

# Wisdom from the street

Capturing the voices  
of people experiencing  
homelessness



**MAYDAY**  
TRUST

P|T|S

Person-led,  
Transitional &  
Strength-based  
Response

By Mayday Trust



In 2011, we conducted a qualitative review of over 100 people inside and outside Mayday Trust. We wanted to know what people thought of the services designed to support their move out of homelessness and toward independence.

Their feedback, and our own reflections, uncovered the systematic institutionalisation of people accessing homelessness services. The ‘traditional’ focus on needs kept people in their area of weakness, leaving them unable to create sustained, positive change for themselves.

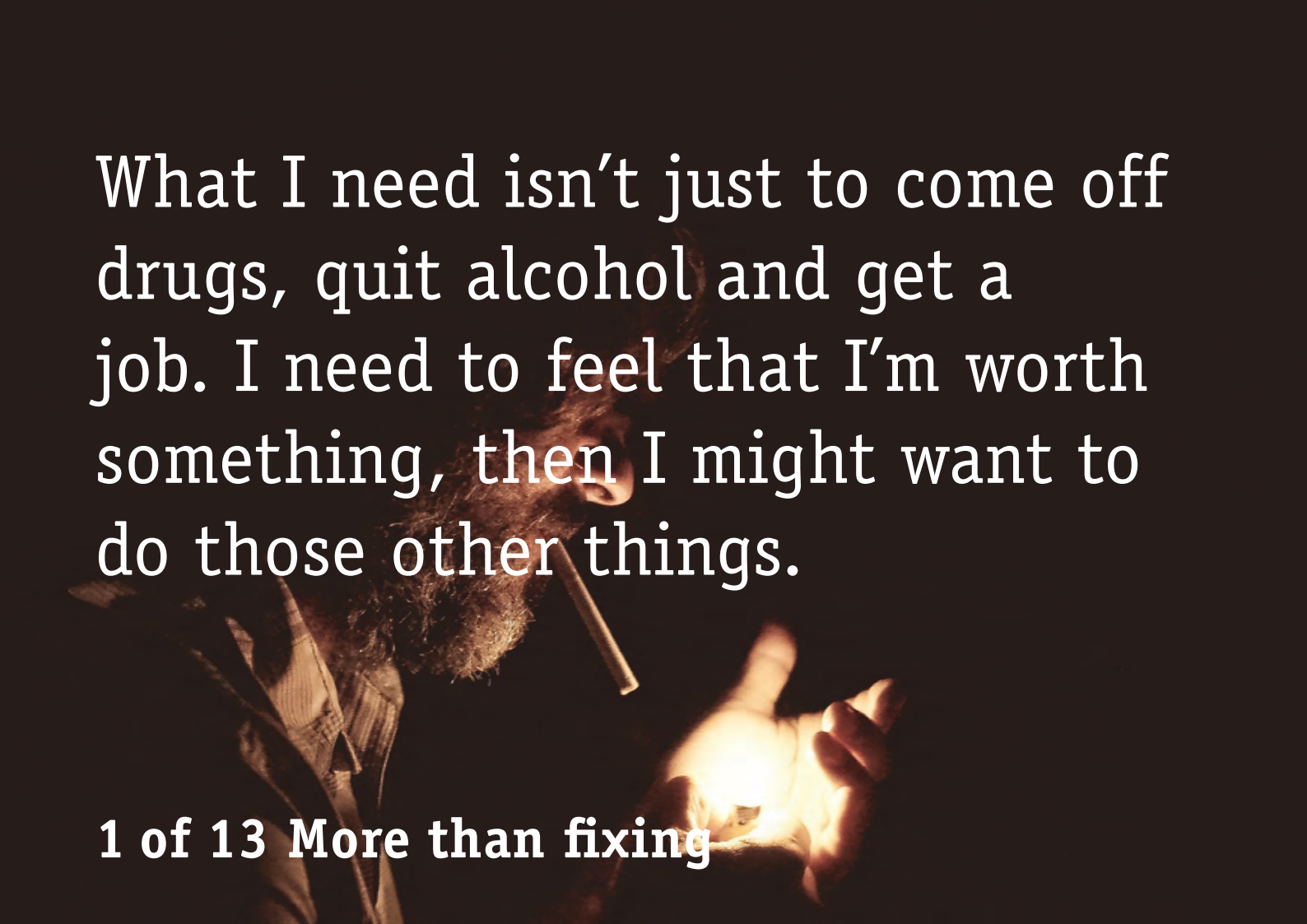
The results were so powerful that they demanded a need for radical change. Change not only in how we delivered support, but in how our entire organisation thought, acted and responded to make sure the individual was at the heart of every decision we made and every action we took.

A whole cultural change was needed. So that’s what we did. We took a blank piece of paper and created the first Person-led, Transitional, Strength-based Response (PTS) for people experiencing homelessness and other tough times.

The following ‘Wisdoms from the Street’ illustrate the key issues highlighted to us during this review. What we learned informed a completely new way of working so that homelessness and tough times can become what they should be; a temporary transition.

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What I need isn't just to come off drugs, quit alcohol and get a job. I need to feel that I'm worth something, then I might want to do those other things.

**1 of 13 More than fixing**

**People told us about the focus of the services they received. They felt that the aim was to find out what the problems were and then set about trying to fix them without understanding that they weren't ready to give up the things that were helping them cope.**

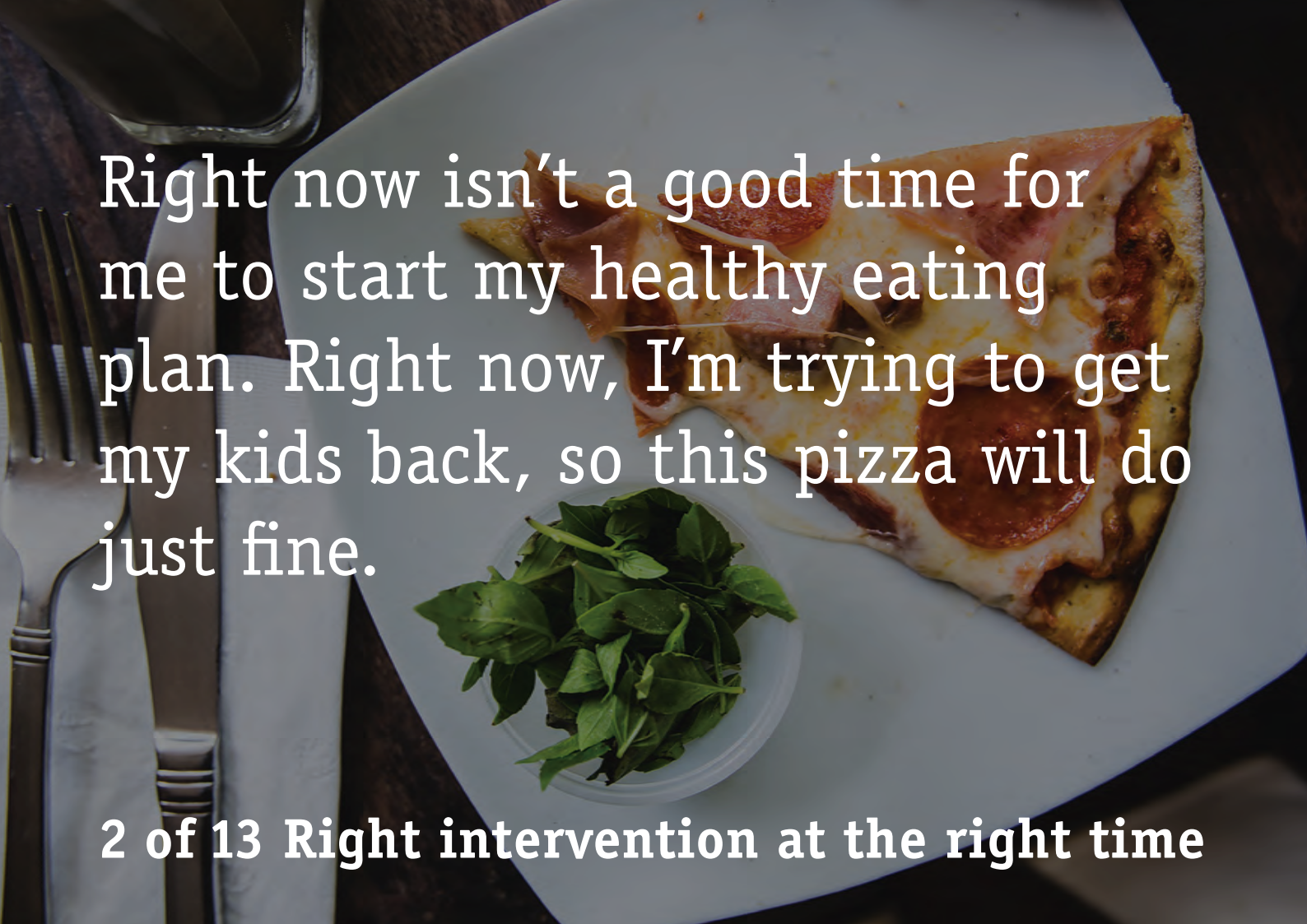
Many used drugs, alcohol or self-harming as ways to cope with traumatic experiences. Some did so to keep in with their friends., forget about their situations or just get through the night. Without finding more positive things to replace them, they needed something to help them get through.

Often, it is difficult for people to move on positively from a place of shame, feelings of failure or where their experiences aren't validated by someone significant in their lives.

### **We took action**

We researched further and found that this was common. There was a body of evidence that identified that, by maintaining people in their area of weakness (their needs), minimal impact would be achieved. By harnessing people's strengths, evidencing their previous successes, exploring what they can do and validating their experiences, people build on their own abilities and move toward more positive, sustainable life changes. Training staff on how people use coping strategies is a key part of this.

***The PTS works with people's strengths and abilities so they can take control of their lives and get to where they want to be.***

A top-down view of a white plate containing a slice of pepperoni pizza and a small pile of fresh green basil leaves. To the left of the plate, a silver fork and knife are visible, partially wrapped in a white napkin. The background is a dark, textured surface, likely a wooden table.

Right now isn't a good time for me to start my healthy eating plan. Right now, I'm trying to get my kids back, so this pizza will do just fine.

**2 of 13 Right intervention at the right time**

**People told us that often, the help available to them wasn't what they needed at that point in time.**

Instead of being able to access what they knew would really help, they ended up attending key working sessions that focused on box ticking rather than what was really going on in their lives and what they felt they needed. The interventions were not 'real world'.

Having to engage in activities that didn't reflect their interests, spending months on waiting lists and undertaking tasks and courses to prove that they were ready to move out of the homelessness sector was often further proof of how far they had failed in life.

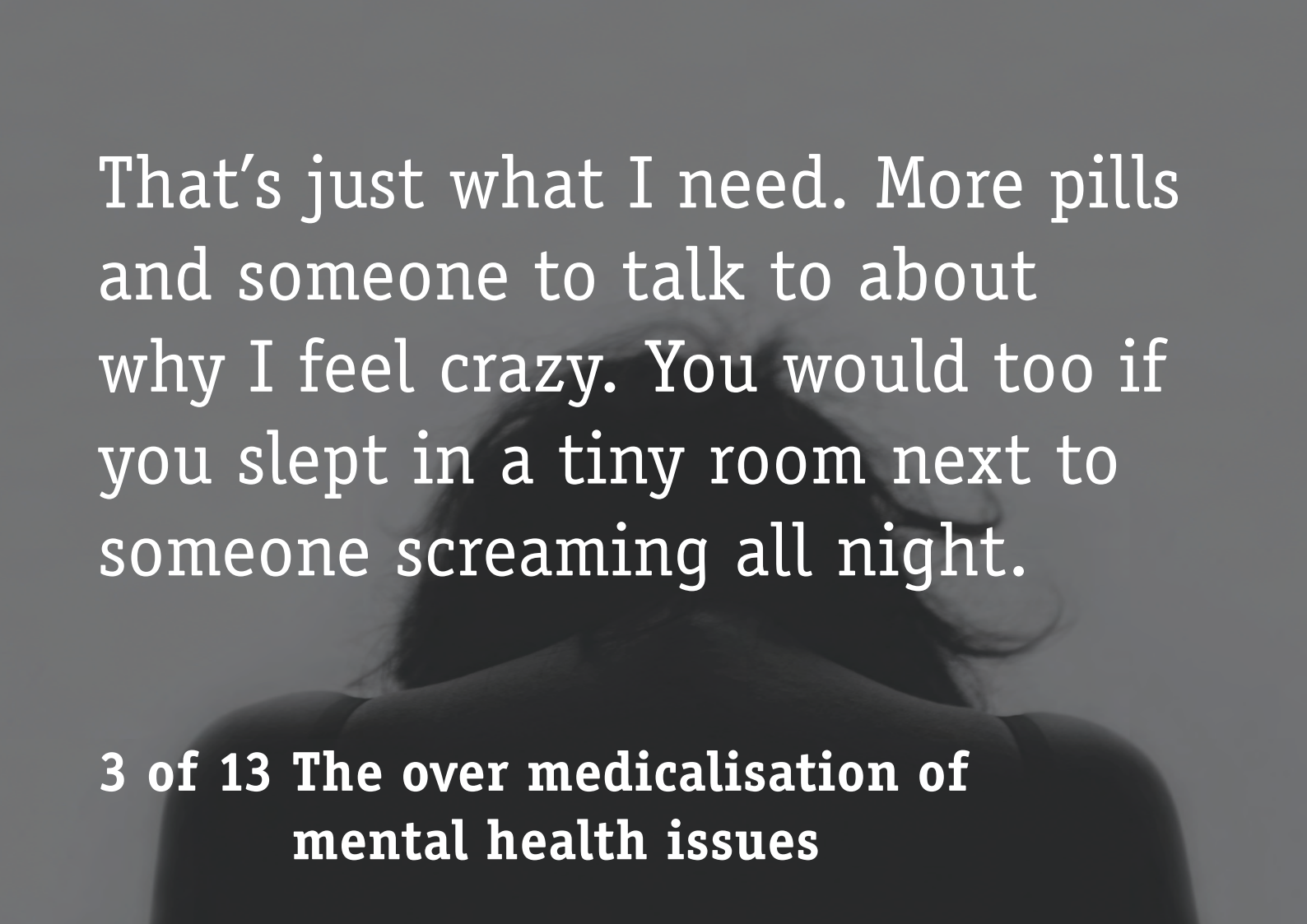
**We took action**

We threw out needs and risk assessments and the use of paperwork in front of people and replaced it all with real world, advantaged conversations.

Our focus was on listening and hearing people, then providing what they needed to make whatever difference they wanted to make in their life. Often, this didn't involve providing a service but was instead providing an opportunity. We gave everyone access to small personal budgets and bonds so they could shape their own markets and drive supply based on what they knew they needed at the times they needed it.

Providing the right opportunity at the right time also meant that the PTS doesn't just operate 9am to 5pm.

***The PTS embeds personalisation through the approach, personal budgets, talent bonds and transition grants that finance the services, activities and opportunities that individuals need, when they need it.***



That's just what I need. More pills  
and someone to talk to about  
why I feel crazy. You would too if  
you slept in a tiny room next to  
someone screaming all night.

**3 of 13 The over medicalisation of  
mental health issues**

**Significant numbers of people talked of being prescribed drugs for anxiety, depression or bipolar disorders, when in reality, their emotional distress was related to their homelessness, isolation and abuse from people around them.**

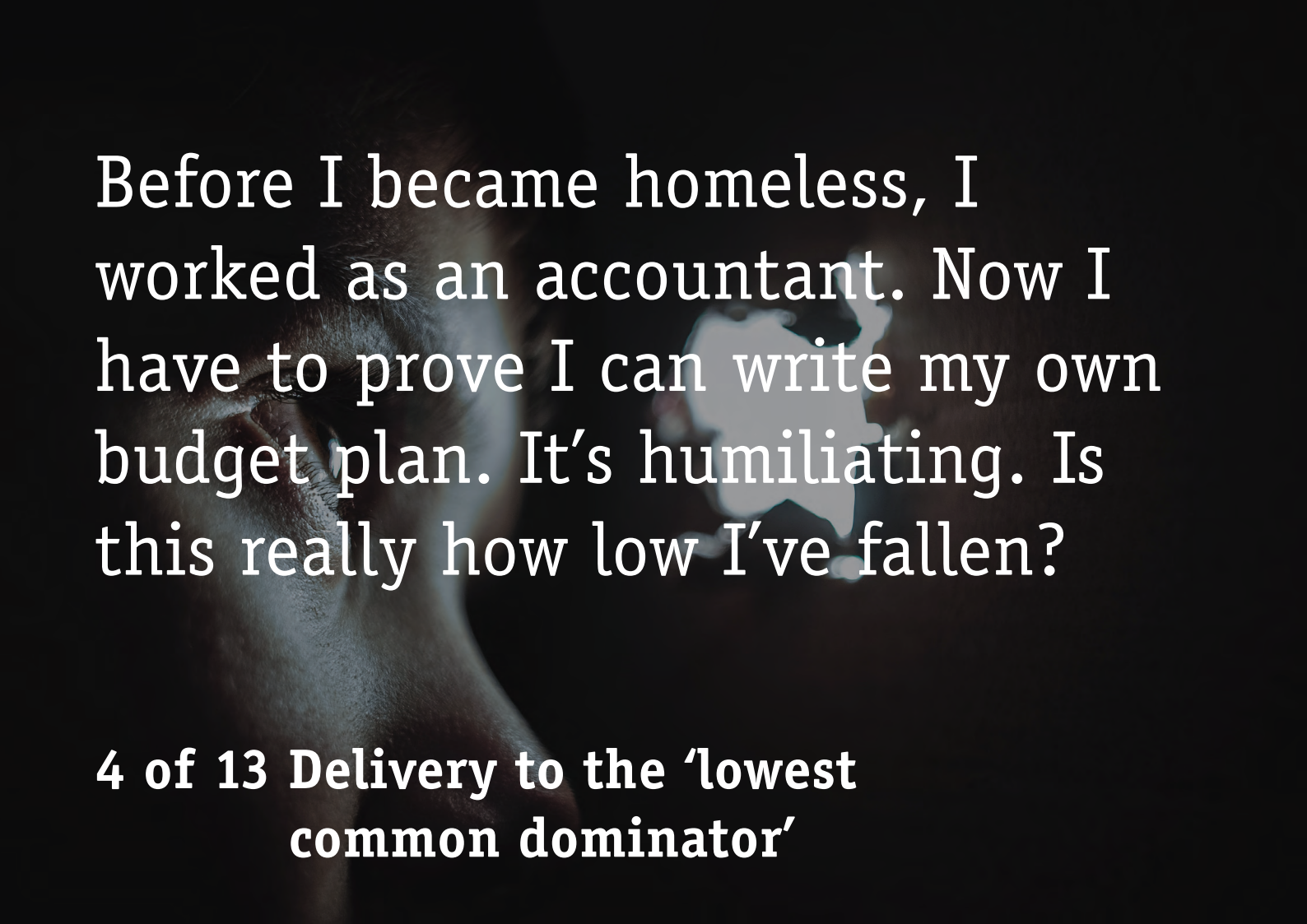
Many people were referred to mental health services and community psychiatric teams due to behaviour that was later identified as post-traumatic stress. Suicidal thoughts or attempts were often a result of events in the past or their circumstances – for example, living in unsuitable housing where they were intimidated or didn't feel safe.

For many people, they became defined by their 'mental health' diagnosis. This acted as a barrier to moving on from their homeless situation and led to them becoming institutionalised into the system.

### **We took action**

In many situations, we changed the focus of our conversations to ask 'what happened to you?' not 'what's wrong with you?'. We aim to identify whether mental health issues and emotional distress are the reasons why people are homeless or if they are a symptom of their situation. This allows support to be tailored to the individual and informs whether solutions are medical or whether alternative options are more appropriate.

***The PTS provides a range of options, choices and information to promote healthy, mental and emotional wellbeing.***



Before I became homeless, I  
worked as an accountant. Now I  
have to prove I can write my own  
budget plan. It's humiliating. Is  
this really how low I've fallen?

**4 of 13 Delivery to the 'lowest  
common denominator'**

**The norm has been for skill development courses and tenancy support training to be a requirement for people to complete in order to prove their ability to look after themselves and move out of homelessness.**

The evidence from what people told us, was that in reality, the only real benefit to them was the short term social interaction rather than any long term sustained improvement.

Low course attendance and strategies for engagement have been high on the agenda for many years. People told us that they didn't engage because they felt awkward, uncomfortable about what they may have to talk about, feared bumping into people they owed money to or saw the groups as patronizing. One guy said he was booked onto a vocational course which was great, but no one had asked about his educational history... he had 2 degrees and was easily more qualified than the person delivering the session.

### **We took action**

We stopped running internal courses and replaced them with brokered, community based opportunities and resources tailored to the individual.

***The PTS gives individuals the control to identify their own goals or barriers and how they want to tackle them.***

A person wearing a brown jacket, a dark beanie, and a large black backpack is walking away from the camera on a city street at night. The street is illuminated by warm, yellowish streetlights and blurred lights from buildings and cars in the background, creating a bokeh effect. Other pedestrians are visible in the distance.

I was abused by my step-dad.  
I drink a litre of vodka a day.  
I last had unprotected sex  
last week.  
Now your turn...I didn't think so.

**5 of 13 More than needs and risks**

**From what people told us, constant needs and risk assessments made them feel humiliated at best, re-traumatised at worst.**

Having to tell, often painful stories, over and over again was distressing. Disclosing very personal information to people they didn't know made them become distant from themselves or they 'became their problem' and adopted it as their identity.

Many told us that they felt powerless to refuse to answer questions that triggered feelings of sadness, hopelessness or embarrassment as without it, they wouldn't get any support. Others used their 'needs' to maximize their chances of meeting their need for friendship, resources or individual attention.

Eventually, this was institutionalising people to the point where they felt they had no hope of a better life or being defined as anything other than the combination of their needs.

**We took action**

We threw out the paperwork. All of it. And started from scratch. Every policy, every procedure, every manual and co-created it all with the mantra 'how would I feel if this were me?' at the core. Engaging with people in a respectful, human and genuine way can't just be new words on paper, it had to be done through our shared, lived experience. Now, each policy, how we approach safeguarding, how we deal with incidences, how we lone work has been developed and delivered to staff around that mantra. As a result, our whole organisational culture has shifted to have the individual's strengths genuinely at the heart of everything we do.

***The PTS has been designed around the individual, not for them, so that each interaction evidences the fact that people can achieve and sustain their progress.***

COMMUNITY

Before I became homeless, I used to love playing guitar and going to gigs. Funnily enough, I still do.

**6 of 13 Strengths, abilities & aspirations**

**People told us that the only times they ever mentioned their hobbies or interests were on application forms and these were rarely or never discussed or followed up.**

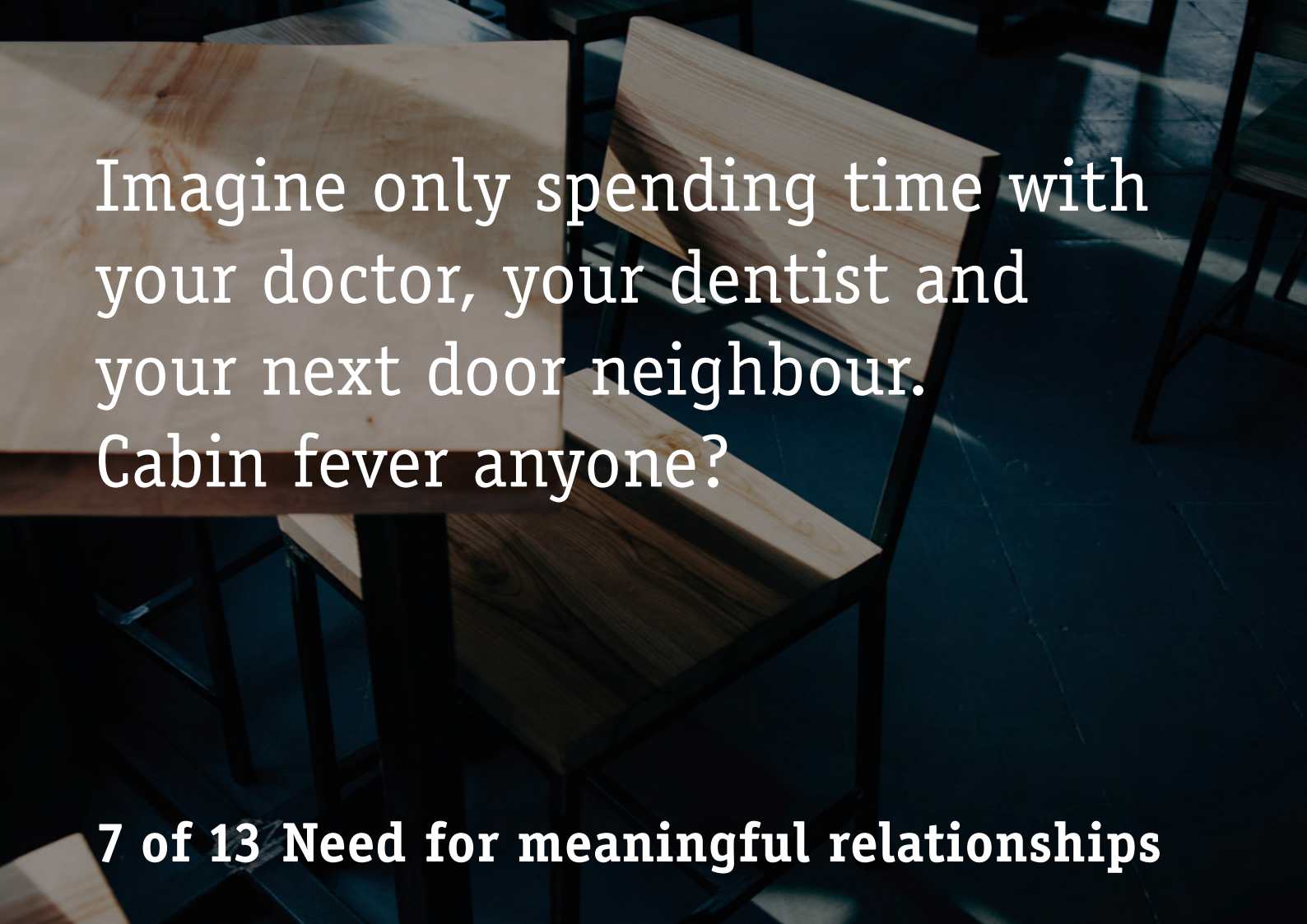
There was limited opportunity to discuss what they had been good at in the past, what they really enjoyed and what their abilities and talents were.

The focus wasn't on exploring who they were and what they could build on or aspired to be. Most had no day to day evidence of personal achievement or success. Their predominant experience was of failing. The focus on goals aimed at 'fixing' problems meant that often, they didn't manage to sustain coming off drugs or keep up with their commitments. Motivation crashed because they felt trapped in a system that told them they failed.

**We took action**

We stopped asking people about their needs. We ensured that every conversation mirrored the conversations we had outside of work when meeting people for the first time. We made a genuine effort to explore what people were good at, their interests and tried to find their 'spark'. Once we found it, we went out and matched them with real world opportunities outside of the homelessness sector. We didn't focus on people giving up alcohol but finding activities that they enjoyed and could develop so they wanted to reduce their drinking.

***The PTS builds on people's strengths and interests so they are inspired to change and motivated to develop them. Positive hard outcomes are naturally achieved and sustained as a result.***

A photograph of a wooden dining table and chairs in a dimly lit room. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking down at the table and chairs. The lighting is soft and moody, with shadows cast across the floor and the underside of the table. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text.

Imagine only spending time with  
your doctor, your dentist and  
your next door neighbour.  
Cabin fever anyone?

**7 of 13 Need for meaningful relationships**

**When we asked people about their friends, they were more often than not other people experiencing homelessness.**

When asked about their support networks, these were support workers or other professionals. Opportunity to build genuine relationships with people outside of the sector was limited.

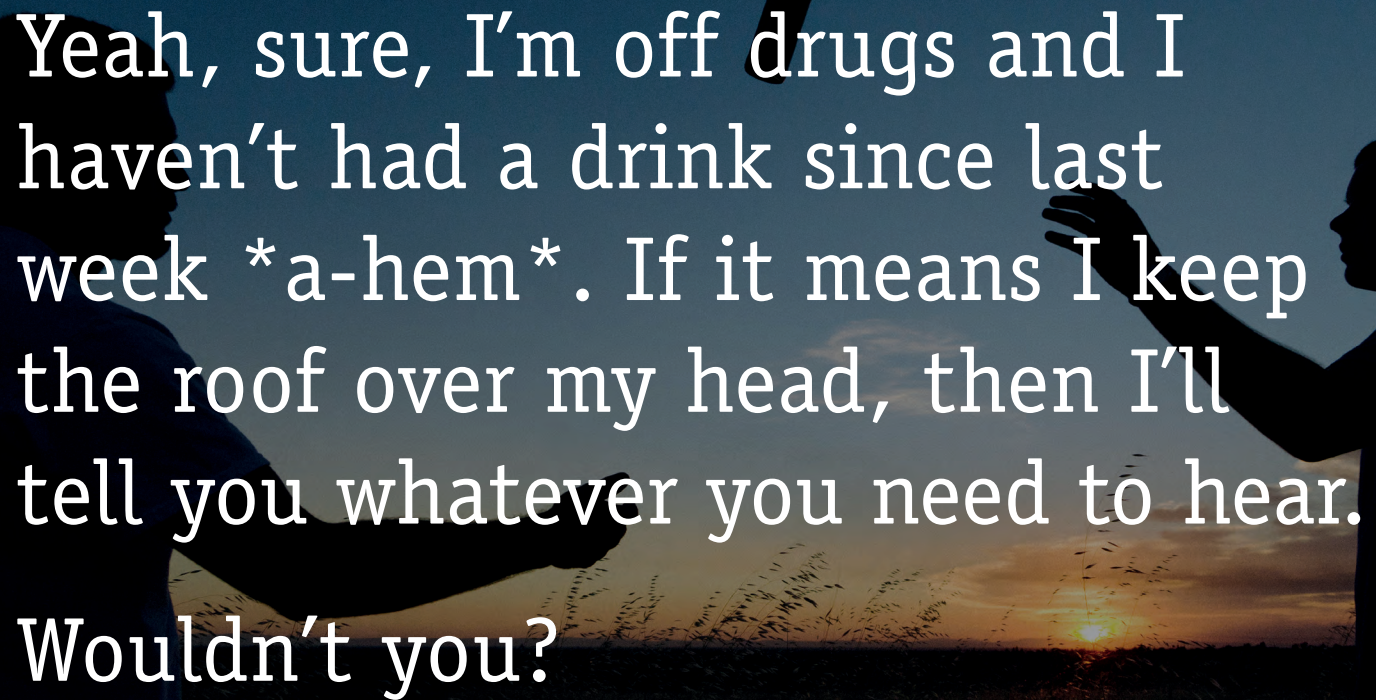
When we went deeper, it transpired that staff were uneasy about introducing ‘homeless people’ to the public as it was too risky and the public wouldn’t know how to handle challenging situations that may arise. People experiencing homelessness felt isolated from the community. They had no confidence to use community resources as they didn’t feel people would accept them.

Many staff were not trained in staff-client relationships and had created dependencies where people became ‘attached’ to their key worker or support worker. While trusting relationships are key, staff also needed to understand the negative impact of encouraging dependency.

**We took action**

We addressed the issue of dependency and made sure that a focus of the work was assisting people to have access to building a whole network of support and a number of trusting relationships. All Mayday coaches are now trained in power dynamics. We also introduced full time volunteers who assist people to build positive peer networks and take up opportunities in the community.

***The PTS shifts the focus away from risk and keeping people apart from familiar acquaintances as they move on from hostels toward building genuine new friendship groups.***

The background of the slide features a sunset scene with two men in silhouette. The man on the left is gesturing with his hand, while the man on the right holds a bottle aloft. The sky is a mix of orange and blue, and the foreground shows dark silhouettes of tall grass.

Yeah, sure, I'm off drugs and I haven't had a drink since last week \*a-hem\*. If it means I keep the roof over my head, then I'll tell you whatever you need to hear. Wouldn't you?

**8 of 13 Balanced power dynamics**

**In a lot of situations where people were supported in their accommodation, people talked about their relationship with their key worker/ support worker.**

It was a common theme that people had good relationships with workers but were often unable to be totally open with them in fear that they would lose their accommodation. Some people said that they attended keyworking sessions just to keep the roof over their head or avoided support sessions as they had rent arrears. Staff often talked about people being manipulative or dishonest but had no recognition of the power dynamic in the relationship between a resident and a worker who has the authority to evict the person.

### **We took action**

We took all of our coaches out of housing and based their roles within communities. We completely separated our accommodation business and made sure that coaches were not involved in management or operational housing matters and didn't have a say on an individual's tenancy status.

***The PTS is set up to ensure that power is balanced so that people are able to develop genuine trusting relationships that don't influence the roof over their heads.***

I'm not sure the security guard at my mental health unit really knows what to say when I talk about how I was beaten up as a kid.

**9 of 13 Appropriate professional support**

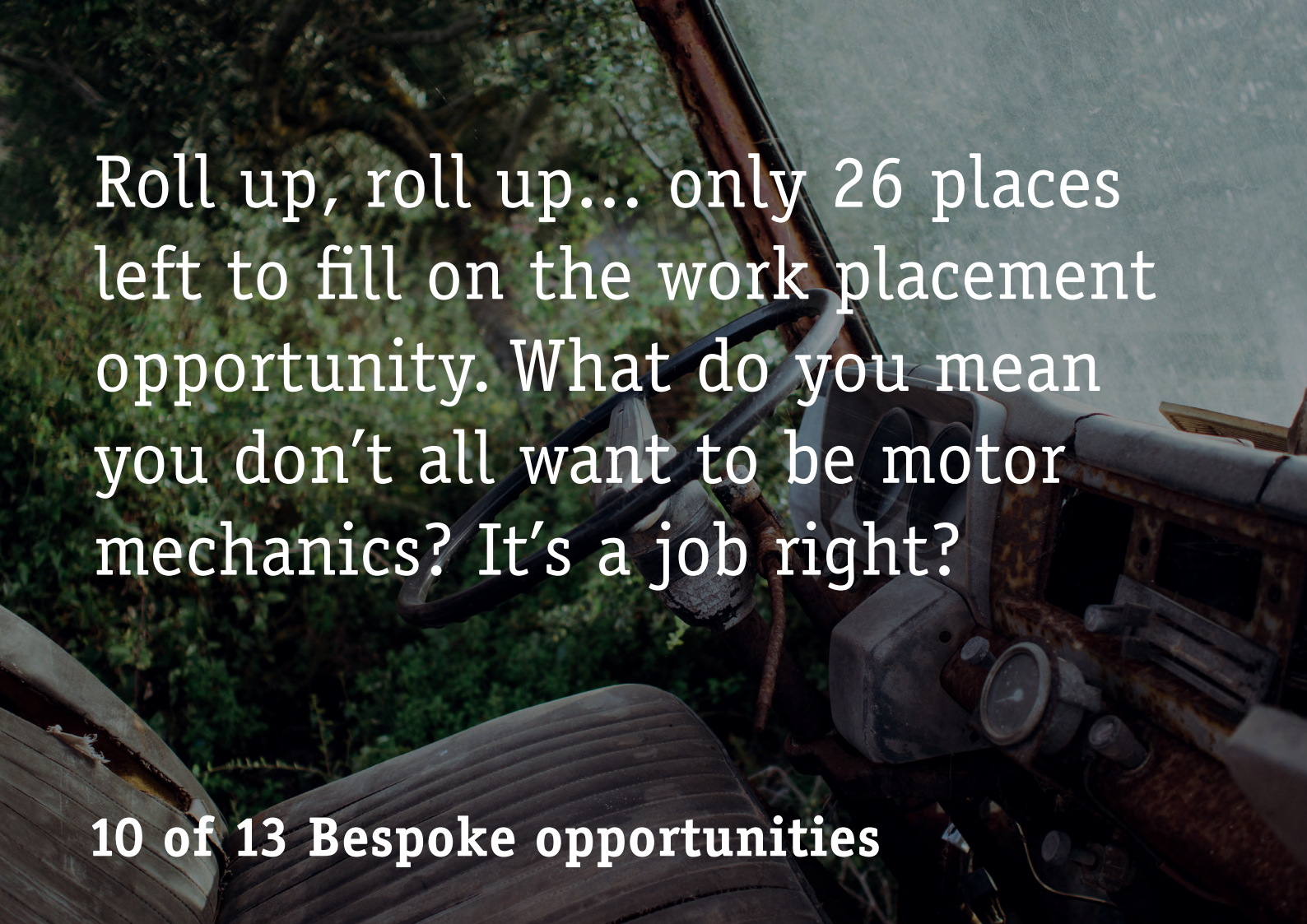
**People who had experienced trauma in their lives and those with mental health issues spoke of disclosing their issues to their keyworkers only to come across significant barriers to accessing the appropriate support.**

Long waiting lists or lack of psychological support whilst using substances came hand in hand with living in temporary accommodation. This resulted in difficulties sleeping, then self-medicating or relying on drugs received from doctors. There appeared to be no solution to this chicken and egg situation. Where some people did get appropriate care when expressing suicidal thoughts, others were accused of attention seeking or referred to services with long waiting times. As a result, they resorted back to self-medicating and unhealthy coping strategies.

### **We took action**

We looked beyond the immediate and usual options available to people who required professional support and provided each person with the option of a personal budget where they were able to select and access their own therapy and therapists when they needed it.

***The PTS opens up immediate and new options for people to access the support they need when they need it so that they can begin to shape their own markets rather than relying on whatever's available.***



Roll up, roll up... only 26 places left to fill on the work placement opportunity. What do you mean you don't all want to be motor mechanics? It's a job right?

**10 of 13 Bespoke opportunities**

**Mayday developed very positive relationships with local, regional and national employers, many of whom offered to provide opportunities to people living in Mayday accommodation.**

However, the take up of placements was mixed and staff talked about spending significant amounts of time trying to encourage people to get involved, often with limited success.

People told us that they were not interested in some of the areas of work on offer and talked about the embarrassment they felt turning up to a workplace as ‘the homeless trainee’.

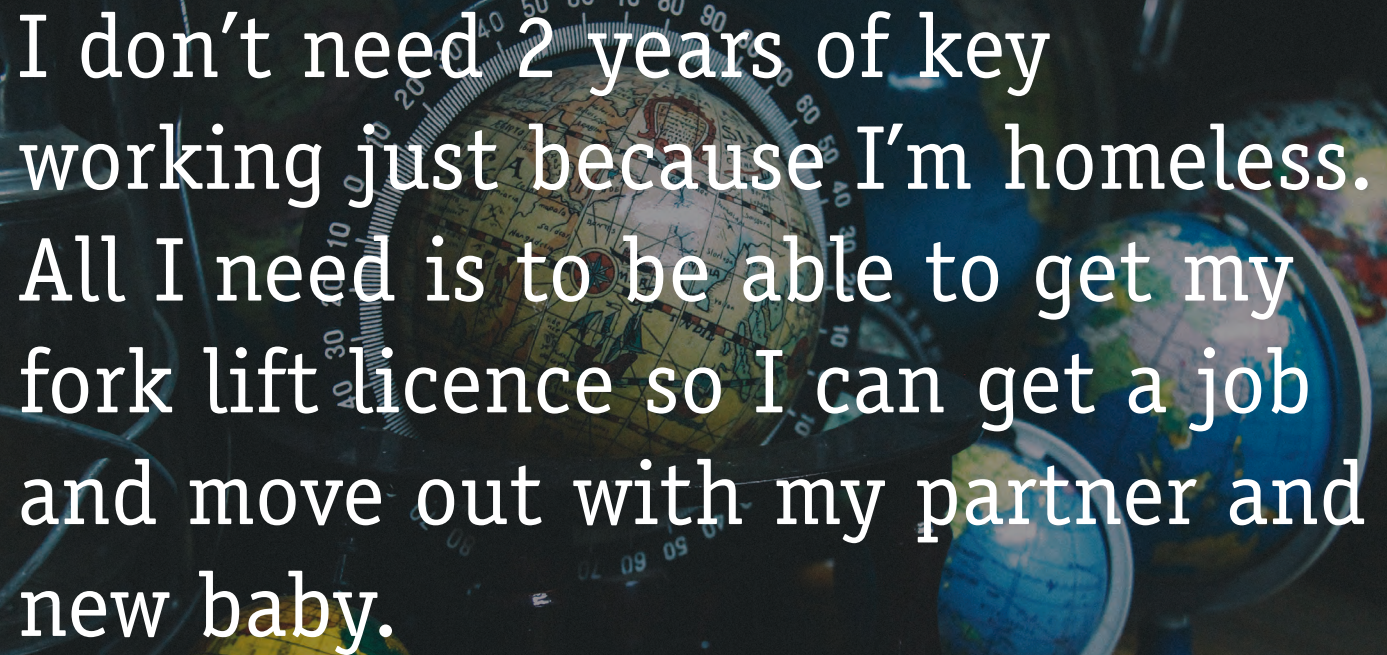
Some young people said that their families put pressure on them to take on casual work to earn income.

Some people said that they did not want their benefits affected. A small number of people said they didn’t want to work.

### **We took action**

We changed how we found work placement opportunities for people and instead of finding the opportunities first and trying to get people to attend, we brokered work and educational placements individually based on what people actually wanted to do. We also put the power in the hands of the individuals to encourage them to make their own approaches and to negotiate terms of the offers themselves.

***The PTS looks beyond homelessness and provides real opportunities for people based on their skills and interests. No more ‘square peg, round hole’!***

The background is a dark, moody collage. It features a vintage-style globe with a grid of latitude and longitude lines, showing parts of Africa and Europe. A large, circular clock face with numbers from 10 to 90 is visible behind the globe. To the right, there's a blue telescope or similar optical instrument. The overall lighting is low, with some highlights on the globe and the clock face.

I don't need 2 years of key  
working just because I'm homeless.  
All I need is to be able to get my  
fork lift licence so I can get a job  
and move out with my partner and  
new baby.

**11/13 'Real world' interventions**


**People talked about how they ended up in supported accommodation primarily because they needed somewhere to live.**

What was offered to them once they had moved in was mostly service led. Many people felt that just because they required a roof over their head, didn't mean they necessarily needed services to get them to where they needed to be. In reality, an opportunity or a new focus was all they needed. Sometimes they just wanted to feel like they were worthy of a bright future and to be offered the means to get there themselves.

**We took action**

We realised that not everyone needed us, or not so much of us. Sometimes, they just needed one simple thing to set them back on the right path. We started to invest directly in people and their talents through Mayday Talent Bonds. People can come to us with their own business plans to access funding to help them move forward quickly before they become entrenched in the system.

***The PTS not only sees talent, but it invests in it so quick transitions out of homelessness are possible.***



Yeah, we're a great community at my hostel. I'm perfectly safe here (as long as I hand over my money to my roommate and don't let anyone else know).

**12 of 13 Individual control**

**People talked about their experience of moving out of homelessness and how little control they felt even when they cooperated fully in what was asked of them.**

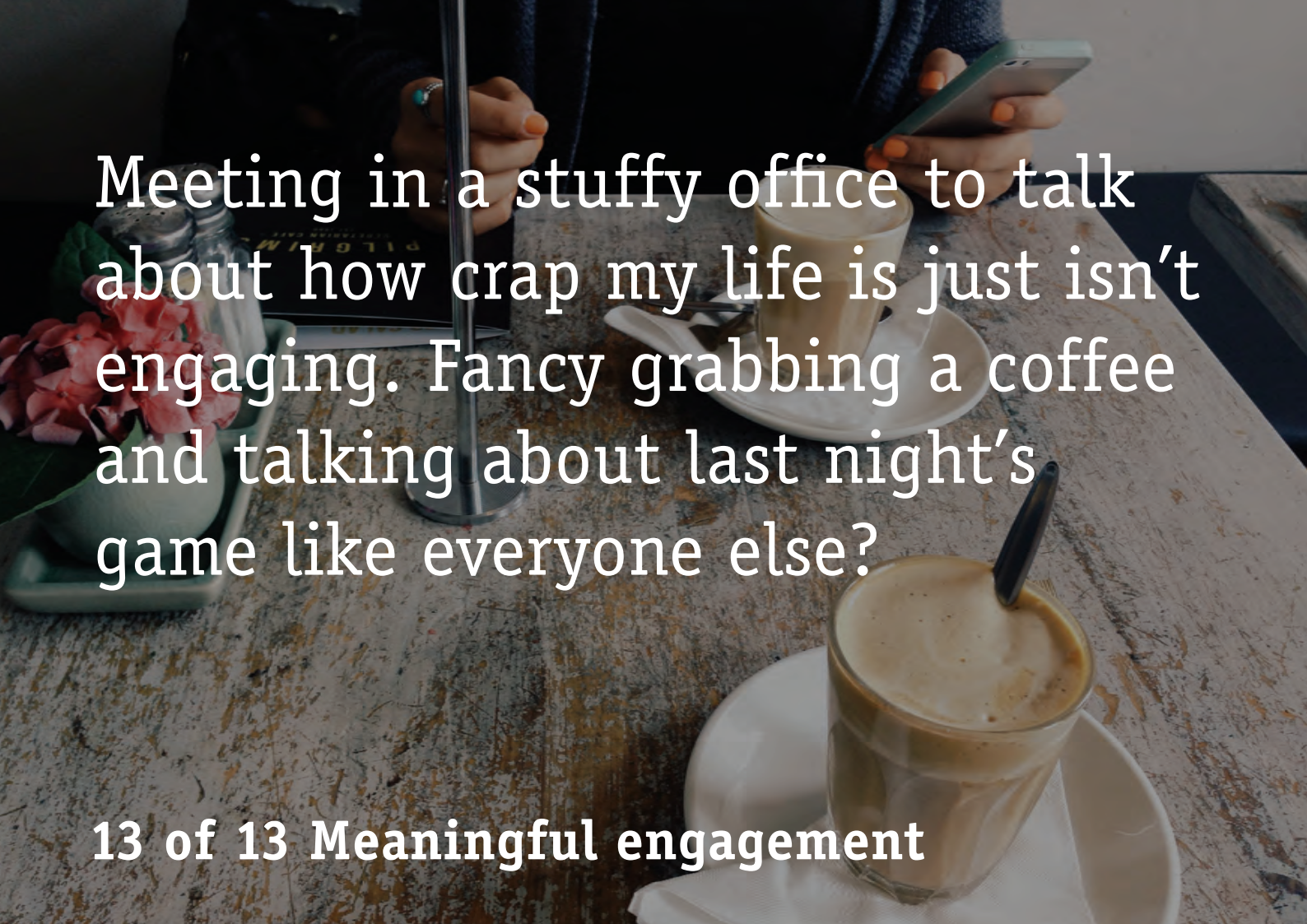
Those who had spent longer periods in hostels talked about being controlled by other people who lived there. This included financial abuse and an unhealthy dependency on using drugs and alcohol as a way of joining in with the social scene and ultimately staying safe.

Most people talked about unrealistic rules which worked against their ability to get out of their situation including not always having access to their belongings or passports. In some accounts people had clearly become institutionalised in accommodation where meals were provided for them and people had very little power and control over day to day living. Some people we work with didn't understand how to use a door key after they moved out of hostel accommodation. It is interesting that these people are referred to or categorized as having 'complex needs'.

**We took action**

We stopped viewing people as having complex needs and shifted the focus of the problem toward the broken, disempowering system that was designed to 'support' them. We didn't challenge the individuals' abilities to function independently and try to fix it. We started trying to fix the system by delivering a new approach from within the broken system. Through leading by example and staying true to our mission and values, we are continually striving to pave a new way forward in the hope that traditional deficit based services will follow.

***The PTS offers a solution to the broken system and relentlessly promotes individual control so that individuals can flourish and transition out of the system with dignity and self-respect.***

A person is sitting at a table, holding a smartphone in their left hand. On the table, there are two cups of coffee on saucers, a small potted plant with pink flowers, and a book titled 'PILGRIM'. The background is a plain wall.

Meeting in a stuffy office to talk about how crap my life is just isn't engaging. Fancy grabbing a coffee and talking about last night's game like everyone else?

**13 of 13 Meaningful engagement**

**Some people were initially positive about ‘key working’ sessions and many valued the relationship with their keyworker including the practical help and advice they received on issues such as welfare benefits.**

However, a significant number of people said they only attended weekly sessions to comply with their plan so they would be nominated for accommodation. Many people expressed unhappiness at turning up every week in small institutional offices just to talk about their ‘issues’. They disliked being constantly reminded about their situation and having to talk about their problems at a time and place that was often dictated to them. It was draining and it didn’t inspire them to want to turn up. Many sessions left them feeling worse about themselves rather than engaged and motivated.

### **We took action**

We stopped making our service mandatory and introduced voluntary engagement. We want people to feel in control. To balance the power dynamic, we considered our service to be a ‘product’; something that we had to market and to sell. If people chose not to buy our product or engage with us, we needed to go back to the drawing board and improve. Like many products, we offer a four week trial, so people can test us out and change their mind before they commit to working with a coach. This allows people to build a relationship before deciding on the changes they want to make in their lives.

***The PTS gives people the choice to choose to work with us and puts the hard work in the hands of our coaches to make sure what they are offering is what people want.***



**Mayday Trust is a forward thinking organisation that thrives on finding better ways to work with people going through tough times such as experiencing homelessness, leaving care or coming out of prison.**

### **What we do**

We provide direct support through our unique PTS Response, which aims to get people through those tough times by making it as positive and transitional as possible. We do this by providing the right highly personalised interventions at the right times and building upon each person's unique strengths, talents and abilities.

We never get complacent and always reflect on our work and people's experience so that we adapt, improve and provide better personalised services for people.

We also work with like-minded organisations, commissioners and investors to share our experiences, explore the benefits and challenges of delivering strength based work with the aim of creating an environment where new solutions and the people who receive them can thrive.

### **Working together**

We are looking for like-minded organisations that are also keen to make a difference to the way traditional services are delivered to people perceived as having 'complex needs' and where Mayday's PTS Response can help to make this happen.

**If you would like to find out more about how we can work together, please visit [www.maydaytrust.org.uk/innovate-with-us](http://www.maydaytrust.org.uk/innovate-with-us) or email us at [PTS@maydaytrust.org.uk](mailto:PTS@maydaytrust.org.uk)**



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