

Young people who faced childhood adversities like abuse likelier to struggle at work: Study

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Experiencing childhood adversities like abuse could impair mental health and negatively affect work life later on as young workers, a study found.

Researchers found that young Singaporean workers who have gone through abuse, been exposed to someone in their home abusing substances or experienced poverty as children were associated with lower perceived health and, in turn, a poorer sense of job security, lower self-efficacy and lower optimism about the future.

This points to a pressing need for employers and organisations to acknowledge and address the potential impact that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have in the workplace, the researchers said.

A new study published in peer-reviewed journal *Taylor & Francis Online* in May explored whether such experiences may influence the overall life outcomes of young

workers in a professional environment.

The study was done by Griffith Business School's associate professor Carys Chan, who is based in Australia, and the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of Social Work and Social Service Research Centre.

Of the 1,229 individuals surveyed, close to 60 per cent had experienced at least one childhood adversity. About 15 per cent had experienced two, while 4 per cent had experienced all three types.

The study focused on three forms of childhood adversity – abuse, living with someone who abused substances, and being raised in poverty.

The respondents were surveyed in two waves, between October 2020 and March 2021 for the first wave and from November 2021 to May 2022 for the second wave.

A significantly higher proportion of workers with lower education levels were found to have adverse childhood experiences compared with those with higher qualifications.

Low-wage earners – defined as those in the bottom 20 per cent of income earners here – were also more likely to have such experiences.

Of the 448 respondents who were low-wage, two-thirds had at least one adverse experience in childhood, compared with about 54 per cent of the 775 respondents who were not low-wage.

The researchers focused on whether respondents had impaired mental health and subjective physical health, and then studied if these health factors affected their work, in terms of self-efficacy, sense of job security and optimism for the future. Self-effi-

cacy refers to one's perception of their ability to perform tasks in different situations.

These three areas are deemed critical for a young worker's career development, researchers said.

The study found that having adverse childhood experiences was associated with poorer self-evaluations of the workers' physical health, which in turn was linked to a poorer sense of self-efficacy.

Adverse childhood experiences were also associated with poorer mental health, which in turn was associated with worrying more about losing their job and feeling discouraged about the future.

Co-author of the study Gerard Chung, an assistant professor at NUS' Department of Social Work, said a worker might notice he feels discouraged or worried about his job, but tracing that back to a childhood experience is a connection that most people do not make about themselves.

"This is also why we want support services to work the other way round – meet people where the issue actually shows up, in their day-to-day functioning, and treat ACEs as one possible part of the explanation rather than a label or a diagnosis," he said.

The aim is to address the present need, with childhood adversity offering context for why some workers may be struggling, but not to be treated as a cause to pin on them, he added.

The researchers said that employers can play a vital role in promoting workers' health and well-being by implementing appropriate interventions and support mechanisms aimed at reducing the impact of these childhood experiences.

Interventions can include stress management training, counselling services and flexible work arrangements to accommodate varying needs of employees. It is crucial for employers not to underestimate the importance of addressing this issue, the study added.

Chung said: "Ignoring ACEs is costly because workers affected by them may have lower productivity and higher healthcare costs, so it's in employers' interest to act." He also warned against using the data to discriminate against workers who had adverse childhood experiences.

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EMPLOYERS SHOULD ACT

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