

February 26,2016

How Do We Get There From Here?

For the purpose of understanding and insight I want to reiterate the Canadian Homelessness Research Networks Canadian Definition of Homelessness:

“Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable ,permanent or appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household’s financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful and distressing.”

Reflection upon the definition of Homelessness, I myself gained some insight into my own childhood and the particular experience of moving frequently. Over my lifetime I have moved thirtyfive times. Eight of those moves were from my earliest childhood memories, up until the age of fourteen. Only realizing now that the reason for the constant moving was due likely to the cost of our housing rising, being unable to remain where we were living, this forced a move upon the family. The residual effect of these frequent and stressful experiences were that for much of my early adult life, after a couple of years in one place I would become restless. This would prompt a chaotic need to move, to change my surroundings. Now, I recognize and acknowledge these feelings, without necessarily indulging them. Although, I do still rearrange the contents of my living environment, this seems to satisfy my need for change.

When chaos and dysfunction are bedfellows, when it is all you know, it is all you do! November 22, 2013, an article published by The Atlantic, written by Derek Thompson, a Business Writer, encapsulates a study linking a 13 Point drop in IQ for those living in poverty. The study by Neuroscientists, Jiaying Zhao, and Eldar Shafir,, based out of Princeton University, published their findings in the journal Science, August 2013. I will attempt to synopsise the article from what I understand. “It isn’t that those of us living in poverty aren’t capable of making rational decisions, it is that the inescapability of poverty weighs so heavily that we abandon long-term planning entirely, because short term needs are so great and long-term gains so implausible.” <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/11/your-brain-on-poverty-why-poor-people-seem-to-make-bad-decisions/281780/>
<https://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S37/75/69M50/index.xml?section=topstories>

When all of your time and energy are spent in subsistent living, one has no time, money or energy left to pursue anything else!

These academic findings are not a surprise to me! In my first article, I spoke of Simone Weil,(1901-1943), a French thinker, anchored in the economic and political realities of her time. Weil documented the struggles of the French labourers she worked with in the factories. Working side by side with them, living on the meaghre wages they were paid,

eating the same food those wages provided and living in a sparse French tenement; Weil understood why there was no resistance to their situation. Weil noted herself an all encompassing and pervasive numbness, the apathy that she experienced left her incapable of advocating for herself or anyone else.

Having a personal and intimate experience with poverty, it confounds me to this day how my personality and my decisions are distorted by the indelible impressions left on my psyche that linger into middle age. There is much that I understand now about my choices over the years of my life that I now choose to do differently. There is still much that I don't understand, and that I may never! What confuses and frustrates me at times is that we as a society understand the longstanding implications and outcomes for those who experience these life situations. We have the statistics, the deaths, from drugs and despair, the incarcerated, the homeless, the children in care, the broken families, the broken lives.

The Myths of Homelessness

#1 Homelessness Affects Only Middle Aged Men

Fact: The fastest growing segment of the homelessness population are women and families with children.

#2 Homeless People Should "Just Get A Job".

Fact: Getting a job is especially challenging for a homeless person who lacks clean clothes, showers, transportation, and a permanent address. Others have a criminal past, learning disabilities or lack of education. Even if they find work, their low income often cannot sustain them.

#3 People Are Homeless By Choice

Fact: No one starts life with a goal of becoming homeless. Yes, poor choices often contribute to it, but circumstances such as job loss, mental illness, domestic abuse, and trauma strongly influence those choices.

Myth #4 Helping People Enables Them To Stay Homeless

Fact: Food and shelter are essentials for life. By offering these and other outreach services like restrooms, showers and mail service, we build relationships with people in need. Then we're able to offer more through our recovery programs, like counselling, addiction recovery, life skills and job training.

Myth #5 Sufficient Affordable Housing Will End Homelessness

Fact: Housing can help people who are homeless due to poverty. But many people still struggle to function in a normal life, and may return to homelessness.

Myth #6 Homelessness Will Never Happen To Me

Fact: Talk to the hundreds of homeless men and women we serve each day and they'll tell you they never intended or expected to become homeless. Many had solid jobs, houses and families. But at some point, life fell apart. Now they're desperate for a way back home. <http://www.portlandrescuemission.org/learn-more/myths-about-homelessness/>

THE TRUTH ABOUT ACEs

WHAT ARE THEY?

ACEs are
ADVERSE
CHILDHOOD
EXPERIENCES

The three types of ACEs include

ABUSE



Physical



Emotional



Sexual

NEGLECT



Physical



Emotional

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION



Mental Illness



Incarcerated Relative



Mother treated violently



Substance Abuse

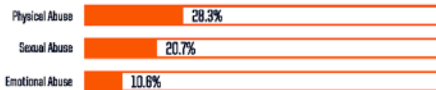


Divorce

HOW PREVALENT ARE ACEs?

The ACE study* revealed the following estimates:

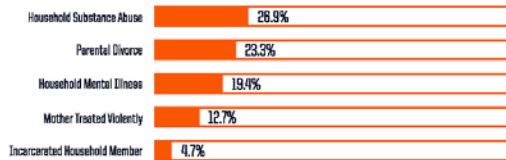
ABUSE



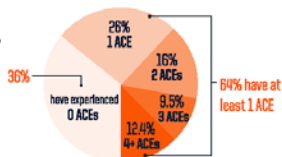
NEGLECT



HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION



Of 17,000 ACE study participants:



WHAT IMPACT DO ACEs HAVE?

As the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for negative health outcomes



Possible Risk Outcomes:

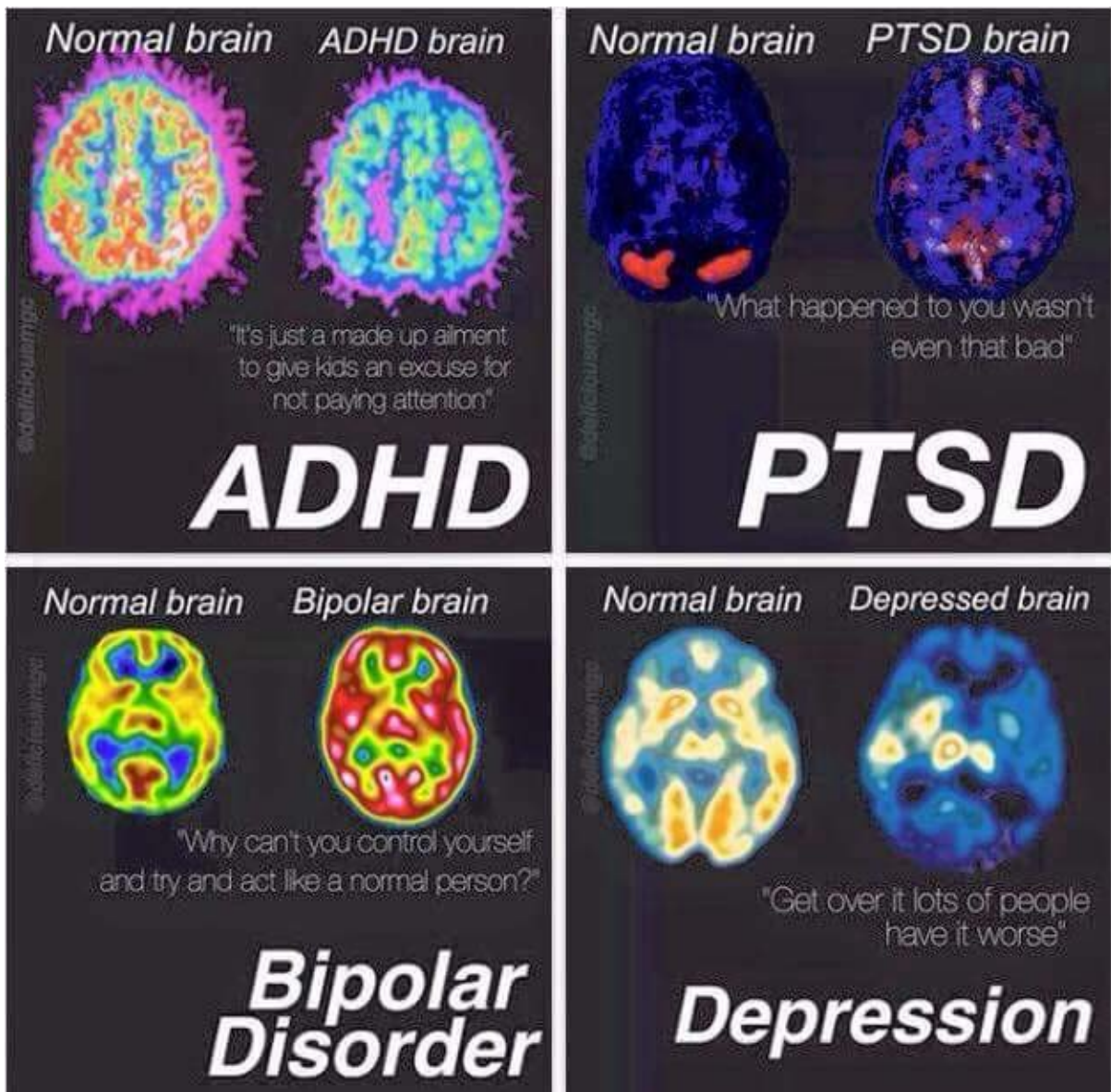
BEHAVIOR



PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH



The infographic that I have included with this article references Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACE's. I am including this as a source of understanding and will follow up this explanation with an image of the MRI's of brain scans showing the actual changes in the brain of mental illness and trauma. These things are very real and have had a significant impact not only on my life, but the lives of many people who have similar experiences. I fall within the area of having experienced all three types of abuse. It was pervasive and longstanding. In many ways, I often marvel at the fact that I am still here. I have cultivated a sort of resiliency. This is not to garner sympathy, it is to gain understanding and empathy for those who have suffered and still do from the challenges faced in overcoming these unfortunate circumstances.



Personally, my two literal experiences with homelessness were at opposing ends of my life the first time a physical assault from the man that I was married to, where I required surgery, hospitalization and three months of being unable to work. This was in my early twenties, I worked as a bartender/waitress, due to the nature of my injuries my recuperation required physical therapy. I lived at a woman's shelter for the duration, subsequently moving into a rooming house. In the early eighties there was not much available for a single woman, and I would like to say that the situation has improved, unfortunately it has not! Referring to my homelessness as literal, I want to make a distinction that I was technically homeless at other times when I was using the time honoured tradition of couch surfing. This too is now being recognized as homelessness. Although it seems to be an accepted form of homelessness for our population of youth, it is still homelessness!

Five year's ago, my mental and physical health took a turn. I found myself in a place that I thought I had left behind, in active addiction, deteriorating mental health and a relationship that was not healthy either. Thankfully, I knew what I needed to do at that point, I had my not lost the tools and resources that I had gained over my years of recovery work. I got myself into Detox, and from there I managed to get a bed at one of the Women's Shelters. It was mid-winter, beds are at a premium at any time of the year, particularly so in winter. Many single women living in a shelter are there for a long time, I met many who had been there month's and several who had been in shelter for a year and more. This due to the fact that families get priority for emergency housing over single women and men. I was one of those who had priority for housing, because of my Joint Custody Agreement for my daughter, who at the time was thirteen. I was registered with the help of staff at the Shelter with the Social Housing Registry, my stay at the Shelter was four months.

Presently the wait times for housing, if you are not in an emergency situation as I was, are seven to ten years here in Ottawa. There are 7,800 people on the list! The City of Ottawa's Affordable Housing stock was increased by 150 Units in 2014. There seems to be a large gap in the funding and implementation of the intentions of all levels of Government to end this housing crisis. What concerns me most is that what I hear being touted is this concept of Affordable Housing! Who is it affordable to? Certainly not me, or anyone living on a below LICO (Low Income Cut Off, \$30,000.). How are we ever going to provide housing for everyone who needs housing? We need to do things differently! This brings me back to the Tiny Housing Community Project. The basis for a Tiny Housing Community is multi-faceted. It is an opportunity for those of us who have had little to no community in our lives, to build something inclusive, to restructure community to fit those of us living on the margins.

Whether Tiny Housing is an interim solution does not matter! It is a partial solution to where we are now, in getting to where we want to be, which is providing shelter for everyone who needs it! The keywords being needs it!