

Toxic Stress 101

What is toxic stress?

Toxic stress is defined by Harvard University Center on the Developing Child as:

“strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years.”

It is closely tied to adverse childhood experiences, racism and neighborhoods that experience economic, health and social disparities.

What is the impact of toxic stress on maternal and child health?

Toxic stress contributes to weathering -- a weakening of the body due to constant wear and tear -- that has a direct impact on preconception health and poor birth outcomes.

Toxic stress builds across the life course and puts people at a higher risk for poor health outcomes like:

- asthma
- depression
- hypertension
- diabetes
- substance misuse
- developmental delays

Women who are exposed to toxic stress before and during pregnancy are more likely to deliver a baby too early or too small. This can lead to later developmental challenges for the children born to these mothers.



What can we do about the effects of toxic stress?

Build resiliency -- the capacity of individuals to maintain positive mental health and avoid behavioral health problems despite the presence of toxic stress and adversity. Resiliency can be built through positive environmental influences, self-care, developing and moving towards realistic goals.

Relaxation response -- a state of decreased sympathetic nervous system activity that opposes the stress response. Activities that signal your muscles and organs to slow down and increase oxygen to the brain include meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, visualization and progressive muscle relaxation.



Tips for working with families experiencing toxic stress:

- Identify the primary sources of chronic stress (such as depression, excessive grief, intimate partner violence, external disasters and other major stressors). Some of these stressors can be identified through program intake and screening forms, while others can be recognized through conversations with women and contact with families.
- Address the primary sources of chronic stress by ensuring access to health insurance, providing program services available and referring to the appropriate agencies. Encourage and prepare women to bring up issues with their health care provider for further screening, diagnosis and appropriate treatment.
- Use a strengths-based approach and motivational interviewing to identify personal (resilience, hobbies), family (father of the child, grandmother) and community (neighbors, faith community) resources and support available. A conversation that begins with discussing strengths can lead to better understanding resiliency and potential sources of support within the family, friends or community.
- Identify ways of increasing positive interactions and activities to buffer stress, such as hobbies, mindfulness, support groups and so on. Encourage the inclusion of family and non-family members during all stages of a woman's reproductive life. By engaging their support, women and mothers can form critical, stable, growth-promoting relationships that can be critical buffers against toxic stress.
- Encourage behaviors that can help buffer the effects of toxic stress and improve overall health and wellbeing, including positive interactions with family, friends, social groups, physical activity and healthy eating.
- Address behavioral issues such as smoking, alcohol abuse and the use of illicit drugs through sharing of information on their effect on maternal and infant outcomes, providing information on cessation and referrals for related programs.
- Follow-up with women to ensure continued encouragement and support as they work to address their life stressors.