

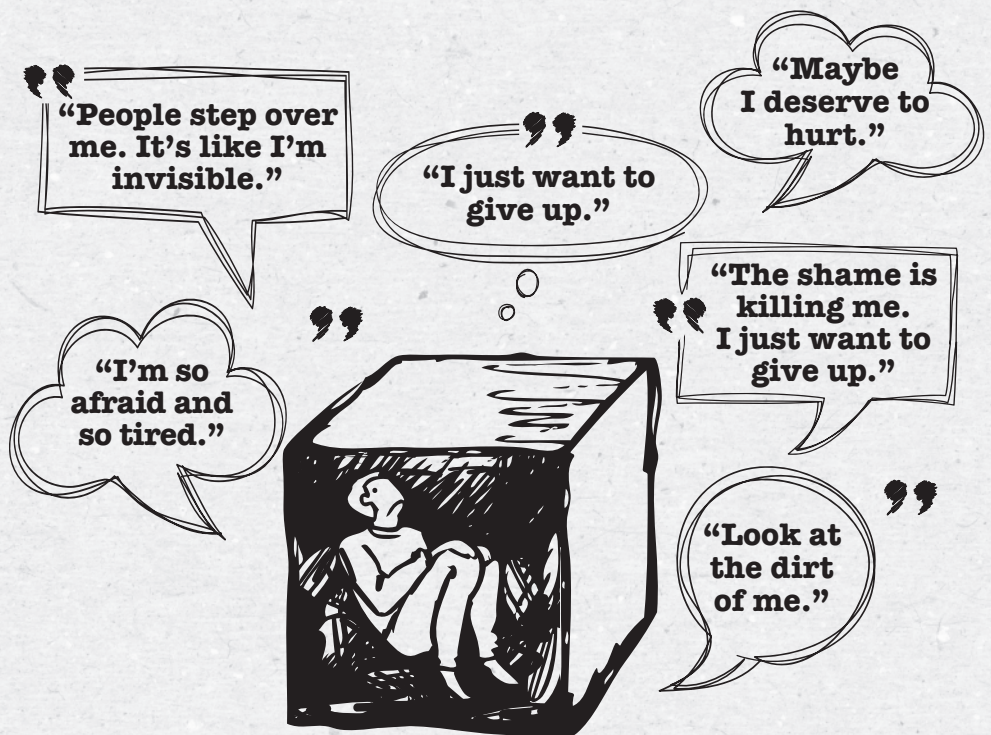
Ending the Silence & Stigma:

Part 2 – Ireland's 'Boxes of Despair'

For five years, frontline responders at MQI have been documenting the links between homelessness, life trauma, addiction, and mental illness: not only can one lead to the other, but often they compound each other as well. And it's leaving fragile people boxed in by despair...

Zoe Dillon's eyes are bright with passion and intelligence as she describes her work as a mental health nurse at the frontlines of Ireland's homelessness and drugs crisis. "I don't think there's been one day when we haven't seen someone here who is feeling suicidal, or who might have self-harmed. And it's not just in Ireland, it's worldwide."

She continues. "Because of the area that we're working in at Merchants Quay, to be able to better help people, we wanted to find out, which things come first? Is it life traumas – such as domestic violence, or childhood abuse, or poverty, or loss – that contribute to homelessness? Then does that lead to addiction? Homelessness itself, we know – losing your home – is in essence a traumatic experience. What we're finding is that all of these elements, the life traumas they've faced, poor mental health, homelessness, and addiction, there's a huge link between them all. Each impacts the other." Zoe's voice saddens as she adds, "I've spoken to people who've said that if they didn't have MQI they wouldn't have anything to live for."



Cruel walls of the housing crisis

While many in Ireland say they are tired of hearing about the prolonged housing crisis on our shores, it continues to build cruel, unseen walls for people left behind. If you are homeless for even 90 days, research shows it will significantly harm your mental health. Studies in Australia, the US, and the UK support this, indicating 35 to 67 percent of homeless people develop mental health struggles after they become homeless.¹ But

without people like Zoe and places like MQI, help can feel out of reach. "Until I came here I didn't realise that unless you have an address, it's very difficult to access community mental health teams," she says. "To be so vulnerable and then to be told, 'Oh, because you have no home it will be even harder to see a community mental health team,' it is shocking. And that despair can drive people to drug and alcohol misuse then. If it's lashing rain and you're sleeping on a footpath and you haven't slept for a week, and someone

Ireland's 'Boxes of Despair', *continued*

gives you a tablet and says, 'This will help you sleep,' You mightn't have done any of that in your life, but a lot of people will take that tablet. Our men and women are hugely open to being targeted by people."

The added barriers of trauma and addiction

Combine homelessness and fragile mental health with addiction and past life trauma, and those four walls of Ireland's 'boxes of despair' are leaving people trapped. Zoe gives an example. "It's easy to turn your face and say they chose the drugs, but look at the child who was sexually abused. Who'd say to me, 'I didn't want that done to me, Zoe. I didn't want to be raped.' And who'd come to our homeless centre as a grown man carrying that shame and guilt over what happened – whose family didn't know how to deal with sex abuse and so he was given anxiety medication to help him sleep at the age of 8, frozen in time from that moment on. Could you honestly go back and tell that child it's his fault he'll be taking drugs one day?"



“I don't think there's been one day when we haven't seen someone here who is feeling suicidal, or who might have self-harmed. And it's not just in Ireland, it's worldwide. Homelessness – losing your home – is in essence a traumatic experience. But our work is showing there's much more to it than that.”

— Zoe Dillon, MQI mental health nurse

Where do we go from here?

With all the walls seeming to box vulnerable people in to homelessness and addiction, Zoe Dillon explains how at MQI and other places, frontline responders are starting where it matters most, with out-of-office hours access to a mental health team and a strategy called *trauma informed care*. "It's about seeing each person as an individual, and recognising that they are traumatised – by being there as a support for them continuously we can start to reshape their coping strategies. We'll be presenting our research at the Fifth Horatio Festival for

Psychiatric Nurses from 9th to 12th May in Copenhagen, and I'm working right now on the bare bones of an anxiety management programme we hope to roll out for clients as a group project. Whether it takes a week or a year, we'll put to use any bit of knowledge to help our clients break down the walls and move on with their lives." ■

Sources:

"Are the homeless mentally ill?," Guy Johnson and Chris Chamberlain, RMIT Victoria, https://www.aspc.unsw.edu.au/sites/www.aspc.unsw.edu.au/files/uploads/aspc_historical_conferences/2009/paper375.pdf.

"The surprising link between mental illness and homelessness," SBS Australia, <https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/health/article/2017/06/27/surprising-link-between-mental-illness-and-homelessness>

"Specialist Mental Health Services for Homeless People," The College of Psychiatry of Ireland, <https://www.irishpsychiatry.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Position-Paper-of-College-of-Psychiatry-of-Ireland-on-the-Specialist-Mental-Health-Services-for-Homeless-Peopl.pdf>.



Learn more about trauma informed care and meet the MQI mental health team:

At the next private tour on 8th May, when Riverbank homeless centre is closed and quiet, MQI's mental health team will be on hand to answer your questions, chat about the work they're doing, and show how it's making a tangible difference in helping people to move on from homelessness and addiction. Please ring Emma on **01 524 0965** if you'd like attend.

"Ending the Silence and Stigma" is a special four-part series for MQI's supporter newsletter, *Quay Times*.

For earlier issues or extra copies, ring **Emma on 01 524 0965** or email to supportercare@mqi.ie.