

**Tips for people
working with
vulnerable
women with
complex needs**

Why we have written these notes

Many women who are in touch with the community justice system are living with many additional problems such as addictions, poor mental health, the consequences of abuse and other trauma, and with homelessness. These issues often mean that thinking about good health and wellbeing is very hard to do. Women in these circumstances describe how their life is about getting through the day the best they can and not thinking about the longer term and what things help to maintain good health and wellbeing.

We hope staff will use these notes to support and encourage the women they work with to look after their health and wellbeing. Please share the notes with people and organisations who will find them useful.



“Just getting through the day safely is a challenge. I don’t have time to think about health and wellbeing. It’s just survival for me.”

About the project

This short project was supported by a grant from the Scottish Government from the Section 16B health grants fund. It enabled us to find out from women who have complicated lives and staff in a range of services that support them what the issues are for women around their health and wellbeing and what helps them have access to health care.

We looked at what supports women to have healthier lifestyles, prioritise their health and wellbeing and take part in screening and prevention schemes as well as receiving care and treatment when they need this.

These notes bring together we have learned about developing and encouraging participation with vulnerable women with complex needs and what they do and need to maintain their health and wellbeing in very difficult circumstances.

The notes have been developed through:

- Conversations with vulnerable women with offending backgrounds and complex needs from a range of services.
- Conversations with women who part of peer support networks for mental health issues and other support groups.
- Conversations with people who provide services in the public and voluntary sectors for women with a range of complex needs.

“We all help each other out, because we understand what it’s like. We all just trying to get through the day as best we can and some days are better than others.”

The conversations focused on health and wellbeing and what this meant to women. It means different things to different women and staff but some key elements included:

- Physical and general health.
- Mental health and wellbeing.
- Specific women’s health issues such as pregnancy, reproductive and sexual health.
- Making use of preventative health services such as screening for breast and cervical cancer programmes.
- Encouraging healthier lifestyles - such as safe ways exercise, healthier eating and reducing use of alcohol.
- Managing long term conditions.

“We talk about the benefits to doing things differently - perhaps better ways to handle things and ideas to think about how we deal with say difficult relationships. But we don’t judge and we don’t criticise”

“We don’t tend to talk about healthier lifestyles - it’s too vague and assumes too much choice. The starting point for us is having somewhere safe and secure to live. It has huge benefits for health and mental well-being.”

“As a staff team we try to model good healthy choices in the things we do too.”

Top tips

Tip

1

Put women at the centre of decisions about their wellbeing

Tip

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Encourage peer support

Tip

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Understand how women help each other to attend appointments

Tip

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Encourage women to take one step at a time

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Take small steps

Tip

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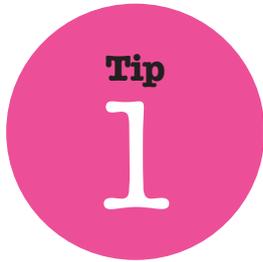
Help women find ways to be active

Tip

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Help women make plans for different situations

Top tips to encourage and support women with their health and wellbeing



Put women at the centre of decisions about their wellbeing

Encouraging and supporting women to be at the centre of decisions and choices about their health and wellbeing should be an integral part of support plans along with addressing other risks and behaviours. For many women this is a first step to expressing views about aspects of their lives and beginning to make changes.

“It was so different. I hadn’t been asked what I wanted before - I wasn’t sure at first but gradually I began to make my own decisions. It felt good and it got easier but some choices are very hard.”

“We do talk about what things help keep us well. I think the outings and plans are good because it give you something to think about before you go and afterwards too.”

“We sometimes talk about what things help with our wellbeing and keeping well, things like showering and looking after teeth and how eating good food can help you feel good.”



Tip

2

Encourage peer support

Women liked being part of a supportive group of women with similar life experiences that focuses on creating a safe positive environment to meet and talk. They told us it had a very positive impact on their health and wellbeing. Women talked about two key benefits of being part of this kind of group.

- Firstly friendship - having other people to share things with and to learn from. This extends to doing social and fun things and helpful everyday things together. Support around each other's health and wellbeing then becomes a part of those friendships.
- The second benefit people described was having something just for them - giving space and time to chat, relax and think about themselves.

“Having a good group of supportive women around me has helped me greatly. I have people to talk to who understand but also to help me when I need it.”

“We talk about everything - there are no closed subjects. We talk about how to keep well and to look after each other.”

“Everyone needs help with something and we all help each other out as and when we need it.”

“We all have ups and downs and can help each other.”



Tip

3

Understand how women help each other to attend appointments

Many vulnerable women have competing and complex issues and chaotic lives that make it very difficult to get and attend appointments. Women said they found many aspects of appointments for their health to be stressful even before they saw a health care professional or undertook any screening procedure, such as organising and traveling to appointments, and waiting for their turn in the waiting room. Many women said that having someone to go with you makes it a bit easier and less stressful.

“I find it hard to go to appointments on my own. There can be a lot of waiting around and I get panicked and worried. But if I have someone with me I feel better and cope with it all better.”

“Just having someone with me makes it so much easier and I feel calmer.”

“If I have someone with me I know I will attend because I wouldn’t let a friend down. But on my own I would just ignore it because it’s too difficult to face alone.”



Tip

4

Encourage women to take one step at a time

When we are thinking about looking after our health and wellbeing and about healthier lifestyles it can sometimes be overwhelming. Women said there is too much advice and information and about so many aspects of their lives that can make it hard to start and to know where to start.

Many women liked the approach of finding one simple thing to start with and then build from there. This approach helped build confidence, focus and decision making because one step or thing was achievable. If you start with one small thing and it doesn't work out it doesn't really matter as you can try something else. And once you have made one step the next one becomes easier - success building on success.

“I had so many things going on and going wrong and I was finding it hard to concentrate and didn't know where to start. My worker said ‘well let's just try one thing first. How about eating an apple every time you visit the centre?’ So I did and I found I liked them.”

“Just working on one thing at a time has helped me do so much more than when I was running round in circles trying to do everything at the same time.”

“We spent some time just focusing on one thing at a time. It's helped with my mental wellbeing because I feel more in control of things and my attention span is a bit longer.”

“I have slowed down and now do much more.”



**Take
small
steps**

Along with taking one step at a time women said that focussing on small things first as a way to make some changes was useful especially when thinking about healthier lifestyles. Many women said that they didn't feel that they had control over many aspects of their lives. But thinking about small steps helped build confidence, think about options and choices, and build on small successes. Women said it helped to talk about the little things that we can do and take charge of and then move onto bigger steps as and when it feels right.

“We all choose something small to try like a 10 minute walk, drinking a glass of water, eating an apple, knitting for 10 minutes or going out of the house. We tried it for a week to see how we got on. We were surprised at how well we had all done.”

“Taking small steps has helped me make my own decisions about things. Even if this has sometimes meant leaving decisions to later because I have too many other things going on just now.”



Tip

6

Help women find ways to be active

Being active and busy with good things to do had a positive impact on women's mental health and wellbeing. Women said they liked having plans and a structure for the week with activities. Many of them talked about enjoying being part of different groups that do different things like walking groups, sewing, photography and arts and crafts sessions. They liked having something just for them that was positive, safe, relaxing and active.

“The knitting group is time for me. I get to make things and chat with people who understand me. I can also take it home to do, it helps to have something to do in the evenings - it keeps me busy and stops me thinking too much.”

“I like the walking group, because you get to talk to different people as you walk along - its easy chatting and we talk about all sorts of things. I even like it when it's raining!”

“We do Zumba. It's such good fun. I'm a bit hopeless so I have to concentrate on the steps and going the same way as everyone else. But I get a break because I can't think about anything else when I do it. It's a mini holiday for my head and I'm getting fitter!”



Help women make plans for different situations

Life doesn't often go to plan or the way we think it will. Women said that having different strategies to deal with different situations, circumstances and people helped them cope with everyday life better and to make better choices.

“It has really helped me to try to think about things before they happen. It means I have some different ways to handle things which are much better for me and people around me. When I’m stressed I know that going for a walk or doing a 5 minute fast dance will help me.”

“I had to go the clinic for some tests. We talked through what would happen when I was there and what the results might be and what I would need to do. It was hard because I didn’t want to think about it or go really. But it did help me.”

For more information

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