

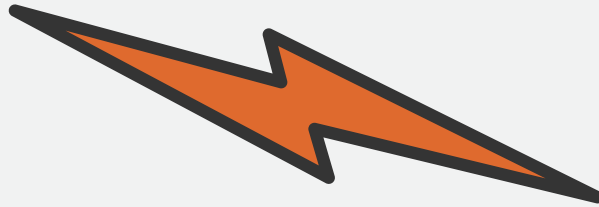
TOXIC STRESS

A GINA GUIDE

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WHAT IS TOXIC STRESS?

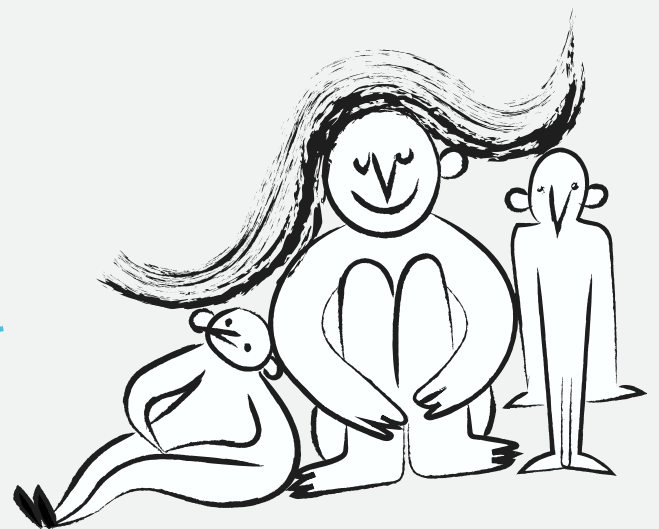
TOXIC STRESS IS THE BODY'S RESPONSE TO PERSISTENT AND SEVERE LEVELS OF STRESS. IT OCCURS WHEN A CHILD DOES NOT RECEIVE ENOUGH SUPPORT FROM A CAREGIVER AND THEIR BODY CANNOT SWITCH OFF THEIR STRESS RESPONSE NORMALLY. THE STRESS CONTINUES TO A POINT WHERE THE CHILD'S BODY AND BRAIN CAN BE DAMAGED, AND CAN CAUSE LIFELONG HEALTH PROBLEMS.



WHAT CAUSES TOXIC STRESS?

TOXIC STRESS CAN OCCUR WHEN A CHILD EXPERIENCES STRONG, PERSISTENT AND RECURRENT ADVERSITY. THIS CAN INCLUDE HAVING BEEN SUBJECTED TO PHYSICAL, SEXUAL OR EMOTIONAL ABUSE, CHRONIC NEGLECT, CAREGIVER SUBSTANCE ABUSE OR MENTAL ILLNESS, EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE AND THE BURDEN OF FAMILY ECONOMIC HARDSHIP, WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF A CAREGIVER. THE MORE UNPLEASANT AN INDIVIDUAL'S EXPERIENCES IN CHILDHOOD, THE GREATER THE LIKELIHOOD OF DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS AND DISEASES SUCH AS HEART FAILURE, DIABETES, SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND DEPRESSION.

IT IS POSSIBLE FOR CHILDREN TO BE IN ONGOING STRESSFUL SITUATIONS BUT NOT EXPERIENCE TOXIC STRESS. THEY CAN BE PROTECTED FROM THIS BY RECEIVING LOVE AND SUPPORT FROM A CAREGIVER WHO HELPS THEM FEEL SECURE AND TENDS TO THEIR EMOTIONAL NEEDS.



WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF TOXIC STRESS?

- **THE HEART**- TOXIC STRESS INCREASES AN INDIVIDUAL'S RISK OF DEVELOPING HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE, WHICH INCREASES INFLAMMATION THAT CAN DAMAGE ARTERIES. THIS CAN, IN TURN, LEAD TO HEART DISEASE AND STROKE LATER IN LIFE
- **IMMUNITY**- TOXIC STRESS CAN MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR THE BODY TO FIGHT OFF INFECTION AND ILLNESS. FOR EXAMPLE, CHILDREN MAY HAVE MORE FREQUENT COLDS OR EAR INFECTIONS
- **HORMONES AND DEVELOPMENT**- TOXIC STRESS CAN IMPACT GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT, AS WELL AS CAUSE OBESITY AND CHANGES IN THE TIMING OF PUBERTY. THIS PROLONGED ACTIVATION OF THE BODY'S STRESS RESPONSE CAN INTERRUPT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRAIN AND OTHER ORGANS. THIS CAN IN TURN INCREASE AN INDIVIDUAL'S RESPONSE TO STRESS-RELATED DISEASE AND COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT INTO ADULTHOOD
- **BRAIN**- TOXIC STRESS CAN CAUSE CHILDREN TO BE HYPERACTIVE AND LACK THE ABILITY TO SIT STILL, LEARN OR PAY ATTENTION. CHILDREN CAN ALSO STRUGGLE WITH REMEMBERING RULES, WILL NOT THINK BEFORE ACTING AND HAVE DYSREGULATED EMOTIONS. THE HYPOTHALAMIC PITUITARY AND ADRENAL (HPA) HORMONE AXIS IS OVER-ACTIVATED, WHICH LEADS TO CORTISOL LEVELS IN THE BLOOD INCREASING. STUDIES HAVE ALSO SHOWN ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN TOXIC STRESS AND CHANGES IN BRAIN STRUCTURE
- **DNA**- A CHILD'S GENE EXPRESSION AFFECTS BODILY FUNCTIONS AND CAN POTENTIALLY BE PASSED ON TO THE NEXT GENERATION. GENES COULD POTENTIALLY BE TURNED OFF, SUCH THAT THEY ARE NO LONGER EXPRESSED.

WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS THAT SOMEONE IS EXPERIENCING TOXIC STRESS?

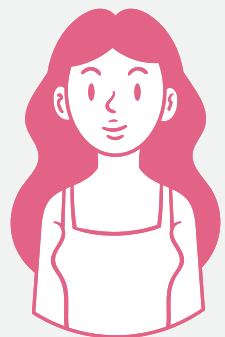
A CHILD:

- MAY APPEAR TO BE ON HIGH ALERT ALL THE TIME, AS PERHAPS AT HOME, THERE IS SOMEONE WHO FRIGHTENS THE CHLD. ABUSE IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT CAN CAUSE AN INDIVIDUAL TO BECOME HYPERVIGILANT
- MAY BECOME MORE WITHDRAWN AND ISOLATE THEMSELVES
- TANTRUMS
- COMPLAIN OF HAVING HEADACHES OR STOMACH ACHES
- HAVE DIFFICULTY SLEEPING
- EXPERIENCE FREQUENT NIGHTMARES
- HYPERACTIVE
- SEPARATION ANXIETY
- BEDWETTING



OLDER CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS:

- MAY BECOME REBBELLIOUS OR WITHDRAWN
- THEY MAY ENGAGE IN RISKY, IMPULSIVE BEHAVIOUR
- SHOW AGGRESSION WITH OTHER PEOPLE
- MAY SELF-HARM
- HAVE DIFFICULTY FORMING RELATIONSHIPS
- POOR SCHOOL PERFORMANCE
- LACK OF INTEREST IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES
- DROPPING GRADES OR POOR WORK PERFORMANCE



ADULTS:

THE EFFECTS OF TOXIC STRESS IN ADULTS ARE MOSTLY THE SAME AS MENTIONED PREVIOUSLY, BUT MAY LOOK DIFFERENT IN CONTEXTS RELEVANT TO ADULTS. INDIVIDUALS MAY HAVE DIFFICULTY MANAGING ALL OF THE DEMANDS OF ADULT LIFE.

- POOR PERFORMANCE AT WORK
- DIFFICULTY FINDING OR MAINTAINING A JOB
- DIFFICULTY MAINTAINING ROMANTIC AND PLATONIC RELATIONSHIPS
- DIFFICULTY REMEMBERING APPOINTMENTS
- PROCRASTINATING DOING IMPORTANT THINGS, FOR EXAMPLE PAYING BILLS OR SHOPPING FOR FOOD
- NOT PAYING ENOUGH ATTENTION TO FAMILY MATTERS, FOR EXAMPLE INADVERTENTLY NOT SPENDING TIME WITH CHILDREN
- MAKING POOR IMPULSIVE DECISIONS WITH MONEY

"Toxic stress messages our brains and bodies to stay *heightened, alert, and to remain in a fight or flight response*. It can harken our physiology to be ridden with *excess cortisol, our body's stress hormone*. It can be hard to work through, especially if you have been persistently exposed to stressful experiences for a prolonged period in your life while also having risk factors, including a vulnerable environment. Professional talk therapy, group therapy, and medical support are beneficial modalities, alone or used together, that can help instill hope, coping, and better management of stress to ensure *more healthy living and improved emotional regulation*."

Talkspace therapist Elizabeth Keohan, LCSW-C, LICSW, LCSW



HOW DO YOU MANAGE TOXIC STRESS?



A SUPPORTIVE, SENSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH LOVING ADULTS AS EARLY IN LIFE AS POSSIBLE CAN PREVENT OR EVEN REVERSE THE DANGEROUS EFFECTS OF THE TOXIC STRESS RESPONSE. EMPATHISING WITH INDIVIDUALS' LIVED EXPERIENCES HELPS THEM TO FORM SECURE RELATIONSHIPS WITH TRUSTED INDIVIDUALS AROUND THEM. THIS CAN ALSO COME IN THE FORM OF THERAPY. INDIVIDUALS WHO EXPERIENCE TOXIC STRESS CAN LEARN TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THEIR SYMPTOMS AND HOW TO MANAGE THESE THROUGH METHODS LIKE SELF CARE.

FOCUS ON THINGS YOU CAN CONTROL

MANY DEMANDS WHICH ARE OUT OF YOUR CONTROL AUGMENT TOXIC STRESS. FOCUSING ON THINGS YOU CANNOT CHANGE WILL MAKE YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED, WITHOUT HAVING CHANGED THE SITUATION. INSTEAD, ADDRESS FACTORS WHICH ARE IN YOUR CONTROL. SPEND TIME DOING THINGS WHICH MAKE YOU FEEL GOOD.

HEALTHY AND BALANCED LIFESTYLE

PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE TOXIC STRESS ARE MORE LIKELY TO TAKE UP UNHEALTHY HABITS SUCH AS SMOKING, DRINKING ALCOHOL OR OVER-EATING. ALTHOUGH THEY MAY PROVIDE SHORT-TERM RELIEF, THEY CAN LEAD TO LONG-TERM ISSUES THAT PROLONG THE STRESS. MAKE YOUR HEALTH YOUR NUMBER 1 PRIORITY- DRINK WATER, EAT A BALANCED DIET, SLEEP 8 HOURS AND EXERCISE REGULARLY.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

THESE HELP TO DECREASE LEVELS OF STRESS. METHODS LIKE MINDFULNESS, MEDITATION, YOGA, VISUALISATION EXERCISES, REGULATED BREATHING, JOURNALLING, OR SIMPLY GOING OUTSIDE FOR A WALK ARE GOOD WAYS OF ALLOWING YOUR BODY AND MIND A BREAK, AND GIVING IT SOMETHING PRODUCTIVE TO FOCUS ON.