



A Crisis in Crisis

The appalling state of emergency accommodation
in Melbourne's north and west

Prepared by the Northern and Western Homelessness Networks

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felt like a cell”*

*“The worst nights
of my entire life.”*

*“Unsafe, uncomfortable,
scared, lonely, worried.”*

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Melbourne is experiencing a housing crisis.

As a result, the numbers of people who have no home are increasing. When people have nowhere to live, they often look to the homelessness service system for urgent support. Unfortunately, the Homelessness Service System across Victoria only has access to 423 government funded crisis beds. To make up a significant shortfall in crisis accommodation homelessness services utilise low end hotels and private rooming houses. This accommodation is extremely unsafe and typically of a very poor standard.

This report has been prepared by the Northern and Western Homelessness Networks in response to consumer feedback that highlights the crisis in crisis accommodation in Melbourne's north and west. This report highlights the appalling conditions that people are required to live in while they wait for more secure accommodation to become available, if at all.

As a sector we are no longer prepared to refer people to substandard crisis accommodation, nor are we willing to participate in continuing to harm vulnerable people seeking our assistance.

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Introduction

The Northern and Western Homelessness Networks are two aligned networks of fifty Specialist Homelessness and Family Violence Organisations, managing 180 Specialist Homelessness programs operating in Melbourne's north and west. These services meet bi-monthly to improve responses to people experiencing homelessness in the North and West through management of coordinated homelessness service system arrangements, consumer consultation, linkages with allied service sectors and shared professional development.

When people have nowhere to live, they often present to the access point services that provide entry to the homelessness service system. As there is a severe shortage of affordable long term accommodation, the homelessness sector seeks to find short term emergency accommodation options for those presenting.

Across Victoria, there are only 423 crisis 'beds' available to people experiencing homelessness and/or family violence. When those beds are full, agencies are completely dependent on the private housing system and they use the limited funds they have available to access low end hotels and private rooming houses.

In 2017 the Northern and Western Homelessness Networks conducted their annual Consumer Survey. In response to feedback received from consumers in 2016, the survey focused specifically on people's experiences of emergency accommodation. The feedback about *purchased* emergency accommodation was overwhelmingly negative across a number of domains; in particular, the level of amenity, lack of cleanliness, high cost, and, most importantly, a perceived lack of safety and security. What consumers clearly stated they wanted was safe, secure, self-contained accommodation, with support available when needed.

The feedback provided by consumers about their experience is not particularly surprising, nor is this a new story. Services and the government have known for many years that the accommodation options available are of mixed quality and amenity, and many are considered unsafe for women, young people and children. The 2009 Rooming House Standards Taskforce Chairperson's Report highlights the very same issues: "Taskforce members reported that squalid conditions are common. Residents report broken locks, broken doors, a lack of working smoke alarms and dirty or unusable shared facilities such as toilets, showers and kitchens"¹. Whilst this report was focused solely on rooming houses, of which there are still many sub-standard facilities still in operation the problem now includes a substantial number of hotels, which are not subject to the same level of regulation.

The Homelessness Service System is experiencing an increased demand for emergency accommodation as a result of increasing rates of homelessness, which is inextricably linked to Melbourne's housing crisis, particularly to the severe and growing lack of affordable housing. This has led to an increase in the number of people presenting to the Specialist Homelessness Service System for assistance, but also an increase in the length of time people are requiring financial support to pay for emergency accommodation, due to a lack of longer term accommodation options. There is also a corresponding reduction in available options, with many low cost rooming houses, caravan parks and hotels having closed over the past few years. The result is that some of the worst private accommodation providers continue to flourish in an environment of high demand and low competition.

This changing environment resulted in the six homelessness access point services in Melbourne's north and west, spending \$2.5 million of Housing Establishment Fund² and other brokerage funds on purchasing emergency accommodation in 2017. This is a 500% increase since 2011³.

The 2018 Victorian Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan has prompted encouraging service reforms in the provision of services to people who are sleeping rough in Victoria. The plan offers a clear framework for the provision of services that should be applied to all people experiencing homelessness: intervening early to prevent homelessness, providing stable accommodation as quickly as possible and supporting people to maintain stable accommodation⁴. Currently the system is reliant on private hotels and rooming houses that our consumers tell us are unsafe, unsanitary and expensive. This does not meet the criteria for providing stable accommodation as quickly as possible.

1 Rooming Housing Standards Taskforce Chairperson's Report, 2009, pg 17.

2 HEF, or Housing Establishment Fund, is brokerage funding provided to Homelessness services to purchase a range of products for people experiencing homelessness, including things such as emergency accommodation, private rent in advance, removals, storage and essential furniture.

3 In addition, key statewide services such as Safe Steps, St Kilda Crisis Centre and Frontyard Melbourne Youth Support Service, all provide after hours responses, funding emergency accommodation from people in Melbourne's north and west who presented to those services.

4 Victoria's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan, January 2018, pg 11.

Clearly this is an unsustainable situation, and the compelling feedback from consumers about their experience should move us to take swift action. The Northern and Western Homelessness Networks call for the following:

Stage 1 – Immediate (Year 1 and 2)

1. The Victorian Government increases Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) brokerage funding across northern and western Melbourne to enable the purchase of safe and appropriate self-contained emergency accommodation as required;
2. The Networks agree on an approved list of private accommodation providers for a range of cohorts and cease using providers that are considered sub-standard;
3. The Victorian Government funds Crisis Accommodation Outreach Support workers at each homelessness access point in northern and western Melbourne (total of 12 FTE) to provide assistance aimed at rapidly rehousing people placed in emergency accommodation;
4. The Victorian Government sets social housing growth fund targets/KPIs for people experiencing homelessness;

Stage 2 – Intermediate (Commencing immediately, completion within 3- 4 years)

5. The Victorian and Commonwealth Governments, in partnership, construct a variety of secure, self-contained, temporary accommodation options for individuals and families as a safe alternative to existing motels and rooming houses⁵;

Stage 3 – Long Term (Commencing immediately, completion within 5 years)

6. In line with the *Everybody's Home campaign*⁶, the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments, in partnership, construct sufficient social housing to enable rapid access to a 'Housing First' model of housing and support that eliminates reliance on private motels and rooming houses for emergency accommodation.

Melbourne's homelessness and housing crisis

We live in a city that is growing by 1,850 people a week⁷. It is estimated that we will need an additional 1.6 million new homes by 2051 in order to meet this growing need⁸.

Lack of supply has resulted in an all-time low in private rental affordability. Anglicare Australia's Rental Affordability Snapshot 2018 identified that less than 1% of private rental properties in Melbourne are affordable for a single person with children in receipt of Parenting Payment. There were **no** properties available that would be affordable for a single person on Newstart⁹.

Not surprisingly, the ABS Census data shows that there has been a corresponding increase in homelessness in Melbourne. Despite the concerted efforts of State and local government, there are growing numbers of people sleeping rough on the streets of Melbourne's CBD and suburbs. This is the visible face of homelessness, but only the tip of the iceberg of the number of people who are experiencing homelessness. Whilst there has been an increase of 14% in homelessness throughout Victoria (from 22,259 in 2011 to 24,828 in 2016), homelessness has increased in parts of Melbourne's north and west by as much as 86% since 2011 and the numbers of people living in overcrowded dwellings has increased by 91% across Melbourne's west. Of the 24,828 people identified as homeless in Victoria on Census night 2016, 41% were in Melbourne's north and west.

In addition to these two factors, there has been a corresponding decline in private accommodation options. For example, in the past four years, two large hotels that were primarily used for families and single women in crisis have closed - City Gate Apartments and Bethel Hotel. Both these hotels, whilst not ideal, provided a relatively safe option, and importantly, charged weekly rates that were significantly cheaper than nightly rates. For singles there has been

⁵ There are already examples in Melbourne of innovative options for cost effectively and speedy construction of self contained accommodation – such as the

Launch Housing VicRoads partnership and the Department of Health and Human Service's demountable pilots.

⁶ Homelessness Australia advises in the *Everybody's Home* campaign, that Australia will need 500,00 new social and affordable homes by 2026.

⁷ ABS Census 2016.

⁸ Victoria in Future 2016 and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, internal analysis, estimated employed persons derived from Victoria in Future 2016, quoted in Victorian State Government, Plan Melbourne 2017 –2050.

⁹ Anglicare Victoria, Rental Affordability Snapshot 2018: Regional Reports and Snapshots(2018).

a significant reduction in rooming house stock over the past 10 years with the closure of places like the Hub in Fitzroy, Fawkner Mansions in South Yarra, the Eildon in St Kilda and the Gatwick in St Kilda, to name only a few. Whilst some of these options, the Gatwick in particular, were substandard and sometimes unsafe, they have left a noticeable gap in the system. It is also the case that many hotel providers will not accept referrals from welfare agencies; either after having had a poor experience, or believing that the clientele will cause trouble. In Melbourne's west, there are currently only two hotels that will accept referrals from homelessness agencies.

What do people who use our services say about emergency accommodation?

The 2017 joint Northern and Western Network Consumer Survey asked service users about the emergency accommodation they were referred to by homelessness agencies¹⁰. Many would argue that providing any accommodation is better than nothing, and is at least a roof over a person's head. The reality of many people's experience challenges this notion. Consumers reported feeling unsafe, demoralised by the squalor they witnessed, with a growing sense of worthlessness and disconnection from their community. Many reported feeling that the quality of the accommodation was a reflection of the way that their community viewed them.

We asked consumers what it was like living in accommodation with shared facilities. Women reported that it was 'horrible, 'terrible', and that they feared violence and rape (one woman reported a rape in emergency accommodation). They said that it was 'unclean', 'not appropriate for children', that there were 'no cooking facilities and nowhere to store food' (see Appendix 1 for a detailed case study).

Men similarly reported that it was 'difficult', 'unclean', 'overcrowded', 'unsafe', with 'poor facilities', 'difficult to cook' and they were unable to 'store food'.

Consumers reported the following experiences of emergency accommodation:

- *I stayed for 18 weeks at [private hotel]. No privacy, too many fights, police continue to be present 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. My first experience. Tome it was hell.*
- *As a victim of domestic violence, I have been housed and surrounded by drunks, addicts and living with a sense of feeling unsafe.*
- *Horrific/degrading felt like a cell.*
- *Unsafe, uncomfortable, scared, lonely, worried.*
- *The worst nights of my entire life.*
- *Couldn't handle living with others in that environment. I went back to living on the streets.*
- *The time when I first left my husband due to dv, I was in a motel and that was not appropriate for me and my children. It was not the safest environment for children. I was given two options of motel rooms. When you have children involved, you need more care taken to accommodation children in safe places.*
- *I have been from pillar to post and treated like a second class citizen. I preferred sleeping on the streets to where you good people sent me.*
- *The landlord at the rooming house cause much trouble. She would open tenant's rooms and go through personal belongings, stealing valuables. The landlord played tenants off against each other causing trouble. The house was dirty and unkempt. I have never felt so used and abused in my whole life.*
- *When I went to the access point (on many occasions), the most I was provided with was a night here and there at a motel. This didn't resolve anything, and I just had to go back to sleeping in mycar.*
- *Difficult, stressful, especially with 3 children.*
- *Scary, unsafe environment, lack of support: overcrowding. Lack of support and Lack of access to needs and social support.*
- *I'd rather pitch a tent up north somewhere than take my child there.*
- *I couldn't refuse as my son and I had no other choices. Roof over our heads felt very unsafe.*
- *I was scared at xxx - lots of men wanting to talk to you and come into your room.*

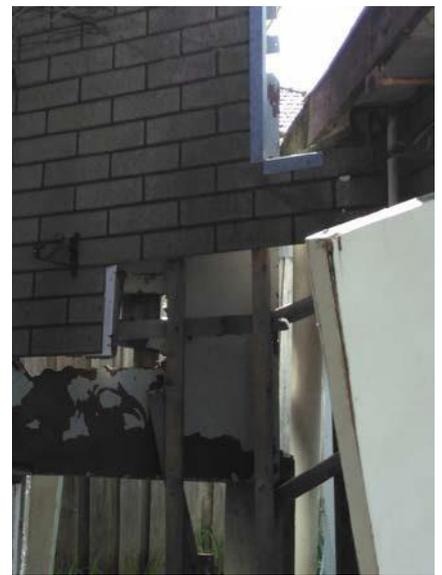
¹⁰ Northern and Western Homelessness Networks' Annual Consumer Survey 2017.

- *A lot of my belongings stolen so not great.*
- *Felt degraded.*
- *Some boarding houses are okay, but landlords were aggressive and threatened violence.*
- *Motel was horrible dirty. A lot of unsafe people who had issues like drug addiction, difficult to be around with children. Had to access food van as could not cook cramped in one small room.*
- *Unsafe for children, lack of amenities, - no cooking facilities - shared one single bed with two children- not comfortable. Had to ask for a microwave. Lucky my children were two and three years old. If they were older it would have been much harder. I did not sleep for two weeks when I was in crisis accommodation.*
- *Drug addicts, violence, assault, dirtiness, unclean toilets, toilets without doors.*
- *I get sent to this "boarding house" which is full of bedbugs a mattress covered in black mould a window that doesn't lock and I'm supposed to pay 280 dollars a fortnight for the privilege ... oh and the boarding house comes with crack heads too. I haven't bothered going back to "housing".*
- *Uncertainty, they [children] are really young asking where are we staying tonight? Trying to keep them safe. I worried a lot about my children. Usual routine of parenting gone, their familiar things have gone- a lot of loss- e.g. toys, bed times muddled up, eat out a lot. You don't feel like a good mother when you eat fast food all the time.*

What do consumers want?

The survey went on to ask consumers what sort of emergency accommodation they would consider appropriate. Despite reporting more positive experiences in government funded crisis facilities than in purchased emergency accommodation, 85% of consumers surveyed said they would prefer their own self-contained space that could be securely locked, even if it was small. Women identified that their ideal emergency accommodation would be homely, private, with good facilities including a clean kitchen. They stated they would like accommodation that was safe and secure for children, with some support available. Men reported that they would like their own private space that was safe and secure, affordable, with support available if needed.

The survey also asked consumers about their support needs. Eighty percent identified as having a mental health issue, and over half reported having at least one disability, with nearly a quarter having two or more disabilities. Of those surveyed, 25% were under the age of 25 years. These figures illustrate a high level of vulnerability amongst the consumers who are being referred to emergency accommodation.



\$2.5m spent on poor quality emergency accommodation

Within this context, homelessness agencies continue to try and provide an adequate response to the thousands of people presenting to them for help. **In 2017 this meant the allocation of \$2.5M in public funds to accommodate 9,000 households in temporary accommodation; most of which is sub-standard and lacking the facilities to enable residents to cook and clean for themselves.** This is an extraordinary reliance on the private sector to respond to vulnerable people who are experiencing housing crisis. Homelessness services have little choice but to use whatever resources are at hand to alleviate a person's immediate crisis. Commonly, they are placing people in poor hotel accommodation that charge expensive nightly rates. For example, one of the most frequently used providers, the Palms Motel in Footscray, charges up to \$160 per night per room. The rooms have no cooking facilities and a very low standard of amenity. The Palms Hotel accounted for nearly \$500k (20%) of the \$2.5m spend on emergency accommodation. Similar hotels, such as the Coburg Motor Inn, Parkside Hotel and the Stay Inn, are regularly used by services, and accounted for 25% of the total spend. Consumers have reported bed bugs, stabbings and assaults in some of the most frequently used emergency accommodation¹¹.

In an average week the five generalist access point services across Melbourne's north and west are funding 170 households in emergency accommodation¹². Once these households are assisted to access emergency accommodation, only a small percentage are able to access support for further assistance, due to high demand and long waiting lists. For example, on average Unison reports five support vacancies for adult clients per month. The result is that many households are not provided with a service beyond being placed in emergency accommodation. The lack of follow up support means that many households remain homeless for long periods of time with little or no help to exit.

This is clearly demoralising and potentially damaging for the consumers of the system. It also takes a toll on the front-line workforce, who enter this work with the intention of helping people, and who are aware that they are potentially contributing to harm. This dilemma was noted in the Rooming Housing Taskforce report in 2009, and the situation has not changed: "This has created moral, ethical and legal dilemmas for crisis workers who are aware that the conditions in many rooming houses present risks to resident's safety and welfare. These dilemmas are shared by government whose funding for crisis housing responses is increasingly being directed to sub-standard premises as demand on existing crisis and transitional housing grows"¹³.

Conclusion

The 2018 Victorian Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan offers an approach in which responses to **all** people experiencing homelessness, not just those sleeping rough, should be framed: intervening early to prevent homelessness, providing stable accommodation as quickly as possible and supporting to maintain stable accommodation. Currently, we are failing large numbers of people presenting to the system by providing sub-standard and potentially damaging emergency accommodation, with little or no immediate follow up support to access more suitable housing, and no support to maintain that housing once accessed.

We are contributing to peoples' experience of trauma and adding to their feelings of hopelessness. We must urgently address this situation by providing adequate funds to purchase better quality accommodation, and by increasing resources to support people to exit rapidly into sustainable long term housing.

The Northern and Western Homelessness Networks can no longer tacitly accept causing harm by accepting high cost poor quality emergency accommodation as a necessary evil for those people who come to us for assistance because they do not have a home.

¹¹ For public reviews of these hotels see:

https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Hotel_Review-g2062777-d1786874-Reviews-Palms_Motel-Footscray_Maribyrnong_Greater_Melbourne_Victoria.html

https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Hotel_Review-g1816502-d1647202-Reviews-Coburg_Motor_Inn-Coburg_Moreland_Greater_Melbourne_Victoria.html

https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Hotel_Review-g1816502-d3492485-Reviews-StayINN_Motel-Coburg_Moreland_Greater_Melbourne_Victoria.html#photos;aggregationId=101&albumId=101&filter=2&ff=230135397

¹² In Homelessness Week 2018 the five homelessness access point services funded emergency accommodation for 172 households at a cost of \$56,017. This is an average of \$8,000 per night and equates to nearly 9,000 people per year. We know that not everyone who needs emergency accommodation receives it because of limitations in HEF and in the availability of accommodation. We also know that services do not have the capacity to fund emergency accommodation for as long as people need it. Given this, we will require at least 10,000 new dwellings per year in order to provide suitable, self contained accommodation for those households in need of emergency accommodation in Melbourne's north and westalone.

¹³ Chairperson's Report, Rooming House Taskforce...

Appendix 1

Judy's Story

"We fronted at the homelessness access point...they booked us into this very squalid motel for us to stay for one night. We found no pillows or blankets or sheets were supplied and we spent a very cold night in the motel with arguments going on all night between the other occupants, windows being broken and almost hourly visits from the police. I also found a very well used pair of knuckle dusters in the garden. By the next day, we were very tired and feeling quite ill. We returned to the homelessness access point with all our bags packed hoping they could help us with more appropriate accommodation."

Judy is a 56 year old woman with a long history of tenuous housing. Judy was in her own Office of Housing property some years ago but family breakdown and domestic violence forced her to vacate this housing which was in her name. Judy's ex-partner damaged the property and accrued a substantial rent arrears debt, which has made it challenging for Judy to apply for housing again.

In early 2017, Judy was in private rental with her current partner Tim.

"The rental property was falling into the ground but it was cheap and all we could afford. We were given a notice to vacate because the house was uninhabitable (apparently it had been perfectly fine to rent to Tim for years prior to this). You could see through the floor. Every time it rained, the house flooded. There was damp and mould throughout this old house. After getting the notice to vacate, we were advised to go to the homelessness access point to get help as we couldn't find anywhere else to live."

Despite being well presented and articulate, Judy and Tim could not secure a private rental property in the highly competitive rental market:

"We were knocked back for everything we applied for and there was nothing that we could really afford. We were advised to visit the nearest homelessness service. This service referred us to a private rental with an owner occupier and paid for the first 2 weeks rent. The day before we were due to move in, the owner contacted us and said the room was no longer available. We went and stayed with my uncle for 3 weeks. Then we squatted in the uninhabitable house over Easter 2017. The owner found us and told us to vacate immediately. We then returned to the homelessness access point. It was at this time we were placed in the hotel – initially for one night. The room was in appalling condition. No bedding. No pillows. Nothing. The first night the police visited the premises 6 times through the night in relation physical assaults, domestic violence and damage to property. Every night there were things going on. The service had only paid for one night. We had to go back to the access point service the following day. We begged to not be placed back at the Hotel as it felt so unsafe but the access point service advised us that they had no other options. "

We went back to the homelessness access point on the Monday with suitcases in tow. The service said they didn't have capacity to help any further. We were given the contact number of accommodation providers and advised to make contact ourselves. We found a Backpackers in an old hotel on Spencer Street. We spent one night there then we had no money left.

We went to have a look at a private rental in a rental occupier property - \$150/week for one bedroom. After 2 days, the woman who ran this place said \$150 was not enough. She told us you now need to pay \$280/week. This was an illegal and misleading rent increase. She regularly barricaded us out of the house. She was really unwell. We slept in the garage for a whole week once because she wasn't at the house and she had changed all the locks. We had to move. Despite this, we were there for 3 months.

We then spent 3 months in a one bedroom apartment with two of our family members but this was too crowded and unsafe. The family members both had substance use issues.

Because we were no longer in their catchment the homelessness access point advised that they could no longer assist us. They told us we needed to go another access point service. We attended that service but didn't get any assistance because it was first in first served. You couldn't walk in off the street and get support. Only managed to get an appointment because the police requested that they give us one because of the level of distress we were in.

The access point referred us to another Motel for one night. This one wasn't as bad as the first Motel. We were there for one night. We had to go back to the access point the next day. We were then referred to a private rooming house. The service paid for us to stay for one week. The manager advised that the property had been 'shut down' but they had decided to reopen it due to the demand for rooms. The property was in appalling condition. The property was operated by a private rooming house provider.

The manager threatened illegal eviction because we did not have rent straight away and needed to delay payment for 2 days until our Centrelink payday. Rent would have been 2 days late. He was threatening and aggressive, swearing and demanding rent. We were paying \$380 per week to share a room. We were both on Newstart payments.

We stayed in the rooming house for 2 weeks. There was a couple with serious substance use issues. The male regularly beat up his partner. On most nights she slept in a completely empty room without furnishings in an effort to stay away from him. This was VERY traumatic for both of us. A short time later this girl overdosed and died in the bathroom at this premises. She had no support.

We requested to be moved out of this property. We felt very unsafe. We approached the manager who had advised us that they have lots of houses and that once residents prove they have a good track record with paying rent, they are happy to move them along into other properties.

We were then moved to an unregistered Rooming House. The hot water was coming out in a trickle. We managed to get that fixed. There were lots of other repairs issues here too. Tenant's Victoria were trying to assist with repairs issues.

In February 2018, Tim was unwell and went to the psych hospital for more than a week. This long period of homelessness and difficulty finding work profoundly impacted Tim's mental health.

I also felt hopeless. No one had offered to help with long term housing options - even simple things like completing a housing application." (As a 56 year old woman, Judy was eligible for older persons housing.)

"I stayed there for 9 months. As a single person in this house I was paying \$220/week. This left me barely enough for food and medication. During this time, there was another extremely violent couple who regularly beat each other: also connected to substance abuse issues. As a person who had lived with domestic violence, this was deeply traumatic.

There were times when it was not safe to leave the room for hours- even just to go to the toilet because it was so unsafe. I also felt scared to leave the room unoccupied as things had been stolen from the house.

I had never been in this position before in my life. You have to be in this (the crisis housing and homelessness system) to fully understand what it is like. I could never understand how bad it was until it was in it."

In December 2017, Tenant's Vic Rooming House Outreach attended the premises after receiving some information about an unregistered Rooming House at this address. At this point Judy and Tim had been in a range of crisis accommodation options since March 2017. They had no hope of their situation changing and had not considered applying for public/community housing as they were advised that the waitlists were endless and it was not even worth trying.

Judy was supported to have her Office of Housing debt reduced significantly, and was assisted to apply again for public housing. She subsequently received an offer of housing, and Judy and Tim moved into a public housing unit.

"This place is a palace compared to the places I have lived in over the last 15 months. It is a bedsit. It is my mini palace. This is my own place. No one has a key to my room anymore. In the rooming house, it bothered me that the Rooming House manager often entered resident's rooms when they weren't there. It is so much safer. The neighbours are nice and friendly."

"I am laughing a lot more and now nothing feels like it's too big a problem. I feel like me again."

"I used to stress about everything and felt like every time I asked for help the door was shut in my face. I feel stronger now and more able to offer support to my partner Tim."