



Tips for practitioners: supporting clients experiencing homelessness and domestic abuse

It can be difficult to identify and support people who are experiencing domestic abuse and chronic homelessness. Here are a few tips gathered from our Spotlight on homelessness and domestic abuse, and informed by learning from our wider [Spotlights series](#) on 'hidden' groups of victims and survivors:

- 1. Consider multiple disadvantage:** Many people experiencing chronic homelessness, whether street homeless, in short-term accommodation or sofa surfing, often have multiple needs and face multiple risks. Domestic abuse may be just one of them and may not be the individual's priority; don't be discouraged, or tempted to close the case and assume that they're not ready to 'engage'. Instead, be understanding, patient and get creative!
- 2. Work with other agencies:** Chronically homeless people experiencing multiple disadvantage can be bombarded by agencies, each with a different priority and agenda. This can cause individuals to close the door to support all together. Instead, work alongside the agencies that may be more closely linked to the individual. Identify a lead agency (which should be based on the client's priorities and wishes) and offer any additional support and advice regarding domestic abuse through that lead if, when and how the client wants to take this up.

3. Work in a trauma-informed way: for many chronically homeless people, the domestic abuse experience that has brought them into contact with your service may not be their first experience of trauma or abuse. This is particularly the case for women, who can experience multiple forms of gender based violence, and for those who identify as **LGBT+**, who may be fleeing homo/bi/trans phobic abuse from family members who may be thrown out of the family home. Underlying experiences of trauma and abuse can affect the way that an individual approaches, and feels best supported by, a service. Domestic abuse services can adopt a trauma-informed approach in some key ways:

- Focus first on building a trusting relationship with your client
- Work collaboratively with your client to devise a support plan that builds on their strengths and prioritises their needs and risks
- Continuously re-evaluate and discuss how your client wishes to approach support at each stage of your professional relationship.

4. Language matters: people experiencing chronic homelessness may not identify with the term 'domestic abuse'. This could be because they assume it can only occur in a domestic setting or they may see abuse as a normalised aspect of their lives. Make language more accessible when explaining the support your service can offer. Perhaps start by describing rather than defining abuse. For example, 'are you frightened or scared of your (ex) partner or family member(s)?' 'Do they physically harm you or threaten to harm you?' 'Do you feel they try to control you?'

5. Don't assume that leaving the relationship is their 'safest' option: people experiencing chronic homelessness are constantly weighing up the known risks within their relationships against the unknown risks beyond – on the street, when they're sofa surfing or when they're in shelters. For instance women are at a high risk of other forms of gender based abuse in each of these circumstances, particularly in mixed hostels. People who identify as **LGBT+** may feel that their current environment is the only one in which their sexuality or gender identity has been (or will be) accepted. Be led by your client. Ask them what they need and where they need to go to feel safe. Work alongside other agencies to achieve this. And remember, many of these victims and survivors of domestic abuse have been living in dangerous and unpredictable situations for many years, we should trust their judgements and instincts.

