

# **Faces of ACEs for Nursing Education**

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# **Faces of ACEs Patient Portfolios**

# Alexa

## My childhood:

I grew up living with both of my parents in Grand Rapids. It was a good childhood overall, but I didn't know any different. When I was 6, my parents started arguing with each other more and more, and my dad would sometimes take it too far and physically hurt my mom. I hated watching it, but it became the new normal for our family. My younger sister and I would go hide in our rooms together, and often we would go there after dinner when they began fighting, and wouldn't see them until the next day. On the worst nights, my dad would come find us and yell at us too, but he never hit us — thank goodness. He would verbally abuse us, saying we would never be good enough. Mom and Dad were so caught up in their arguments, I was left emotionally neglected until they got divorced when I was 16. The divorce was just more emotional turmoil for me. I had to constantly choose between my parents, and either way, someone was left angry. As soon as I turned 18 and graduated high school, I moved and went to college far away from my hometown so I didn't have to be choosing constantly anymore.



## Currently:

I am 38 years old. I have been in multiple long-term relationships, but have never been married. I'm just too nervous that what happened with my parents will happen to me. I never want to go through the process of divorce myself, or expose my own children to that. I sometimes feel depressed, but it hasn't ever gotten in the way of living my life to the fullest. After the divorce, I started smoking to ease the pain. It also led to more unhealthy lifestyle choices like poor dietary choices, I wasn't truly taking care of myself. Last week I went to the hospital because I have been getting more short of breath and fatigued while doing simple tasks like walking up the stairs. I was diagnosed with congestive heart failure. The doctor said I can improve my outcome with lifestyle changes, but I haven't decided what changes I'm willing to make.

Based on what you read about Alexa, what ACE score would you give her?

# Sammantha



## My childhood:

I grew up with a younger brother and my mom. My mom had me when she was seventeen and my biological father was never involved in my life. My mom told me once that he had been in jail for a while and was dangerous to be around. We moved around a lot depending on who my mom was in a relationship with at the time. Most of the time we lived in small apartments in various cities. The most permanent place we stayed was from when I was 7-17. We lived with my mom's boyfriend, Tim, and his sister and her family in an apartment. There were nine of us in a three bedroom apartment and there were times when food was scarce. My mom worked multiple jobs to try and ensure that we had enough money to live on, so she was rarely home with me and my brother. Tim was home all the time and he drank a lot. There would be multiple days I would come home from school and he would be passed out on the couch. When he drank I stayed away from him as he would either be too friendly and touchy to me, or he would be angry and yell. I don't know how my mom stayed with him, but we needed the roof over our heads, because before moving in with Tim we had no place to live. I lacked a father figure in my life and sought affection to fill that void through sexual relationships starting at the age of 14, with multiple sexual partners.

## Currently:

I am 20 years old and live with my 2 year old baby girl Mila in a friend's apartment. I moved out at the age of 17 and became pregnant two months later, which caused me to drop out of high school. Last year I completed the GED test. The baby's father is much like my father, not interested or involved in the baby's life. After having my baby I needed to spend some time at Pine Rest because my postpartum depression was so bad. I think a lot of things had built up in my life, and that took a toll on my mental health. I worked through a lot of things in that season of life but I still struggle with anxiety and depression and take Paxil (paroxetine) for my depression. My main stressor is the lack of money to pay the bills. I work as a CNA at an assisted living facility on third shift and live paycheck to paycheck. I enjoy going out for drinks with friends on the weekends, even though I know that is not being the best mother to Mila. My mom and Tim watch my daughter for me often, even though it concerns me leaving Mila around Tim when he is drinking. I have to utilize them as I can't afford any other options for my daughter.

Based on what you read about Sammantha, what ACE score would you give her?

# Devon

## My childhood:

From the age of 4, I was raised by just my mom. My dad was involved with the gangs on our side of town, and one night, I watched him get taken to jail. I haven't seen him since. Growing up without a father-figure was tough, on both me and my mom. I watched her turn to drugs as her coping mechanism. She hid it from me at first, but before long, her addiction was no longer invisible. She was also diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, which made her unpredictable at times, and made it difficult for her to keep a steady job. I spent a lot of time with my best friend, Nico. He had a similar situation at home, so we could confide in each other. He really was the reason I made it through. But, we also formed some bad habits with each other. To take away the pain, we turned to IV drug use; I mean, it worked for our parents, so we thought we'd give it a try. Plus, it wasn't hard to get our hands on some. The first time we tried it, we were 12. It didn't make life easier, but it helped us deal with our circumstances. By the time we were in high school, using almost every day still didn't make the pain go away. We tried everything - heroin, PCP, you name it. And the stress at home and school was getting harder and harder to deal with. My mom died when I was 18, and I moved in with Nico, as if life couldn't get any worse. The drugs took her life, and I could see they were ruining mine, too.



## Currently:

I am 21 years old and have been told by my doctor that I have 6 months to live. The constant use of those drugs absolutely destroyed my body. I didn't stop after my mom passed. My heart is failing, and my brain is in a constant state of withdrawal. Nico and I tried to quit injecting when we graduated, but the physical pain was so much worse. We were too embarrassed to ask for help, but neither of us were strong enough to help the other. About a month ago I felt my body suddenly changing for the worse, so I went to the community health clinic to see a doctor. It was the first time I had been in years. I've now been clean of drugs for 3 weeks, but the urge is always there. I try to stay positive and make the most out of my time here, but it's hard to do anything when I can feel that my body is physically decaying. After that doctor's visit, I spent time in a rehabilitation center. It helped, but it didn't relieve the pain of my mother's death, or put me at peace with mine. Luckily, I have my best friend here to support me, and I'll try to make this time count.

Based on what you read about Devon, what ACE score would you give him?

# Jessy



## My childhood:

Until age 9 I was in foster care with my two siblings, Brianna, my older sister, and Charlie, my younger brother. Thankfully, we only moved placements three times in the 6 years we were in foster care waiting for a forever family. When I was 5, a family welcomed all three of us into their home, alongside their three biological children.

The longer we stayed the more I believed we would stay with them forever, but they were not open to adopting us and would remind us that there was a forever family out there for us. It was a conflicting feeling to have a place feel like home, but knowing you are not wanted there permanently. I know they cared about us deeply, but we were never treated like their own children. After moving in with them, I was only able to see my birth mom twice before she lost her parental rights. I was always told she struggled enough to take care of herself and certainly couldn't handle taking care of the three of us. Each time we saw her she would tell us how much she loved us, and she was trying to fix herself so we could all be together again. I knew she struggled with depression, the stress of limited resources, and drug use. When we first heard a couple wanted to meet the three of us and potentially adopt us, it was hard to get my hopes up, but they really did adopt us! The day we were adopted was the best day of our lives; we were finally wanted by someone. They gave us a great home and I am forever grateful for that because I know dealing with my siblings and I was not always the easiest. We suffered a lot of hurt in our early years, and when you never feel like you have a stable place to call home, it is hard to trust people who really are there to love you.

## Currently:

I am 30 years old and married with a three year old child, Bret, with one more child on the way. My wife has been so patient with me over the years of our marriage. The early years of our relationship certainly were not easy as I continued to navigate allowing myself to trust others to stay in my life. If you ask her, I had a really hard time opening up and was not always easy to love. It has taken many years of therapy and a lot of self awareness to get to the place I am in life now. I still have nightmares about my childhood and being alone every once in a while. I also often find myself wondering how my birth mom is doing, although I do not think it would be beneficial for me to try and reach out to her. I believe it could resurface anger and hurt that it took a long time for me to forgive. Part of that forgiveness was accepting that I needed to take medication for my constant anxious thoughts, that I believe stem from the lack of stability in my childhood. Currently, I have dedicated my life to those in the foster care system and fight hard for children to have an ending to their painful childhood like I was gifted. I am on the board of directors to the same agency that placed my siblings and I, and my wife and I are working through adopting a sibling group ourselves.

Based on what you read about Jessy, what ACE score would you give him?

# Nikki

## My childhood:

I had a great childhood. I grew up on the east side of Michigan, on the outskirts of Novi. I was constantly surrounded by family, and grew up in a home with both of my parents, my sisters Katie, Grace, Elena, and our brother, Lucas. I loved that I had so many siblings, and I was usually the peacemaker of the group, since I was the oldest. Our extended family all lived nearby, so I was really close with my cousins, too. It made for a very fun upbringing, there was always something exciting going on! My parents both worked full-time jobs to support our family, but were always so supportive of me and my siblings. I had amazing relationships with them both, we told each other everything. Even in my early years, I was really shining academically in school and was developing a passion for soccer. Everything was perfect, until January 14th. After lunch when I was in third grade, I was called down into the office along with Elena and Lucas, who were both in kindergarten at the same school. When we got there, mom was waiting for us. She didn't look good, and it was very unusual that she was there. I will never forget that day. She told us in between tears that dad had gotten into a terrible car accident on his way to work and had died on scene. At the age of 8, I never thought I would be attending my father's funeral. The next year was probably the worst of my life, but our family became so much closer. I couldn't have gotten through it all without my siblings, my strong mom, and supportive extended family. My mother really set the example for us and continued to be our rock during the hard times.



## Currently:

I am now a sophomore at Grand Valley State University. I kept up with my academics, and just got accepted into the nursing program! I play on the club soccer team and enjoy hanging out with my roommates when we're not busy with school. I'd be lying if I said that my dad's death didn't affect me, but I feel that I have handled it well. After his passing, I went into a deep depression. Life just wasn't the same without him. And it got worse after I moved across the state for college, without the support of my mom and extended family. But, I started going to counseling, didn't keep my emotions a secret, and was able to lean on my amazing family and friends during the darkest time of my life. I still see my counselor once a week, we have developed a great relationship, and she has been such a therapeutic outlet for me. I miss my dad, there's not a day that goes by that I don't think about him. But I can say now that I am a much healthier person, physically and mentally, and I know he would be so proud of me.

Based on what you read about Nikki, what ACE score would you give her?

# Samuel

My childhood:

I had a good early childhood. I had two involved parents, attended school, always had enough food on the table, a large house, and plenty of clothes. We even went on a lot of fun family vacations; Aruba was a yearly destination for our family. From an outside perspective, everything about my life looked perfect, but I knew there was always something a little bit different about my father.



There would be days when he stayed in bed and never once got out. We learned to leave him alone on those days. Still, he always provided for our family and had a good job. I have a lot of fond memories as a young child with my dad. When I was nine years old, my mom took my sister and I on a weekend away to visit her parents, who lived out of town, while my dad stayed home for work. That weekend, my mom got a phone call and everything about life as I knew it changed; my dad had committed suicide while we were out of town. The next years were the hardest years of my life. My mom blamed herself for the whole situation, believing my father's death was her fault. My mom had not gone to college, and she was a stay-at-home mother before my father passed away because he had a job that provided for all we needed and wanted. This caused my life to change from having a mom who was always there, to having a mom who needed to work full-time. This was hard for her as she had no college education and a lot of bills to pay if we wanted to keep living the lifestyle we lived when dad was alive. Eventually it became impossible for her to keep up. There were times we struggled to put food on our table and I came home from school knowing that I wouldn't eat until I went to school the next day. We also had to move because we could no longer afford our big house in the suburbs.

Currently:

I'm 17 years old. I still attend school, but my dreams of being an athlete no longer exist because I work every night. My income goes to help my mom so we can have enough food to eat and can pay our rent and utility bills for the small apartment we live in. We don't go on vacations anymore or have a closet full of new clothes. I feel like I'm finally becoming aware of the impact my father's unexpected death had on my life and how it has subconsciously consumed me. Some may say the last years of my life I was just in "survival mode". My mom knew I was struggling and encouraged me to go to counseling, which has been helpful. I continue to feel like I need to be there for my mom, reminding her it wasn't her fault that my dad had taken his own life, but instead it happened because he was sick. This is a hard role to play, when some days it is hard for me to feel okay. My depression medication doesn't always seem to help. It's hard for me to imagine what life would be like if my father was still here - what life would be like if we were still living in our nice neighborhood, going on vacations, and I was able to live a normal high school life. It would have been a life that allowed me to play sports and hang out with friends because I would not have had to always be working. I feel like I have been robbed of my childhood and had to grow up fast because I needed to help provide for my family.

Based on what you read about Samuel, what ACE score would you give him?

# Marcus

## My childhood:

I grew up with a large family, and was always surrounded by our relatives. Out of my 5 siblings, I was definitely closest with my twin brother, Zach. Both of my parents worked the evening shifts at their jobs, so we would always hang out at our aunt and uncle's house right down the road after we got home from school, until about 9pm when our parents would pick us up. Our families were really close, and it was always a blast spending time with our cousins so often. Somedays, Zach and I would be the only ones there with our aunt and uncle because the other kids had sports practices and after-school clubs. On those days, our uncle would always ask us to help him with tasks outside, or in the basement, but there were never jobs for us to do. Instead, he would take us by ourselves and sexually abuse us, and nobody else knew about it. We knew it was wrong, but he threatened to ruin our lives and the lives of the rest of our family. We never told our parents, or anyone for that matter, out of fear of what he would do to us next. As I grew older, these instances were less frequent, but the stress and trauma were always lingering in the back of my mind. I coped with this stress by engaging in sexual activities with many different girls throughout my school-age years. By the time I was 17, I had slept with at least 50 different girls, and had multiple sexually transmitted infections. I rarely told others my feelings or discussed my emotions, but Zach and I were always there to lean on each other.



## Currently:

I am 35 years old, married, and have twin boys of my own. I spent some time after college focusing on myself, got help with my mental health, and saw a trauma counselor regularly. I stopped sleeping around - I realized promiscuity was not a healthy way to cope with what my uncle had put me through. I also spoke up - Zach and I told our parents the truth of what had happened on those nights after school, and my uncle is currently serving time in jail for his actions. As for me, I continue to keep up with therapy sessions, since they exponentially help with the repressed feelings. My wife Rachael helps remarkably with my mental health; we met in our senior year of college, and she was the first person who I opened up to and let actually see my heart. Since our relationship began, my life has been nothing but fruitful. I strive everyday to provide a healthy environment for our boys, and to make sure they never have to go through what I did in my early years.

Based on what you read about Marcus, what ACE score would you give him?

# Jasmine



## My childhood:

I had an unstable childhood that forced me to grow up fast. Until the age of 10 my parents were together, although it was certainly not a picture perfect marriage. My dad was gone a lot of weekends for work and when he was home, he and my mom would argue often. One day, my parents sat me down and told me that there were going to be getting a divorce. Following that, my mom moved across town to an apartment, and I spent the rest of my childhood going back and forth between my dad and mom. My dad got remarried within a year to a different woman named Britney. My step mom has always tried so hard to win me over and spend quality time with me, but she is not my mom and there is a lot of hurt I have had to work through because of her. My dad went on a lot of fun vacations without me once he got remarried it was almost as though I was replaced by Britney. I never felt like I could discuss the feelings I have with my mom because it hurt her a lot too how fast my dad moved on after the divorce. I watched my mom struggle to pay the bills, work through being broken-hearted, and be left with very few people in her life outside of me to talk with. It was a lot to be there for her at such a young age. The one thing I missed out on in childhood was having a permanent stable home, many weeks it was exhausting going back and forth between my parents.

## Currently:

I am 25 years old. I just completed college, which is a huge accomplishment for me. Due to the instability of my childhood, I really struggled to do well in school during middle and high school. I was diagnosed with ADHD after the divorce and even with medication, I struggled to focus and complete tasks. I had to start at community college because out of the 6 universities I applied to, none accepted me due to my lacking GPA. I moved to a new state to go to college, and it felt like a new start, which is exactly what I needed. I have recently done a lot of self reflection on the influence the instability from my childhood has had on me. I have not been in a committed romantic relationship in a long time, and it is something that is terrifying to me. I also feel like I have yet to fully settle and allow myself to call one place, job, or group of people home. I have come a long way in forgiving my dad and mom and learning to appreciate my step mom. I know that with continued counseling and reflection, I will keep healing the things from the past that hurt me deeply.

Based on what you read about Jasmine, what ACE score would you give her?

# **Powerpoint and Debrief Activities**

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# Faces of ACEs

An exploration of Adverse Childhood Experiences



# ACEs Overview

- ACEs are Adverse Childhood Experiences.
- Felitti and Anda first led a study in 1998 that correlated adverse childhood experiences and negative health outcomes later in adulthood.
- The ten ACEs are categorized into 3 categories: Abuse, Neglect, and Household Dysfunction.

## ABUSE



Physical



Emotional



Sexual

## NEGLECT



Physical



Emotional

## HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION



Mental Illness



Incarcerated Relative



Mother treated violently



Substance Abuse



Divorce

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## ACEs Overview

- ACE scores are calculated based on how many ACEs a child has experienced.
- The higher the ACE score, the greater risk for negative health outcomes.
- As you will see, a high ACE score does not absolutely lead to an unhealthy adult life, but in many cases, what happens in childhood can impact health in adulthood.



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## Case Study Activity



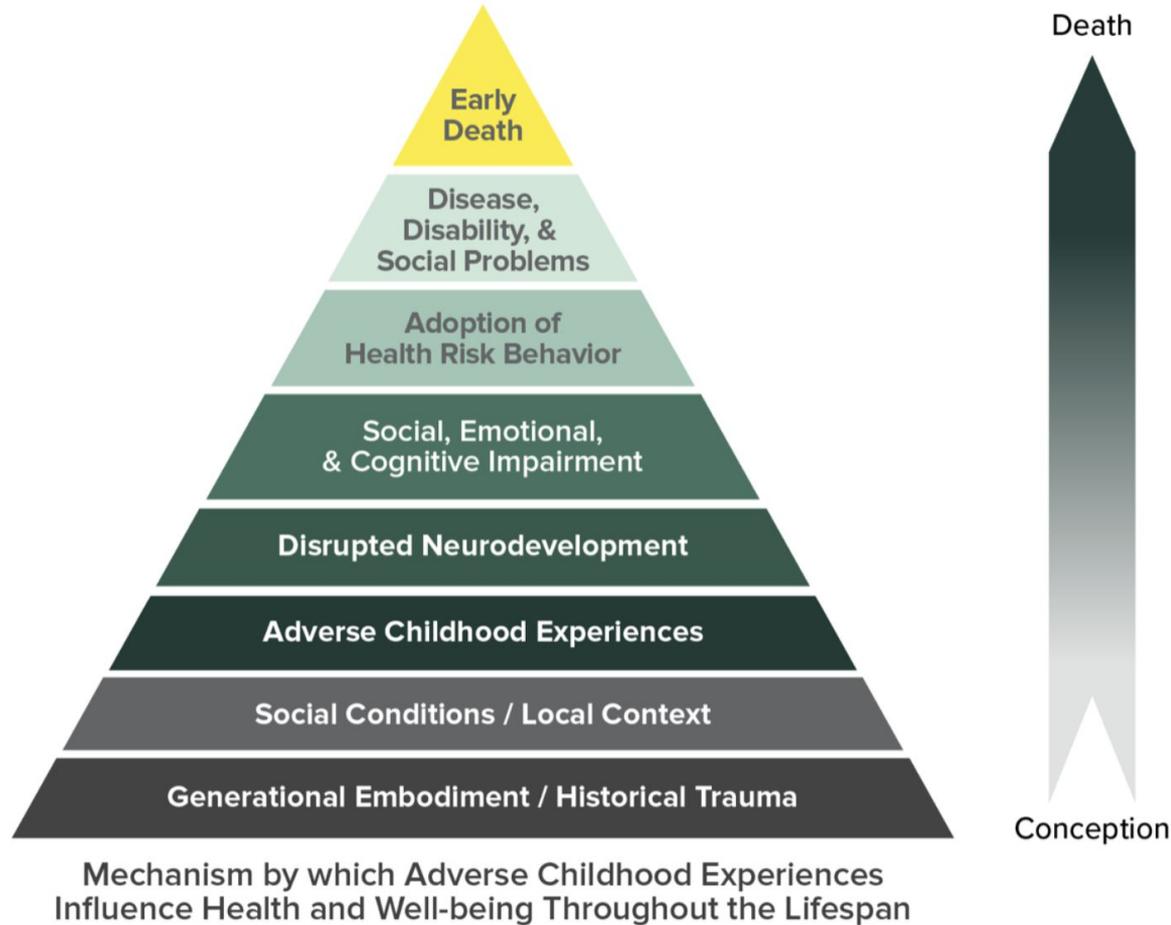
With your clinical group, read aloud each of the case studies given to you. Some of these stories may be hard to read, but you will experience patients with hardships and trauma similar to these in practice!

Between the childhood story and current story, pause to determine each person's ACE Score, and discuss potential negative health outcomes that may have occurred.

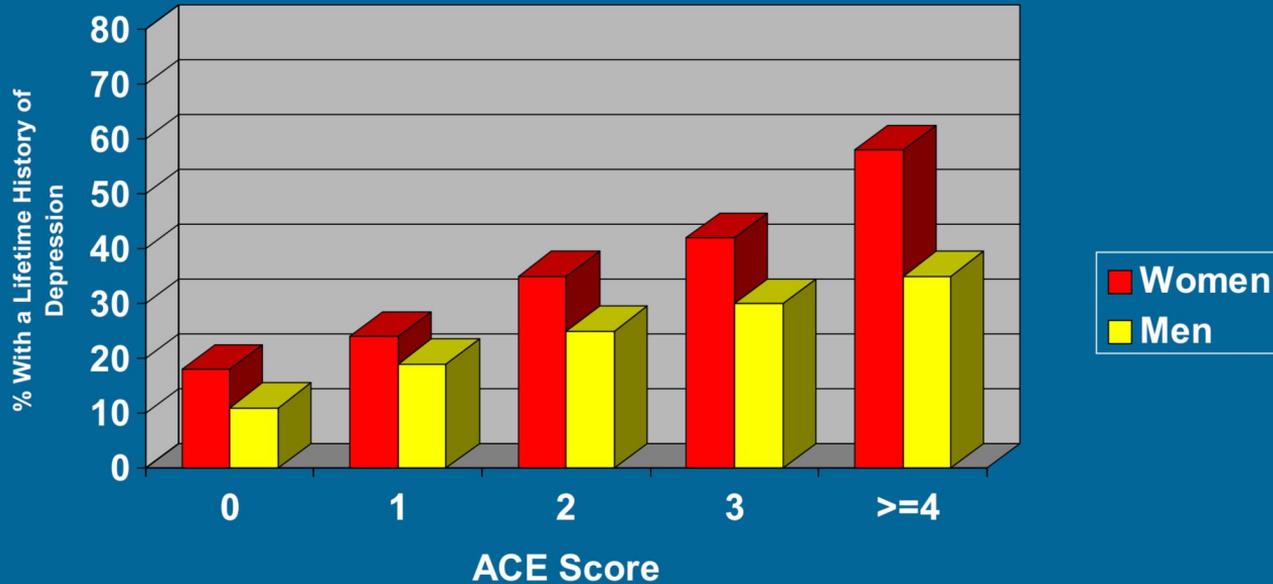
Use your critical thinking skills to process how these ACEs could affect each person long-term, and be aware of how each scenario makes you feel.

# Let's Discuss!



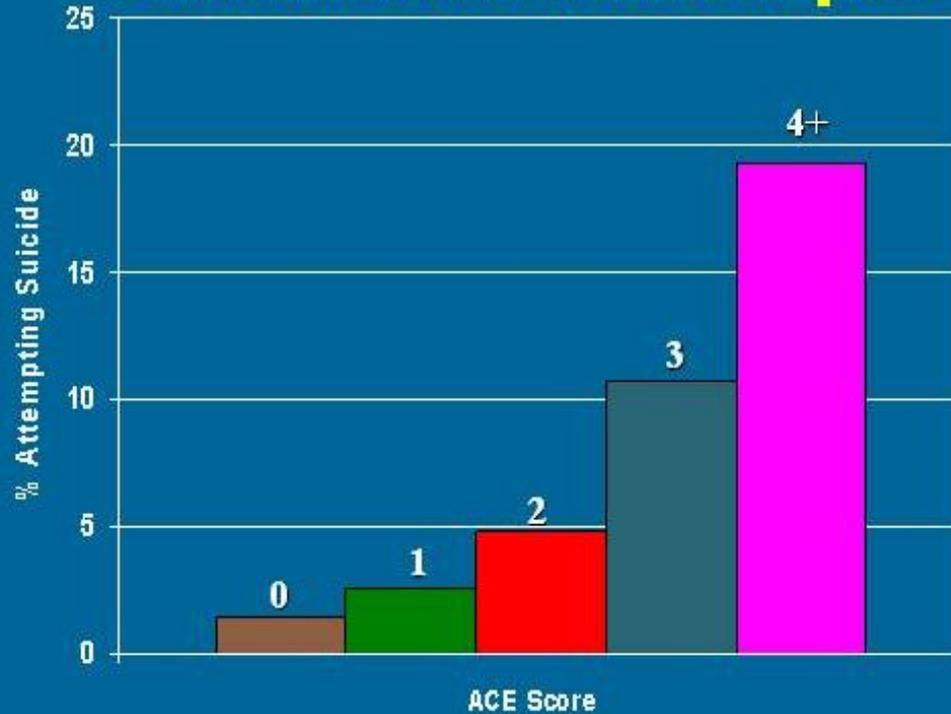


# Childhood Experiences Underlie Chronic Depression



Graph Source: Felitti, V., & Anda, R. (2010). The relationship of adverse childhood experiences to adult medical disease, psychiatric disorders and sexual behavior: Implications for healthcare. *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (pp. 77-87). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511777042.010

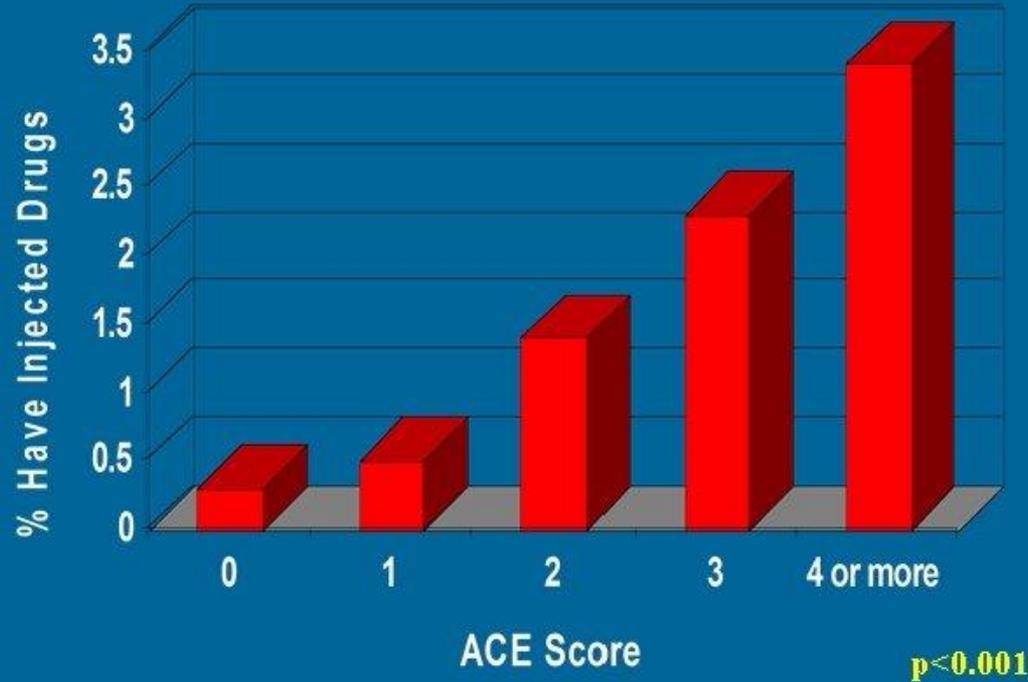
## Childhood Experiences Underlie Suicide Attempts



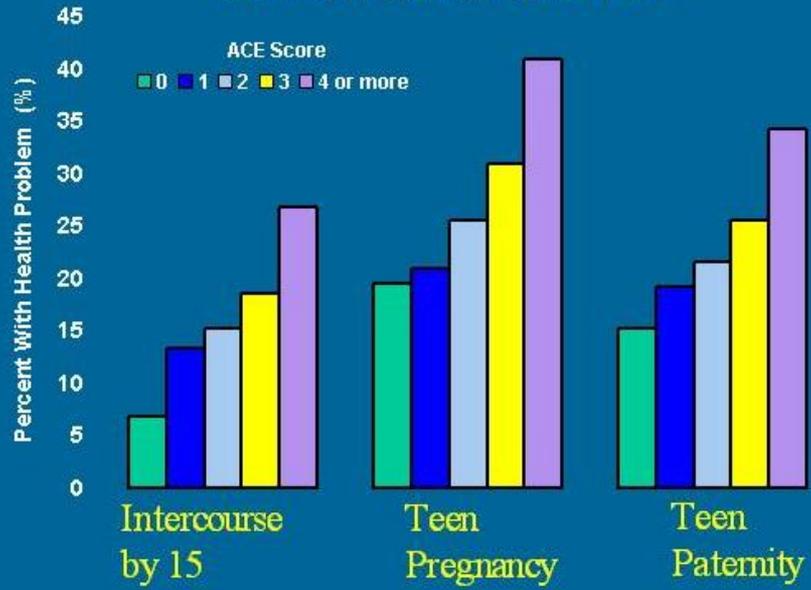
## Childhood Experiences vs. Adult Alcoholism



## ACE Score vs. Intravenous Drug Use



### ACE Score and Teen Sexual Behaviors



### Childhood Experiences Underlie Later Being Raped



Graph Source: Felitti, V., & Anda, R. (2010). The relationship of adverse childhood experiences to adult medical disease, psychiatric disorders and sexual behavior: Implications for healthcare. *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (pp. 77-87). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511777042.010

# How does this happen?

ACEs translate into chronic disease by:



- Long-term damage from various behaviors used as **coping mechanisms** in response to ACEs such as smoking, overeating, physical inactivity, alcoholism, illicit drug use, promiscuity, etc.
- Complex physiologic effects of **major unrelieved stress** on CNS functions affecting core body processes like inflammation and immune response.
- By **epigenetic effects** that cause toxic stress to be potentially transmitted at the genetic level to the next generation, this is not fully explained, but research continues.

ACEs are the main cause of health risk behaviors and therefore directly correlate with rates of disease, disability, premature death, and healthcare costs.



**Questions?**

## **Debrief Questions**

What stood out to you?

Which story surprised you the most?

Discuss how reading the case studies made you feel.

What similarities and differences did you notice between the cases?

In what ways do you think nurses can influence the course of ACEs' effects?

How might you see the effects of ACEs in your psych clinical placement?

## **Debrief Key Points**

### **Alexa - ACE score:**

- Heart disease occurs 1.7x more often for those who experienced emotional abuse
- See the effects on both physical and mental health in the long-term outcome
- Chronic disease predicted by to complex physiologic effects of major unrelieved stress on CNS functions affecting core body processes like inflammation and immune response

### **Sammantha - ACE score:**

- Show statistic of ACEs and number of sexual partners / teen parenting
- Mental health complications due to complex physiologic effects of major unrelieved stress → leading to increased suicide risk
- Substance abuse
- Discuss job and economic implications due to ACEs

### **Devon - ACE score:**

- ACE score vs IV drug use skyrockets
- 3 weeks clean - potential for OD if he were to suddenly use right now
- Coping mechanisms turn into chronic disease, death

### **Jessy - ACE score:**

- Mental health complications due to complex physiologic effects of major unrelieved stress
- Need for therapy, forgiveness, and self awareness, and even still parts of the past are hard, especially the effects of an unstable environment as a child.
  - Name additional examples of childhood instability that can lead to neglect

### **Nikki - ACE score:**

- Even 1 ACE contributes to chronic depression risk
- Overcoming ACE
- Resources available

### **Samuel - ACE score:**

- Toxic stress from ACEs can change brain development and affect such things as attention, decision-making, learning, and response to stress.
  - Discuss the possible outcomes of this later in Samuel's life → HTN by age 25
- The traumatic impact of having a family member die by suicide
- Mental health impact of ACEs
- ACE's are costly for society and families - what changed in Samuel's life?

### **Marcus - ACE score:**

- ACEs translate into disease by unhealthy coping mechanisms (promiscuity)
- Could still be affected long-term by STIs

- Major unrelieved stress of past events (sexual abuse)
- 2 of the top 10 risk factors for health risk behaviors

**Jasmine - ACE score:**

- Influence of instability
- Mental health complications due to complex physiologic effects of major unrelieved stress → ADHD and school complications
- Need for therapy, forgiveness, and self awareness following ACEs