

Chapter 3

Attention Robbers: ACEs

There Will Be Blood

Matthew Lysiak fit together the puzzle of massacre shooter, Adam Lanza, in his nonfiction book “Newtown, an American Tragedy.” On December 14, 2012, Lanza shot his way into Newtown public elementary school and slaughtered the principal, school psychologist, four other educators, and twenty-six seven-year-olds. Before the massacre started, he shot and killed his mother at their home.

Adam was a loner from the start, rarely ever playing with other children and reacting blankly to approaches by adults. He was a frail child and was mostly silent. He suffered anxiety attacks, hyperventilated, and threw tantrums. He could not sit still and constantly fidgeted. Some kids taunted and teased him, and in middle school he became the target for class bullies. Then in high school the students, aware that he was uncommunicative, different, and that something was wrong, ignored him. He was obsessed with germs and wiped things down with a disinfectant, especially before he would eat. And if someone were to touch his food, no matter how hungry he was, he would not eat.

James L. Knoll IV, psychiatrist and Director of Forensic Psychiatry at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, NY, offers a basic list of factors to keep watch for to prevent mass shootings. He defines mass murder as the killing of four or more victims at one location within one event. Common factors include extreme feelings of anger, social alienation, rumination on violent revenge, feelings of persecution, and destructive envy.

Most of my life I’ve lived with all of these attributes. Each time I read of a mass murderer, or any murderer, I think “if not for fortune.” I am lucky not to have murdered. When I was five or six I planned to kill my mother and father. I would make a long fuse out of gunpowder from firecrackers. During the night I would turn on the gas, wait till the apartment was filled with fumes and then light the fuse from outside of the house.

In researching for his book “Far from the Tree” concerning the Columbine massacre in Littleton, Colorado in 1999, Andrew Solomon said that he had spent hundreds of hours with the Klebolds, parents of Dylan Klebold, one of the teenaged perpetrators. In an New York Times interview, he said that in all that time he could find nothing about the parents that might have in any way contributed toward the mass murders. In fact, he

said they were “admirable, intelligent and kind people whom I would have gladly have had as parents myself.”

He might have been describing my parents. My father devoted much of his time as a volunteer first aide instructor for the Red Cross. He taught classes to firemen, police officers and many other civic groups. He was friendly, listened to others, and got along with everyone. Everyone except me and my sister.

My mother too, was friendly, a good quiet listener, and got along well and was loved by everyone. She looked as warm and caring as a story-book mother, and took good care of my sister.

Earliest memory: My father was driving on an isolated country road, my mother up front with him, and Zan and I in back. Zan, eight or nine years old, did not agree with something my father said, (or perhaps she began to sing). He stopped the car, got out, opened the back door, shoved Zan out, got back in and we drove away. I don't know how long he drove before he turned around to go back and pick her up.

Even early into my fifties—as I write this, I'm months now from 80—I thought of killing my mother. (My father had already died.) I would take an airplane back from where I was teaching in Japan. I would get a gun and come to her apartment and kill her. I did not want to kill my sister. But she was mentally ill and depended on my mother for her survival. I would have to kill her. I struggled with this and perhaps that is what kept me from carrying it out. In the meantime I continued to wake up screaming from nightmares about my mother.

A Test You Don't Want to ACE

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, a collaboration between the CDC and Kaiser Permanente Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego, examined the link between childhood stressors and adult health. Over 17,000 adults participated in the research, making it one of the largest studies of its kind. Each participant completed a questionnaire that asked for detailed information on their past history of abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction as well as their current behaviors and health status.

The research identified basic Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that included physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, incarceration, mental illness, separations, and bereavement. These adverse experiences cumulatively increase a gamut of later-occurring negative events including attempted suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, and the list goes on and on.

With his Macaque monkeys, Harry Harlow had already demonstrated the life-long impact of infant trauma and distress. If maternal deprivation lasts more than three months, no amount of exposure to mothers or peers reverses the harm done. John Bowlby demonstrated much the same with human children. So the best thing to prevent making monsters is to establish a warm, loving, caring, bond during infancy and early childhood.

For a long while I was envious, resenting anyone who seemingly born with the proverbial silver spoon. Then I chanced upon a 2010 article published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology by a Mark D. Seery, a professor at University of Buffalo, titled “Whatever Does Not Kill Us: Cumulative Lifetime Adversity, Vulnerability, and Resilience.” As expected he found that that high ACEs are “associated with higher global distress, functional impairment, PTS symptoms, and lower life satisfaction.”

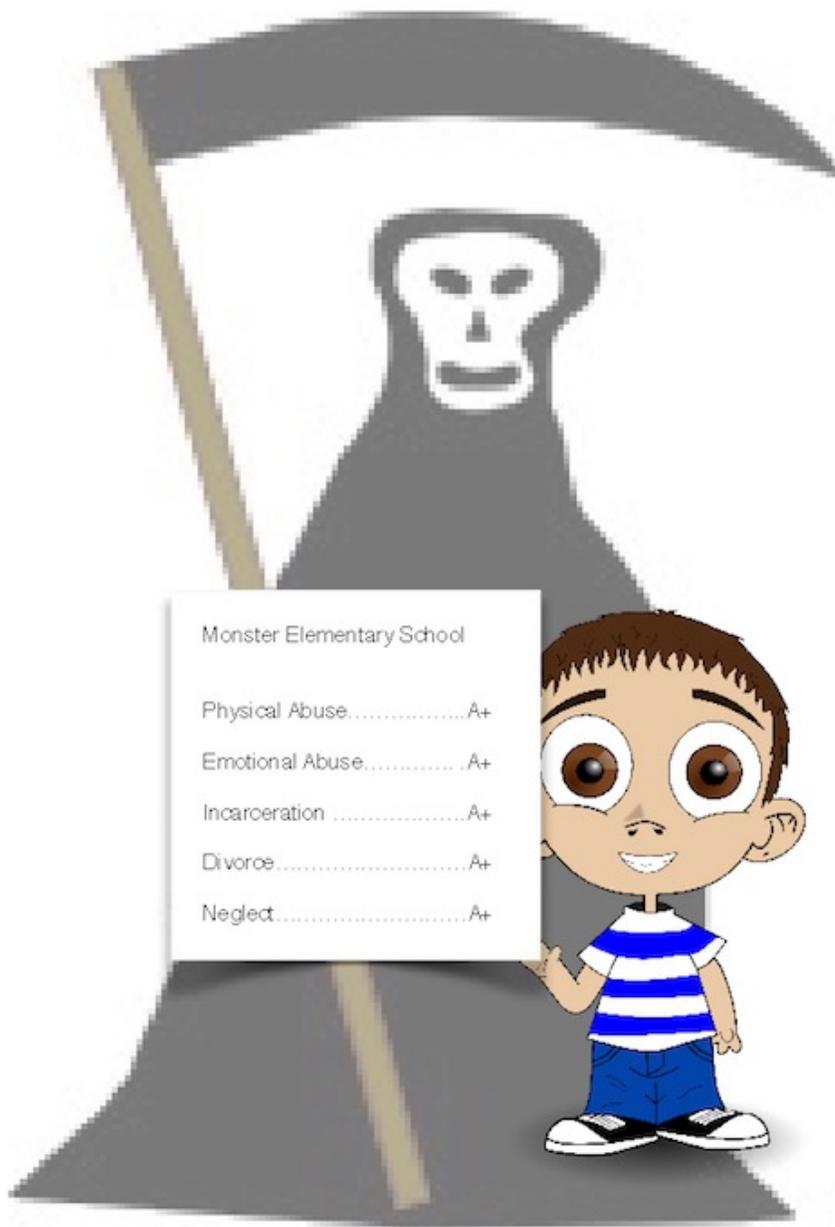


Figure 3-1: ACEs

He also discovered that having some ACEs can benefit us by making us resilient.

And having no ACEs can be sometimes be as bad as having high ACEs!

Having some ACEs fosters subsequent resilience later in life. People with some ACEs were actually the least affected by recent adverse events. In the words of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”

Epigenetic Loops

Early adversity alters the chemistry of DNA in the brain through a process called methylation. The epigenome or methyl groups are tiny markers attached to the DNA. The DNA code remains fixed for life, but the epigenome is flexible. Epigenome chemical markers provide a link between our environment and how our genes are expressed. These markers react to signals from the outside world such as smoking, diet, stress, and exercise.

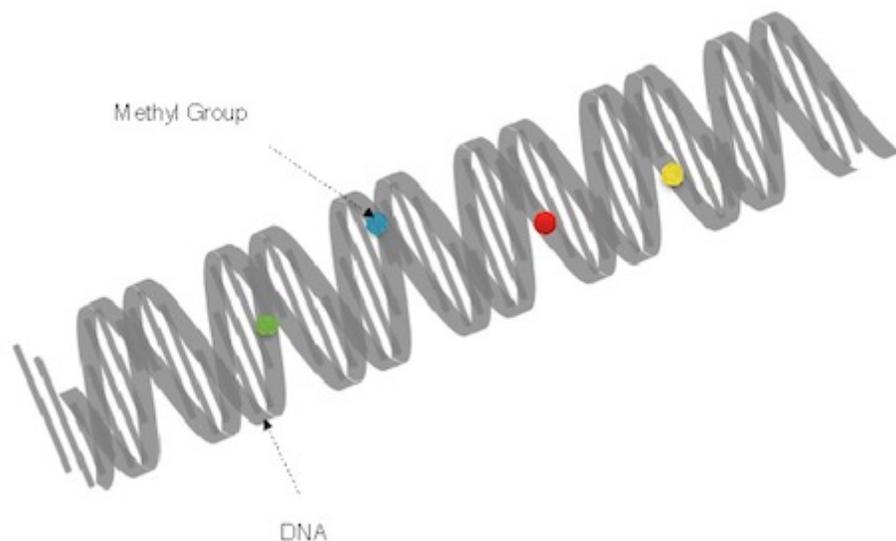


Figure 3-2: Epigenetic Loops

The epigenome adjusts strands of DNA to our rapidly changing environment, causing them to scrunch down and become inactive, or relaxed and active. DNA contains all of the instructions for building the parts of the body. But that tells only half of the story. The epigenome effects a change of expression of the genes. Our genes plus our epigenome together determine our fate.

So if a child is constantly confronted with abuse or neglect, he would have epigenetic markers on his DNA determining how appropriately and effectively, or rather inappropriately and ineffectively, he will respond to stress later in his life. Once these markers do their business and the stress system and ability to recover is damaged, he will over respond to stress and will always be over-responding to stress. His anxiety sensors are constantly on and he has no idea how to turn them off.

Not all ACEs are equally damaging, though. The most damaging are deeply personal, chronic, and perpetrated by someone you love and depend upon for your survival.

Countering ACEs takes at least one reliable adult who knows what is happening and is openly supportive to the child. Teachers are already overburdened. But one supportive, reliable teacher can make a difference in a child's life. I took a tremendous amount of class time away from instruction whenever I was disciplined and I was disciplined throughout each school day from kindergarten through seventh grade.

I never bonded with a reliable adult, but because of my background I bonded with and was supportive of my students who were labeled disruptive or odd. I was one of them. I think I might have rescued a few from impending demise.