

Rosie Mishaiel:

Take a moment to think about your home. Now your building, your street, and finally your community. Where you live, from your home to the surrounding neighbourhood, are all important factors that impact your health and well-being in many ways. The condition and quality of these spaces play a critical role in levels of stress, physical activity, exposure to allergens and chemicals, and risk of injury. Housing unaffordability is a significant public health concern, and it's worsening in Toronto. Research, as well as people's personal experiences, show that unaffordable housing and housing that is poor quality, unstable, or located in neighbourhoods with higher incidents of crime or a lack of amenities like grocery stores, parks and transit is linked with poor physical and mental health, and impacts our health care system.

Rosie Mishaiel:

My name is Rosie Mishaiel and this is Housing and Health: Unlocking Opportunities, a podcast produced by Toronto Public Health about housing in Toronto and how it impacts the health and well-being of the people who live here.

Rosie Mishaiel:

A warning to listeners. There are sensitive subjects raised in this show, including struggles with thoughts of suicide. You'll also hear detailed descriptions of poor living conditions. If you need support, please contact the Toronto Distress Centre at (416) 408-4357.

Rosie Mishaiel:

In this episode we meet Ashley, a young single mother of a toddler who has been living in subsidized housing in Toronto for a year and a half. Ashley has had difficulty finding a stable place to live on her limited income. Though she is now living in subsidized housing, the unsafe conditions in the building and the neighbourhood have affected Ashley's health, as well as her son's. Ashley has anxiety and mental health issues that prevent her from working. She receives income from the Ontario Disability Support Program. Before moving into subsidized housing, Ashley lived with her mother and grandparents, but left because her grandparents were abusive.

Since leaving her mother's house, Ashley has moved around a lot, at least 16 times in the past five years, mostly staying with friends.

Ashley:

I used to live at my mom's house, but it was with my grandparents and they were really abusive, and the place was like a shack, pretty well... It was really bad living conditions. I was really depressed and I tried to kill myself. I didn't want to live there. I didn't want anything to do with it. I just wanted to die whenever I was there.

Rosie Mishaiel:

When she was pregnant, a housing worker helped her get on a special priority waitlist for subsidized housing, but the conditions in subsidized housing are poor. Ashley has faced a number of problems like disrepair, black mould, and pest infestations in her unit. She has continually reported these issues to the landlord to no avail. According to Ashley, the landlord, who she refers to as "the management," either doesn't take her seriously or is slow in responding. When she first moved into the building, Ashley says she didn't have a fridge for over a week. Her stove was not working for an extended period of time and would sometimes even catch fire. Things still somehow managed to get worse.

Ashley:

When I told the management, they're like, "Oh, well that's how it's supposed to be," and I'm like, "I don't think so," and it took them... And then so underneath the sink was completely exposed and then cockroaches started coming in, and I was like, "Hey, can you do something? There's cockroaches everywhere, and I don't leave food around. They're just all over." They're like, "No, it's normal." I'm like, "No, it's not. You have to do something about the cockroaches." And so they were like, "Okay, we'll put gel." And so they put gel on the walls, and that didn't do anything. I told them and they were like, "No, you have to wait for them to die," and I'm like, "Oh my God."

Rosie Mishaiel:

Ashley says something as simple as doing laundry in her building can be hazardous.

Ashley:

You can't even do laundry in the building because nothing works. The dryers don't work. And then the one time I did do the laundry here, I got infested with bed bugs. I had to completely get them to fumigate... And they didn't fumigate for like three weeks, and I don't know why. They kept calling the guy to come in and do it, and they were pushing it off and then they didn't even tell me that you had to bag everything and push everything away from the walls. And so when the guy finally came, he couldn't do it. And then he did it and then so we put everything back, we washed everything. And they didn't tell us he was coming again to do a second treatment so we had to wait again.

Rosie Mishael:

She was especially careful in washing her son's toys, afraid that he might ingest some of the chemicals. Ashley said that she spent a lot of money replacing mattresses and box springs, buying new bed bug covers, cleansing spray and powder, as well as cleaning their clothes and the couch. This was tough on a low income.

Rosie Mishael:

There's plenty of evidence that being exposed to certain biological, chemical, and physical substances in the home is bad for your health. That includes things like pests, mould, and harsh cleaners. Also, allergens in the home, specifically dust mites, dampness, and mould have been strongly linked with the development of asthma.

Rosie Mishael:

Housing quality is particularly important for families with children. Children are at greater health risk than adults for a number of reasons, mainly because they are still growing and developing and also because of the ways that they interact with their

environment. Young children play on the floor and touch everything. They'll also put anything in their mouths.

Rosie Mishael:

In addition to the physical impacts, poor housing quality has been linked with emotional and behavioural problems in children and youth. A study of children and adolescents from low-income urban neighbourhoods in the US found that children exposed to poor quality housing experience greater emotional and behavioural problems than children in higher quality homes. In other words, children that live, for example, in homes with leaking roofs, broken windows, non-functioning heaters or stoves, peeling paint or exposed wiring experienced greater emotional and behavioural problems than children in higher quality homes. The study found that when children's housing problems increased over time, their emotional behavioural problems also increased.

Rosie Mishael:

Housing conditions affect parents too. The study also found that low quality housing causes stress in parents, increases their mental health problems and limits their ability to regulate family activities. Other research has shown that the opposite is also true. When families are given support to move to housing with improved conditions, it can significantly boost health by reducing stress, exposure to allergens and chemicals, and improve their overall quality of life.

Rosie Mishael:

It's clear that investing in housing has a direct impact on the health of tenants, but it doesn't stop at housing conditions. The quality of the neighbourhood has an impact on health too. When the cost of housing is high, the choice of neighbourhoods becomes limited. People end up living in areas that are unsafe and have less access to green space, transportation, grocery stores, schools and employment, all of which enable a healthy life. Ashley describes where she lives as a bad neighbourhood and has concerns for the safety of both herself and her son.

Ashley:

The people I can deal with, but when they're leaving literally crack pipes and needles all over the floor, you can contract HIV and stuff. A kid doesn't know not to pick it up, especially one that can't talk or walk, doesn't understand really. So that's really big. I don't take him to the park. There's a park behind my building but there's this guy, he's known for coming around in a robe and just flashing the kids, and so I don't like being in this area with my son.

Rosie Mishaiel:

She also avoids going out with her son, often going grocery shopping while he is at daycare. She also travels long distances to play in parks and safer areas. Ashley's experience reveals how unsafe neighbourhoods can influence health and well-being. Some neighbourhoods are considered unsafe because they expose people to hazardous materials: things like needles, broken glass and environmental pollutants. Other neighbourhoods are considered unsafe because of high crime rates. Living in fear of bodily harm and injuries can increase stress, limit trips outside of the home and prevent social interaction. It also stops people from doing things that are essential to good health, like walking, cycling, playing in parks and accessing services.

Ashley:

It stresses me out. And a lot of the people in this area, they drink all day and they're known for doing drugs, and they harass me every time I go out, especially when I'm with my son and that gives me anxiety. I have bad anxiety and they won't stop bothering me. He can walk perfectly fine by himself, but I don't want him walking in this area, there's always people fighting outside, there's been shootings in the area and it's just... Great, great place for a kid to grow up.

Rosie Mishaiel:

Addressing neighbourhood characteristics, either by developing mixed-income neighbourhoods or by investing in revitalizations, can significantly improve mental health. For example, in 2012 the Toronto Social Housing and Health Study

interviewed residents of Regent Park before and after a revitalization effort. The researchers found that residents felt better about their home, their neighbourhood, and their community a year after the revitalization. They also reported feeling less overall distress.

Rosie Mishaiel:

Ashley says if she could, she would like to move to a nicer neighbourhood, but the cost of housing and lack of choice in subsidized housing prevent her from moving. She feels that living in a safer neighbourhood would have a positive impact on her mental health and well-being. Ashley's experience is not unique in Toronto. As a young single mother, Ashley is trying to create a safe and healthy environment for her child to grow and develop. While Ashley struggles with poor housing conditions and an unresponsive landlord, she has benefited from the support of friends, housing workers and public health nurses in raising her son. Alice Gorman, former manager in the Child Health and Development Directorate at Toronto Public Health says that good quality housing and safe neighbourhoods are paramount to healthy childhood development.

Alice Gorman:

Having stable housing as a given, adequate in size, affordable for people, safe, well-maintained communities where the families that we service could actually see their children grow, thrive in a neighbourhood. Children really do need that in order to be able to move forward.

Rosie Mishaiel:

Ashley and her support network will continue to pursue improvements to the condition of her unit. A crucial step in creating a healthy environment for her and her son.

Rosie Mishaiel:

Next time on the show, you'll meet Renel and Quill. Renel is a young Métis Black Canadian who has experienced discrimination from his landlord. Quill is a

transgender man forced into housing instability because of harassment and discrimination.

Quill:

There was no single rooms, no safety for transgender people. I can recall when... Actually, one of those first days I was there, I was sitting down eating breakfast and I ended up getting sick because of it, because it was bad food. And one of the kids that walked up to me and said, "Are you a boy or are you a girl?" And then progressively continued to call me a he-she.

Rosie Mishaiel:

My name is Rosie Mishaiel. This has been Toronto Public Health's podcast, Housing and Health: Unlocking Opportunity, written by Toronto Public Health and produced and edited by Media Face. We thank all who contributed to this episode by sharing their stories. We also acknowledge the Dish With One Spoon wampum belt covenant, as well as the indigenous peoples on whose land these stories took place. The Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Huron-Wendat.