Autism & Homelessness

DR ALASDAIR CHURCHARD, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

WITH THANKS TO: VICTORIA ASEERVATHAM, ROUGH SLEEPING COMMISSIONING MANAGER, WESTMINSTER CITY COUNCIL

Aims

- To give information on the probable association between autism and homelessness
- To share details of best practice

What is autism?

- Differences in social understanding and interaction
- Inflexibility and sensory differences
- Lifelong condition

Autism & multiple disadvantage

- Only 1/3 of autistic adults in some form of paid employment (National Autistic Society, 2016)
- 79% of autistic adults have had a mental health problem during their life (Lever & Geurts, 2016)
- 79% of autistic adults say they feel socially isolated (National Autistic Society, 2016)
- Don't forget strengths!

Homelessness research
(Churchard et al., 2019)

1.1% OF GENERAL POPULATION ARE AUTISTIC

PUBLISHED PAPER: 12% OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS SHOWED STRONG SIGNS OF AUTISM

Social differences

- Two areas:
  - Social understanding
  - Social interaction

Examples

- *This client does not initiate social interaction and displays a rigid smile when greeted. They give tangential responses and speak in stilted sentences.*
- *This client does not make eye contact, has a blank facial expression, and has to be told when interactions are finished as they would not pick up on this otherwise.*

Restricted and repetitive behaviours & interests

Inflexibility & repetition

Items in this client's room are organised in rows. Their day follows a precise routine of when they sleep and watch TV. They always take the same route to the shop and have rules about where shopping can be placed in their flat.

Fixated interests

This client makes lists of obscure musicians and has a large collection of broken electronics.

Sensory differences

When fire alarm went off unexpectedly seemed like they would scream, always has curtains closed, burnt hand badly but seemed under-reactive to pain (waited 1 week to seek treatment).

Sensory differences video



Autism & trauma

Risk from others plus core aspects of autism (Rumball, 2019)

Increased risk of developing PTSD, and trauma less likely to be recognised? (Haruvi- Lamdan et al., 2018)

Trauma and autism combine to make it more difficult for the individual to make use of support offered?

Lived experience
(Stone et al., 2023)

- ‘autistics who appear to be functioning like me, society just goes well you are fine you don’t need support, and then there’s nothing, we fall through the cracks, especially as adults’

- ‘I didn’t know how to start, I didn’t know who to talk to . . . I went four years without benefits, without a bank account, without ID, because I didn’t know what the fuck to do, I went down to five and a half stone, I was literally emaciated, you could see all the bones in my body.’

Autism & Homelessness Toolkit

- A practical guide for staff and organisations who work with people experiencing homelessness.
- Includes what autism is, how to recognize it, and how to work effectively with autistic people experiencing homelessness.
- Currently being updated.

Supported by:

homeless link

resources for autism

City of Westminster

St Mungo's
Ending homelessness
Rebuilding lives

National Autistic Society

General principles

- Continue following PIE best practice:
  - Highlight and celebrate the client's strengths
  - Focus on what the client's priorities are for your work with them
  - Recognise the importance of relationship building
- BUT adapt approaches to meet the specific needs which come with autism

Engaging with clients who show signs of autism

- Adapt how you build relationships - short and regular
- Be consistent
- Slow down
- Reduce choice and minimise demands
- Make communication clearer and use images
- Be aware of differences in sensory sensitivity
- Use strengths-based approaches
- Be reflective and resilient

Overall area to consider	Specific issues
What are their needs in terms of social contact?	• Do they want to talk to and spend time with others, or would they rather be on their own? • Would they benefit from having regular contact with someone, such as a befriender?
How can you adapt your communication for this client?	• Can you use pictures to make communication easier (e.g. a picture of the hostel/accommodation on offer)? • Think about the key things you need to tell them, and how you can make this information as clear and simple as possible • Some autistic people take a little longer to process information
Can any of the actions or protocols the service normally expects, be dropped, or done in a different way?	• Some autistic people find signing forms very difficult • Can welfare checks be done differently? (E.g. noting when they are seen on CCTV.)
Does your usual approach to support planning need to be adapted to meet the person's needs?	• Are all the forms you use necessary / do they all have to be filled out with the individual? • What is the priority of the person receiving the support?

Do they engage in any behaviours which appear ritualised or obsessive? If so, what can the service do to accommodate these behaviours?	• Try to establish clear and explicit rules with the person of how those behaviours will be accommodated
Do they have any highly-focused interests which need to be accommodated?	• Again, clear and explicit rules are essential • Can you better engage the person by focusing on these interests?
Are there any sensory sensitivities to be aware of?	• Things most people would not even notice (e.g. a slightly brighter light) can be overwhelming • They may otherwise be less sensitive, and as a result want more stimulation (e.g. loud noises, extremes of temperature) • Think about all the senses
How can you help them manage change?	• Helping the person move on from the service will need substantial preparation

Further details

- Paper on autism & homelessness: https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318768484
- The toolkit can be found at: Autism_Homelessness_Toolkit.pdf (kxcdn.com)
- Article about research: http://theconversation.com/autistic-people-at-greater-risk-of-becoming-homeless-new-research-97227
- Alasdair's details: alasdair.churchard@hmc.ox.ac.uk