

Title: Adverse Childhood Events, Empathy, and Altruism

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Abstract:

With a growing prevalence of adverse treatment of children, it is important to look into the long-term effects of negative childhood experiences – specifically their capacities for empathic concern and helping behavior. Empathy is the tendency to read and interpret others' emotions. Long-term outcomes of adverse childhood events (ACE) include a host of mental health disorders. Other studies have found that, on the other hand, ACE is correlated to an increase in empathy. Previous studies have also indicated that stress can increase prosocial behavior; the latter seems to function in offsetting the effects of the former. Clarification can be found in a motivational process model, which theorizes that experiencing ACE increases one's motivation to help others who may experience the same circumstances. While ACE may indeed initially result in a blunting of affect, successfully overcoming the effects of these events often leads to a desire to change outcomes for others.

836 adults (72.5% female) completed an online survey that included the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, the Adverse Childhood Events scale, and the altruistic behaviors scale. In line with previous research, both Adverse Childhood Events, $r=.155$, $p<.001$, and empathic concern, $r=.188$, $p<.001$, are positively correlated with altruism. However, there is little research that determines the link between adverse childhood events and empathy. Not only are empathic concern, $B=.153$, $p<.001$, and the experience of adverse childhood events, $B=.190$, $p<.001$, positively associated with altruism, but there is a strong interaction affect between empathic concern and adverse childhood events, $B=.107$, $p=.002$. In other words, the interaction between empathic concern and a history of adverse childhood events is positively associated with altruism.

Most research on factors associated with altruism has focused on simple main effects. However, by exploring interaction effects, we can better determine what types of people are more likely to behave altruistically.

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