



Introduction

Stress Busters are strategies anyone can use to reduce toxic stress. Research shows that Stress Busters help reduce the effects that toxic stress can have on our brains and bodies.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) know firsthand the individual and community stressors that can impact clients' ability to be as healthy and well as possible. By teaching clients – children, youth, and adults – about toxic stress and integrating the Stress Busters to support them, as well as using Stress Busters to inform organizational programming and services, CBOs can strengthen the essential work they do to keep communities healthy and safe.

The strategies in this toolkit acknowledge that clients often work with CBOs to address immediate stressors, such as housing instability, food insecurity, and job loss – stressors affecting us from the “outside.” The Stress Busters are intended to be used in conjunction with this work to also address the body's internal response to stress, which causes physical changes to how our bodies and brains function, impacting our health, feelings of well-being, and behavior.

Thank you for embarking on this journey.



What are Stress Busters?

Stress Busters are strategies anyone can use to reduce toxic stress. They include:

- ✓ Supportive relationships
- ✓ Quality sleep
- ✓ Balanced nutrition
- ✓ Physical activity
- ✓ Mindfulness practices
- ✓ Experiencing nature
- ✓ Mental healthcare

Introduction | Stress Busters Toolkit for Community-Based Organizations

Who this toolkit is for

If you are a community-based organization, agency, or program that provides services or supports individuals in your community, this toolkit is for you.

How this toolkit was developed

This toolkit is based on research and evidence-based practices, as well as clinical expertise and lived experience from community partners. It was co-developed by the UCLA-UCSF ACEs Aware Family Resilience Network (UCAAN) in close partnership with the ACEs Aware Community Partner Council and ACEs Aware Patient Advisors. The ACEs Aware Community Partner Council consists of CBO leaders who work closely with the Medi-Cal population and clients who have been impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The ACEs Aware Patient Advisors are a group of patient consultants who have lived experience with Medi-Cal and ACEs. Their insights and expertise were invaluable in shaping tools and resources included in this toolkit that reflect the realities of diverse communities across California. ACEs Aware Patient Advisors and ACEs Aware Community Partner Council members contributed personal and lived experiences and feedback that informed the toolkit's approach to Stress Busters and provided accessible and culturally relevant language and examples.

Why use this toolkit

- ✔ **Build capacity:** If your organization is interested in integrating stress-reducing strategies into your work with clients, as well as building or modifying your organizational programming and services to support this work, this toolkit, [free educational handouts](#), and a [free online training course](#) can help streamline the process.
- ✔ **Understand the science:** Stress Busters can be used as part of an integrated approach to preventing and healing toxic stress that may arise from ACEs and other life adversities. This toolkit explains how toxic stress affects our bodies and brains and why the Stress Busters are effective.
- ✔ **Learn trauma-informed approaches for clients, yourself, and your workplace:** This toolkit offers trauma-informed approaches to traditional self-help strategies to help everyone manage stress and heal. This includes a collaborative, strengths-based framework called *Listen, Partner, Connect*.
- ✔ **Apply evidence- and community-informed strategies:** The strategies in this toolkit are based on research, as well as the professional expertise and lived experience of CBO staff and patients to ensure they are practical for use at community-based organizations and with clients who have Medi-Cal.

Promoting health equity

Systems-level inequities and discriminatory policies in our societal and institutional structures affect the conditions in which people live, work, and play. These conditions, such as if we have access to fresh food, safe housing, outdoor spaces to be in nature, and tobacco-free housing or workplaces, are called social drivers of health (SDOH) because they can significantly impact health and well-being.¹

Introduction | Stress Busters Toolkit for Community-Based Organizations

Systems-level inequities may create barriers for clients in accessing and engaging with the Stress Busters. For example, if nutritious food isn't easily available, it is hard to eat more fruits and vegetables. Or if there are no safe parks, sidewalks, or bike paths in the neighborhood, it is hard to be more active.

Therefore, engaging in the Stress Busters with clients should be grounded in understanding each client's individual situation and context, including SDOH and lived experience. This may include acknowledging and, when able, addressing existing challenges in engaging in the Stress Busters, as well as doing individualized planning that builds on a client's unique strengths.

The tools and strategies in this toolkit are designed with this approach in mind. For example, for each Stress Buster you will:

- ✓ find prompts to consider the impacts of environmental inequities based on structural and/or interpersonal racism and discrimination on clients.
- ✓ be encouraged to listen to what clients think would work best for them and to take into consideration how clients' environment, race, culture, religion, or other factors may influence how they want to approach reducing stress.
- ✓ see reminders to focus on a client's strengths and things that help them in their lives.

What you will find in this toolkit

This toolkit provides background information on ACEs, toxic stress, and the impacts on the brain and body. In each Stress Buster chapter you will find:

- ✓ why the Stress Buster is important for health and well-being.
- ✓ the science behind the Stress Buster.
- ✓ how to use the Listen, Partner, Connect Framework when applying the Stress Buster.
- ✓ resources for information, materials, and additional supports.

Introduction | Stress Busters Toolkit for Community-Based Organizations

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