Combating toxic stress

Your Turn
Shelby Pedersen
Guest columnist

ICAN recently held a training for our staff about Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma Informed Care. Our community programs manager, Ted Huntington, has been trained in these areas. The training was a great experience for our staff to learn more about Averse Childhood Experiences and Trauma Informed Care, not only how it impacts the youth that we serve, but to take a better look at how they handle stressful situations managing our youth. Also how they handle stressful situations in general, as everyone has triggers that impact them.

Adverse Childhood Experiences is the term given to describe all types of childhood trauma, including abuse, neglect and other traumatic experiences. If you are curious about your own Adverse Childhood Experiences score, you can take the quick assessment at acestoohigh.com/got-your-ace-score/.

Knowing your ACE score is one thing, but investing in the solution is another. We assume at ICAN that the majority of the youth we serve have experienced some childhood trauma. We need to ensure that we are prepared to equip these youth with the skills they need to conquer their Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Ted had the group talk through stressful situations where things are not in our control – such as traffic, youth acting up or being short-staffed. We also identified how youth might end up in a stressed-out state. Maybe they started their day with their parents fighting, then had to sit quietly in school all day. The other side of that is things that are in our control – our attitude, thoughts and actions. Ted gave a great analogy using the Incredible Hulk. He calls it "Hulk Mode" – when that stress starts to build and you turn into a different person. That's a "toxic cocktail" where cortisol and adrenaline are released into the body, resulting in aggression, impulsion, irrationality and anxiety. Identifying and countering toxic stress is key to regulating this vicious cycle, and everyone can benefit from some of the steps it takes to get from a "toxic cocktail" to a "soothing smoothie."

1 Know your triggers – what tends to set you off?

2 Learn some skills that are immediate counters to toxic stress – maybe that is self-talk "not today trigger!" or some deep, concentrated breathing.

3 Reevaluate your state, what are you doing and is it effective?

4 Figure out what works best to calm you down and use these as long-term coping techniques.

Toxic stress that builds up in the body and keeps coming back can have serious health implications. There's evidence that Adverse Childhood Experiences and built-up toxic stress lead to disease, disability, social problems and early death.

Our ICAN programs team talked through some "soothing smoothie" ideas for themselves, as well as dealing with kids. One really unique skill that worked great for one of the youth was holding and petting a soft blanket. This particular youth was really having trouble controlling their emotions, so one of the staff members asked them what they do at home when they get upset. They said that they pet their guinea pig. So the staff member came up with the idea of giving them a soft blanket to hold and pet, which worked great.

Whether it is yourself, your child, or someone you care for – understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences and having compassion for what others have been through is helpful for everyone. Developing skills to calm toxic stress – in yourself or in a child you know will have long-term health benefits.

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