MENTAL HEALTH & HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness impacts mental health in a variety of ways. Obstacles such as being unhoused, food insecurity, health uncertainty, family instability and other factors are all sources of stress for people experiencing homelessness. 30-40 million Americans were at risk for eviction or foreclosure prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this stress. Being mindful about your interactions with people experiencing homelessness can reduce the stigma and help folks feel more supported.

Read on to learn more about the mental health impact of homelessness and tips on what you can do to lessen the stigma.

THE MENTAL HEALTH COALITION

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*Materials prepared by MHC's research team and reviewed by experts in the field for accuracy

WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

Homelessless is when someone doesn't have stable and liveable housing. Homelessness can look different depending on a person's situation. For example, **street homelessness** refers to someone living on the street, outdoors, or in unsafe conditions. The experience of living in a shelter or couch surfing looks different from **street homelessness**, but this is also considered homelessnesss because it involves not having a stable living environment.
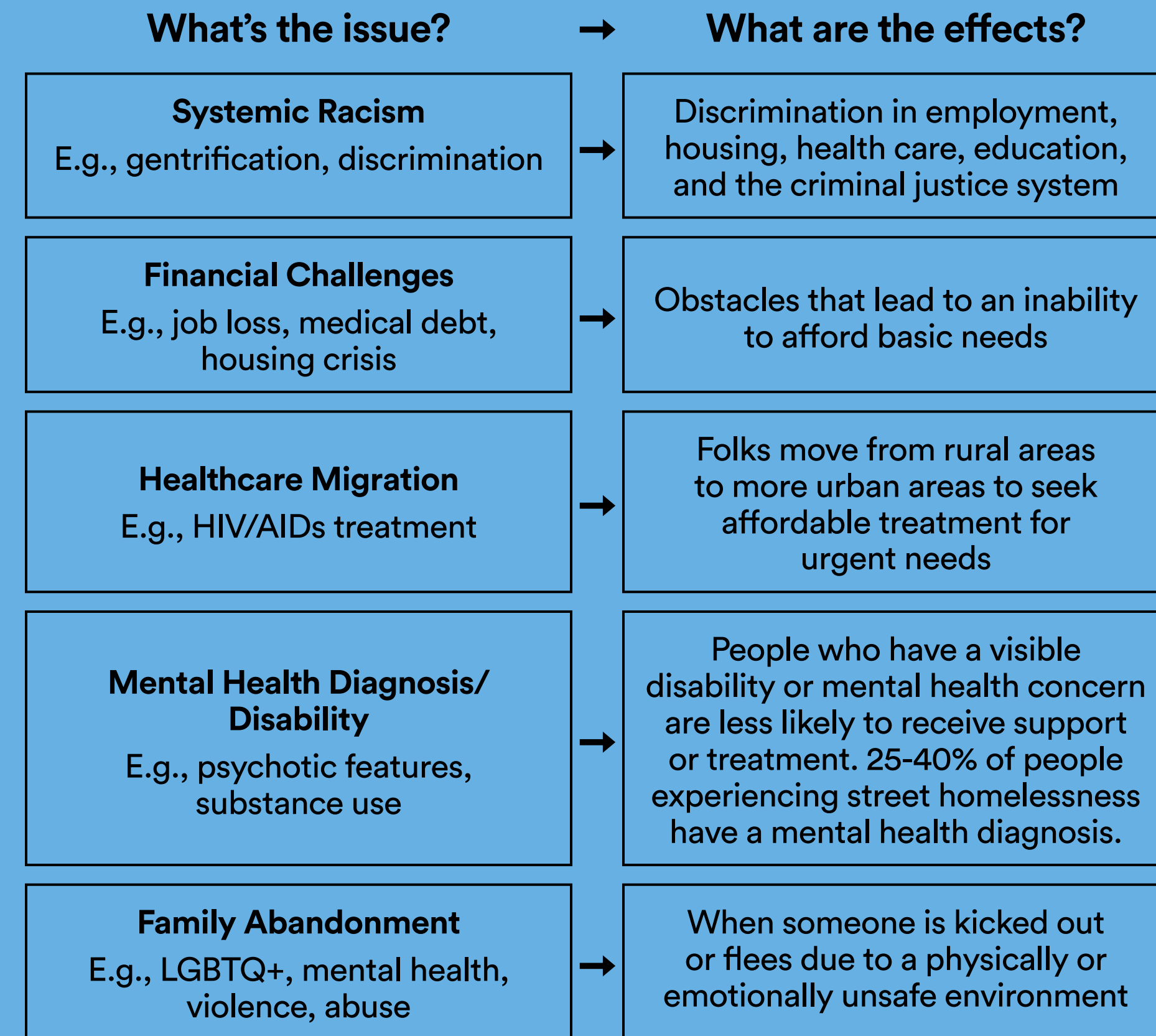
WHAT LANGUAGE SHOULD WE USE WHEN TALKING ABOUT HOMELESSNESS?

Living with homelessness is usually a phase in life, not a permanent state of being, and because of this it is important that we talk about homelessness as a temporary state not a permanent diagnosis. We can do this by using **person-centered language** such as "someone experiencing homelessness" or "person who is currently unhoused".

More information from: Mental Health America (a)

MENTAL HEALTH & HOMELESSNESS

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO HOMELESSNESS?

One of the biggest issues surrounding homelessness is that society largely assumes it is the fault of those experiencing homelessness, rather than the several **systemic factors** that lead to it.

What's the issue? →	What are the effects?
Systemic Racism E.g., gentrification, discrimination	Discrimination in employment, housing, health care, education, and the criminal justice system
Financial Challenges E.g., job loss, medical debt, housing crisis	Obstacles that lead to an inability to afford basic needs
Healthcare Migration E.g., HIV/AIDs treatment	Folks move from rural areas to more urban areas to seek affordable treatment for urgent needs
Mental Health Diagnosis/ Disability E.g., psychotic features, substance use	People who have a visible disability or mental health concern are less likely to receive support or treatment. 25-40% of people experiencing street homelessness have a mental health diagnosis.
Family Abandonment E.g., LGBTQ+, mental health, violence, abuse	When someone is kicked out or flees due to a physically or emotionally unsafe environment

More information from: Brain and Behavior, Silence the Shame, NAMI, Trevor Project

HOW DOES STIGMA AROUND HOMELESSNESS IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH?

1 Prevalent stigma around homelessness and those experiencing homelessness

2 Dehumanization of those experiencing homelessness (i.e. avoiding eye contact, name calling, assigning blame)

3 Lack of connection and support, loneliness, hopelessness

4 "Homelessness" incorporated into people's identity, rather than a temporary crisis, in order to relate to one another and experience community

MENTAL HEALTH & HOMELESSNESS

HOW CAN WE HELP HUMANIZE THE EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS?

Acts of kindness	Some folks feel self-conscious about giving food or items out of fear of being a burden or not being helpful, but even **small acts of kindness**, like a smile, can help people feel less isolated.
Speak respectfully	**Speak respectfully.** If you can't help, explain kindly that you can't at the moment or that you want to help but are running late, etc. Offering some context and kindness goes a long way.
Check your expectation	An important rule of thumb: don't expect a certain reaction when you're offering support — folks don't owe you **enthusiasm or gratitude.**
Advocate + organize	**Advocate** for issues when you see them, and organize with others in your community.
Meet people where they are	Try to see things from **their perspective** & meet them **where they are.** If you don't feel comfortable giving cash, consider giving bottles of water, food, or hygienic products (e.g., toothpaste, deodorant, etc.). Ask what could be most helpful. Blankets — Hygiene & Menstrual Products Socks & Shoes — Medicine Food & Water — Having someone to talk to — Physical assistance

RESOURCES

For Those Experiencing Homelessness

Places to Donate

Places to Go
    Public Libraries
    Emergency Shelters or Drop-In Centers
    Affordable Medical/Psychiatric Support
    Fountain House (NY)
    Find Your Local Food Bank Here (Feeding America)

Numbers to Call
    Essential Community Services: 211
    Crisis Intervention Emergency Hotline: 1-888-358-2384

Feeding America

Fountain House

HELP USA

National Alliance to End Homelessness