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# Trauma during homelessness: Early findings from a qualitative study

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FUNDED BY

**NIHR** | National Institute for  
Health and Care Research

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## Andy's Story



*A composite of the stories  
shared throughout work  
I've led with people  
experiencing  
homelessness*

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**Trauma** can take place at **any age** and have **lasting impacts** on **mental health and wellbeing**.

Everyone **reacts to trauma differently** and there are **various forms** of trauma.

**Trauma** can take place before, during and as a consequence of **homelessness**.

## **Aim:**

Integrate understanding around trauma experienced while homeless and its perceived impact on mental health for people experiencing homelessness (mainly in the North East).

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**How did we do this?**

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**We aim to better understand the experience of trauma during homelessness and how it impacts on mental health.**

**What did this look like:**

- Interviews with
  - 13 people from Newcastle upon Tyne
  - 13 people from North East small seaside coastal towns
- Co-production with two people with lived experience



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**What did we learn?**

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## What did we learn?

If we think of experiences as stories...

There is more similarities than differences.

There are key plot lines spanning experiences.

There are moments that have the potential to lead to positive or negative changes in people's lives

Finding meaning in traumatic experiences during homelessness and the immediate impacts

Turning points that shape the trajectories

Present circumstances

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## The power of stories



**Sam's Story**  
**Trauma as a**  
**chronic recurrent**  
**condition**



**Alex's Story**  
**Trauma as a**  
**shock to one's**  
**system**



## Sam's Story Trauma as a chronic recurrent condition

Sam had a history of trauma stemming from childhood to present circumstances.

*I got abused by my step-dad, growing up, and I tried to tell my mum when I was 13. My mum didn't believe me, so with my mum not believing me and knowing that my mum was my own*

*flesh and blood, I turned to drugs to bottle it, like to start forgetting what was going on in the household. So, let's say I've had to deal with quite a lot of trauma over the years.*





## Sam's Story

They have been rough sleeping and moving from couch to couch over the last year. While sleeping on the sleeps they shared:

*I've been attacked four times when I've been on the streets. I've seen people die in front of us. I've nearly died three times. I've been through the mill me, But I'm still going. I've seen people come and go. I've seen people get in some states. I've seen people on top of bridges and talked people off it.*

While talking about how everything over the last year had impacted them, they explained:

*You just want to turn it off. Nothing, you can't do anything apart from mix with other homeless people, and they're on drugs. So, they're like, "Oh, this will get you to sleep faster. Oh, this will warm you up. Oh, this will take your thoughts away." So, you're, like, "Shall I sit in the rain freezing or shall I try it?"*



## Sam's Story

What about longer-term:

*Well you feel like you want to top yourself when you are living on the streets, because you don't think anything is going to get better. You don't think there is any light at the end of the tunnel. That's for sure.*

So what if nothing changed, what does it mean for Sam?

*Yes, it's just normal, that's how it is yes. I don't think I'm going to have many years left anyway to tell you the truth now, you just get on with things you know, because nothing really helps.*



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**...But what if something did happen, what else could have happened to Sam?**



**Sam's Story**  
*Alternative  
endings*

**What if Sam ended up getting help:**

*I was relieved, in a way, because with me being in jail for that week, it stopped me from using as many drugs as I was using and, obviously, getting on a treatment programme, which I'm still carrying on, on the outside.*



## Sam's Story Alternative endings

### **What if Sam ended up getting help:**

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### **What if Sam made a friend:**

*... He was a cunning lad, you know what I mean? He was from [another city] and we just got on and just talking and just, sort of, putting things back into perspective again.*



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### What if something happened that changed Sam's circumstances:

*I'm 14 weeks pregnant now and I wasn't planning on any more kids, but I was going down a road where I shouldn't have been, so if this didn't happen I think I would've been dead by now.*



## Alex's Story Trauma as a shock to one's system

In the last year Alex's marriage fell apart. They ended up staying with friends before sleeping in a tent.

*My marriage broke down. I had my own house, and the normal 2.4 children type of family. And marriage broke down, basically, out of the blue. Everything went a bit strange after that.*





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*My marriage broke down. I had my own house, and the normal 2.4 children type of family. And marriage broke down, basically, out of the blue. Everything went a bit strange after that.*

*Like the trauma, I don't know what that is. I suppose, the worst part of it all, is the limbo side of it because you don't know what's next, kind of thing. The uncertainty of where you're going to be, or what's going on. The actual situation, being out overnight camping, in the middle of nowhere, wasn't such an issue. The bigger issue was the uncertainty of what's next.*





## Alex's Story

They ended up in a hostel, where things only got worse:

*It's horrible not having a fixed address and being in a hostel. It's my first ever time experiencing it and I never really thought it would come to this, us having a fight would turn my world upside down and it did and I ended up homeless.*

*There's a lot of trauma in here with a lot of fights that go on and people just being put onto the street because of fighting. I took an overdose the first two months of being here because I had a massive row with someone. We're fine now. I nearly died. You're always worried in here, you're worried what's going to happen next. It just causes loads of anxiety.*



## Alex's Story

So, what if nothing changed, what does it mean for Sam?  
*I don't know, but some aspects will get better, some will get worse pretty much any time I try to do anything in my life.*

*So it was more just confirming what I think and just confirming that other people are pretty much delusional when they say, "You just need to reach out." [Support] it's not going to help and they just don't get that, and then they just discharge me and bounce me from one service to another to basically say the exact same thing.*



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**...But what is something did happen, what else could have happened to Alex?**



## Alex's Story *Alternative endings*

### What if Alex ended up getting help?

*Just contacted loads of people, really. [VCSE], a few different charities, information places, and stuff. I rang them, got a bit of information off them. I thought, "Well, this might go somewhere." It was like a bit of light at the end of the tunnel, but still, with the previous experience, I was a little bit wary.*



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### What if Alex made a friend?

*I've made a really good friend in here. I won't say her name, but I've made a really good friend and I'm happy about that. We class each other as sisters, so it always makes me feel good and worth it. It makes it more tolerable in here having a friend in here as well because it can get intolerable sometimes.*

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**Why does this matter?**

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## The big take-aways:

- The experience of homelessness and its surrounding circumstances are often traumatic.
- Early intervention can mitigate experiences of trauma and reduce the burden experienced consequently.
- Meaningful relationships and contact with services makes a big difference.
- There are different ways stories can end.

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# Thank you for listening!

## Funding acknowledgement:

Emma Adams, (NIHR Doctoral Research Fellow, NU-010978) is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) for this research project.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR, NHS or the UK Department of Health and Social Care.

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