

Working with homeless women



When we conducted a qualitative study with homeless women, we found that the relationship with their coach or worker is key to the experience they have in their recovery.

We spoke with women who have experienced homelessness and the frontline staff that work with them to learn what makes an effective working relationship. These best practices are designed to act as a quick reminder of what women need and want.

20 best practices

- Down-to-earth, friendly approach – “I can just be myself”
- Give women choice – “this might be the first time they’ve had the opportunity so we give them choice wherever we can – even where they choose to sit”
- **Be compassionate – listen and show that you care about what you hear**
- Go the extra mile – make sure there’s always someone available for them to contact; be there for women (e.g., go to appointments with them)



- Set healthy boundaries – be clear about what you will and won’t do and stick to it
- **Keep in touch – have regular communication with the women**
- Show no judgement – “Demonstrate that we can understand them; we do not judge them; it’s OK”
- Be creative – engage in activities such as making a diary of their journey. “Create what they want to create; Make it practical – quotes, reminders, budgeting plans, goals, dreams”



- Share professional experiences (anonymous, limited detail) to demonstrate you understand but being clear each woman’s experiences are individual to them
- **Active listening and empathy – show that you are listening and respond constructively**
- Start small – achieve little things to begin with to show progress and create a positive working relationship
- Look for what is unsaid – ability to look beyond the presenting issue to ascertain if there are additional risks or concerns.



- **Go at her pace – help her set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound (SMART) goals that work for her and walk alongside her in a supporting role**
- Open up possibilities – focus on the current needs of the woman whilst opening up the option of other possibilities and future goals and dreams
- Praise – show your appreciation of their progress and help women find healthy ways to reward themselves (e.g., a cup of tea)



- **Safety first – for women experiencing violence or involved in sex work, put a safety plan together**
- Ask questions to challenge current behaviours – help women to see their situation differently with open questions that help them to reflect (eg, how did that make you feel?)
- Trauma-informed approach – understand that past experiences influence present behaviours; be aware of possible triggers



- **Take a person-centred approach – get to know her and her needs and work in a way that supports her best; empower her to take action herself**
- Support women to rebuild relationships – help women to learn to communicate and set healthy boundaries in their relationships.



10 things to avoid

- ✗ Minimising / normalising
- ✗ Victim-blaming/shaming
- ✗ Telling them you know how it feels when you don't
- ✗ Forcing women to make decisions
- ✗ Telling women what to do
- ✗ Patronising
- ✗ Dismissing
- ✗ Rushing
- ✗ Undervaluing rapport
- ✗ Pushing solutions when the woman is not ready

What women say about our support

"[My worker] is down to earth and lovely.... [my worker] will listen to your experiences and give advice. Without textbook. Yeah. But if something causes her alarm. Obviously she has to report it. But she's very good."

"They've all been supportive, helped me, like when I was going through my hip operation, my worker used to come to the hospital, and she picked me up from the hospital. She didn't have to do that."

"More a normal person. Not bigger than you. She's more open. She talks to you, like you want to be talked to... If I need anything, if I need to talk, she said she's always there and always answer her phone."

"I was really lucky that [my worker] came along. She saved me she saved me.... and she rung me, I met her on the Wednesday and I was in [temporary accommodation] the next night or something. And within a month I was in my house."

"If it wasn't for them. I don't know where I'll be."

"My keyworker, I won't moan about him, cos he's nice. I can ring him up and he'll be there. I can text him he texts me back. I've got a good keyworker he - that's how it should be."

Final tip

When designing new services and initiatives, involve women in the process from idea generation, to creative design to organisation. This enriches the services and helps make sure we provide services that matter most to the women we support.