




Homelessness, Stigma, and Depression.

Symbiotic relation between all three as they interact, cross-fertilize, and are wholly absorbed for the homeless individual the longer they remain in homelessness.



In artistic descriptions of clinical depression, three motifs often appear: water, wells and darkness

William Styron: “The gray drizzle of horror induced by depression takes on the quality of physical pain.” *Darkness Visible*, 1990

 Water can be the source of a lot of physical pain and discomfort. Soaked and cramped, many of our rough sleepers lie in such extremities night after night.

WE CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT THIS IS DOING PSYCHOLOGICALLY TO THE ROUGH SLEEPER IN QUESTION. IMAGINE, YOURSELF, WRIGGLING INTO A DAMP SLEEPING BAG ON THE STREET TO GET SOME REST. IMAGINE THE INNER TURMOIL AND LACK OF SAFETY.

‘The grey drizzle of horror induced by depression ‘ is entirely present in many homeless individuals’ lives.

Many residents in the ONO hostel had been there for over a year

I was confronted night after night with stories of profound trauma.

- Constant stories of unspeakable cruelty to children, the same who were now homeless as adults
- Reliving traumas, in an evocative way, of what had happened during extreme acts of domestic violence, or violence which the speaker was responsible for
- Three accounts of serious sexual assaults within a hostel

Van der Kolk, pioneering Dutch psychiatrist, writes:




‘Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives.’

MENTALLY DAMAGING LIVING


These safe connections are taken away from homeless people.

Mistrust, fear, and negative past experiences lead to an atmosphere in the hostels which is extremely isolating. In this isolation depression rears its head.



'At such a moment one feels as if one were lying bound hand and foot at the bottom of a deep dark well, utterly helpless.' Van Gogh in a letter on his depression. |

The constant appearance of the 'well' as a motif in describing depression can also be indicative of stigma. The stigma of being based at the very bottom of the societal hierarchy leads to deep, abiding feelings of shame and self-loathing



When immersed in a homeless identity, people who once treated you equally, with respect, begin to feel sympathy. Being treated differently is patronising, assuming, as it does, that ‘you are a victim.’


IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF TRAUMA IN HOMELESSNESS, AND TO MEET EACH PERSON AS THEY ARE, AND WHERE THEY'RE AT. TREATING ALL AS DIGNIFIED INDIVIDUALS, WITH COMPLEX NEEDS AND RIGHTS. IN ESSENCE THIS IS THE SPIRIT OF HARM REDUCTION PRINCIPLES



The effect of both stigma and depression amongst the homeless cohort can be reflected in the statistic that 1 in 3 homeless individuals have attempted suicide.


BASED ON THE HOMELESS FIGURES FROM APRIL 2019 - A STAGGERING 10, 378, THIS TRANSLATES AS 3,145 PEOPLE FROM A SINGLE COHORT OF IRISH SOCIETY HAVING TRIED TO END THEIR OWN LIVES.

RECENT ARTICLE IN IRISH TIMES ABOUT SUICIDAL IDEATION BECOMING COMMONPLACE AMONGST HOMELESS CHILDREN. THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT AS TO THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUICIDE AND HOMELESSNESS




Tchaikovsky, lamenting his 'wearing maddening depression', wrote in a heartfelt letter to his sister of his own dark states: 'I know the feeling only too well. In my life, too, there are days, hours, weeks, aye, and months, in which everything looks black, when I am tormented by the thought that I am forsaken, that no one cares for me. Indeed, my life is of little worth to anyone.'

Homeless identity is so all-consuming that a person feels a split inside themselves, between a time when you were housed, and the utter severance of those ties with you as you become sucked into the institutionalising identity of homelessness, synonymous with low self-image



This erasure of self leads to suicidal compulsions and attempts, which are, tragically, often completed. Therapy can be very beneficial - it's what kept me afloat during my homeless days - as it provides a safe place of non-judgement where the person is free to express themselves honestly.

Many in the homeless cohort have a natural mistrust of 'opening the can of worms' of therapy. Such is the prickly shell they build to grow a thicker skin in the face of multiple traumas.



Perhaps the greatest lesson to learn is compassion.

‘A compassionate society ... is one that takes the full measure of the harms that can befall citizens beyond their own doing; compassion thus provides a motive to secure to all the basic support that will undergird and protect human dignity’

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum