



BOOK REVIEWS

The Deepest Well Book Review

Patrina Dow, Ph.D.¹

¹ Human Services, Purdue University Global

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This book review examines *The Deepest Well* by Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, an exploration of how early adversity shapes long-term physical and mental health outcomes. Dr. Harris brings together scientific evidence, clinical narratives, and public health advocacy from her research and observed experiences of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), to reveal the mechanisms linking toxic stress to chronic illness. This review summarizes the book's major themes, including trauma-informed care, health disparities, and the integration of mental and physical health services. It also evaluates the text's contributions to human services practice, education, and research, identifying both its strengths, such as accessibility and interdisciplinary relevance, and limitations, including the need for deeper engagement with systemic inequities. In comparison to other trauma-informed works, *The Deepest Well* offers a unique and practical approach for practitioners, educators, and researchers seeking to bridge the gap between adversity and healing.

In *The Deepest Well*, Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, a pediatrician and the founder and CEO of the Center for Youth Wellness in San Francisco's Bay Area, delivers a compelling and easily digestible exploration of how childhood adversity significantly impacts lifelong health. Supported by her work in one of San Francisco's most underserved communities, Dr. Harris bridges clinical medicine, public health, and social justice to examine how trauma in early life becomes biologically rooted in the body. This work is a call to action for all medical, behavioral health, and social service practitioners to address and enhance the health and well-being of the individuals and populations they serve, particularly in marginalized communities.

The book is organized into three main sections: the science of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), the biological and behavioral impacts of toxic stress, and the real-life implications for public systems and interventions. Throughout the book, Dr. Harris draws on a mixture of compelling narratives from her patients, clinical data, and reflections from her efforts to transform pediatric care through her Center for Youth Wellness. While Dr. Harris' experience is rooted in pediatric health care, the important themes that she addresses in this book, including structural inequities, trauma-informed practice, and resiliency resonate deeply with Human Services education and practice.

One of the main themes noticed in *The Deepest Well* is the connection between early adversity and long-term health outcomes. Dr. Harris details how early exposure to abuse, neglect, and household dysfunctions activates the body's stress response system in a way that potentially leads to increased risk of chronic conditions such as heart disease, asthma, depression, and substance-related difficulties. She refers to this physiological phenomenon as "toxic stress," a term that has become foundational in both healthcare and human services. Rather than viewing these conditions in isolation, she argues for a unified, systemic approach that recognizes adversity as a critical social determinant of health.

Another key theme is the invisibility of trauma in communities of color. Dr. Harris highlights how the intersectionality of racism, poverty, and lack of resources compounds the effects of ACEs for Black and Brown families. Her work emphasizes culturally responsive care, which is an area of continued focus, development, and expansion within Human Services education and practice. While the ACEs framework has gained national attention, Dr. Harris calls for expanding our understanding to include community and historical traumas, particularly those experienced by BIPOC populations.

The Deepest Well aligns closely with broader trauma-informed literature, though it stands out for its distinct public health perspective. While many works on this topic emphasize the neurobiological impact of trauma and a clinical focus, Dr. Harris goes beyond these and also focuses more specifically and intentionally on early intervention, prevention, and systemic solutions. Her approach also intersects with literature exploring the embodied impact of racialized trauma and culturally rooted healing practices.

A major strength of *The Deepest Well* is that it does a wonderful job of making complex scientific research both personal, practical, and easy to comprehend. Dr. Harris's writing style is clear and engaging, pulling readers in and making the book accessible to a broad audience, including students, practitioners, educators, and policymakers. Her use of case examples from her clinic not only makes the science personable but also serves as a reminder of the real-world implications of early adverse experiences, especially in communities where stigma is high and treatment is low. Her emphasis on resilience and hope provides a balanced perspective that avoids pathologizing those who have experienced trauma.

Another major strength is the book's call for systemic solutions. Dr. Harris emphasizes the need for collaboration across education, healthcare, and social services to implement trauma-informed screening, early intervention, and holistic care. For Human Services professionals, this framework is especially relevant, as it reinforces the importance of addressing root causes rather than just symptoms. Dr. Harris's advocacy for universal ACEs screening in pediatric care may be controversial to some, but it raises important ethical and practical questions about prevention and early intervention that Human Services professionals must consider.

While Dr. Harris acknowledges systemic racism and social determinants of health, a limitation of *The Deepest Well* is that it could have offered a further engagement with and exploration of these dynamics. For example, the book touches on racial disparities but does not fully explore how systemic oppression functions within the healthcare system itself. Additionally, while the healthcare perspective is valuable, Human Services readers may find that the book could have benefited from a further discussion of more generalist-focused, community-based and grassroots approaches that go beyond clinical environments to more holistic forms of care.

The Deepest Well has broad relevance and applicability to the Human Services Profession. It serves as an essential primer on trauma-informed care, particularly for professionals working with children, families, and underserved communities. The ACEs framework and its integration into service delivery can inform programming in child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and mental health. Dr. Harris's focus on early screening and prevention is especially important for practitioners advocating for upstream solutions to community challenges.

The Deepest Well makes a significant contribution to the growing body of literature that emphasizes the intersection between trauma, health, and social services. Its blend of storytelling, science, and systems thinking offers a rich foundation for Human Services professionals who are seeking to better understand and address the root causes of client challenges. The book urges readers to move beyond surface-level solutions and consider how early experiences and the systems that shape them impact health and well-being across the lifespan.

For Human Services educators, this book is an excellent addition to coursework on trauma-informed practice, ACEs, and childhood development. For practitioners, it provides a persuasive framework for integrating mental, physical, and social care across diverse populations and settings. And for researchers, Dr. Harris's work offers a call to further explore the intersection of adversity and inequality in shaping health trajectories, especially within historically excluded and underserved marginalized communities of color.

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