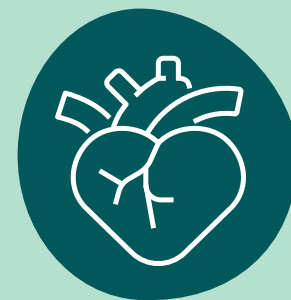


# Appendix K – Supporting people with complex health conditions



Phil is in excruciating pain due to a tooth abscess. The last time Phil tried to see a dentist the receptionist asked him to leave before he'd even had a chance to say hello. The infection is making Phil sick and feverish and he can no longer stand. People walking past don't pay attention because they assume Phil's strange behaviour is due to drug use.

*Each person has their own unique experience and needs. It is important to understand the intersectionality between a person's gender, race, sexual identity, culture, experiences and circumstances. Workers may refer to multiple appendices to assist their understanding, engagement and support for each person they engage.*

## Overview

People experiencing chronic homelessness are more likely to have a range of complex health conditions. These may include chronic pain, cognitive impairment, traumatic brain injury, mental illness, substance use disorders and/or chronic health conditions such as diabetes, Hepatitis C and other blood-borne viruses, HIV, dementia, liver or heart disease.

Complex health conditions can arise from risk taking behaviours, ageing or psychiatric disorders<sup>i</sup>, as well as the result of abuse, trauma or the hardships of life on the streets. Complex health conditions can significantly impact many aspects of a person's life including their capacity, opportunities, motivation, behaviour, and quality of life, especially if the person is unable to access appropriate treatment.

For people experiencing homelessness, meeting basic needs such as food, water and a place to sleep can be the most important day-to-day priority. Health needs are often not addressed until an emergency arises<sup>ii</sup>. Physical barriers such as a lack of documentation (e.g. Medicare card), not being able to afford public transport or access transport to attend appointments, having no mailing address or phone to receive appointment reminders, and not being able to keep medications secure are some of the difficulties faced by people experiencing homelessness<sup>iii</sup>.

People experiencing homelessness may also struggle to access crucial medication and nutritious food which leaves them unable to address their health needs and can lead to worsening health conditions<sup>iv</sup>.

The rate of mental health conditions is substantially higher among people with a history of homelessness (54 per cent) compared to the general population (19 per cent)<sup>v</sup>. An Australian survey found that 73 per cent of men and 81 per cent of women experiencing homelessness had one mental health disorder in the past year; while 40 per cent of men and 50 per cent of women experiencing homelessness had at least two mental health conditions<sup>vi</sup>.

In addition to higher rates of mental health, people experiencing homelessness have high comorbidity rates of various conditions including alcohol and other drug (AOD). More than one third (38%) of people were diagnosed with a chronic physical health condition in addition to their co-occurring AOD and mental health condition<sup>vii</sup>. People experiencing homelessness may benefit from the support and coordination of various services. However, navigating these services can be challenging<sup>viii</sup>.

In some cases, people experiencing homelessness may experience significant stigma and discrimination from providers when they do access health care<sup>ix</sup>. This can impact the person's general health, access to services, and often results in poorer mental and physical health<sup>x</sup>. People experiencing homelessness may be fearful and distrust health services due to past experiences including institutional mistreatment and harm and/or intergenerational trauma.

A person's complex health condition/s may not be visible without the person's disclosure. In some situations, a person may not recognise their own complex health condition/s. Workers must therefore be non-judgemental of a person's condition and chosen treatment to address their condition (which may include no treatment). Trauma can be a major contributing factor to a person's health, so it is important the worker provide a trauma-informed and person-centred response throughout.

## Substance use disorders

Substance use disorders are a complex health condition. People may use substances such as alcohol or other drugs (AOD) to dull emotional or physical pain, or to escape from problems or difficulties experienced in life including experiences of trauma.

Around 1 in 20 Australians has a substance use disorder<sup>xi</sup>. It can result in changes and long-term damage to a person's brain and other organs<sup>xii</sup>. AOD use may result in increased aggression and irritability, changes in attitude, personality or habits, and involvement in criminal activity.

AOD use is complex and workers should practice harm minimisation to support people using AOD to reduce the harm to the person and the wider community. Harm minimisation techniques help to reduce risk behaviours, create safer settings for use, and build resilience<sup>xiii</sup>. It focuses on the person's rights while helping people remain safe.

There may be limited access to treatment options for people who request assistance. For those who are in active addiction, restricted access to their substance of choice and/or support network may lead to acute, complex withdrawal, irritability, and erratic or risky behaviour.

## Engagement strategy

### Things to know before engaging:

- It is important to show compassion and respect to people who are experiencing complex health conditions and homelessness. This includes remaining non-judgemental and person-centred to ensure the person's individual needs are met.
- People with chronic health conditions may struggle with communication and movement. They may also experience depression and anxiety or a lack of independence due to their condition. It is important to understand the effects of chronic health conditions before undertaking any engagement<sup>xiv</sup>.
- Navigating the service system can be complicated for people with complex health conditions due to the extra complexity the condition adds to their homelessness. It can also restrict options for support. Workers should be aware of suitable resources and work with the person to obtain the support they chose.
- If someone is at imminent or immediate risk of attempting to harm themselves or someone else (or yourself), contact emergency services (police or ambulance) on **Triple Zero (000)** for assistance.

### Strategies for engagement:

- Introduce yourself in a friendly manner, stating your name and the agency/organisation you work for.
- Ensure your approach and all interactions are non-judgmental both in verbal and non-verbal communication. Remove any personal bias during engagement.
- Remain calm and do not raise your voice throughout the interaction.
- Maintain your safety and the safety of the person at all times and contact emergency services if required.
- Give the person space and allow them to take a break if needed or requested.
- Avoid using potentially harmful positivity statements (e.g. "You'll get over it").
- When safe to do so, encourage a health response instead of a police response.
- Refer the person to a health service nearby if needed or requested. Where possible, offer to take the person or organise transport to a service for support if the person accepts assistance.
- Call an ambulance if there is a health or safety emergency (000).

## RESOURCES

CRISIS SUPPORT		
Name	Service	Contact Details
<a href="#">Ask Izzy</a>	A website directory that connects people who are in need with nearby services such as housing, food, health care and legal services in their local area.	<b>Website:</b> <a href="https://askizzy.org.au">https://askizzy.org.au</a>
<a href="#">Link2Home</a>	A statewide telephone service providing information, assessment and referral to specialist homelessness services, temporary accommodation and other appropriate services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week every day of the year.	<b>Phone:</b> 1800 152 152 <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/ways/are-you-homeless">https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/ways/are-you-homeless</a>
<a href="#">Mental Health Line</a>	A free 24/7 statewide phone service which links people with NSW Health mental health services.  It is staffed by trained mental health professionals who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• offer mental health advice</li> <li>• complete a brief assessment</li> <li>• make recommendations for appropriate care, including referral to NSW Health mental health services.</li> </ul>	<b>Phone:</b> 1800 011 511 <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/Pages/mental-health-line.aspx">https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/Pages/mental-health-line.aspx</a>
OTHER SUPPORT		
Name	Service	Contact Details
<a href="#">ACON</a>	Provides a range of services including, mental health and drug and alcohol, family and domestic violence, ageing as well as HIV and sexual health education, prevention and testing services to LGBTQ communities.  ACON also provides counselling, care coordination, peer support to people living with HIV. ACON works to improve the health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.	<b>Phone:</b> visit the website for contact numbers for the relevant location <b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:acon@acon.org.au">acon@acon.org.au</a> <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://acon.org.au">https://acon.org.au</a>
<a href="#">Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)</a>	A 24/7 free and confidential counselling helpline for those in NSW with concerns around alcohol or drug misuse. ADIS is staffed by professional counsellors who provide education, brief intervention counselling and referrals to other appropriate services in NSW.	<b>Phone:</b> 1800 250 015 <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://www.svhs.org.au/our-services/list-of-services/alcohol-drug-service/alcohol-drug-information-service">https://www.svhs.org.au/our-services/list-of-services/alcohol-drug-service/alcohol-drug-information-service</a>
<a href="#">Bobby Goldsmith Foundation</a>	Support for people living with HIV including case management, community support, financial advocacy and counselling, HIV/AOD Integrated support, and health and well being programs.	<b>Phone:</b> 02 9283 8666 <b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:bgf@bgf.org.au">bgf@bgf.org.au</a> <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://bgf.org.au">https://bgf.org.au</a>
<a href="#">Full Stop Australia</a>	Confidential, trauma specialist counselling for people of all genders who are impacted by violence and abuse, as well as their friends, colleagues and family members.	<b>Phone:</b> 1800 Full Stop (1800 385 578) <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://www.fullstop.org.au">https://www.fullstop.org.au</a>

## RESOURCES

Name	Service	Contact Details
<a href="#">Health Direct</a>	A 24/7 free health advice helpline. Can provide information on health professionals in the area.	<b>Phone:</b> 1800 022 222 <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://www.healthdirect.gov.au">https://www.healthdirect.gov.au</a>
<a href="#">National Disability Insurance Scheme</a>	Provides support packages for people with disability and links people to services for therapeutic support, personal activities, equipment, community connection, and other support to maintain independence where possible.	<b>Phone:</b> 1800 800 110 (NSW hotline) <b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:enquiries@ndis.gov.au">enquiries@ndis.gov.au</a> <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://ndis.gov.au">https://ndis.gov.au</a>
<a href="#">NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal – Guardianship Division (NCAT)</a>	The Guardianship Division determines applications about adults who are incapable of making their own decisions and who may require a legally appointed substitute decision maker.	<b>Phone:</b> 1300 006 228 <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://www.ncat.nsw.gov.au/how-ncat-works/ncat-divisions-and-appeal-panel/guardianship-division.html">https://www.ncat.nsw.gov.au/how-ncat-works/ncat-divisions-and-appeal-panel/guardianship-division.html</a>
<a href="#">NSW Public Guardian and NSW Trustee and Guardian</a>	The Public Guardian is a public official appointed by the NCAT Guardianship Division or Supreme Court of NSW to make healthcare, lifestyle and medical decisions for a person who lacks decision-making ability. The Public Guardian delegates their decision-making authority to a team of guardians at the NSW Trustee and Guardian.	<b>NSW Public Guardian</b> <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://www.tag.nsw.gov.au/public-guardian">https://www.tag.nsw.gov.au/public-guardian</a>  <b>NSW Trustee and Guardian</b> <b>Phone:</b> 1300 109 290 <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://www.tag.nsw.gov.au">https://www.tag.nsw.gov.au</a>
<a href="#">NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA)</a>	The NUAA operate a Needle and Syringe Program to supply people who inject drugs with sterile injecting equipment to prevent the transmission of blood borne viruses, including Hepatitis C.  The NUAA also provides blood borne virus testing and treatment referrals.	<b>Phone:</b> 9171 6650 <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://nuaa.org.au">https://nuaa.org.au</a>
<a href="#">Way Ahead</a>	Provides a mental health information line or online directory to connect people to services, provide support information on mental health, wellbeing and community services.	<b>Phone:</b> 1300 794 991 <b>Directory:</b> <a href="https://directory.wayahead.org.au">https://directory.wayahead.org.au</a> <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://wayahead.org.au">https://wayahead.org.au</a>

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- iii Ibid.
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- vii Comorbidity Guidelines, [Homelessness](#), Comorbidity Guidelines website, n.d.
- viii AIHW, [Health of people experiencing homelessness](#), AIHW website, 2024.
- ix J Reilly, I Ho and A Williamson, 'A systematic review of the effect of stigma on the health of people experiencing homelessness', *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 2022, 30(60), 2128-2141, doi: 10.1111/hsc.13884.
- x Ibid
- xi healthdirect, [Substance abuse](#), healthdirect website, 2023.
- xii Ibid
- xiii AIHW, [Alcohol, tobacco & other drugs in Australia](#), AIHW website, 2023.
- xiv Global Health Living Foundation Creaky Joints (GHLF), [How you can support someone with chronic illness](#), GHLF website, 2020.