

What happens in childhood does not stay in childhood.

"Hade, be senda! Seni deli eden terapidir!" Shouted my mother as I relayed what my therapist conjectured about my generalized anxiety disorder. At this point, I calmly reminded her of the carnage I witnessed in our home as a child and the inevitable impact this has had on my mental health.

I would posit that my family is not unique in its stance towards mental health issues – that they do not exist; that it is *all in your mind* – a least said, soon as mended mentality, which would favour poor physical health over poor mental health, to save any embarrassment or shame on the family.

In my experience, cultural beliefs play a crucial role in perpetuating stigmatizing attitudes towards individuals with mental health problems – and yet, contradictorily, some of us believe in curses, the protective talisman, the Nazar and seeking cures for poor mental health through having our homes blessed and paying an Imam hundreds of pounds to banish curses. During a conversation with Systemic Psychotherapist/ Social Worker, Sezer Fahri, he expressed agreement, explaining:

"I was raised in a home in north London which had a very strong Turkish Cypriot cultural essence, with the Nazar göz on the walls and abundant olive leaves used to ward off the evil eye and bad spirits. Working in the field of mental health in London, I have always been surprised and somewhat disappointed by the extremely low numbers of referrals from Turkish Cypriot families, which I have understood to be a symptom of a lack of trust of services, scepticism of therapy and perhaps a belief that family members struggling with mental health difficulties were best supported within the family system and not the business of strangers. Of those Turkish Cypriot families that have come into contact with mental health services, I have always been awestruck by their commitment to their "loved one" and ferocious devotion to supporting the family member with mental health difficulties. After all, I too am a strong believer that psychological problems are best managed and supported within families and this is something I mainly attribute to my Kibrisli values, beliefs and upbringing."

Is it not easier to just open up about how we are feeling? One problematic consequence of this hush, hush perspective of mental health is the judgement and consequent blame appropriated to parents – *what did you do or fail to do as a parent? Did you not talk to your children enough?* This is not necessarily exclusive to the Turkish Cypriot community, of course; appalling attitudes towards poor mental health spans centuries and knows no racial, religious or class boundaries – and it is up to each one of us to put an end to it.

I will start at the beginning and set the scene for you before I continue because I believe it is essential to be open and authentic in the perspectives I offer on the subject of **adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)** and mental health across the life trajectory, particularly concerning the potential for survivors of ACEs to surmount this early adversity.

I am a second-generation Turkish Cypriot, born in Hackney. My mother is a Turkish Cypriot, and my father is from Bursa, Turkey. I grew up with an unconditional mother in her love for my two half-brothers and me. However, our household was not a psychologically or physically safe place and living in one of the most dangerous places at the time - Holly Street, that is saying something. Watching my father physically abuse my mother was a daily occurrence. Knives, broken bones and screaming were the norm.

I would deem it odd when the house was quiet, wondering when the next attack would occur and why. My father ended up in prison and was later deported, which further weakened our bond, adding to my mental health struggles as a child.

My brothers had it far, far worse, but that is their story to tell, not mine. My parents never had any self-regulated behaviour (I will address ACEs and **self-regulation** shortly). This meant that there was no healthy role model for behaving or responding in emotionally charged situations. It is little wonder that I wanted to teach and support children like me when I grew up. I knew that my experiences and insights would enable me to build authentic connections with young

adults exposed to ACEs and generally misunderstood by adults around them – be these family members or teachers.

I am not claiming that I live my life free from my traumatic childhood. I am triggered daily; I find it difficult to self-regulate. My self-limiting beliefs and behaviours pose a constant struggle. I also suffer from anxiety and OCD during times of distress. In short, psychologically and physiologically, the trauma remains, which I continue to process and overcome. Avoiding medication, I work through my dysregulation by working out at the gym daily and playing football. It is trial and error when finding a suitable solution for you. If you can, and it is safe to do so, I would urge caution over medicating for some mental health issues, as side effects, high tolerance, and addiction are sadly commonplace.

So, what are ACEs?

While I cannot do this global phenomenon justice in this brief article, I feel it is essential to draw your attention to it because it may apply to you on a personal level, while having gone through your life not knowing that you have even been exposed to ACEs – or, it might be that you are unintentionally exposing your children to these.

ACEs are traumatic events that are uncontrollable to the child, occurring from in utero, which have pervasive effects on holistic health and wellbeing across the life trajectory. Burke Harris et al., (2018: 1) explain that *ACEs are stressful or traumatic events experienced before the age of eighteen.*

There are (typically) ten ACEs identified in the original landmark study conducted (Felitti, et al., 1998), which fall under the toxic trio of:

1. Abuse

- ▶ Emotional abuse
- ▶ Physical abuse
- ▶ Sexual abuse

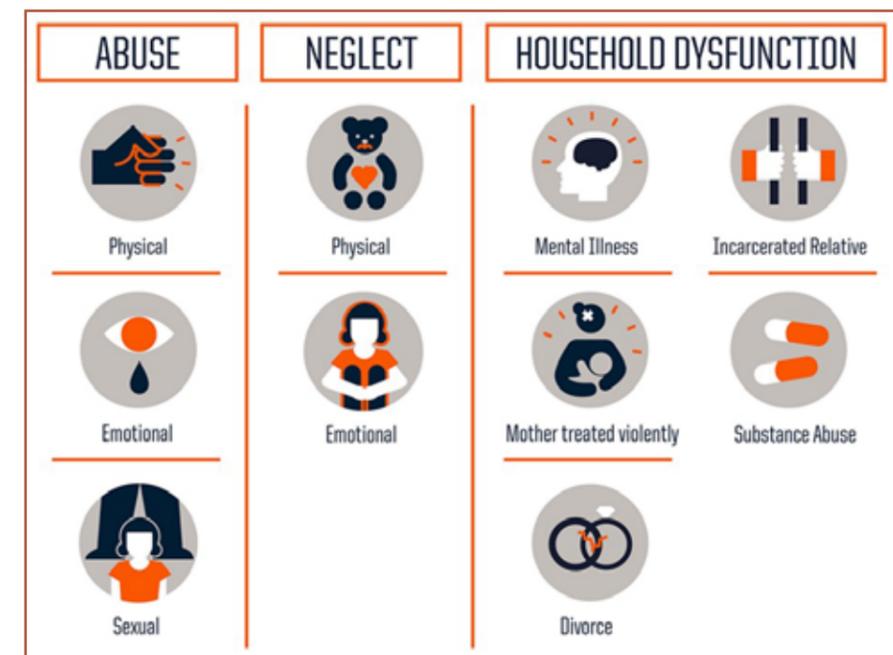
2. Neglect

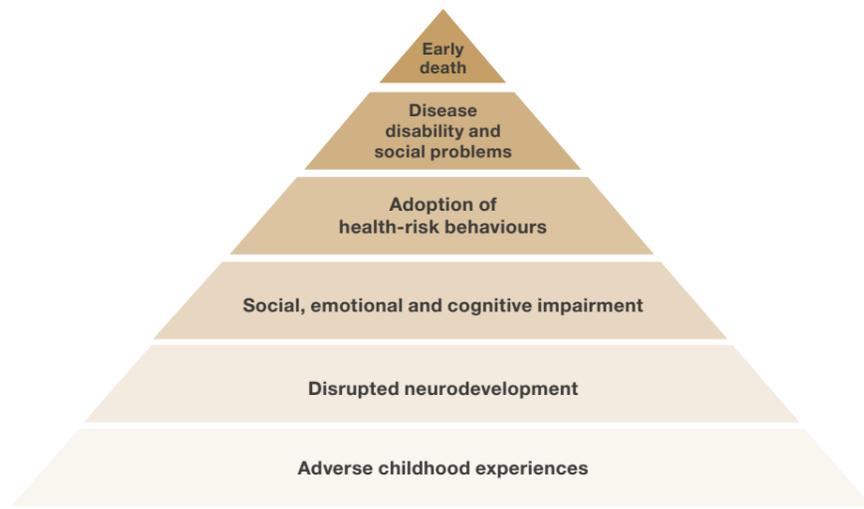
- ▶ Emotional neglect
- ▶ Physical neglect

3. Household challenges (or dysfunction)

- ▶ Domestic abuse (domestic violence)
- ▶ Substance abuse
- ▶ Mental illness
- ▶ Parental separation/divorce
- ▶ Imprisoned parent/relative.

These are depicted below, in **Figure 1 The Ten Adverse Childhood Experiences** ▼





I happen to tick nine of the ten identified ACEs. How many of these ACEs are familiar to you with regard to your childhood experiences, I wonder? What life are you creating for your children right currently?

Now, according to this model, the more ACEs a child endures, the higher their ACEs score – the higher their ACEs score, the increased likelihood of risk-taking behaviours, chronic ill-health and premature death. This is illustrated on the right, in **Figure 2, The Impact of ACEs on Health and Wellbeing Across the Life Trajectory.** ◀

Do not be afraid to reach out, because not only will you help yourself, you will also help to break the taboo of mental health.



◀ **Dr Mine Conkbayir giving one of three sell-out lectures on ACEs on behalf of Funzing**

Self-regulation is the greatest gift we can give to children.

Children who experience nurturing and stable caregiving develop greater resilience and the ability to self-regulate uncomfortable & overwhelming emotions.

Adopting a whole life perspective, findings from the 1998 landmark study demonstrated an **unequivocal connection** between the length, severity and cumulative effects of childhood ACEs and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults, including:

- ▶ chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- ▶ asthma
- ▶ obesity
- ▶ kidney disease
- ▶ stroke
- ▶ coronary heart disease
- ▶ cancer
- ▶ diabetes
- ▶ substance abuse
- ▶ violence
- ▶ imprisonment.

How many of you go through life experiencing ongoing poor health without ever being given a diagnosis? *It's just stress*, you might say, and it is not. Left unaddressed, poor mental health directly impacts physical fitness and life expectancy, which is why we must be brave enough to have open conversations about how we are feeling and the roots of why we think the way we do.

Post-pandemic especially, we cannot afford to raise children whose emotional toolkits are empty – and this means we have to prioritize our mental health to be the best role model for our children.

ACEs – It's Not All Bad!

For those of us who have survived ACEs, you might think it is all doom and gloom, but it need not be. Having counter-ACEs (positive influences) in your life, which ameliorate against the impact of ACEs, is the key to overcoming and thriving.

As a child, my counter-ACEs were my school and teachers. I loved school – it was my safe place. Teachers, too, were safe. I loved playing football and reading – which offers children and adults alike a great way to escape!

Some more counter-ACEs include:

- ▶ Having a caregiver whom you feel safe with
- ▶ A predictable home routine (including having like regular meals and bedtimes)
- ▶ Beliefs that provide comfort
- ▶ Liking school
- ▶ Teachers who care
- ▶ Having good friends and neighbour
- ▶ Feeling comfortable with yourself
- ▶ Opportunities to have fun.

Self-regulation – The Key to Living a Fulfilled Life

The key to achieving a fulfilling and successful life depends on one's ability to self-regulate. This means managing our thoughts, emotional responses and consequent behaviour - and how we overcome fear and anxiety. Broadly speaking, self-regulation (SR) includes these ten qualities.

- ▶ Controlling own feelings and behaviours
- ▶ Self-soothing/bouncing back from upset
- ▶ Being able to curb impulsive behaviours
- ▶ Being able to concentrate on a task
- ▶ Being able to ignore distractions
- ▶ Behaving in ways that are pro-social (like getting along with others)
- ▶ Planning
- ▶ Thinking before acting
- ▶ Delaying gratification
- ▶ Persisting in the face of difficulty

The critical point about SR is that it can only be nurtured through responsive, reliable and loving relationships. It takes courage and honesty to reflect openly. While it can also be painful, it is necessary to heal and avoid the same mistakes with our children.

The crux of the issue remains that we do not speak openly or frequently enough about mental health, nor do we give our children the tools to self-regulate! We are unique with different experiences, so what works for one person might not be effective for the other.

Do I burn olive leaves and have the Nazar göz in my home? You bet I do! It is part of my culture and upbringing and is a source of comfort. In no way however, do they undermine the importance of evidence-based strategies for overcoming mental health issues.



Top Tips for Addressing Mental Health Issues

- ▶ **Do not be ashamed or afraid to say that you have mental health issues! This is the first and most crucial step in overcoming any stigma**
- ▶ **Speak openly and in age-appropriate ways about mental health with your children so that they know it is perfectly normal to experience poor mental health and that something can be done to overcome it**
- ▶ **Listen carefully if someone opens up to you about their mental health - repeat what they have said back to them to ensure you have understood it. By showing you understanding how they feel, you are letting them know you respect their feelings**
- ▶ **Pay no attention to family members if they try to minimize what you are going through – assert yourself calmly and walk your path**
- ▶ **Do not fear seeking professional help. Try getting referred for some free therapy or counselling via your GP**

- ▶ **Organize/attend local support groups around mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, schizophrenia. These can prove invaluable as a lifeline through meeting families who are experiencing similar difficulties as you are while helping to dispel any myths around mental health conditions**
- ▶ **Journal – keeping a daily journal about your feelings and any triggers is vital in helping you to overcome them**
- ▶ **Listening to soothing music can instantly slow the heart rate, which regulates breathing – this is particularly useful to those who suffer from anxiety. (YouTube has countless playlists you could try.)**
- ▶ **Practice daily yoga or mindful breathing – these immediately lower reactivities to stress**
- ▶ **Do grounding exercises when you feel anxious – teach these to your children. You can find many on Google. One practical approach is the 5-4-3-2-1 Coping Technique for Anxiety**

- ▶ **The Samaritans offer emotional support 24 hours a day, in complete confidence. Call 116 123**
- ▶ **Anxiety UK runs a helpline staffed by volunteers with personal experience of anxiety from 9:30-5:30, Monday to Friday. Call 08444 775 774**
- ▶ **Take a look at my two times award-winning FREE self-regulation app, the Keep Your Cool Toolbox. It is helpful to children and adults alike and is available on Google Play and via this website: <https://keepyourcooltoolbox.com/>**
- ▶ **Visit my website to take a closer look at my work concerning mental health – and feel free to get in touch if you would like to tap into any of my services: <https://mineconkbayir.co.uk/>**
- ▶ **The updated edition of my latest award-winning book, Early Childhood and Neuroscience, is now available. This contains further detail about ACEs and trauma, as well as other topical issues cornering child development: <https://amzn.to/345gFgs>**