

Wisdom from behind closed doors

Capturing the voices of people
living in supported accomodation,
sleeping rough and sofa-surfing



MAYDAY
TRUST

Based on our experience of working with people from all backgrounds and providing accommodation in challenging circumstances, we wanted to know about their experiences and how they feel about the services and accommodation they have received. Wisdom from Behind Closed Doors is based on 80+ conversations with people who are housed in temporary or supported accommodation, as well as people who are sleeping rough and sofa-surfing.

People told us that they wanted a home where they could feel safe and secure, **where they would receive a warm welcome; where they could just get on with their lives.**

People moving into accommodation didn't want to feel labelled, stigmatised or that they had to prove themselves in order to remain. What they want is to start rebuilding a sense of purpose and value to their lives. People want to stay somewhere with a decent standard of accommodation which supports them to access education or work. People told us that they wanted a place where they can make friends and maintain contact with their family. People want the assurance of knowing what to expect from their landlord, including how long they can stay, and what their responsibilities are within the accommodation. Like any tenant, people want access to a feedback and complaints process when the accommodation is not up to standard or things aren't going well.

People want to be treated with dignity and respect.

“I did two years in prison and now I’m doing two years here. They say I got sentenced for two years, but in reality it’s four.”

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If I get a job my
benefits will mess up.
I won't be able to
afford my rent,
then what? I'm back
on the streets.

1 of 10 The right to move on



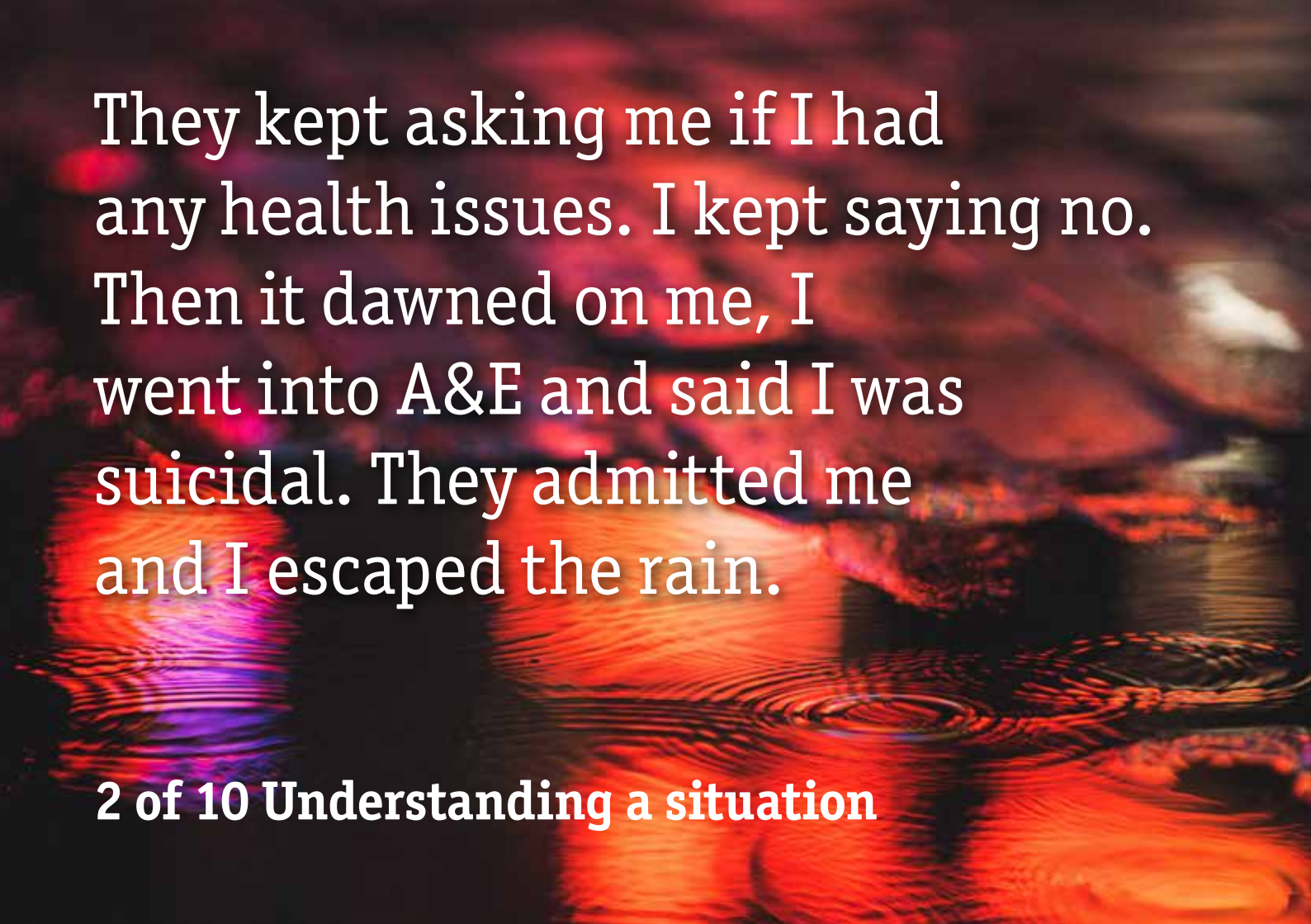
People told us that once they had transitioned out of their need for support and had secured employment they then couldn't afford to live in supported accommodation, leaving them facing an uncertain future.

The current supported housing system combines charges for accommodation and support. This has been viewed as an efficient and successful way to fund housing associations and supported housing providers to deliver a holistic approach to working with 'vulnerable adults'. However, for many of the people we spoke to, it also creates a perverse incentive.

For those who do get a job their options are limited to either trying to find alternative accommodation, giving up their job, or to 'go undercover' and not declare their employment - risking fines and possible eviction. Even when the finances and arrangements are in place, for some being labelled as 'vulnerable', moving accommodation and settling into a new job is not an ideal combination. People even reported being encouraged by staff not to work until they had paid off their rent arrears. Not only is this costly to the system but it also stops people from moving on with their lives.

Mayday's Response

Mayday is moving towards an alternative model of accommodation and support. We are transforming our current housing portfolio to accommodation that charges Local Housing Allowance rates or affordable rents. This way people do not have to move when they are successful in gaining employment. Support is separate and provided through Mayday's Personal Transitions Service (PTS), which is a flexible, personalised and strength based approach. Importantly, people can continue to access the support when they move.



They kept asking me if I had any health issues. I kept saying no. Then it dawned on me, I went into A&E and said I was suicidal. They admitted me and I escaped the rain.

2 of 10 Understanding a situation

Some of the people we spoke to felt that they often had no choice but to make their personal situations worse in order to be prioritised for housing or simply escape the cold.

Due to the lack of affordable housing and the low priority given to single homeless applications, more people have viewed supported housing as either a way of getting a bed for the night, or a route to moving higher up the council waiting list. Maintaining people in high cost supported housing is not only expensive, but also presents the same perverse incentives for those who have overcome their issues and are ready for employment and independent living.

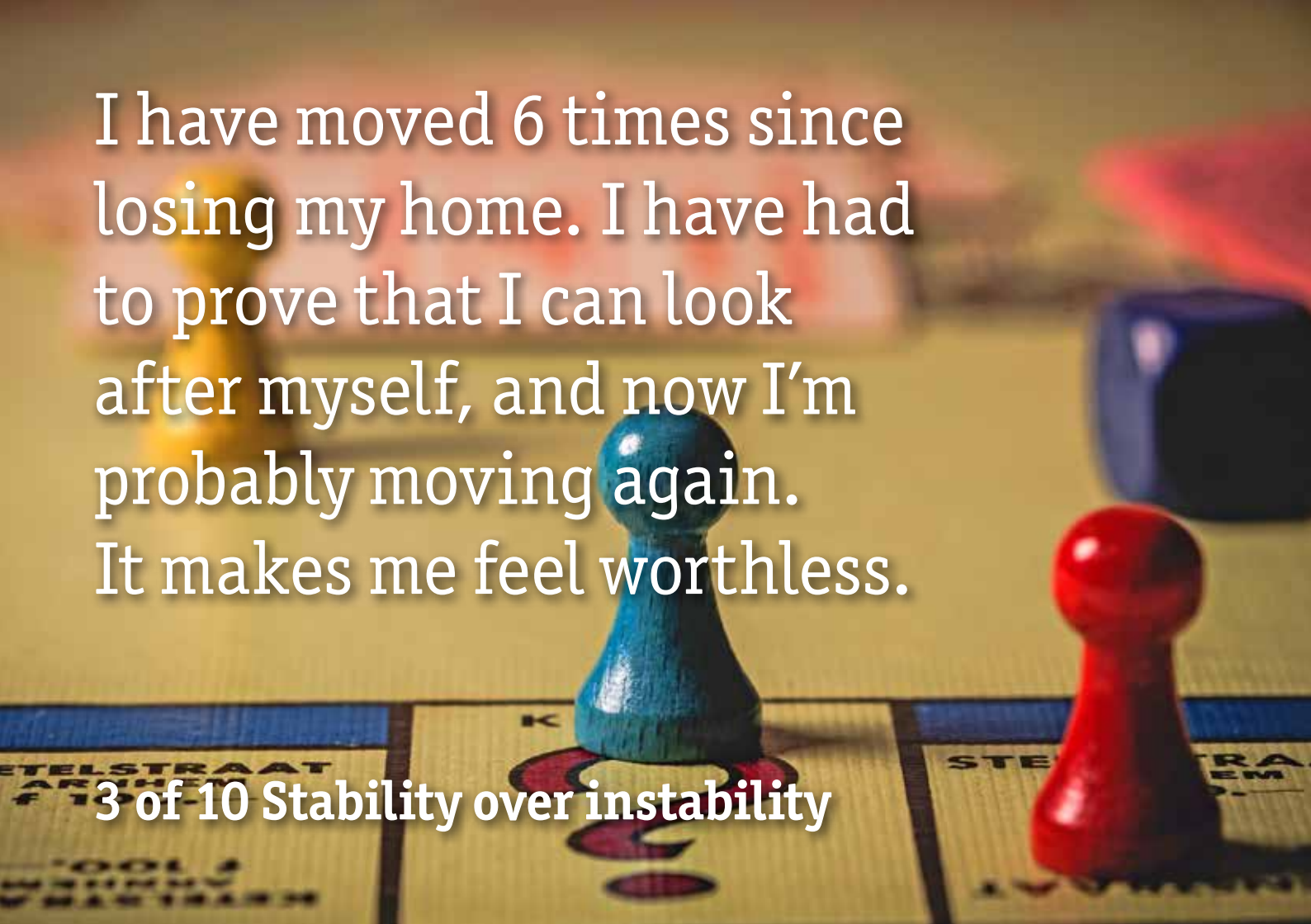
The high rent charges for supported accommodation and a lack of options for people once they secure employment mean they are at risk of becoming trapped or becoming anxious and gaining a mental health diagnosis. This situation can escalate to people becoming institutionalised or gaining a status as 'complex needs'. At this point they become a high cost priority to the state, but on a personal level they are trapped in a situation of no hope or confidence and are disempowered to make positive changes in their lives.

Mayday's Response

Mayday is now offering social housing to people with 'complex needs'. The PTS service is optional (although subject to a duty of care, which means that in some situations Mayday will allocate a Coach in the best interests of the person). People can decide if, when and what support they need – meaning that they have control of their own situation.

I have moved 6 times since losing my home. I have had to prove that I can look after myself, and now I'm probably moving again. It makes me feel worthless.

3 of 10 Stability over instability




People felt dehumanised by the current system and often experienced severe anxiety due to having to move multiple times in a short period.

Hierarchical and pathway approaches to accommodation are still used today. This means people regularly have to 'prove' that they are 'tenancy ready' in order to progress to the next stage of accommodation, regardless of their skills or experience. People reported feeling humiliated and worthless; they expressed a desire to settle down, a place where they didn't need to move after periods of time, somewhere they could make their own.

Mayday's Response

The psychological impact of multiple accommodation moves and having to 'prove' your worthiness in order to secure accommodation is significantly underestimated. There is growing research on the 'Housing First' models for the most entrenched rough sleepers which demonstrate more successful approaches to tackling long term homelessness.

Mayday is currently developing a personalised, strength based housing offer, which we hope will influence future commissioning. We believe that the current pathways and temporary housing provision hides the reality of the housing crisis and can have a long term impact on the individuals resulting in high costs to health and other statutory services. We hope to attract financial support to trial an alternative solution to supported housing, which will evidence cost savings as well as more positive outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.

A dark, cluttered room, possibly a storage area or a neglected living space. The walls are covered in graffiti and posters. In the center, there is a red toy car with a white roof and a red figure on top. The floor is littered with debris and papers. The lighting is dim, with a bright light source visible in the background.

I don't want to be ungrateful but it's like, when you trash your flat they fix it, make it nicer than before. But if you keep your head down and look after it, then you get nothing.

4 of 10 Somewhere to call home

We were told that by being given substandard housing people were left feeling worthless and insignificant.

Having a decent standard of accommodation, particularly when you have been through a tough time, is so important. Many people felt devalued and disrespected by the standard of their accommodation. Often those who looked after their accommodation felt ignored in comparison to people who disrespected and damaged their property. People also shared that they felt they couldn't really question the suitability or standard of accommodation because they should just be grateful for what they were given.

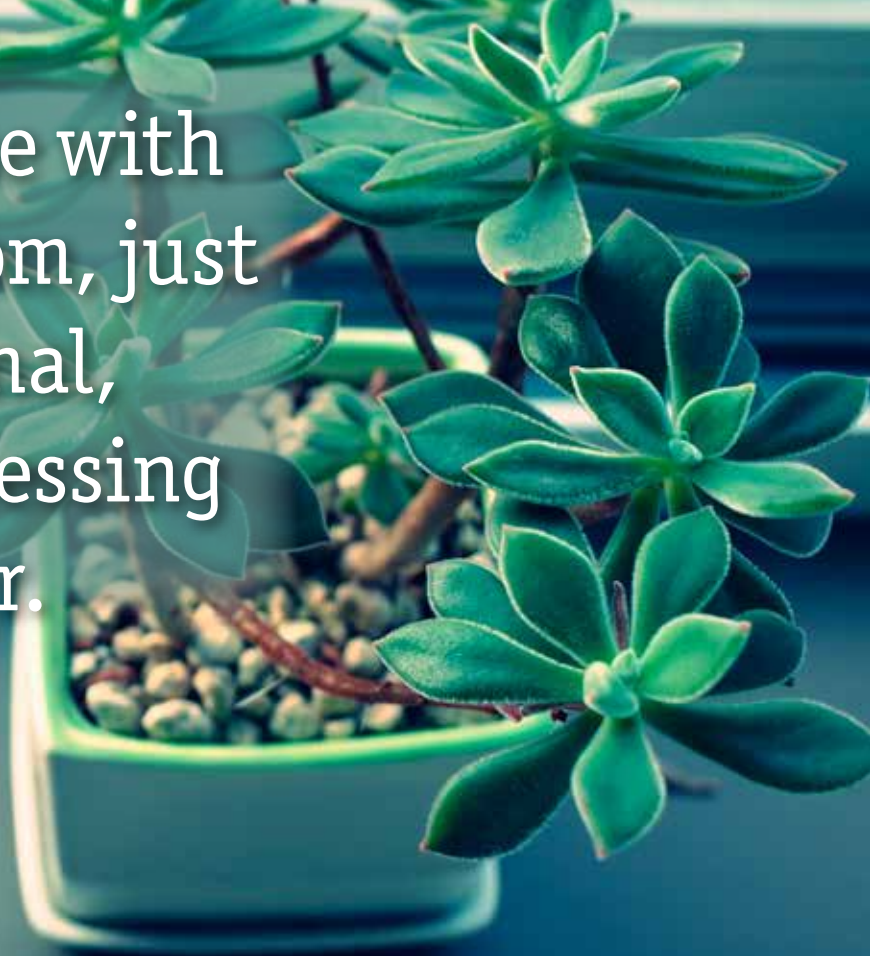
Mayday's Response

Mayday has introduced a minimum standard for the quality of accommodation - WILT. The general principle we adopt is asking the question '**Would I Live There?**'

Mayday staff are trained on the principles of PIE (Psychologically Informed Environments) so they understand the importance of the environment and what can make a positive difference for people. Individuals can also apply for a personal budget to personalise their room.

I could have done with
a plant in my room, just
to make it personal,
rather than processing
me like a number.

5 of 10 A human welcome



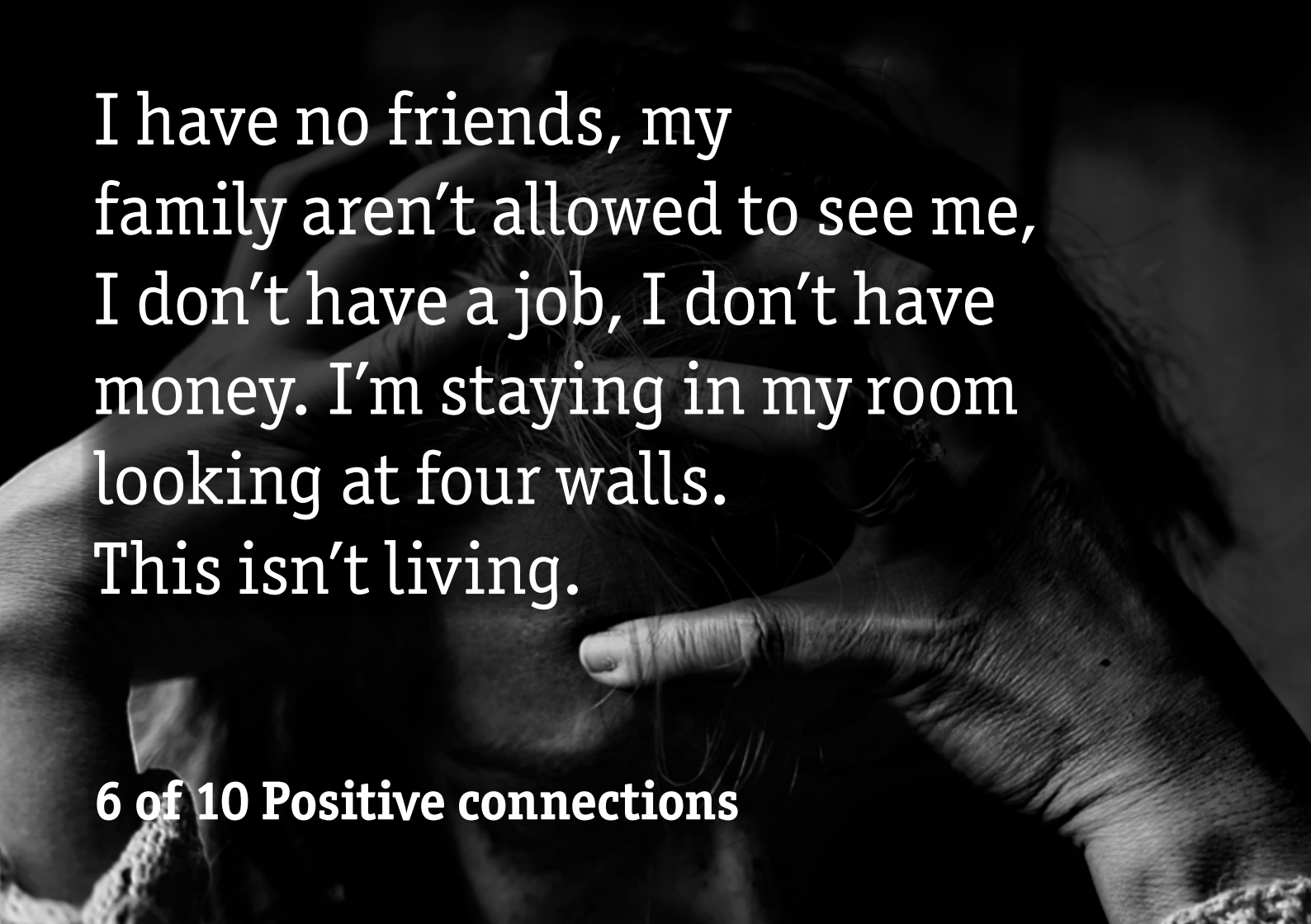
When asked how people felt when moving into supported accommodation many said they felt lonely and it was like living in an ‘empty shell’.

Moving into a new home is stressful, especially if you’re transitioning from being on the streets, so being alone in a new place with a sparsely furnished room can sometimes feel just as isolating. This transition from being homeless to moving into accommodation was a significant issue for the people who talked to us. It was important to feel welcomed and to have information both on the local area and who to contact in case things go wrong.

Mayday’s Response

Our first task was to ensure people felt welcomed. There is now a welcome protocol which expects staff to make regular contact with the people they are working with before and after moving in and this can include going out for a coffee or lunch in order to spend time getting to know the local area. In addition, a new personalised Welcome Pack is on the way; an information guide and a pack with the basic supplies, just like people get when they move into a new house.

The new protocol and Welcome Pack aims to make the transition into their new home as bearable as possible for people. We hope to stop people from feeling isolated and instead make sure they feel welcome and in control of the situation.

A black and white photograph showing a person's hands gently holding their hair. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the hair and the skin. The overall mood is contemplative and intimate.

I have no friends, my
family aren't allowed to see me,
I don't have a job, I don't have
money. I'm staying in my room
looking at four walls.
This isn't living.

6 of 10 Positive connections

As identified in the first Wisdoms, ‘Wisdom from the Street’*, relationships, connections and relational approaches are hugely important but complicated and personal to each of the people we spoke to.

What people told us on this subject varied; some wanted to get away from other ‘vulnerable’ people, whilst others benefited from making friends. What was clear is that the majority of connections were driven by a need to survive, to avoid being a target and to stay safe, rather than genuine friendship.

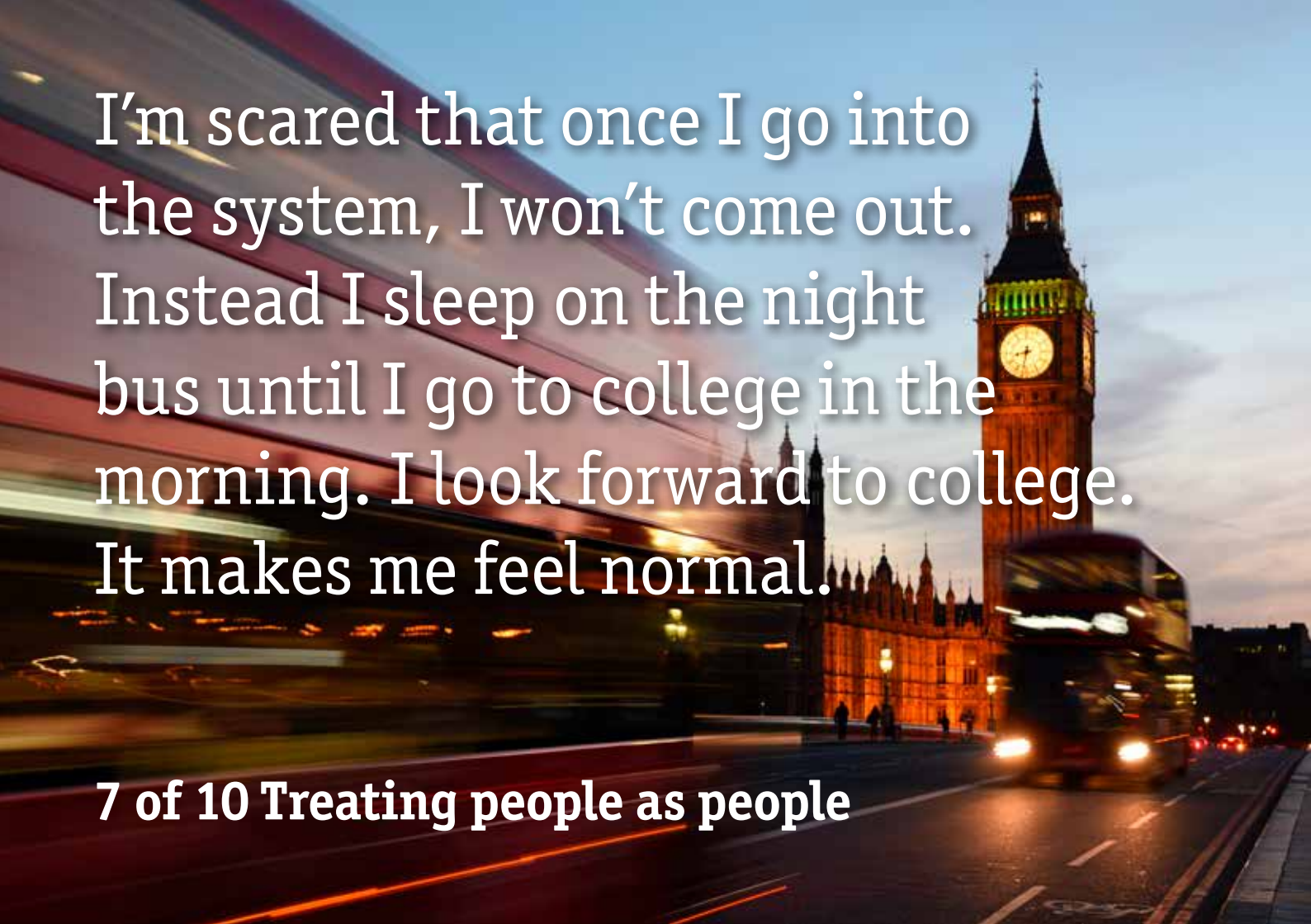
Some people felt isolated and cut off from family and friends when housed out of their known area and in unfamiliar surroundings. In this situation gaining accommodation became a barrier between people and their support network, which had the potential to make their situation worse.

Mayday’s Response

The Mayday team are on a brave journey to explore relational and ‘real world’ approaches to supporting people who are trying to survive their tough transition.

Mayday is gradually moving to smaller numbers of people sharing accommodation. In bigger schemes people are introduced to their immediate neighbours but communal activities are kept to a minimum as people are encouraged to socialise outside their accommodation and in the local community.

**Wisdom from the Street was published in 2012 and can be downloaded from www.maydaytrust.org.uk*



I'm scared that once I go into the system, I won't come out. Instead I sleep on the night bus until I go to college in the morning. I look forward to college. It makes me feel normal.

7 of 10 Treating people as people

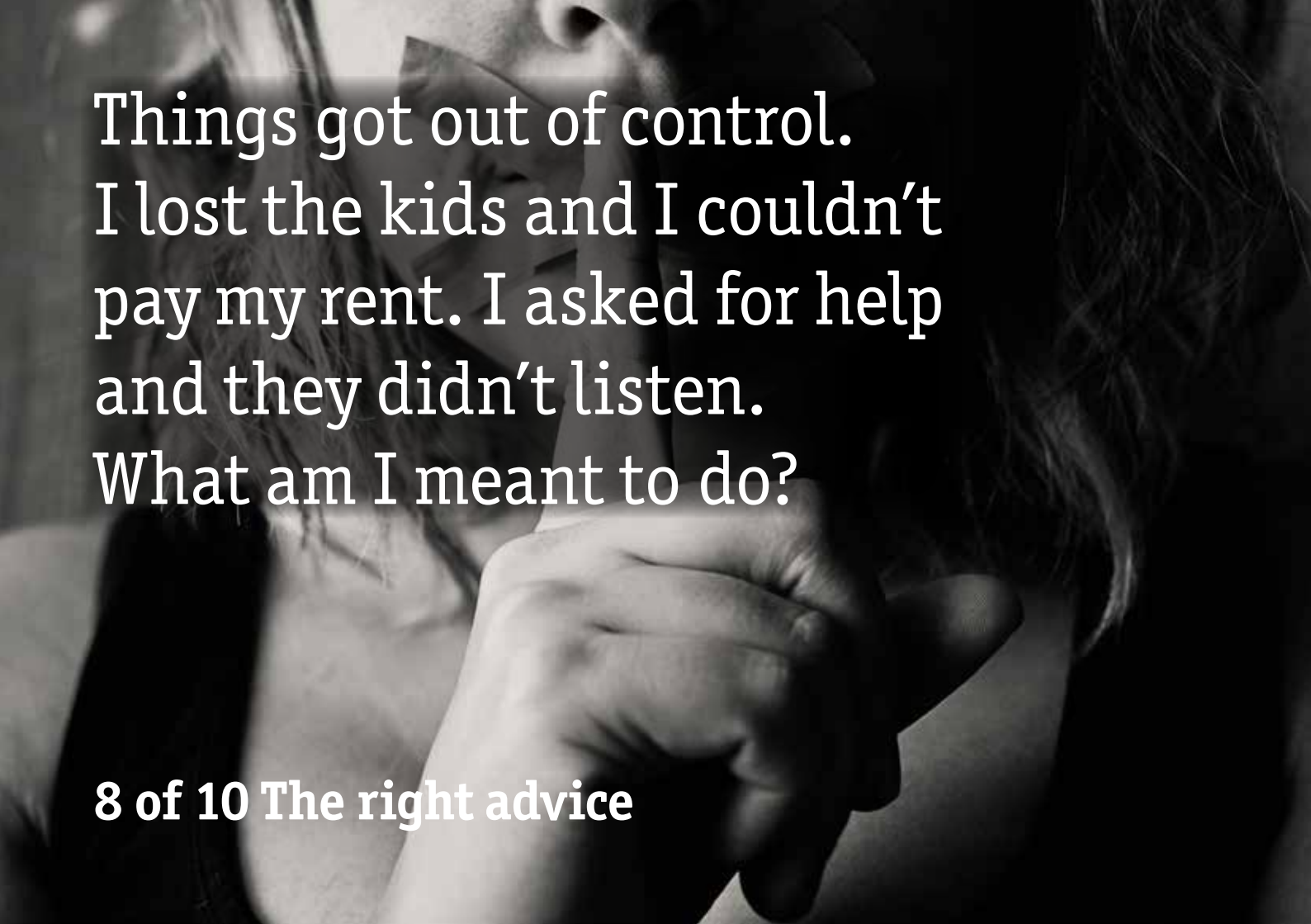
People told us that they wanted to feel normal. In some circumstances people were avoiding accessing services out of fear of becoming trapped and labelled. Staying on the streets or sofa-surfing was a way of clinging onto some form of normality.

What has been striking from both these conversations and those included in 'Wisdom from the Street', is the desire to feel normal. Yet the current system does the opposite, creating the powerless and hopeless 'victim personae'. While the focus of many services has been to 'empower' by helping people gain confidence and self-belief, there is little recognition that these services are based on a system that continually focuses on weaknesses and deficits. By pathologising normal responses to trauma, people accessing these services are often left alienated and disenfranchised.

Mayday's Response

Mayday is currently embedding a person-led approach which focuses on disrupting these traditional approaches, unlearning what is currently perceived as good practice and, without being flippant, treating people as people.

The Mayday team have started to look at all the nuanced ways that we inadvertently dehumanise people. Teams meet regularly to continually reflect and question what we do and how we are doing. As a result of this reflective practice and listening to the people we work with we have already stopped resident meetings and swapped 'Housing Assessments' for 'Housing Conversations'. The latter aims to move us from assessing whether we want to accommodate a person, to seeing if we have suitable accommodation for a person.



Things got out of control.
I lost the kids and I couldn't
pay my rent. I asked for help
and they didn't listen.
What am I meant to do?

8 of 10 The right advice

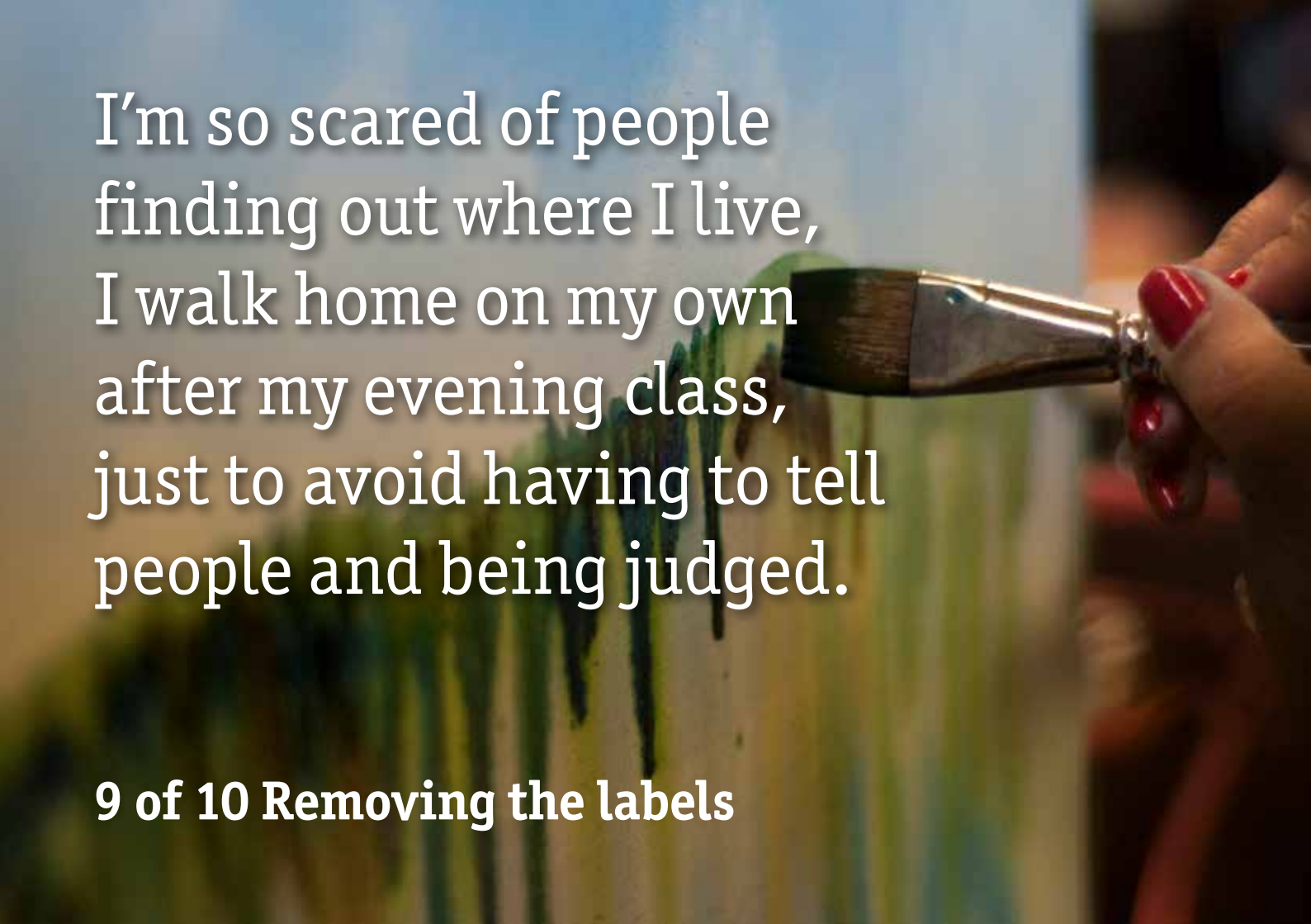
What we heard time and time again was how the smallest of problems could spiral out of control. Often this was down to people being given the wrong advice or jumping to the wrong conclusion.

Most people found it difficult to navigate the housing system, with some people receiving misinformation or not being informed of their right to appeal decisions. Many failed to ask questions just because they didn't want to make a fuss or because they felt that they wouldn't be listened to.

Mayday's Response

Mayday has built up good working relationships with local Citizens Advice services, law centres and other advice and advocacy centres in order to ensure people know where and how to get the best housing and benefit advice.

In addition to this, the Mayday team maintain regular contact with people before, during and after their transition into their new home. This means that people feel supported and the lines of communication stay open, avoiding the escalation of day to day problems.

A close-up photograph of a hand with bright red nail polish holding a paintbrush. The brush is in the process of painting a vertical, abstract design on a white surface. The design consists of several vertical strokes of green and blue paint, with some darker, more saturated colors. The background is blurred, showing a light blue wall and a dark, out-of-focus area on the right side.

I'm so scared of people finding out where I live, I walk home on my own after my evening class, just to avoid having to tell people and being judged.

9 of 10 Removing the labels

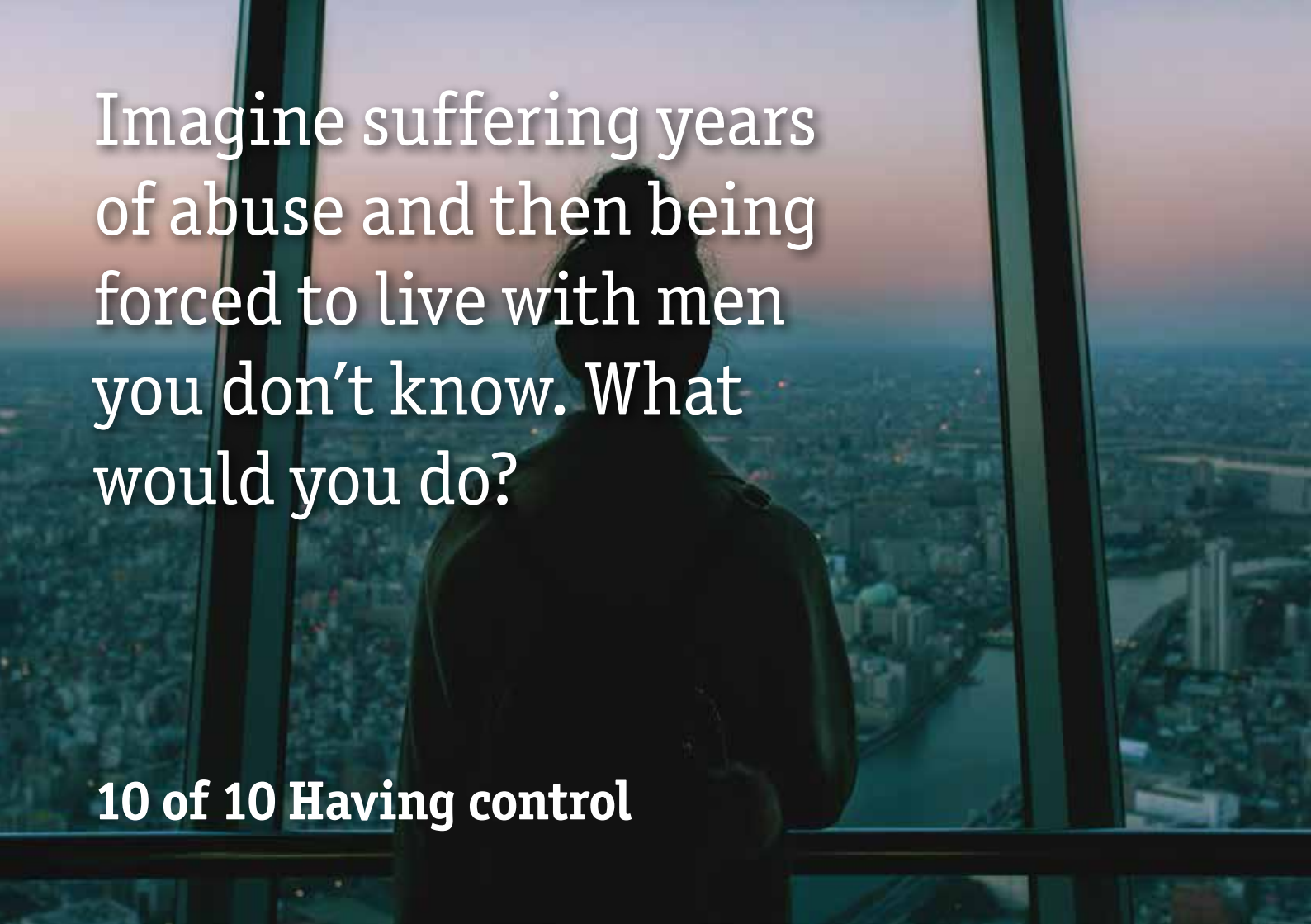
People talked about being reluctant to disclose where they lived to potential new friends, employers and services.

Whether perceived or real, people believed that they would be judged or stigmatised because they lived in a hostel or supported accommodation. Many felt humiliated or embarrassed to say that they were homeless. This presented yet another barrier for people to overcome and allow them to move forward with their lives.

Mayday's Response

Mayday has removed all external physical signs that indicate that a property is supported housing. The Mayday team receive PIE (Psychologically Informed Environments) training to ensure that properties do not become institutions. Instead they are presented and operated as quality, affordable social housing. The walls are filled with art and not negative posters. 'Rules' and restrictions are minimised in order to respect the rights and responsibilities of individuals.

Mayday does not operate specific issue based accommodation, such as accommodation for offenders. We believe that this type of accommodation further stigmatises people. It extends the period that people are 'labelled' and often colludes with silo based sector working e.g. ex-offenders' accommodation operated by the Criminal Justice sector. There is no evidence to demonstrate that housing offenders together delivers better outcomes than housing people directly into the community. In fact, the latter removes the stigma as people are not seen as 'ex-offenders' and are not in the company of other offenders. In addition, people can access personalised support while integrating back into the community.

A person is seen from behind, standing on a balcony or in a high-rise building, looking out at a vast cityscape at dusk. The sky is a mix of soft pinks and blues, and the city below is illuminated with lights. The person's hair is tied up, and they are wearing a dark jacket. The window frame is visible, framing the view.

Imagine suffering years
of abuse and then being
forced to live with men
you don't know. What
would you do?

10 of 10 Having control

Many people we spoke to said that past experience of abuse and trauma meant they didn't feel comfortable in supported accommodation. Others said that they felt that they had to share their traumatic experiences to prove that they were worthy of accommodation.

The women we spoke to on the streets had particular concerns about hostels, especially about sharing a space with men, who they thought would be excessively drinking, taking drugs and causing trouble. Many experienced abuse in the past and they did not feel they could live with men they didn't know.

People found homeless service applications unnecessarily complex and invasive. They felt they had to describe all of their traumatic life experiences in order to evidence that they were 'worthy' of a safe roof over their heads. In some cases, people felt they had been perceived as a 'scrounger', 'loser' and 'feckless' by others, especially by those in positions of power, who were making decisions about their accommodation.

Mayday's Response

Mayday aims to give maximum power and control available to each person. To achieve this we are starting to adapt the culture of our organisation; the language, systems, processes, staffing profiles and training. Task Teams have been established to listen to the people living with us, research and develop internal transformative change.

Mayday is also pursuing a local influencing and advocacy role to promote real world and personalised responses to local housing decision.

Mayday Trust, alongside National Innovation Partners, is reconstructing the system to work for people going through tough times.

If you would like more information on our Housing Transitions Service detailed in this booklet, or the Personal Transitions Service (PTS) please don't hesitate to get in touch.

The PTS Movement for Change

It's much harder to stop a movement than it is to stop a single organisation

Through the PTS Innovation Partnership and Accreditation Mayday Trust works with like-minded organisations to continually gather evidence, become fully person-led, by leading from the grassroots to transform organisational culture, practice and influence through doing to bring about a world where the system works for people going through tough times.

If this is a vision that resonates with you then we would love to hear from you.



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