CHILD HOMELESSNESS & TOXIC STRESS: FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES

HOW CHRONIC STRESS & HOMELESSNESS IMPACT THE DEVELOPING BRAIN

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as poverty and homelessness can cause chronic stress during childhood. Typically, the more adversity a child experiences (the higher their ‘ACE score’), the higher their risk for long-term negative consequences.

Chronic stress is powerful because it can alter brain circuits, causing the child’s stress response system to go on high alert, unable to shut off. This impairs the pre-frontal cortex, hurting executive function. It also hurts the hippocampus. In turn, a child’s ability to learn, regulate their emotions and behaviors, and interact in socially appropriate ways is diminished. This helps explain some of the academic outcomes we see in children who are homeless.

The pre-frontal cortex is involved with:
- solving complex problems
- rich thought
- emotion and personality expression

It is also the home of ‘executive function,’ which refers to a suite of cognitive activities such as:
- paying attention
- remembering details
- planning
- information processing

These are all functions hurt by toxic stress in childhood.

The amygdala is an almond shaped brain region responsible for:
- detecting harmful or scary environmental stimuli
- activating our stress response system, which can impair the prefrontal cortex

When this happens we are less able to:
- think rationally
- control our emotions
- engage in effective planning

The hippocampus is important for memory formation, and is essential to learning. It is also affected by chronic toxic stress. This means that stress can:
- cause memory impairment
- hurt knowledge acquisition

Changes in the hippocampus have been linked to:
- anxiety disorders

PREVALENCE OF STUDENT HOMELESSNESS

IN THE CLASSROOM

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

INCREASE RISK FOR ADULT HOMELESSNESS

As ACE scores increase (e.g., the level of adversity someone experiences in childhood), so does adult homelessness.

MORE ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES INCREASE RISK FOR ADULT HOMELESSNESS

Children coping with significant adversity will have a harder time learning. Out of a 30-child high school classroom, only 11 students will have experienced one or zero ACEs.

Half of children who are homeless experience anxiety, depression and withdrawal.

Children who are homeless have 2x the rate of learning disabilities.

Children who are homeless are 4x more likely to have a developmental delay than stably housed peers.

75% of children who are homeless under the age of 5 have a developmental delay in speech.

Children who are homeless have 3x the rate of emotional behavioral disorders than children who are stably housed.

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