

*Somebody break me, I'm dreamin, I started as a seed the semen
Swimmin upstream, planted in the womb while screamin
on the top was my pops, my momma screamin stop
From a single drop, this is what they got
Not to disrespect my peoples, but my poppa was a loser
Only plan he had for momma was to fuck her and abuse her
Even as a little seed, I could see his plan for me
Stranded on welfare, another broken family.*

- *Tupac Shakur*

Introduction

Research on adversity experienced during childhood has burgeoned over the last quarter century, yielding that there are links between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and health outcomes later in life. These outcomes can be both negative or positive, and while an overwhelming amount of research states the prevalence of adverse effects, as so is valid for research indicating the possibility of positive ones. In addition, there is burgeoned research on protective factors fostering resilience in individuals, which may alleviate the harmful effects of having ACEs. (Myat Zaw et al., 2022). Protective characteristics and resilience traits can cause some individuals to adapt successfully despite adversities. However, the lack of protective factors or low levels of resilience may not quell the adverse health effects in adolescence and adulthood (Myat Zaw et al., 2022).

One example of an ACE is growing up in a single-parent household. Although investigations of low parental influence on child development usually involve mothers, there has been more and more focus on how fathers play a role specifically (Wang, Wu, Phelps, 2021). Interestingly enough, studies have shown that, indeed, not having an involved father can result in ACEs but so is true that the presence of one acts to buffer other potential ACEs and is proven to be an essential protective factor overall (Wang, Wu, Phelps, 2021).

This paper explores how protective factors such as mentorship and the emergence of self-identity through creative expression fostered resilience for an individual who grew up without a father and successfully overcame the proceeding challenges he faced throughout his adolescent years.

Literature Review

ACEs and Paternal Neglect

ACEs are potentially traumatic events in childhood, ranging from abuse and neglect to other traumatic experiences derived from household dysfunction (Felitti et al., 1996). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente conducted the most significant investigation of ACEs. A significant finding from this shows that ACEs can lead to multiple risk factors linked to negative outcomes for an individual in their adult life, including engagement in risky behaviors, contraction of chronic diseases, or addiction/dependency on drugs or alcohol. In addition, ACEs can impact children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, leading to the adoption of health-risk behaviors and potentially causing disease, disability, and social problems in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1996). Put simply, the higher number of ACEs an individual has, the higher the potential is for early death.

ACEs are not unique experiences, with almost half of Americans having at least one ACE and about 14% having three or more (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). A common ACE among the population is parental divorce or fragile families such as single-parent households, poor parent engagement, or general dysfunction (Wang, Wu, Phelps, 2021). To highlight the importance of a father's involvement in a child's life within the ecological theory, Bronfenbrenner posits that fathers function as a microsystem resource essential for healthy development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Substance Abuse

Early substance use and substance abuse is a risk-taking behavior hypothesized as a coping method for ACEs or childhood trauma (Haller & Chassin, 2014). The association between cumulative ACEs and substance use may explain youths' desire to escape unwanted feelings associated with adverse-event exposure. It may be that youth exposed to multiple ACEs have difficulty coping with chronic life stress, which may, in turn, lead to elevated substance use as a method to avoid and temporarily relieve feelings of distress that may accompany such experiences (Brown, 2017).

Resilience and Protective Factors

While ACEs have the potential to be harmful and long-lasting, research has shown that there is a relationship between ACEs and the presence of *resilience factors* (Leung, Chan, Ho, 2020). Resilience is the capacity and degree to which one can withstand the harmful effects of adversity and recover from adversity to return to an acceptable level, despite experiencing psychopathology (Ungar, 2013). Research shows that resilience can offset the negative outcomes for children and lead to healthy outcomes in adulthood, which may lead to the prevention of ACEs in future generations (Chitiyo, 2021). An individual's resilience is attributed to various protective factors fostered through external sources or innate characteristics. According to Emmy Werner in *Handbook of Early childhood Intervention*, the term protective factors is used in this context as a generic term for moderators of risk and adversity that enhance developmentally appropriate outcomes (Zigler & Werner, 2000, p. 115). Protective factors include intelligence levels, positive temperamental characteristics, family relationships, community influence, socialization practices, peers, spirituality, academic opportunities, and mentoring (Zigler & Werner, 2000, p. 129).

Mentorship

“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

- Frederick Douglass, 1855

Children with greater social support and protective adult relationships are less likely to engage in early substance use (Bensley, Spiker, Van Eenwyk & Schroder, 1999). The decision to use substances or drink alcohol early may be explained by youths’ desire to escape unwanted feelings associated with adverse-event exposure or difficulty coping with chronic stress (Bensley, Spieker, Van Eenwyk, & Schroder, 1999). This early substance use-paternal neglect relationship is strongly associated. However, research shows that the presence of a supportive community and positive role models or mentors mitigates the behavior of engaging in drugs and alcohol. Mentorship is a protective factor that can potentially prevent “at-risk” youth and can reduce internalizing and externalizing behaviors. In addition, research has shown that having a significant mentor improves self-identity and youth-adult relationships, self-perception, social interactions, peer connectedness, empathy levels, academic achievement, and motivation (DuBois et al., 2002).

Methodology

Procedures

Using Google Scholar and the database from Chapman University’s Leatherman Library, use of the boolean searches include “adverse childhood experiences” AND resilience AND “protective factors.” Additionally, searches containing these listed various terms with the use of “mentorship,” “creativity,” OR “father engagement,” “drug use,” OR “self-expression” was used in a systematic search. Databases include PsychINFO, Academic Search Premier, PsycARTICLES, SAGE, ProQuest, and EBSCO/ERIC.

Characteristics of selected studies were determined by title name, an overview of the abstract, results/findings, and review of discussion sections. Findings from both qualitative and quantitative studies explored narratives of subjective experiences related to ACEs, self-reporting, longitudinal and cross-sectional designs, and results-oriented research studies. They were selected based on relevance to the themes found during participant interviews, the relationship between resilience and ACEs, and comprehensive results/findings that pertained to protective factors within the context of specific themes. The determined themes include the role of mentorship and creativity as protective factors promoting resilience in the specific interviewee participant.

Two 45-minute interviews were conducted with a volunteer participant willing to answer questions about childhood adversities. The participant signed a consent form, and precautions were taken to keep his identity anonymous. The individual interviewed is known through mutual friends and acquaintances in a local billiards league community. The participant is named Daniel in the proceeding text to preserve his confidentiality.

Prior to the interview, Daniel was given detail about what the interviews would cover, and a consent form was signed. Both interviews took place in person at small, local coffee shops between 7 am and 8 am on weekends to provide more privacy when fewer people were present. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions surrounding his life experiences, with specific attention given to identified childhood adversities or exposure to traumas. In addition, discussions and follow-up questions focused on protective factors and other strengths to elicit a narrative and understanding of his resilience to overcome.

The Participant

Daniel Johnson is a 30-year-old, mixed-race (Black and White), heterosexual male from Long Beach, California. At an early age, his father left him and his mother while his mother was pregnant with his younger brother-to-be. What followed was a “complete shift in trajectory” and “completely changed the dynamic at home, in [his] mother, and [himself],” Daniel stated. His mother fell into a cycle of chronic depression and worked overtime at the hospital, requiring Daniel to take on an adult-like role at a young age to care for his younger brother. Along with his mom’s decision to move the boys and herself to Colorado, the groundwork was laid for the following challenging years. His mom worked many hours to make ends meet, and during her time at home, she was often in depressive states that caused her to be unengaging at times, apathetic or tired. Daniel knew how loved he and his brother were and tried not to guilt his mom with his concerns or complaints. The three of them eventually moved back to California and lived closer to some aunts, uncles, and cousins with whom he spent much time during his pre-adolescent years.

From age 13 to around 21 years old, Daniel’s life “felt dark and lonely .”Experimenting with drugs and alcohol led to chaotic behaviors, interactions with law enforcement, poor academic performance, suspensions/expulsions, car accidents, and, eventually, a heavy heroin addiction. He was 16 at the time. He was expelled from high school halfway through his first year, and his journey with education and relationship with a school setting ended there. He was enrolled at continuation schools until he was arrested during his senior year and obtained his GED while he served time. Possession and the intent to sell heroin were charges that led to his arrest and, over the next five years, three separate stints in the county jail. He had a felony on his record by the time he reached 19 years old. Daniel also shared that there were “more than a few

occasions that death knocked on [his] door after dancing with the devil”; that he “is lucky even to be alive today.”

When discussing the implications of his maladaptive behavior and emotional disturbances, Daniel expressed his feelings of guilt, shame, and low self-worth after eventually getting clean and turning his life around. He also realized that he did not clearly understand himself as a person, as he spent so much of his childhood in flight or fight mode and his adolescence in a drug-induced fog. While unaware then, he later realized how many things he missed over the years while his peers and classmates discovered their interests, developed themselves, and explored their passions. “At 23 years old,” he stated, “it was like I was meeting myself for the first time.”

Findings

Indeed, the negative consequences of paternal neglect or absence permeate. Even more noticeable is the effect on children whose fate is consequently partly shaped by this dynamic. Daniel’s ACEs shaped many of his coping strategies as an adolescent, most of which were detrimental to healthy development. Reflecting on his past, he understands that many of his maladaptive behaviors were tied to possible deficits in his emotional and cognitive development stemming from the trauma of his father’s decision to disengage and disregard him and his family.

Taking on a caretaker role by nine years old and living in a home lacking consistent warmth and positive engagement, Daniel sought comfort outside the home – many of which contributed to his behaviors and traumas. However, identification of protective factors later emerged when he got sober – the positive impact of having a mentor and his innate ability to create – which he attributes to his success in overcoming his past and flourishing in his present.

Mentorship

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are approximately 18.3 million children in America who live without a father in the home, putting the United States in the lead for children living in single-parent households of any nation in the world (2021). This is an alarming statistic, and it comes with longstanding effects; however, mentorship can quell such effects. Daniel's mentor came in the way of a former heroin addict and drummer musician, whom he met through a mutual friend after his first jail sentence. Not only did his mentor understand addiction, but he also cultivated a sense of self-worth and capability through drumming after noticing Daniel's raw talent. He ultimately became a catalyst for Daniel's notable success as an entrepreneur, musician, and sober lifestyle.

Creativity

Daniel's artistic abilities are inherent. The creative lens through which he views the world around him has been evident from a young age, and he explored different creative expressions throughout his childhood and adolescence. In its various forms, art helped lessen the internalized effects of the trauma he experienced when he engaged in maladaptive behaviors as a teenager. This echoes previous research on addicted populations and art; creative expression can promote a reduction in the sense of isolation, feelings of shame, and feelings of internalized stigma (Schmanke, 2017).

He spent most of his adolescence idolizing the Grammy award winner and world-famous rapper Eminem. Daniel's love of Eminem's music growing up seemed to be linked to anger, being misunderstood by people around him, the trauma of being neglected, and a desire to explore his self-identity in a fashion that made sense to him.

After he overcame his substance addiction, Daniel spent much time writing music and learning instruments such as the guitar and drums. His natural inclination toward drumming was

almost inherent, as he learned he was a decent drummer by simply sitting behind a drum set one day – no formal lessons, no music teachers, no courses. He is also naturally inclined to lyricism, which stems from his love for wordplay and, he believes, correlates to the heavy influence of Eminem and other alternative hip-hop artists growing up.

Discussion

Implications

Prior research affirms that parents who experienced early life stress and adversity are at increased risk for child maltreatment when they become parents (Bartlett, 2017)

Limitations