



## **May 2023 News and Notes**

### **ACEs and Trauma – Informed Approach**

**By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT**

In recent years, there has been increasing understanding about how early life experiences impact mental and physical health. Much attention has focused on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website characterizes ACEs as “stressful or traumatic events, including abuse and neglect.”<sup>2</sup>

ACEs were first identified in the 1995-97 landmark study conducted by the Division of Violence Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in partnership with Kaiser Permanente. More than 17,000 participants took part. Among the study’s findings were the following:

“ACEs are common. For example, 28% of study participants reported physical abuse and 21% reported sexual abuse. Many also reported experiencing a divorce or parental separation, or having a parent with a mental and/or substance use disorder.”

At CIP, when a client first begins therapy, therapist and client conduct an intake assessment, identifying presenting problems and setting therapy goals against which progress will be assessed. The focus is first on each individual (or couple or family) to determine the best treatment approach. Whether or not a client may have experienced trauma or toxic stress, either as a child or later in life, may not be known



immediately. Nevertheless, because trauma is so common, it is not ruled out.

“All of our work is trauma-informed,” states Executive and Clinical Director Robin Joy Berenson, “and we take great care to be sensitive to everyone’s uniqueness.”

Trauma-informed treatment planning is a flexible process based on the particular needs and strengths of the client. It recognizes that people change with regards to their needs, strengths, readiness, and ability to engage in different aspects of trauma-focused treatment over time.

“Trauma-Informed Practice,” explains Dr. Berenson, “is a strengths-based framework grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma. It emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for everyone, and creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.”

The main goals of psychodynamic therapy are to enhance the client’s self-awareness and foster understanding of their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in relation to past experiences, especially experiences as a child. This is accomplished by the therapist guiding the client through the examination of unresolved conflicts and significant events in the client’s past.

Through such a process, clients are able to develop a sense of empowerment and an ability to develop their innate resilience as well as draw on other protective factors, such as social support, self-care and nurturance. Individuals receive the tools they need to regain emotional well-being so that they may live full and productive lives.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on ACEs, visit: <chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/resourceFiles/sptac-ace-role-of-substance-misuse-prevention.pdf>