

How can stable housing contribute to improved mental health and well-being?

Imagine it's your best friend's birthday and he's having a huge party at the coolest indoor trampoline park. All your friends are there. Kids are running everywhere, playing dodgeball, climbing through mazes of mesh tubes and ropes, and bouncing across the giant indoor playground. Fun, right? Well, to 6-year old me, it was just chaos. I was the kid that held tight onto my mom's leg and didn't dare stray into the unknown of foam pits and other kids bouncing past. My brain was in overdrive and it didn't feel predictable or safe. How could I focus on having fun with everything I was trying to process in my mind? It was just a birthday party though and I got to go home afterwards. Home. A safe place with all of my things that gave me a sense of calm and security and well-being. I'm not that little kid anymore and I no longer find trampoline parks intimidating but if I never had that ability to escape a stressful situation to a stable, predictable environment, I know that my mental health would have been greatly impacted. Everyone needs a safe place that they can call home to allow their bodies and brains to reset.

The Canadian Mental Health Association specifically states that, "housing is a basic human right and requirement for good health". This basic human right, something that many people often take for granted, is not about possessions or material things. Having adequate, affordable housing leads to increased personal safety, stability, routine, better sleep and diet, and reduced stress and anxiety. It's an investment in health and illness prevention because when people are able to devote more income and attention to care for themselves, the result is

fewer health problems. All of these things contribute to improved mental health and well-being, all from the opportunity of this basic human right.

Recently, watching Survivor with my family, a Wednesday night ritual in our house, one of the contestants made a comment that stuck with me, “there’s no fear like the fear of the unknown”. As I had been thinking about this essay and how stable housing contributes to improved mental health and well-being, this statement rang very true. Here was a group of people, trying to function and be successful in an environment in which they had been stripped of shelter, food, loved ones, and routine. Emotional breakdowns are very common on the show and yet this was just a game show and living without these basic needs was only temporary. What happens when people are stuck in a situation in which they need to survive in instability day after day with no end in sight? The emotional toll is huge. They don’t have the relief of going home or knowing that in just another week, things will be different. With stable housing unavailable and unattainable to so many people, they are living in a constant state of fear and unknown and this most definitely has a negative impact on a person’s mental health and well-being.

When housing is secure and affordable, people can better manage their money and plan for the future. Constantly worrying about rent or the risk of eviction creates financial stress. Chronic stress is one of the leading causes of anxiety, which can also lead to depression and physical health issues. Stable housing reduces this uncertainty allowing individuals to focus on other aspects of their lives, such as education, work, and personal growth. Knowing that your housing situation is under control can bring a huge sense of relief. A tiny home development initiative in New Brunswick shows firsthand the positive impacts of giving people an opportunity

to have safe, affordable housing. This little community gave people a fresh start and a sense of purpose. People that believed they would not still be alive without it. It gave them a safe place to call their own, which not only allowed them to gain money and skills but it restored their confidence and self-esteem. Having the mental energy to pursue goals, become entrepreneurs, and work towards better opportunities was all possible when stable housing allowed them to think beyond just survival. “The homes are tiny, but the hope each offers is huge”.

It’s also important to recognize the stigma and judgement that people face when struggling with homelessness or housing insecurity. Feeling looked down on or excluded is very damaging to a person’s sense of worth and can make mental health struggles even worse. In addition to this, unhoused people often face more barriers to receiving care. They are looked at as less than, dirty, criminal, and not worthy. Every person deserves safety, respect, and opportunity. Stable housing helps restore dignity and provides a sense of belonging and normalcy. It allows individuals to feel respected and valued, which is a key part of maintaining good mental health.

More and more Canadians are struggling to find homes that they can afford. The Canadian Government needs to provide more support to make this a possibility. They are taking steps in the right direction having launched a new federal agency called Build Canada Homes. The goal is to build affordable homes at scale. 1 billion dollars is set to go towards supportive housing for the homeless or those at risk of homelessness. Additionally, a recent partnership with the University Health Network (UHN) was announced to build studio units for at-risk seniors, in which all residents will have access to health and social services on-site. “Stable

housing is a cornerstone of good health”. This initiative “integrates supports that address key social determinants of health, including housing stability, food security and access to care”.

I’ve lived in Oakville in the same house my whole life. I have a space to call my own, where I can unwind, focus on school, and be truly at ease. I know how lucky this makes me. I also know that not everyone has the stability or comfort that I’ve always had. My home is much more than just a building. It has given me the confidence and security to be who I am and pursue my goals. This is a basic human right that millions of people do not have. Stable housing isn't a luxury or a privilege, it's the foundation for mental health, dignity, opportunity, and hope. Every person deserves that safe place, that calm and security, that sense of belonging.

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