



The importance of feeling safe in new relationships

When people move, there are new relationships to build with new staff teams. This may take time, and may be a challenging process for both the person who has moved, and the staff.

Some people may have had negative experiences with staff before, which left them feeling controlled or unsafe, like Carly, who said this about her time in hospital:

"If you do anything wrong, like try and get out..... they'd used to press the alarm, and then you'd get the staff from all over the ward coming in. And then they used to pin you down, and then they used to give you an injection to keep you quiet."

Experiences like this could understandably make people worried about the new staff they are coming to work with.

Psychologists understand that relationships are really important. Although staff at the new home are not engaging in therapy with the person who is moving, they can offer something in the relationship which is *therapeutic* - i.e. which is helpful, supportive and is nurturing. One important aspect of the relationship is the *developmentally needed relationship*. Just as babies and young children need 'good enough' parenting to know that their carer is there for them, we all benefit greatly from a sense that someone is there for us, no matter what. This means that we prefer consistency and reliability in relationships. This makes it easier to predict what the other person will do. This is reassuring, and much less scary.

John Bowlby and later Mary Ainsworth developed attachment theory based on observations of young children and their caregivers. They noticed that young children can have close bonds with those who care for them regularly. These bonds allowed them to feel safe and secure. Their caregiver can then provide a 'safe base' from which they feel secure enough to go and explore the world; they know that they can return to this safe base for comfort and protection.

As adults, attachment still plays a part. People want to know that they can trust a relationship, and trust a caregiver to be there for them. In services, service users can use the staff as caregivers like this, to help them feel less anxious.



This might play out in what is seen as 'pushing boundaries' - the person may need to see that you (and your team) will provide consistent and reliable support to them, even if things go wrong. Sometimes people end up behaving in ways which aren't safe for them or others, and it may get to the point where the relationship is no longer possible - the placement 'breaks down'. Unfortunately this can then reinforce the person's belief (sometimes not at a conscious level) that 'no one can cope with me'.

Many people live with a sense of threat that their new placement could be taken away from them at any time. As Chris put it on his fears about living in the community:

"if anything goes wrong, if you step out of line, you're probably going back to prison and they throw the key away."

This sense of threat may make people feel anxious about how safe and reliable their new home is. Underlying anxiety could influence people then behaving in ways that are challenging, and therefore unfortunately ironically make the chance of a placement breakdown more likely.



Figure 1 shows a pattern of how fear about being let down again can impact on behaviour, which in turn impacts on fear in a vicious cycle. If the cycle keeps going, Maraya is at risk of being moved again if behaviours continue to escalate if staff think 'we can't cope'.

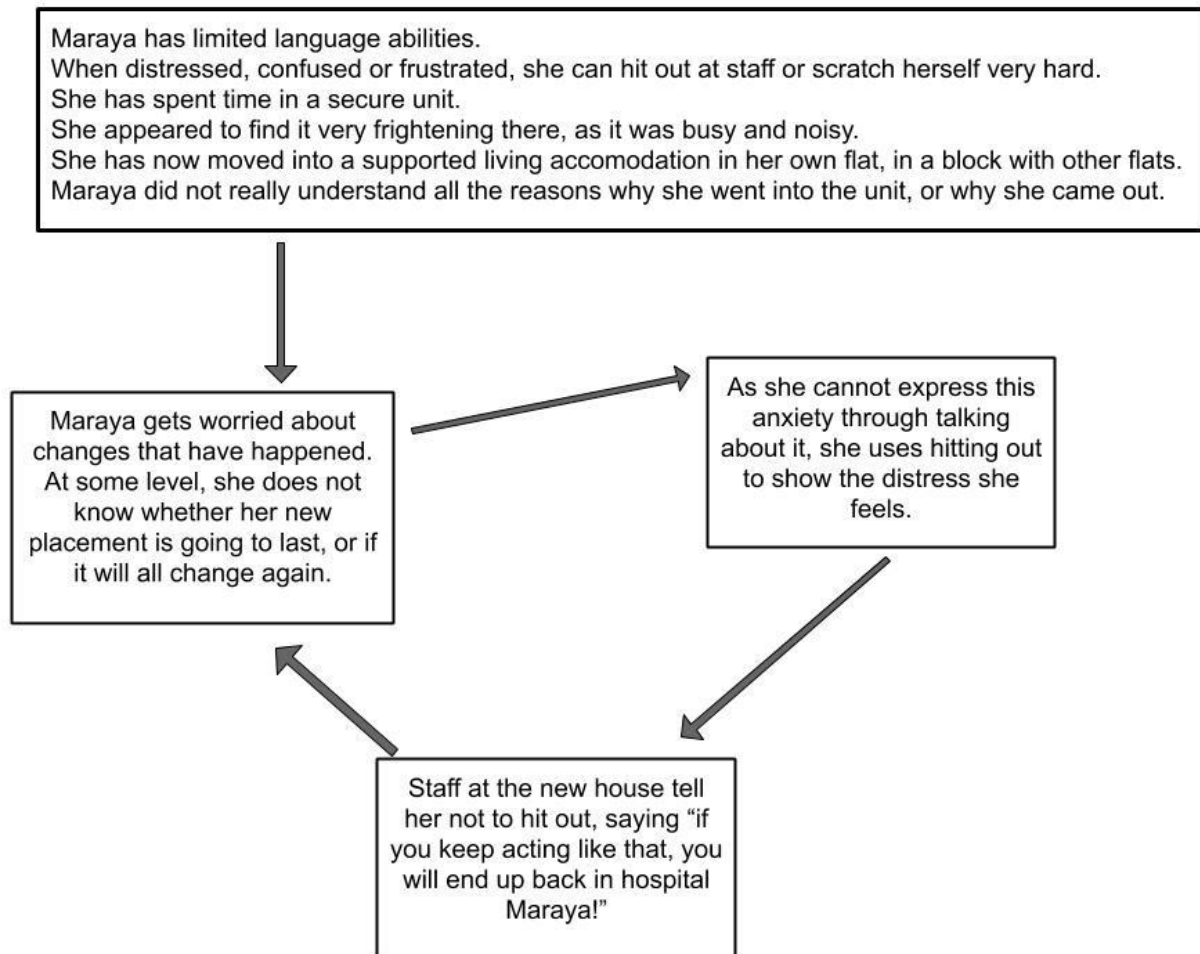


Figure 1.

Therefore, it can be vital for someone who has moved to feel a sense of safety and security with the new team's ability to support and contain them, for the placement a success.



Some ideas for boosting a sense of safety in the relationship:

- All the team should stick to the same support plan for working with someone. This will mean that the support is predictable, which is reassuring and comforting. Use team meetings to make sure you are all consistent in your approaches.
- If you have promised you will do something, make sure you do it - this will build a sense of trust.
- Consider using visual timetables to keep routines structured and predictable.
- Don't be dismissive - you may not agree with what's upsetting the person, or the level of distress, but their response is valid and you should make sure you take time to show them that you have heard, and are taking them seriously.
- As a team, take time to get to know the person, and their past experiences - this could help make sense of how they behave now, and may make you feel better able to understand where they are coming from. A clinical psychologist may be able to help develop a *formulation*, which draws on the things that someone has been through to make sense of how they are at the moment.
- Make sure you have good supervision to talk about times that are difficult - this will help you keep a check on your own responses to situations which can be really difficult at work.
- Be mindful of not using threats - don't say things like "if you keep acting like that, this placement might not work out...." Things like this could backfire! Rather than making someone behave in a way that you want, it could lead to the person being more anxious and more likely to act in ways which jeopardise their placement.