

Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were generally regarded as a risk factor for compromised psychological wellbeing, especially in the clinical field. Yet, non-clinical studies failed to find a robust effect of ACEs on poor mental health in adulthood. The current study hypothesized that a cognitive ability to flexibly shift in perceptual perspectives may moderate the link between ACEs and self-reassurance, an adaptive self-relating style that promotes mental wellbeing. In particular, it was hypothesized that self-reassuring responses would be decreased when exposure to ACEs was coupled with weak flexibility in shifting back to the egocentric perspective. The associations among ACEs, flexibility in perspective shifting, and self-reassurance were examined in community participants with diverse profiles of ACEs and mental health outcomes. Regression analyses showed that ACEs alone did not reliably relate to reduced self-reassurance. Critically, an interaction between ACEs and inflexible perspective shifting was found to account for self-reassurance. Similar patterns of associations were found when early relational stress was indicated by measures of childhood trauma involving close others or maladaptive parenting styles. Results suggested that a persisting effect of ACEs on mental health in later life stages was contingent upon inability to shift flexibly between alternative perspectives.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, childhood trauma, self-compassion, perspective shifting, resilience