

Checklist On How Workers Can Empower Service Users

10 Do's and Don'ts

Workers have to work within constraints imposed by their employers. However, within these constraints there are choices. Depending on the choices you make service users will feel you are on their side, indifferent or wanting to control them by abusing the power you have over them. You can contribute towards our recovery or our hopelessness and powerlessness.

Below are some do's and don't's for staff wanting to relate to individual service users in ways that are empowering.

- 1. Do let us know what our rights are.** Often we feel we have none and are treated as if we have none. Ensure that we know about our rights to refuse treatment, make a complaint, access an advocate or be represented at a mental health tribunal. It helps to be told on more than one occasion and also to have the information in writing.
- 2. Don't hide behind a mask of professionalism.** Don't use words we don't understand and avoid using jargon. Don't pretend you know more than you do. Mental health work is full of uncertainty, confusion, controversy and contradictions. Honesty in itself is empowering.
- 3. Do ask us what we want.** You may not be able to provide it. You may disagree. But do ask us. Potentially at least we are the experts on our own needs.

4. **Don't dismiss our complaints and worries as symptoms of our 'mental illness'.** Far too often our physical health has been disregarded, women have been sexually abused while in psychiatric hospitals and have not been believed. Genuine grievances have been ignored or not taken seriously with tragic outcomes.
5. **Do recognise and work with our strengths and potential.** Support us in trying new activities, taking on responsibilities and finding outlets for our creativity.
6. **Don't panic when we express feelings.** Often it is useful to sob, shout and scream. We appreciate being listened to and given time and space to work through our feelings.
7. **Do tell us as much as you can about the medication** we are taking as well as the other options open to us e.g. counselling, Cognitive therapy, Complementary and alternative therapies, local and national self help groups.
8. **Don't write us off.** We are fed up with being told 'You will have to take these pills for the rest of your life' or 'There is no cure for manic depression'. Negative and dismissive remarks may cause great hurt and be a source of pain to us for years. Many of us have overcome or/and learned to self manage our own mental distress. Often this is despite the pessimistic predictions of 'experts'.
9. **Do talk to us.** Mental distress is isolating. Help us break through it by treating us as fellow human beings and trust us as equals. Don't try to force us to talk when we clearly find it hard to open up.
10. **Don't forget that we live in a multicultural society,** in which people have very different beliefs and values. Learn all you can about the people who use your service - not least by asking them.