

COTS: Integral Response Helps Break the Cycle of Homelessness

“This place explodes people’s consciousness... people who may have been beaten as children, numbed by decades of using, brought up with racist values – when they leave here, they are leaders, people who have discovered that giving back is truly where it’s at... Here something happens that turns me inside out – I can’t wait to get to here every day because I can’t wait to hear the next story.” - COTS staff person

Adverse experiences in childhood can derail healthy development and cause persistent problems in later life. The “troubled youth” who becomes a delinquent or a criminal is almost a cliché now in literature, movies, and newspaper stories. But to what degree do childhood difficulties really determine adult behavior? And more importantly, how can the influence of negative early experiences be mitigated, years after the fact?

The Committee on the Shelterless (COTS) in Petaluma, CA is an Integrally-informed agency that uses current research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and resiliency to design programs for homeless people. ACEs, subsequent substance abuse, and other health risk behaviors can hinder a person’s ability to resolve one stage of development and move onto the next.

Integral theory helps identify the impact of trauma on individual development, as well as unique strengths across developmental lines, and informs COTS’ intentional work with the organizational culture and systems to help people resolve developmental obstacles and move forward in their lives. COTS’ leadership sets the example, drawing like-minded employees, and the culture has grown around the leader. COTS believes that their documented success in breaking the cycle of homelessness is due largely to this Integrally-informed approach.

Integral theory also guides use of a substantial body of research, including a large-scale study on the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and adult health and well-being conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente. The ACE Study demonstrates a compelling relationship between childhood trauma and adult risk behaviors. Other research also implicates ACEs as a root cause of serious social problems such as homelessness and criminal behavior. Integral theory is utilized to design and implement a comprehensive array of programs which address ACEs as core injuries that often lead to homelessness.

While staff describe ACEs as fundamental to everything going on in the lives of homeless people, Integral theory is considered key to the response strategy. This framework supports staff in simultaneously viewing the whole person within the collective context, guiding assessment, programming, ACE-informed culture, and ongoing service.

Is it possible for a minimally funded homeless services program to help people with such deep-seated problems? Integral theory supports integration of the ACE research with research on resiliency, which explains why some people bounce back from adversity, trauma and tragedy. This research indicates that a person's resiliency is fostered and strengthened when she or he is given:

- a personal connection with someone who believes in him/her
- a sense that others have high expectations of him/her
- opportunities to make choices

COTS responds to ACEs and supports resiliency through Integrally designed programs geared to break the cycle of homelessness. ACEs are not accepted as an excuse to justify anti-social behavior or poor life outcomes, but rather are explicitly recognized in a way that helps clients understand their suffering and chronic bad experiences. Resiliency support helps clients to successfully rebuild their lives.

COTS leadership and many program directors operate from an Integral awareness, and staff have been provided Integral theory education. Staff describe COTS as very much an Integral program at all times, stating that otherwise, the programs would be piecemeal and the approach would not be as comprehensive. "You've got to have the whole philosophical and intellectual theoretical framework – otherwise, your programmatic components will not address the whole person."

Personal development is part of the culture at COTS -- those embodying COTS best are aware of being on their own growth track. COTS' leadership is setting the example for a compassionate culture characterized by love, integrity, and respect. The culture created at COTS extends into the community, and people often think of COTS when they want to provide service, creating a strong volunteer base within the community. COTS staff and participants provide service within the community, and community volunteers are integral to COTS programming.

Each COTS program addresses the effects of specific ACEs on adult clients, and builds on clients' desires to avoid creating a new cycle of ACEs for their children. Kids First, support groups, case management, anger management, and the Four Agreements Seminars are all examples of COTS programs that have been impacted by ACE research.

At this writing, family homelessness is increasing, with the dismaying result that more children will be at risk for adverse childhood experiences and their negative later life outcomes, contributing to the vicious cycle of homelessness that COTS is committed to breaking. COTS' high-impact, demonstrably successful Integral approach is implemented in a cost-effective manner through community involvement, relationship-building and advocacy, and a strong volunteer network. This approach is worthy of replication in other communities and other organizations and institutions that engage with populations impacted by ACEs, such as prison inmates.