

# Counselling and Homelessness

by *Andrea Koenigstorfer, MIACP, BACP*



Addressing the issue of homelessness needs to go beyond the provision of immediate crisis help, and incorporate dealing with the traumatic experiences and psychological issues that are intrinsically linked with being homeless. Counsellors are uniquely able to reach out to these clients and support them in processing these issues that are so often overlooked in homelessness services. The challenge for the counsellor lies not only in being open-minded with regards to how counselling might need to be adapted in this particular setting, but also in taking appropriate measures for

self-care when working with this client population.

The Dublin Simon Community Sure Steps Counselling Service was established in 2012, and has since developed into a specialised trauma-informed counselling service. Currently, about 20 pre-accredited and fully accredited counsellors are providing psychological support to an average of 70 clients per month presenting with a wide variety of issues. The range of services encompasses 1-to-1 counselling across treatment services and housing / emergency accommodation services, weekly drop-in clinics in treatment

services as well as in the mobile health unit, in-reach and outreach crisis intervention, and a counsellor-led emotional wellbeing group programme.

**The root causes of homelessness are multifaceted and wide-ranging. A large percentage of individuals who are homeless have been exposed to some form of previous trauma**

(Hopper, Bassuk & Olivet 2010). However, many people affected by homelessness also present with depression, substance use issues (Fischer & Breakey 1991; Jainchill, Hawke & Yagelka 2000), and severe mental health conditions (Fitzpatrick, Kemp & Klinker 2000; Jainchill, Hawke & Yagelka 2000). As a result, these individuals are even more vulnerable to revictimisation (Goodman, Dutton & Harris 1995) and have impaired social networks and complicated service needs (Jainchill, Hawke & Yagelka 2000). Homelessness leaves people isolated and alone and hugely stigmatised by society, who often consider these individuals responsible for their situation and unwilling to pull themselves out of homelessness (Fitzpatrick, Kemp & Klinker 2000). Society's biases against the homeless are often internalized by the people who experience homelessness, resulting in a severe lack of self-esteem and feelings of extreme guilt and shame (Shallcross 2010).

Historically, the impact of

trauma has been overlooked in providing care to individuals in homeless service settings (Hopper, Bassuk & Olivet 2010). However, recent research has shown that responding to the immediate crisis of homelessness alone is not enough; a holistic approach also needs to incorporate the longer-term healing of these individuals. When working with the homeless, counsellors therefore need to adopt a trauma-informed perspective.

Experiences that create a sense of fear, helplessness, or horror, and overwhelm a person's coping resources are referred to as trauma (Hopper, Bassuk & Olivet 2010). The impact of trauma can be long-term and devastating and interfere with a person's sense of self, sense of safety and control, ability to self-regulate, and interpersonal relationships. This often makes them hypervigilant and hyper-alert.

Homeless clients of every gender, age, race and background often have been exposed to a variety of traumas in their lives, including physical, psychological and sexual abuse, neglect and (domestic) violence (Hopper, Bassuk & Olivet 2010). This early trauma provides a subtext for the narrative of many clients' pathways into homelessness (Browne 1993). The consequences of earlier trauma are a difficulty of people affected by homelessness to cope with the numerous hurdles they have to master in order to exit homelessness (Bassuk, Perloff & Dawson 2001).

**Loss is another inherent factor in homelessness** (Shallcross 2010). Many people are affected by homelessness after a loved one becomes ill or dies, someone loses a job or a home burns down. It is essential to help clients process their losses, and one way of doing so is through helping them find a sense of connectedness to break through their isolation.

**The experience of being homeless is traumatic in itself.** Homeless clients lack a stable home and the uncertainty of whether they are going to sleep in a safe environment or get a

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decent meal puts them under constant stress. The lack of financial resources, life skills, and social supports makes it extremely difficult for them to change their life circumstances (Hopper, Bassuk & Olivet 2010). The physical aspect of rough sleeping is equally traumatic – partly because homeless people are vulnerable to attacks by predators, as well as harassment from the authorities (Shallcross 2010).

### **What does this mean for the counsellor?**

Trauma-informed counselling involves “understanding, anticipating, and responding to the issues, expectations, and special needs that a person who has been victimized may have in a particular setting or service” (Moses et al. 2004 P.19). Counsellors working with clients affected by homelessness need to be aware of the traumatic experiences of their clients and incorporate an understanding of this trauma into their work (Hopper, Bassuk & Olivet 2010). Given that homeless clients with a history of trauma often feel unsafe, the counselling process needs to work towards building their physical and emotional safety. Because control is often taken away in traumatic situations, and because homelessness in itself is highly disempowering, counselling needs to emphasize the importance of choice for these clients. This allows them to re-build a sense of self-efficacy and control over their lives. Last but not least, a trauma-informed counselling approach focusses on the strengths rather than the deficits of the clients. Clients affected by homelessness are often pigeonholed (or judge themselves!) in terms of negatives – substance use issues, illiteracy, severe physical or mental health issues, unemployment, forensic history etc. Counselling needs to support these clients in identifying and highlighting their own strengths and develop coping skills to further develop their own resiliency.

Given their background, for many homeless clients learning to trust their counsellor is a first step towards rebuilding trust with others (Shallcross 2010). The importance of the counsellor's work lies in recognising and accepting these clients as human beings – or in other words, simply listen to them tell their story. A lack of validation is a common theme among clients affected by homelessness. They feel judged, they feel nobody cares about

conclusions (Shallcross 2010). Clients affected by homelessness are often emotionally and cognitively dysregulated. A client that shows a high absence rate in a class might have anxiety issues and is afraid of waiting alone at the bus stop to go to and from the class, while staff interpret his absences as a lack of motivation or disinterest. A client may have a history of rejection and therefore be extremely vulnerable to any signs of being rejected.

To work effectively with clients affected by homelessness means the counsellor has to meet the client where they are at and go where they need to go (Shallcross 2010). This entails being open and non-judgmental, and often to give up on the idea that counselling happens in your own office. Counsellors need to reach out to clients in a very humanizing way. Sure Steps Counsellors see clients in their current environment, whether this is in emergency accommodation, supported housing or treatment services. For clients that may not yet be ready for counselling we provide weekly drop-in clinics the Dublin Simon Community Detox and Stabilisation Units as well as in a mobile health clinic where clients who are too frightened of engaging with a counsellor inside a building can make initial contact with a counsellor in their usual environment.

The specific theoretical approach used with clients affected by homelessness is not the most important factor (Shallcross 2010). What matters most is the ability of the counsellor to relate to the client. Because homeless clients feel isolated and disconnected, building a relationship with the counsellor for them is a way of connecting and feeling empowered.

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them. They feel powerless, dirty and a sense of shame that is overwhelming. It is essential for the counsellor to change this paradigm, build a relationship with them and improve their experience within “the system”. To be able to achieve this, the counsellor needs to listen to each individual client with an open mind, without any preconceived ideas about what a homeless person is. Contrary to what most counsellors would have learned during training, it can be useful for counsellors to allow themselves to be vulnerable and share their feelings when working with homeless clients. It is okay as a counsellor to let these clients know that you're sad or hurt or angry about what has happened to them.

One way of getting to know homeless clients is to understand what drives them to act in certain ways rather than jumping to

A counsellor cancelling an appointment might be interpreted as yet another abandonment and result in a violent or angry outburst that does not fit the facts – and therefore be met with a lack of understanding on behalf of the counsellor, yet another instance of being invalidated. Rather than jumping to conclusions, it is important to sit down with the client and explore what the problem is. At the same time, we can use their story to expand their perspective and encourage change, taking away the blame, while empowering them to take charge in changing their current circumstances.

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### Conclusion

Addressing the issue of homelessness needs to incorporate addressing the underlying trauma that is so closely linked with the experience of homelessness. Counsellors working in homeless services have the opportunity to reach out to trauma survivors who otherwise are often disregarded. Providing immediate crisis relief in the form of food, shelter, and clothing needs to go alongside with helping individuals heal from past trauma and build healthy, supportive connections in the community.

Working with clients affected by homelessness is very demanding. It challenges counsellors emotionally and it is easy to become discouraged and disheartened in view of the apparent inability to help facilitate change. In light of this feeling of hopelessness, as well as the traumatic history some of these clients present with, there is a risk of burnout if this is not managed properly. What is important is to find the value in what we are doing and appreciating that success might not come in huge leaps and bounds. Accepting this truth is essential – we often may just be planting a seed by creating an environment and experience for the homeless person that is different. This is

all we have control over. There is no quick fix with homeless clients yet counselling offers homeless clients an opportunity to understand why they react to certain situations and teach them more pro-active coping mechanisms as an alternative. Together with other interventions this does open up new prospects for the future. ☺

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