

Homelessness and trauma

The Mercy Foundation recently hosted a forum on homelessness and trauma. Approximately 30% of chronically street homeless people self report having had a brain injury. Understanding the impacts of trauma is greatly beneficial when working with clients experiencing homelessness or who have experienced homelessness and are now being supported in housing.

Traumatic Brain Injury

Dr Jamie Berry discussed the impact of traumatic brain injury (TBI). Jamie discussed the interchangeable relationship between cause and effect of homelessness and trauma; for some people, the effects of a traumatic event in their life can lead them into homelessness whilst for others, an experience of homelessness can be traumatising. The symptoms to look out for that may indicate a brain injury include poor concentration, memory problems and irritability.

Jamie discussed the types of support that people living with a TBI may need once they are in housing, such as daily living skills coaching, domestic assistance or home care, using technology to set reminders about relevant appointments and direct debit for bills.

Trauma and children

Professor Max Bennett AO spoke about the effect of trauma on the brain of children. Child abuse has major consequences for negativity, language delay, deficits in memory performance, low self-esteem and poor relationship skills.

As adults, children who suffered abuse are more likely to have difficulty with substance dependence and addiction, post traumatic stress disorder, impulsivity, and at greater risk of depression and suicide.

Experiencing homelessness is not only traumatic for adults but also children. Professor Bennett's presentation reminded us that it is imperative that families and children must be prioritised for safe and secure housing.

Lateral Violence

Another topic discussed at the forum was Lateral Violence. Bronwyn Penrith, chair of Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Women's Corporation, spoke to the audience about this issue. Lateral Violence is a destructive behaviour where two or more people effected by the same situation turn on each other, rather than confronting the situation that is oppressing them both.

This type of behaviour includes gossip, backstabbing, jealousy, bullying, blaming others and shaming. Perpetrators often have low self-esteem and feel stuck in a cycle of oppression.

Bronwyn has devoted much effort to addressing Lateral Violence with communities across Australia. She runs workshops with community groups to help them recognise Lateral Violence and take steps towards ensuring this behaviour is addressed. Treating each other with respect and kindness is a start to combatting lateral violence. Within the broader community, addressing discrimination and negative stereotypes, healthy recognition of diversity and building resilience in communities, including Lateral Violence policies in your Reconciliation Action plan (RAP) will help address the causes of lateral violence.

Bronwyn Penrith was awarded the 2016 Cath Leary Social Justice Award – please see page XX for more details.