



Where Autism
Professionals Connect

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Autism and homelessness

I first began to think about the link between autism and homelessness after I was contacted by someone working in a London borough who had become concerned about an older adult street sleeper who he felt would not survive another winter on the streets. No one had been able to make headway with this individual, and having come across someone in his personal life who was diagnosed with autism, the worker began to make some connections.

As the homelessness worker and I talked I had one of those rare lightbulb moments. It is so obvious. The main causes of homelessness are family breakdown, unemployment and poverty and an inability to understand the complexities of the benefits system. Sound familiar?

The street is undemanding and when there:

- you are in control of your environment choosing where and when you sleep
- you are in control of who you do or do not communicate with
- you create your own rules (mostly) and the dangers that many of us might anticipate are irrelevant until they have actually happened to you.

The drift to the street should be preventable but it is only preventable if professionals pick up on the signs, and if the resources are there to offer proper alternatives.

Without exception the workers that I have met over the past couple of years have been caring and wonderful people who are expected to understand a wide range of issues, from mental health to alcohol abuse and from acquired brain injury to domestic violence and sexual assault. Autism may not have featured in any training or thinking. But what if it is on the agenda? Staff are eager to learn but when they do it is not easy to put best practice into the long journey from street to indoors.

Issues to consider

I have now trained a number of homelessness workers and we have looked at many issues such as:

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- alternative communication
- visuals and process time
- reduced choices and clear rules

Improving workers awareness of autism has been incredibly effective, but unless there is appropriate accommodation available at the very moment someone says yes, then all is lost.

By appropriate I mean hostels with trained and understanding staff, and meaningful rules. They need to be aware that ritual and routine may be essential in helping someone feel safe, and that once there someone may not see the point in moving on again.

A new tenant may be living in your unit but have no interest in having you as a 'friend'. Hostels may be far too hot for someone who has lived outside for a long time. Sensory issues must be understood, acknowledged and accommodated and once again, visuals used to help reinforce any rules and future plans. Of course in an ideal world we would be moving someone into a nice flat with trained support and with low arousal surroundings but sadly that is not the real world.

We must ask ourselves, why would someone who has found a home that suits them in a dark doorway where no one bothers them and they feel in control, choose to move to somewhere where forms must be completed, questions answered many times, rooms shared with strangers and rent paid?

A homelessness organisation has a staff notice which talks of 'helping people take control of their lives'. I have challenged this as, if we are honest, what we are trying to do is take that control away and provide a safer, better alternative to a lifestyle that may appear to the autistic individual 'autism friendly'. Controversial in this time of personalisation but controversial or not, it works.