — to educate physicians and families on how childhood trauma begets adult illness and sometimes irreparable damage to our loved

ones. Only then can we help those who feel paralyzed by their pasts to achieve the healthy lives they deserve. As Vance Johnson both lived and warned, those unresolved childhood experiences can lead to a very devastating and destructive lifestyle! God bless him for sharing his journey from abuser to advocate!