



brighter futures

creative support, housing and employment

EMPOWERING - What we mean by support and having control

Support is someone from outside my cycle of stresses, offering me their thinking so that I get back in touch with my ability to do what I need to be able to.

This applies to the way we support one another, whether it is us supporting our customers, colleagues or a manager supporting a member of their team. It is how we help people to be empowered, to have control in their lives and to realise their potential.

In order to understand what this means in practice we need to explore

Feelings and where they come from

Having control and being empowered

Thinking and deciding

Feelings

We all have feelings, physical feelings, artistic feelings and emotional feelings. Feelings are really important, they stimulate us to act. They help us be creative, commit to helping others, speak out against injustice; so much of the world has been changed for the better because many people felt that things were not right or not fair. Many of us do the work we do because we want to help other people. We feel that homelessness is not right or that it is unfair that people with mental health needs have a poor quality of life. These are good feelings and are very important to us.

Physical feelings of pain mean we act quickly to move away from danger; they protect and keep us safe. We are also stimulated to help others in danger, a soldier who risks his own safety to bring an injured colleague back from enemy lines, feelings like courage, duty and justice are very important. Love and happiness bring joy and fulfilment into our lives.

Some feelings are dangerous, and negative, the feeling of being unable to cope, feeling overwhelmed at the loss of someone or something, feeling guilty, worry and anxiety. We have experience of some of these negative feelings, feeling that you must have another drink, cannot cope without taking drugs, anger that leads to violence.

The problem with feelings is that although they are a fundamental part of what makes us human we do not choose to have them. They stimulate us to act but they come from our unconsciousness. Importantly, feelings come from our past. Our past has given each of us a rich history of pleasures and pains. The feelings associated with past events will be reawakened each time we are in a situation that reminds us in some way of the time that we first experienced them. Feelings are stimulated by things that happen now but the actual feeling that is stimulated is one of a memory fixed in our past.

For example going into a classroom, or a room that reminds us of a classroom, will stimulate the feelings we had associated unconsciously with feelings we had during our school days. If school was a positive encouraging and happy experience we will feel those things. If we were bullied, did not do well or were told we were stupid and useless, then those feelings will come back. We will then respond to these feelings. We may feel happy and assured and enjoy a learning experience. Alternatively those feelings of being stupid and frightened may overwhelm us and rather than engage and enjoy the experience we will feel overwhelmed by emotion and unable to engage with what is happening in the here and now. Those feelings may mean we become convinced we will never be able to learn, we withdraw or we become easily distracted and not be able to concentrate. We may tell ourselves “I knew I would never be able to do it”. Actually, we didn't know, we felt. We have not thought and decided because our unconscious feelings determined our actions.

Feelings take over in many other places. For instance, people who have done heroic things will say they do not know why they did something they just did it, they did not think about it. Many people experience falling in love as a pull that they don't understand and know often that the person whom they love is unsuitable. Partners are often like parents or previous and unsatisfactory lovers. This is because love is based on feelings which come from the past.

Having control and being empowered

We have defined our key value of “empowering” as to have control in our lives. We accept that it is very important for us to be in control, to take decisions and make better choices that will give us the outcomes that we want. If we act on our feelings we are acting out things from our past which we cannot change or control, in the present. We are not making better choices. The problem with feelings is that we are not in control of them and if we are not careful they take control of us.

Similarly, however, if we try to ignore our feelings we will become cold and inhuman and prey to them overwhelming us when we least want them. Accordingly, we have to recognise the nature of feelings and the difference between feelings and thinking so that we can integrate both into our lives.

We accept we have feelings and that they are important to us, but they rarely act as a useful guide for action. To achieve control, to be empowered, we need to have and

acknowledge our feelings to be able to express them but before we act we need to think and decide how we will act. Control comes from our conscious decision making.

Someone who has tried to lose weight may recognise the time they found themselves standing at the fridge door eating and wonder quite how that happened? We had not thought about it but we responded to a feeling and the feeling said “eat”. The feeling we responded to may not have been hunger, when we were young we may have been given food to “cheer us up” or were told that “good” children ate their dinner, so we ate. We can be stimulated to eat to satisfy feelings other than hunger. We might be stimulated to eat by sadness or anxiety. We feel, so we do. Not being in control of our actions is very common. How many times have we heard people say “I felt, I did not think I just acted, I could not help myself”? In other words, I had a feeling and I did something, I was not in control.

Think and decide

To be in control we have to do something differently in response to our feelings. We need to know that, in future we will benefit from the ways in which feelings can give us positive qualities like energy, or courage or compassion or patience but we also need to reassure ourselves that we never have to give in to the ways in which they appear to be forcing us to doubt ourselves or act impulsively or lazily. We need to acknowledge and express our feelings, collect information about what is happening, think about what we want to achieve and then make a decision based on thinking about the evidence that is available to us.

If we try to give up smoking the feeling that we want a cigarette and “must” have one, can be all consuming, we cannot stop this feeling but if we think about what we want, to be healthy, to save money and all the other reasons we try to stop, then we make a decision not to have a cigarette. We *think* about this and *decide* to use patches or gum to help control the feeling. In thinking and deciding we take control. If we decide to give up on our birthday, or during the happy summer months, we may be able to harness good feelings and therefore energies, associated with those times to help us to give up.

The motivational interviewing and Covey’s circle of concern and influence, being proactive and resourceful, are tools that help us to help ourselves and each other acknowledge feelings and then think and decide and to use this as the basis for our actions.

Lunchtime stress buster

We may get half way through a busy day and become overwhelmed by feelings of frustration, tiredness or stress. That feeling that “I have not got anything done this morning”, can lead to us becoming frustrated and anxious feeling the customer is an interruption to our job. To overcome this we need to acknowledge the feeling, express it and think and decide.

Stop; find a colleague or someone who can share ten minutes with you. Take five minutes each to tell the other person about the list of things you have done in the morning. Your partner should force you to recount the events of the morning and encourage you to see your various activities as the achievement they were. They should never try to persuade you that things were useful (because to do so would be to argue with your feelings). They should merely ask you questions to enable you to realise that your activities were useful. By listing every detail you will start to see how the hours have passed. By answering the questions you will see the importance of what you did. The thinking of someone from outside your cycle of stress will show you how much you have done and how effective some of that has been.

Just five minutes of thinking rather than feeling, can really motivate you, remind you just how good you are, and give you the energy, to be even more successful in the afternoon.

Some useful questions to ask your partner as s/he tries to see the significance of their time.

- What did you do next? How long did that take? Did you do anything in between those things?
- Why was that important? What would have happened if you hadn't done that? Who benefitted from that? Would anyone else have done that if you hadn't?
- Can you see that you did more than you felt you had done?