

Why Welcoming Is Important

In this toolkit, we define welcoming as: the act of willingly greeting and receiving people on arrival with interest, pleasure and courtesy.

In addition, it is important to be clear that within addiction and mental health, we welcome all people, not all behaviour.

People judge their experience by the way they are treated as a person

Research has shown that even after receiving high-quality, evidence-based care, people can leave health-care settings feeling dissatisfied.

Over the years, we have learned that what has the greatest impact is how the person feels they were treated during their experience. These experiences are often based on impressions, and not reality. We need to hold this in mind when delivering services to addiction, mental health and concurrent disorder clients.

How can welcoming help?

Researchers consistently find that most people who seek help for addiction or mental health problems feel:

- Depressed
- Deflated
- Pessimistic
- Intensely anxious

These emotions are likely caused by a combination of fears:

- Being judged negatively by others
- Experiencing further rejection
- Confirming their belief that they are unable to cope adequately

These feelings are compounded by uncertainty about what will be expected of them if they commit to working with a service or program. Such feelings can cause significant resistance in people.

However, they can be resolved positively and quickly if we warmly welcome clients when they arrive.

Successful welcoming has been shown to:

- Reduce barriers to access
- Increase customer satisfaction
- Help people feel accepted by others

This can lead to a greater sense of self-acceptance in the person seeking help, and a sense of hope that things can get better.

Welcome people in both routine and emergency situations

It is important to be particularly welcoming to people who cannot be immediately served by the program or service that they first approach. This will help to communicate a sincere desire to engage that person in care as soon as possible and to welcome them into the system as a whole.

Even when we are not able to help the person ourselves, we can help to connect them with someone else who can help.

Keep people and their families engaged

An empathetic, hopeful relationship helps a person stay engaged and get the services they need. The person's family and significant other should also feel welcomed and included. This can encourage genuine sharing and facilitate wider communication.

How does welcoming relate to patient satisfaction?

Over the years, many studies have focused on patient satisfaction. The results tend to be consistent across a variety of environments.

People commonly use these words to describe positive healthcare experiences:

- Caring
- Kind
- Compassionate
- Helpful
- Comforting
- Concerned
- Loving
- Understanding
- Empathetic

You may notice that all of these words relate to how people felt they were treated as people when they made contact with services, and not how they were treated for their problem.

Compassion is consistently and significantly related to satisfaction. Courtesy and competence are a very distant second and third to compassion. Studies show that competence and courtesy are expectations within health-care systems and are not considered as anything over and above.

When patient satisfaction was explored in more detail, five main areas came up consistently that related to the ways that staff or teams behaved:

1. Intuition: Sense people's needs before they ask
2. Teamwork: Team members help each other out
3. Empathy: Acknowledge people's feelings
4. Courtesy: Respect privacy and dignity
5. Communication: Explain what's happening

What is the impact when we get the welcome right?

When we get it right, welcoming and engaging visitors into service can have a significant impact. Take a look at some of the quotes below (Wen et al., 2007):

- "They made me feel like I was a person, not just some derelict that, you know, shouldn't be breathing."
- "They show that they care: it's not just a job. They want to know you as well as a person."
- "They are open and receptive and don't stereotype me."
- "They ask you how you are feeling and you talk about what is wrong with you. Some places are better at doing that."
- "Someone spent an hour on the phone trying to help me to get a package together, and that amount of work, on a case to improve my life circumstances and make an adjustment in me, is really commendable".