

Book Review

Book Title

ACEs in the Shadows – Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences, By A Survivor

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I came across this book by accident when it appeared as a recommended read on Amazon. The fact the author wasn't named (A Survivor) intrigued me. I was curious as to what their motivation was for writing.

Having the book in hand, it does look like a classic self-publish job: no page numbers, a few spacing issues between paragraphs and not much detail on the brains behind the text. But looks can be deceiving. What unravels throughout this book is an insightful narrative unpacking the 'ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) Movement', as well as a personal account of someone who has experienced the long-term and damaging impact of early adversities in their life.

The book is a helpful introduction to ACEs. For those that are not aware of the public dialogue surrounding ACEs, Adverse Childhood Experiences relate to any number of events that can have a detrimental impact on a young person into adulthood. This includes: being physically, emotionally or sexually abused by a parent/care giver (or any adult in a position of caring/authority); neglect which takes the form of not having enough food, clothing or attention; and/or witnessing a parent or carer being abused – physically and/or verbally by their partner.

The original ACEs Study took place in the USA in the mid-1990s and involved two health care organisations: Kaiser Permanente and the Centre for Disease Control. It involved 17,000 patients being given a physical examination and

completing a confidential survey about childhood experiences and their current state of health.

The light bulb moment for this study came when the researchers realised, beyond any doubt, that there was an association between childhood trauma (i.e. ACEs) and health and social problems later in life.

The book is in part a guidance and introduction to the concept of ACEs and current public thinking around the topic, and in part an autobiographical account of someone with real life experience of ACEs and their consequences over a lifetime.

The book's subject matter should appeal to a wide range of people, including professional groups with an interest in ACEs (e.g. social work, carers, health professionals and education professionals), and people with real life experience of trauma in early life.

Although written under a pseudonym, you quickly establish that the author is a man over the age of 60 from Cumbria. He has suffered in the hands of abusers while at home, by his stepfather, and while in a residential care home. He provides a brief but frank account of the sexual abuse he suffered over a period of three years, as well as divulging details of his medical history. This is challenging to read. The author equates this difficult experience to a high ACEs' score, related to the 10-question survey used to assess the number of adverse events that have been experienced in childhood. Research suggests that such a high score goes some of the way to explain the state of someone's physical and mental health later in life.

The author praises the work underway in Scotland just now supporting public understanding of ACEs, with the ambition of making us the world's first ACEs aware nation. He has the same ambition for his own home county of Cumbria.

Despite the complexity of the subject matter, the main messages from the author are fairly clear and straightforward – that ACEs are real and should be taken seriously, and that there is a direct and obvious correlation between ACEs and poorer physical and mental health in later life. It is clear the author wants to

galvanise people into action by developing public understanding of ACEs further. He is also explicit in what he has done to contribute to this movement, and what he expects others to do.

What is fascinating about this book is that the author has asked three professionals to contribute to it by asking them what can be done about ACEs. This, combined with the author's own views and perspectives, gives the book more depth and credibility, in my opinion. I was heartened to read Edinburgh-based teacher and ADHD campaigner, Laura McConnell, waving a red flag surrounding the 'dangerous flawed practice' of considering a child's ACEs score within an education context.

This book is an enjoyable and easy read, but I would suggest not reading this in isolation of other text surrounding ACEs. Indeed, there are some questions that I felt were left unheard and unanswered. For example, how can a survey based on a middle-class population in America in the mid-1990s be applicable now? What research is being done to examine adversities experienced during adulthood and their impact?

The author also praises and appears in awe of American based paediatrician Dr Nadine Burke Harris – who was recently appointed California's first Surgeon General – and understandably so. She has pioneered much research and public dialogue linking adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress with poor health in later life.

Anyone who has seen Dr Burke Harris in action, and there are many of us (her TED Talk 'How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime' has had over three million views), will know not only is she a leading light on everything ACEs related but she is also, helpfully, a very charismatic communicator, making the difficult and sometime bamboozling subject matter accessible to the masses.

The author takes the 'leading light' description of Dr Burke Harris further by suggesting she is almost a modern-day Florence Nightingale: 'another lady holding a lamp and instigating an equally radical paradigm shift.' His enthusiasm for her work is clearly infectious as, like a hypnotised patient, I

followed his instruction and purchased her 'The Deepest Well' book after turning the last page of this book.

About the author

Mike Findlay is a Head of Communications within Scotland's third sector. He has worked for over sixteen years across a number of sectors including justice, children's health and higher education, supporting organisations in growing their external and media profiles.