

4.1.2: Trauma-informed care

What is trauma? How does it relate to homelessness? A traumatic event is sudden and unexpected, and perceived as dangerous. It may involve a threat of physical harm or actual physical harm, leading to intense fear. It overwhelms our immediate ability to cope. In this module, you will learn how to describe trauma associated with homelessness, explain the body's natural responses to both acute and chronic trauma, and list examples of trauma-informed care in HCH services.

Key components of trauma

- Intense feelings of helplessness, terror, and lack of control
- Threat to one's physical or mental well-being through violence or threat of violence
- Brain's response: fight, flee, or freeze
- Prolonged trauma:
↑ sensitivity, ↑ triggers



Traumatic experiences have several key components, including intense feelings of helplessness, terror, and lack of control and the threat to one's physical or mental well-being through violence or threat of violence. Although what people perceive as threatening can differ, the body's response is the same: the brain reacts with signals to fight, flee, or freeze. This response to trauma works to protect us and teaches us how to respond to danger. But if the traumatic situation never stops, those responses can actually change the way the brain works, causing heightened sensitivity and increased alarms.

Homelessness is traumatic



Photo by Shane Bauer

- Lack of safety
- Uncertainties of meeting basic needs
- Exposure to the elements
- Lack of access to services
- Loss of meaning and hope
- Serious medical conditions
- Mental health problems
- Addictions
- Childhood histories of abuse and neglect

Almost everything about homelessness is traumatic – the lack of safety, uncertainties of meeting basic needs, exposure to the elements, lack of access to services, and the loss of meaning and hope. For many homeless people, the trauma is compounded by serious medical conditions, mental health problems, addictions, or childhood histories of abuse and neglect, from which they still suffer.

Trauma-informed workers know

- Homelessness is traumatic
- Sensitive services are necessary
- No “right” way to react or recover
- Most people heal

*National Center on Family
Homelessness, 2006*



Photo by Shane Bauer

Traumatic experiences are often shattering and life altering for children and adults. The Healing Hands article included in this module explains more about how these responses reveal themselves in clinical care.

HCH workers assume that a person who has experienced homelessness has also experienced trauma. They understand that people who are homeless need services that are sensitive to their status as trauma survivors. They know there is no ‘right’ way to react to or recover from a traumatic event, and that over time and with support, most people heal.

In the video for this segment, you will hear more about trauma-informed care in HCH services.