



Searching for answers:
navigating homelessness, substance use and mental health

Co-occurring conditions workbook

Searching for Answers

Searching for Answers is a short film which shines a light on two people's lived experiences of co-occurring conditions of homelessness, substance use and mental health.

Using this workbook

This FREE reflective workbook for practitioners contains discussion prompts, statistics and suggestions for further learning on co-occurring conditions.



Edward pictured walking in central London. Taken from 'Searching for Answers' film.

What we mean by 'co-occurring conditions'

Co-occurring conditions is the co-existence of both mental health and substance use needs, a common experience for many people experiencing homelessness. While commonly used to refer to the combination of substance use/alcohol and mental health, the term is also sometimes used to refer to other combinations of need, such as homelessness, poor physical health or neurodiversity.

Over 51% of people found sleeping rough in London in 2021-22 had mental health needs and over a third were experiencing co-occurring substance use, mental health and homelessness. Source: CHAIN annual bulletin (2022-2023)

The most prevalent health problems among individuals experiencing homeless are substance use (62.5%), mental health problems (53.7%) or a combination of the two (42.6%)
Source: Mental Health Foundation



Photo taken from 'Searching for Answers' film.

Causes of homelessness

It is easy to make assumptions about why people are homeless. In fact, the biggest cause of homelessness is now tenancy breakdown.

Homelessness is something that is widespread and can affect any of us.

31% of people making a homelessness application, deemed homeless or threatened with homelessness, were in that position due to loss of tenancy

Source: The Homelessness Monitor, Crisis, 2021

An estimated 271,000 people were homeless in England in 2022. In 2023, one in 58 people in London were considered homeless in London

Source: Shelter England, 2023

The links between trauma, homelessness and substance use

92% of people experiencing homelessness have experiences of trauma – with over two-thirds reporting four, or more, traumatic experiences

Source: The Prevalence of Trauma among People who have Experienced Homelessness in England

Poor mental health is both a cause and consequence of homelessness. People take drugs for many reasons, but it is often rooted in experiences of trauma, often from childhood.



- When you first have contact with a client or patient, what assumptions do you make about clients with multiple needs?
- How can we discuss traumatic events without re-traumatising service users?

Women's homelessness and the impact of domestic violence and abuse

It is often thought that women experience less homelessness. In fact, women's homelessness is often hidden or under-represented in statistics. Women forced to rough sleep are incredibly vulnerable, facing a constant risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation.

This causes them to hide away from city centres to stay safe. Consequently, women are also hidden from outreach services and face more barriers to accessing support.

Source: Single Homeless Project

65% of homeless Londoners in temporary accommodation are women.

Source: London Councils

There is strong, consistent evidence of the relationship between women's homelessness and experience of domestic abuse.

Source: Women's homelessness, European Evidence Review

A 2018 report conducted by the St Mungos homelessness charity found that 54% of St Mungo's female residents that had slept rough had experienced violence or abuse from a partner or family member and 33% said that domestic abuse contributed to them becoming homeless.

Source: Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology, St Mungo's



- The film raised experiences of domestic abuse – how do you approach conversations around domestic abuse with clients?
- It is noted that many women experiencing homelessness have had children removed. What thoughts and feelings come up for you when supporting a client around this?



[Park in central London, taken from 'Searching for Answers' film.](#)

LGBTQI+ experience

LGBTQI+ people are more likely to experience homelessness than their peers.

Source: Understanding the Multiple Vulnerabilities, Support Needs and Experiences of People who Sleep Rough in England – Initial findings from the Rough Sleeping Questionnaire, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

A recent report found that over a third of people forced to live at home during the COVID lockdown felt that they were discriminated against during this time because of their sexuality or gender identity, and one in ten felt in danger at home.

Source: The mental health and experiences of discrimination of LGBTQ+ people during the COVID-19 pandemic: Initial findings from the Queerantime Study, Dylan Kneale, Laia Bécáres



Park in central London, taken from 'Searching for Answers' film



- How could you as a practitioner support people from the LGBTQI+ community to feel safe and comfortable when accessing support?
- How could services be more accessible and welcoming to the LGBTQI+ community?
- What does gender-informed working mean to you?

Resources

Co-production

- Co-production toolkit, Single Homeless Project
- How co-production benefits people, professionals and organisations, National Lottery Community Fund

Gender informed approaches

- PIE4Shelters Project – A guide to improving trauma and gender informed responses to women experiencing homelessness and gender-based violence, FEANTSA
- Working with perpetrators and survivors of domestic abuse in homelessness settings, in partnership by Standing Together, Fulfilling Lives in Islington & Camden, Single Homeless Project and St Mungo's
- A sense of safety: Trauma-informed approaches for women, Centre for Mental Health
- Findings of the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage, AVA (Against Violence & Abuse)

Language Use

- Power of language toolkit, Fulfilling Lives in Islington & Camden

Mental health & substance use

- Improving access to mental health support, National Lottery Community Fund
- Alcohol and multiple disadvantage, Making Every Adult Matter
- Multiple disadvantage, substance use and mental health, Making Every Adult Matter
- Experiences of multiple disadvantage, Groundswell
- Working with change resistant drinkers, Alcohol concern's Blue Light Project

Neurodiversity

- Autism and homelessness toolkit, Homeless Link
- Exploring the links between neurodiversity, crisis and crime, Revolving Doors

Trauma informed approaches

- Trauma Informed, reflections on our way of working, Fulfilling Lives in Islington & Camden
- Trauma informed practice toolkit, Scottish Government
- Hard Edges: Mapping severe and multiple disadvantage, LankellyChase Foundation



Photo taken from 'Searching for Answers' film.



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