

Three Types of Stress (Toxic Stress)

A metaphor to explain how adverse experiences can influence biology and development



The story you're telling:

"Chronic, severe stressors can cause a response that is toxic to the developing brain and has long-term effects on health and wellness. Supportive relationships can serve as a buffer against a toxic stress response."

Strategic way to redirect thinking away from patterns such as:

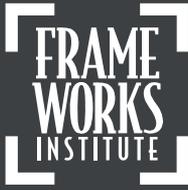


- **Black Box of Development**
- **Family Bubble**
- **Medicalization of Childhood**
- **Separate Influences**
- **Threat of Modernity**

Concepts and ideas included in this frame element:

- **There are different types of stress. Short periods of low-level stress are normal and healthy – this is positive stress. But others can affect the body's alarm systems in ways that disrupt health and development:** Establishes stress as a factor in child development, and establishes a clear distinction between normal, everyday stresses and serious adversity that can cause disruptions in brain and biological development.
- **The way the body responds to serious or chronic stresses depends on the presence or absence of supportive relationships. If stable, responsive relationships are available to help buffer the experience, the stress can be tolerable:** Focusing on the scientific finding that responsive caregiving moderates stress responses is a powerful way to build public understanding of environmental influence, and channels attention away from purely individualist explanations.
- **In the absence of supportive environments, some kinds of stress are toxic to the developing brain and have long-term effects on health and wellness:** The idea of toxic helps to communicate the seriousness of adverse experiences, and establishing its effects on the brain provides a mechanistic, brain-based explanation that can dislodge notions as 'stress is just emotions.'

(Continued on reverse)



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- **Toxic stress disrupts the architecture of the developing brain, undermining cognitive functioning. It can lead to lifelong difficulties in learning, memory, and self-regulation:** Communicators can use this aspect of the science to connect to concerns about education and the workforce.
- **Toxic stress is a physical phenomenon, and it causes physical problems. When stress hormones remain elevated over long periods of time, they produce “wear and tear” on the brain and some of the body’s systems, such as the cardiovascular system:** Communicators can use this aspect of the science to better explain social determinants of health, or to connect social conditions (e.g. poverty or domestic violence) to public health considerations.
- **Toxic stress can affect behaviour, through biology, changing the body’s natural alarm system so that it responds to events that might not be stressful to others:** Communicators can use this translated science to build understanding and support for issues such as mental health, school climate/discipline policies, juvenile justice reform, and violence prevention.
- **Toxic stress is one explanation for how adversity and inequity gets “under the skin” and built into the body. When children grow up in chronically stressful conditions, such as communities characterized by high levels of violence or untreated mental health issues, their risk of toxic stress increases.** Communicators can use the frame this way to connect to issues of disparities across geographical or social dimensions, and channel attention away from default thinking that disparities exist because of poor choices.
- **Tackling toxic stress involves developing supportive community environments, to both reduce exposure to toxic stress and to make stressful life events more tolerable:** Focuses attention on policy-level interventions and continues to reinforce the role of environmental influences on outcomes.
- **Now that we know about toxic stress, it underscores the need for...** Close on Communications on a range of social and health issues can connect to the research on toxic stress to make a strong, science-based case for community services and opportunities.