



Homeless Couples and Relationships

DILLON MICHELIS, SENIOR CASEWORKER (PREVIOUS COMPLEX COUPLES PROJECT LEAD)

Introduction

- Funded by Tower Hamlets, GLA, City of London (March 2019 – July 2020)
- Why?
- [Couples First? Report](#) – Brighton Women's Centre, Commonweal Housing
- How?
- Homeless Couples and Relationships Toolkit
- Virtual training: Tower Hamlets services
- eLearning

Defining a couple

A couple refers to two people who have each identified as being in a relationship with the other. They may have other partners, there may be unhealthy aspects to their relationships and their relationships may be involve separating and reuniting repeatedly.

The toolkit mainly considers clients/couples with complex needs.

Staff may come across couples where:

- Both partners are rough sleeping.
- One partner is rough sleeping and one partner is in accommodation.
- Both partners are in the same accommodation.
- Both partners are in accommodation but living separately.

Themes

1. Data & Visibility

Best Practice:

1. Principles for Working with Couples
2. Multiple Disadvantage, Couples and Identity
3. Housing
4. Drug & Alcohol Use
5. Domestic Abuse
6. LGBTQ+ Homeless Couples & Relationships.

Q&A

Data & Visibility

- No robust data or reliable monitoring tools (CHAIN and hostel databases)
- August 2018 – August 2019 data collection
- Single Homeless Pathway
- Impact
- Recommendations
- Couples' Pathway
- Additional invisibility of LGBTQ+ homeless couples

Principles for Working with Couples

- Assumptions, unconscious bias, expectations, lack of staff support
- Use a strengths-based approach
- Relationships are a support need
- Experiencing healthy relationships is a human right
- Understanding multiple disadvantage and marginalised identities

What is Multiple Disadvantage?

People facing multiple disadvantage experience a combination of problems including homelessness, problematic substance use, contact with the criminal justice system and mental ill health.

They fall through the gaps between services and systems, making it harder for them to address their problems and lead fulfilling lives.

Homeless couples, particularly rough sleeping couples, benefit from being offered appointments on the same day in order to start their recovery on the same timeline and reduce the risk of disengagement.

Multiple Disadvantage, Couples & Identity

- Identity and experience is at the core of human interaction and relationships. Couples will often find that their experiences of navigating society are similar.
- Sharing experiences of homelessness and other multiple disadvantages with a partner can intensify their bond with each other. This may often lead to a sense of a 'shared' identity which is a common theme when considering cases of couples who have experienced rough sleeping together.
- Supporting each partner to learn who they are with and without partner.
- Marginalised identities, health inequalities, and partnering with identity responsive services.

Assessments

- Couples being supported by the same outreach or accommodation service should be allocated separate key workers as this reduces risks around unconscious bias and conflicts of interest.
- For rough sleeping couples, assessments for each partner should be arranged at the same time, or at least on the same day but separately, in private.
- In accommodation services couples should receive separate and private key work sessions as well as an offer of a monthly joint key work session where each partner and both key workers are present. These sessions should be used to discuss progress as a couple, any tenancy issues and move on options.

Housing

- When both partners have high support needs and wish to live in the same accommodation, two separate rooms in the same service should be offered to them where possible. Couples that are separated are more likely to abandon their placements and return to rough sleeping together.
- If one partner has no recourse to public funds, the other should be referred to a service that has a visitors policy as this reduces the risk of abandonment.
- If both partners needs have lowered, semi-independent move on options can be considered where the couple may be able to share the same flat. Each partner's key worker should meet with their clients separately and in private to clarify if each partner would like to move in with each other.

Talking About Relationships

The right to experiencing healthy relationships is a support need for our clients.

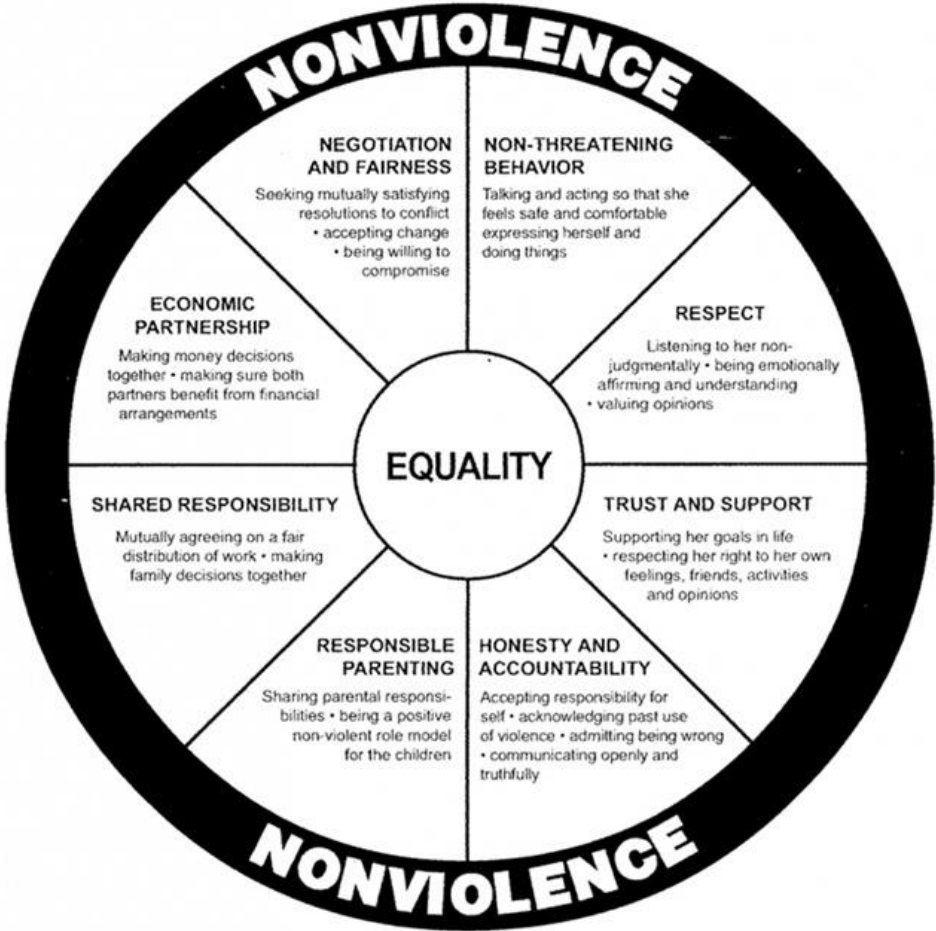
This reflects St Mungo's Recovery Approach where the aim of recovery is to achieve what each client sees as a fulfilling life with purpose and meaning, and for them to be part of mainstream society.

For most people this means having a place to call home, sustaining a sense of wellbeing, enjoying positive relationships, being able to navigate life and being part of a community.

Key Work Sessions

- Whether you are working in outreach or accommodation settings, helping our clients to achieve this can be done by regularly talking about relationships during 1:1, private key work sessions.
- These sessions should not take place with both partners present and a client does not have to be in a relationship for these discussions to take place – they can support our clients to form healthy relationships in the future.
- The aim of these key work sessions are to have an open conversation about relationships rather than coming across as being nosy which risks disengagement.
- [Asking Personal Questions Prompt Sheet](#)

Equality wheel



Drug & Alcohol Use/Co-dependency

- If a couple are both living at the service or if a client has a partner elsewhere and both are co-dependent around drug and alcohol use and wish to access drug and alcohol support, key workers can advocate for them to start their treatment at the same time.
- The first appointment for each partner can be arranged for the same time but in separate appointments at their local or specialist drug and alcohol centre. This increases the chances of the couple stabilizing at the same time and reduces the risk of sabotaging the other partner's recovery.
- If the partner is at a different service, key workers can make contact with the partner's key worker and carry out joint work to support the couple's recovery.

Information Sharing

- Whether the clients are both living in your service or where one partner is living at a different service, regularly hold multi-agency couple case reviews to include key workers associated with both partners: hostel key worker, drug and alcohol worker, mental health worker, physical health practitioners, palliative care workers etc.
- These meetings are intended as a supportive measure where all professionals attending the case review can create a support plan for the couple and share relevant safeguarding information.

Housing and Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse is common across all parts of society, including for people experiencing homelessness.

Domestic abuse is defined as any incident, or pattern of incidents, of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality.

Domestic abuse can be physical or sexual, but often also includes psychological, emotional or economic abuse.

All client-facing workers should receive domestic abuse awareness training.

Staying in a Couple

Housing Arrangements

- Homeless survivors of domestic abuse who wish to stay with the partner/perpetrator are more likely to abandon their place in accommodation if they are separated from them. This is especially the case if they are moved to accommodation with a no visitors policy. If the perpetrator is rough sleeping or in accommodation that is unstaffed, incidents of abuse are less likely to be suspected or witnessed and therefore reported. This also heightens the risk of serious injury and homicide.
- Standing Together Against Domestic Violence recommends that couples where domestic abuse has been suspected or identified should also be offered two separate rooms in separate parts of the same 24/7 staffed, high need accommodation service.

Housing and Domestic Abuse

- Personal Space
- Communication
- Separating

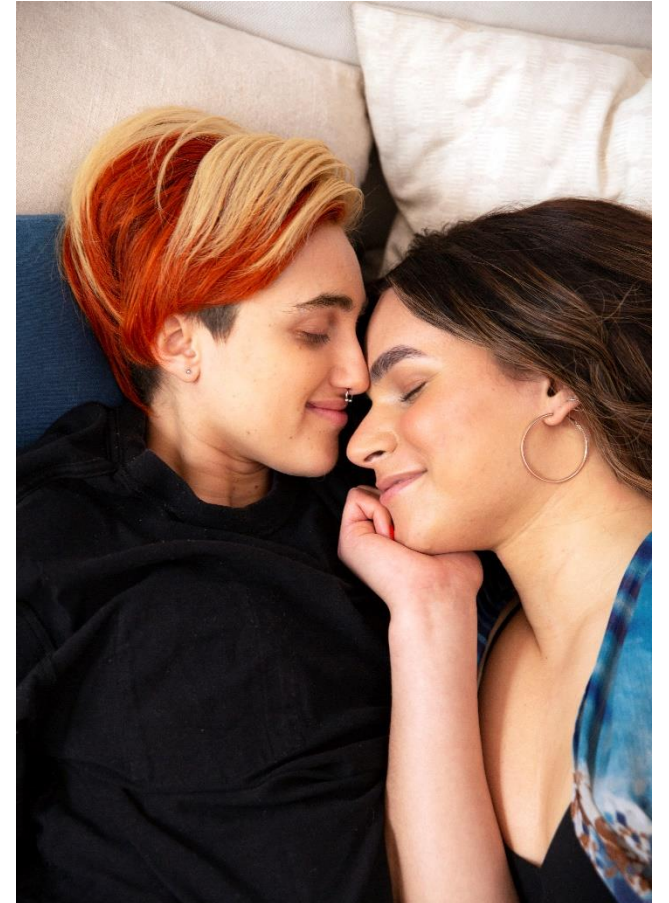
Staying in a Couple

Monitoring

- Any suspicions of domestic abuse or incidents can be recorded and monitored and teams can carry out multi-agency work with statutory and specialist domestic abuse services to support the survivor. This also reduces risks of serious injury and homicide as teams are able to contact emergency services and work closely with the police.
- The survivor may spend most of their time in their partner's room but this arrangement gives the survivor their own space if they wish to access it. The survivor may not want to end the relationship with the perpetrator but this will give the survivor an opportunity to safely disclose any abuse and receive support. You cannot force the survivor to separate from the perpetrator as this runs the risk of disengagement with support.

LGBTQ+ Couples

- Safely Identifying
- Options/ Partnerships
- Support Needs
- Assumptions



Domestic Abuse and LGBTQ+ Identities

- LGBTQ+ people experience and share similar types of domestic abuse as their heterosexual cisgender peers, however LGBTQ+ survivors are by and large invisible in the mainstream support system. There are still significant barriers LGBTQ+ survivors face with regard to accessing refuges and mainstream services.
- The signs of domestic abuse may differ from heterosexual cisgender homeless couples depending on the identities and intersections of identity the survivor has. For example, the perpetrator may control their trans partner's access to hormone replacement therapy.
- The [LGBTQ+ Power and Control Wheel](#) shows some the specific signs of domestic abuse within LGBTQ+ relationships.

What Homeless Couples Need

Rough Sleeping Commissioners

- Create a clear couples pathway
- Award the same local connection
- Understand the risk of separating rough sleeping couples
- Trust outreach teams' assessments of couples
- Reintroduce rolling shelters

Hostel Commissioners

- Commission a range of move on options within the borough that can house and support couples at every level of need
- Regular communication with rough sleeping commissioners about the needs of rough sleeping couples

All commissioners

- Ensure services are psychologically informed
- Ensure services are given the resources needed to effectively support couples
- Partnerships with NHS and specialist services
- Influence statutory services to provide understanding of homeless couples and complex needs

Organisations

- Collect data on relationship status
- Create a couples policy
- Create a domestic abuse policy
- Provide clinical supervision for workers supporting domestic abuse survivors
- Provide domestic abuse awareness training
- Provide LGBTQ+ awareness training
- Provide sexual health awareness training

Client-facing staff

- Risk assess couples in a safe and sensitive way
- Provide a separate key worker for each partner
- Hold regular 'Team around Me' style couple case reviews
- Listen to both clients individually and as a couple
- Use a strengths and rights-based approach
- Provide opportunities to talk about the relationship
- Trained to recognise the signs of domestic abuse
- Trained to support disadvantaged women
- Confident about asking personal questions
- Understand the needs of couples from diverse backgrounds
- Partner with and learn from specialist and identity responsive services

Q&A

For further information and guidance as well, please refer to the [Homeless Couple and Relationships Toolkit](#).