Structure

Structure is the most fundamental step in the foundations for good support – the rock upon which everything else depends. Without it, any other efforts to improve support are at risk of failure or of being short-lived.
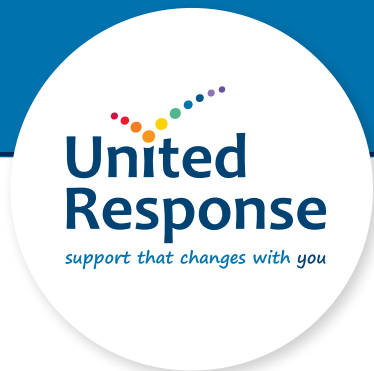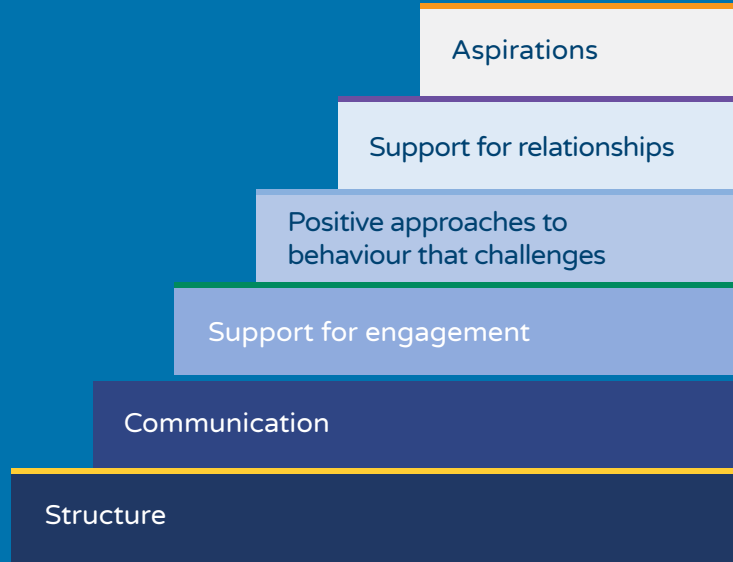
By the word "structure" we mean a deliberate arrangement of events, activities, routines, rituals, interactions and opportunities over time, so that they happen predictably. We would expect structure to be derived from, and built around, the individuals concerned, not imposed without regard to personal preference, nor vary as a result of support staff differences.

Good structure enables people to anticipate what is happening, provides a shape to the day and an organised framework for support.

Good support provides:

1. **Structure:**
   creating predictability and consistency

2. **Communication:**
   understanding and responding to a person's communication skills and needs

3. **Support for engagement:**
   supporting engagement in meaningful activities, interactions and relationships

4. **Positive approaches to behaviour that challenges:**
   understanding behaviour that challenges as an expression of legitimate distress to which we must listen and respond

5. **Support for relationships:**
   improving a person's quality of life through relationships with others

6. **Aspirations:**
   working together to avoid complacency and contribute towards the person's rich and fulfilling life

Aspirations

Support for relationships

Positive approaches to behaviour that challenges

Support for engagement

Communication

Structure

United Response
support that changes with you

Why is structure important for all of us?

Fear of Uncertainty

Structure is important for everyone because we hate uncertainty. We live in an uncertain world and for the most part we don't like it, so we work hard to make as many things certain as we can. It's reassuring when things happen as we expected, when we're in our usual routine, when things feel familiar, when we are confident about what will happen to us and what we'll do, when.

So we live our lives with structure built in. We write in our diaries, we make lists, we have personal routines for carrying out everyday tasks, and we carry large amounts of information in our heads about what's happening when.

Here's a simple test: Ask yourself, when working shifts which is the work file that staff look at most? In these circumstances, it's pretty much guaranteed that staff will look at the rota file more than any other – because it contains the information they need to feel confident about what their life's going to look like into the future.

> **Research has shown that if given the choice between these alternatives:**
>
> **a.** An appointment to be given an electric shock now, or
> **b.** An appointment later at which they might or might not be given the same electric shock
>
> most people choose the certainty of the guaranteed shock now rather than the uncertainty of a possible shock later.
>
> See **http://bit.ly/UncertaintyArticle** for more details

Practical Necessity

They will also be examining the rota in order to plan everything else in their life. We need structure for practical reasons: to get out of the house on time, to get to work when we're required, to meet with others socially, to know what to buy for the evening meal, to look after our children or other relatives who depend on us, and to do things together.

Schools have timetables, factories have systems, armed services have protocols, and shops and restaurants have stock ordering processes – in fact pretty much everything we do to meet our needs and wants has a structure – not to be boring or crush spontaneity out of the world but because we've realised it's a better approach than haphazard impulse. We've also learned that the more people there are involved and the more factors that might change, the greater the need for structure.

Of course we're all different and we vary in how much structure we build into our lives, and we all do some things spontaneously. Additionally we may not need to plan some things if we have trusted people in our lives who will do that for us. But everybody needs at least some structure: to feel reassured and secure, and to get what we need and want.

Structure
Why it's important for us important for all of us

https://youtu.be/HCydSCJARSU

Why is structure important for people you support?

In order to be able develop and maintain structure in your own life, you need to be able to perform a range of complex intellectual functions. You need to be able to understand, retain and recall a lot of information about the world around you and the people in it, eg.

- Arrangements that people make with you

- What order you prefer to do things – and what order others prefer

- How long it takes to get to places you want or need to go

- Being able to tell the time and understanding what different time periods mean

But these are the sorts of things that people you support find difficult. A learning disability or mental health need affects a person's ability to understand or remember the information they need to create and maintain their own personal structure. So people requiring our support will have at least as great need for structure as everybody else but without all (or many) of the skills to manage it for themselves, and in these circumstances structure will come from others – in one of three ways:

1. **Institutional structure** imposed by an organisation to meet its own needs, with no regard to the preferences, routines and rituals of the individuals it is supposed to serve, making it an unethical approach

2. **Staff-focussed structure** delivered individually and differently, on successive shifts, by each staff member according to their own views, beliefs, preferences and routines, and regardless of the confusion that it causes for the people they support. Whilst this approach avoids institutional regimes, it fails to provide predictability and forces the person being supported to adapt their life to suit the whichever staff happen to be on duty, and then change repeatedly, day after day

3. **Structure based around the needs and preferences of the individuals concerned** delivered by staff who have agreed and recorded it, and reflecting the sorts of compromises that are needed when people have to share resources. This is the only approach that is both ethical and effective.

Structure is reassuring – even institutional regimes, while ethically unacceptable, are reassuring – and is particularly important when people experience any degree of anxiety. Structure is the first component of the SPELL approach advocated by the National Autistic Society, because it helps people on the autistic spectrum anticipate events and therefore experience lower anxiety. Structure provides markers that we can help people recognise and use to explain what's going to happen

Furthermore structure provides other communication opportunities: to talk about future and past events and to create visual representations of what will happen when.

Without structure it's difficult to plan, organise or schedule, and new opportunities are less likely to happen - because we've got nothing to plan them around - or be taken – because they come out of the blue. Experience shows that in the absence of structure it's very likely that there will be long periods of nothing happening, interrupted by sudden bursts of difficult-to-understand and chaotic activity: not circumstances likely to promote engagement or a fulfilling lifestyle.

It goes against the romantic view we have of ourselves, of being 'free spirts' living life by the moment, but the plain fact is that people who experience difficulties processing information, benefit most from support that delivers opportunities and help in predictable and consistent ways: a lot of the time the same things happen, in the same sequence, in the same way, again and again. Structure is what people we support need most.

Structure
Why is it important for the people we support

https://youtu.be/fSjvZWSLIP0

How to support structure

So if people we support need structure, what can we do to ensure it's what they experience? What's required flows from the issues we've already discussed. Structure must be:

Built around individual preferences, routines and rituals

Our values tell us this is right and it's what sets structure apart from institutional regimes. The structure we create and maintain should be a response to what people tell us works for them, with their words or through their reactions. We need to work on the basis that people will struggle to do it for themselves, and that the number of people involved requires extra effort to ensure predictability.

Agreed by those who support the person

To be effective structure has to be consistent across support staff and over time. This will involve compromise by everyone – a deliberate conscious decision to prioritise predictability and consistency above supporters' individual views of the right way to do things.

Obvious

Structure is only useful if it is noticed. We should do whatever is required to make structure obvious to the person: from using verbal or written reminders - for people who are able to process, retain and use information in these forms - through to using visual timetables, or making the sequence of events and our support noticeably consistent, for people who experience more substantial difficulties.

Accessible to everyone providing support now and in the future

Usually this means writing the structure down so that it's always available to everyone who supports the person, in formats like shift plans, support plans and written routines. This is not out of a desire for more paperwork, but because of the numbers of people regularly involved in supporting a person, and the risks of vital information getting lost if it's not written down.

Team Member:
"I think the best way is to stay for coffee after we've supported Ryan to the church service – it's rude not to"

Practice leader:
"Well I'm sorry, but we've agreed the right thing for Ryan is to go straight out and then on to Maurice's house when the service ends. So that's what we all need to do, otherwise Ryan isn't sure what to expect, and then he might say he doesn't want to go to church, not because he doesn't like it, but because we're making it confusing!"

Flexible

Lives change. Unexpected opportunities or commitments come up. Things don't turn out as we anticipated. So the structure we create and maintain needs to evolve, respond to changing circumstances and incorporate some contingency planning. If it doesn't it's not doing its job. With a planned structure we can accommodate changes in preferences, explore alternative possibilities and welcome sudden requests for something different. Without a planned structure, life becomes chaotic and frightening all of the time, particularly for people you support.

There's more detail on assessing the presence and quality of structure in Foundations of Good Support resources, but however you go about it remember it's not just about the paperwork, nor is it useful to regard structure as just another organisational requirement: structure is the way we increase the predictability of life for people we're supporting, and the framework through which they can get what they need and want in life.

Sue Smith explains how her team developed a shift plan:

"We started by making a list of:

- All the housework, gardening, maintenance that needs to be done to keep the house going
- Each person's personal and self-care activities
- All the current social, leisure, work and community the people we support are involved in and the days and times when they things happen.

Next, we mapped these out onto flip charts covering the week so we can see whether everything fitted together, whether there were big gaps.

Then we transfer the details to a shift plan to cover the week

Throughout each day the staff get together with the people we support – after breakfast, lunch and dinner – to review the plan, add any particular activities that need to be done, note any changes that need to be made and to decide who do what. It was easier than I thought and it's made a massive difference"

Structure
How can we support structure

12 Common Questions and Concerns about Structure Answered

1 **There's so much going on in our service. We support 5 people who all have busy lives. It's hectic and quite often there's arguments, but what else can we do?**

At the moment you're trying to do everything that everybody wants all of the time. That seems like the right thing but what it means is that it's all a mad dash and in the chaos and confusion you can't do everything that people want, and they find it difficult to tell what's happening so they're anxious, and they can't predict that they'll actually get to do what they're expecting, so that causes arguments. What you need to do is try and do less, and more calmly. Negotiate with the people you support if that's possible, or do it and observe people's reactions if not. The chances are that you'll actually support people to do as much as when you were trying to do everything but there'll be less stress for everyone.
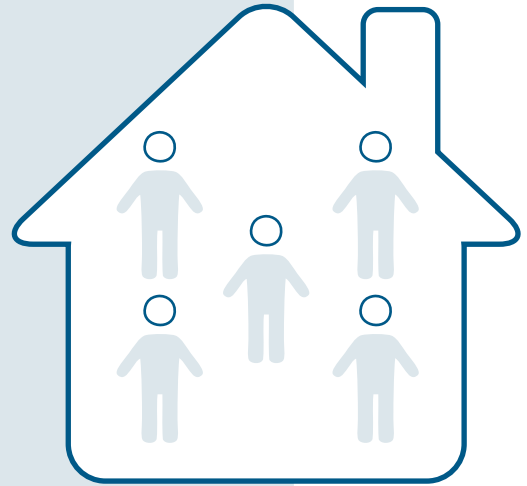
2 **We want to work in a regular routine way but the ladies we support won't let us. They'll only do certain things with particular members of staff so you can't have them happening regularly, because if the right staff aren't on duty then it's not going to happen.**

If the ladies you support were being supported more consistently by staff they would be happy to do things regularly. So the focus of the team needs to be on supporting people more similarly and that's about compromise between different staff. If a team have consistency as their priority, they find that people they support prefer the structure they experience as a result. If you ask the question "Am I going to drama on Tuesday" which answer would you prefer: "Yes you are", or "Well hang on, I'll have to have a look at the rota and see who's on. Give me 5 minutes while I do this, then I'll go and check"?

3

If we tell Audrey that the next thing she will do is have her medication, then she will want it to happen right now and not wait for the right time? How do we deal with that?

Audrey isn't being demanding. She's reasonably asking for the thing you've said she's going to have. You have a sense of the time that must pass before it's meds time, but she probably doesn't. She is much more likely to understand a sequence of events rather than an abstract passage of minutes or hours. The temptation for you is to not tell about her medication (because you don't want her to be anxious) – in other words reduce the amount of structure you're providing. But in fact what's needed is more not less. She needs a clear understanding of the sequence of events (structure) before medication time: "… we will go for a walk, then have a cup of tea. After that we'll watch "The Chase", and then it will be time for your medication". Structure is the solution, not the problem.

4

I understand the need to be consistent, but it's not us that wants to be inconsistent, it's Liam. He sees each member of his support team as completely different and likes it that we behave differently and do specific things with him. He says things like: "Gary you're the pub man", "Val you do horses with me", "Mel is cleaning", and he won't do any of those things except with that person.

There are two questions to ask before we consider Liam's situation:

Q: Do human beings generally prefer consistent structures in their world?

A: Yes

Q: Are staff naturally really good at working consistently with each other?

A: No
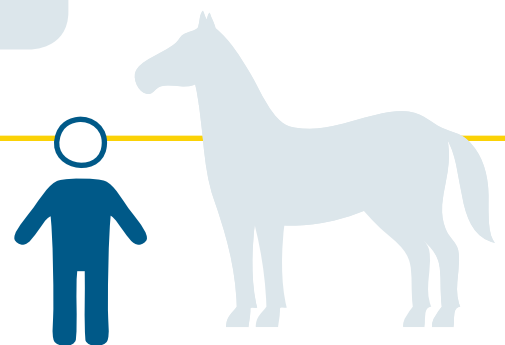
So the chances are that Liam has been looking for consistency, and the only version he can find is that an individual member of staff will be consistent WITH THEMSELVES. He's not rejecting structure, he's finding consistency in the only place he can. And because he's dependent on specific people, his opportunities will be severely compromised by staff leaving in the future, as they will. So you need to turn it round in your heads and concentrate on how to help him overcome this problem that we have caused. Look for opportunities to introduce other people into these activities, just briefly to begin with, and work very hard on supporting Liam consistently as he begins to accept other people.

5 **We have weekly activity planners that show when each of the people we support is going out. Why isn't that enough?**

Your activity planners focus on specific activities that are outside the home. That's only a proportion of the time, and each of the people you support will need more structure than that. Structure needs to involve things they do at home as well. It's how they will know what to expect, what's expected of them, what order things happen. If you don't have an agreed consistent structure then individual staff will be doing things differently.

Weekly Structure
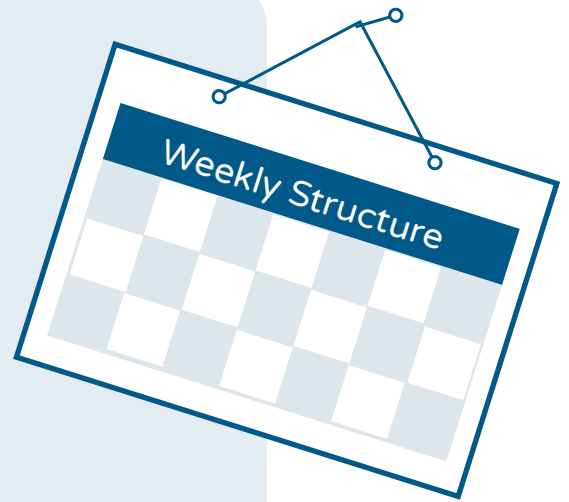
6 **When we tell Bryan what's going to happen he refuses. We've found the best way is to tell him nothing about what's going to happen and then he won't reject it**

No thank you!

There's a variety of reasons why people may routinely reject things, but the most likely cause is the way those opportunities been offered, rather than some inner need to reject things. So the answer is to lower your expectations, simplify your communication, make things happen predictably and consistently and keep going for some time (we're talking weeks here probably) so that you can be sure Bryan really understands what's going to happen, what he's going to do, how you're going to behave. You'll probably find that Bryan has been rejecting the way you offered opportunities not the activities themselves.

7 **The difficulty we have is with behaviour that challenges. We've had incidents when we've been supporting Peter doing things and we've had to stop doing them. Where do we go from there?**

The thing about structure is that it needs to be built around the person and what they want and need, but by itself it doesn't need to be ambitious, or satisfy the ideals of the staff team, to be a good structure. We may like the idea that we're supporting the person to do exciting things, meet new people and aspire to unthought-of possibilities. If it goes wrong we may need to pull back – to a less exciting, less ambitious structured pattern of activity and events. But what we should not do is retreat to "no structure" where, because of our concerns about behaviour that challenges, nothing happens for long periods of time. And in fact only if there's solid structure underpinning what we do are we likely to be able to rise once again to higher levels of the Foundations of Good Support.

8

If we tell Grace what she'll be doing later in the week she agrees, but then come the day she'll refuse, so our attempts to plan a predictable structure collapse every time.

This is largely an issue of communication. We know that when people say "Yes" that it can be for a variety of reasons not connected to the actual thing they're being offered, and similarly when they say No. So you need to stop assuming she is making an informed choice when she says both Yes and No. Try using a visual timetable and other non-verbal prompts and talking about what will happen, rather than overloading her with questions about it.

Monday

Tuesda
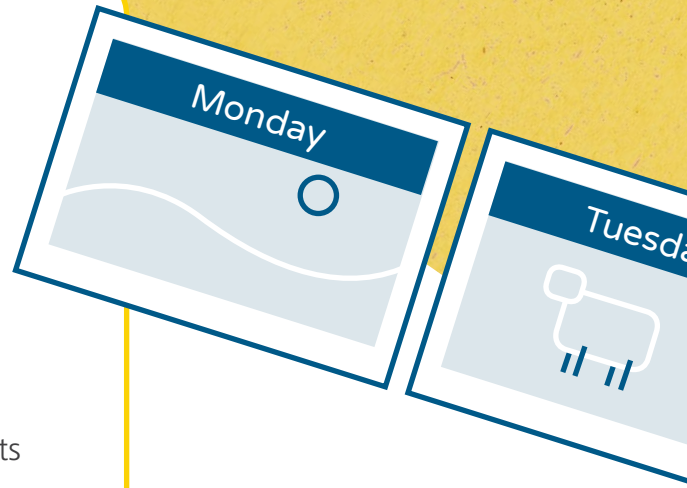
9

We don't know what's going to happen from one day to the next so we just have to respond to whatever happens. What else can we do?

You need to tackle the reasons why you don't know what's going to happen from one day to the next. Your job involves supporting people to understand what's happening, providing structure is a big part of that, so whatever's going on that's getting in the way needs to be resolved. The evidence is clear - if you can only act in a reactive way you are not giving the people you support what they need.

10

Isn't it unfair to make things predictable if then something happens and we can't do what we said we'd do?

This doesn't seem a good enough reason to turn against all structure. If structure works for most of the time but then people find change very difficult, the answer is in how its explained, how sudden the change is and what we're able to do instead, not a rationale for never providing structure in the first place.
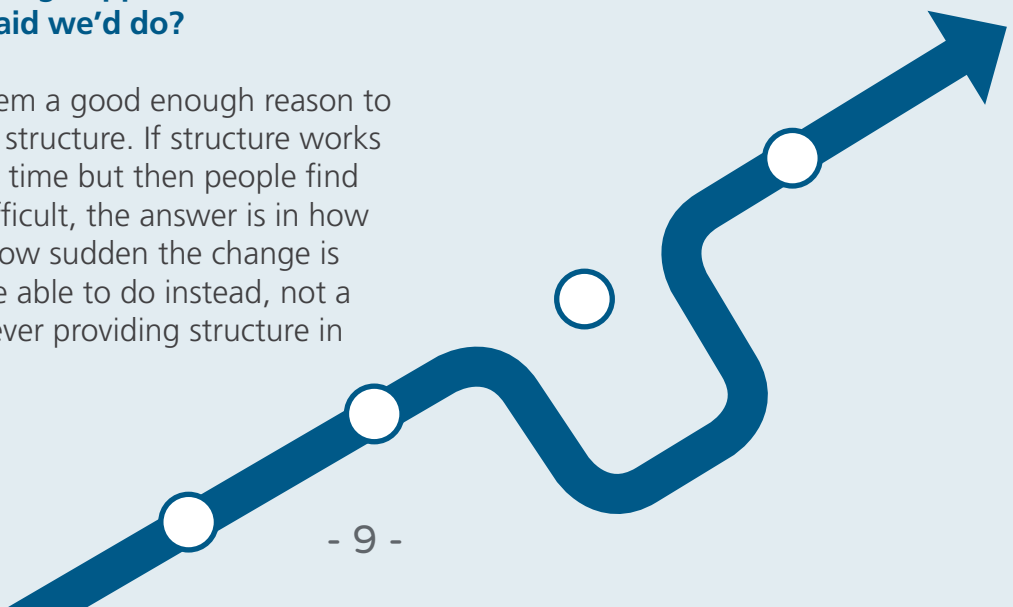
11 **Chloe is so physically disabled that she can't get involved in many things, so she often does nothing while things happen around her. How can we create structure for her if she's not doing much?**

It is easier to notice what's happening, when you're actually doing it yourself. So if Chloe can't physically get engaged then we need to make a deliberate effort to make structure more obvious. Staff who support Chloe need to agree to the order that they will do things that don't directly involve her and then do them so she can notice: in front of her, near her, using whatever senses work best for her. Chloe will benefit from the reassurance of noticing familiar sequences, and is more likely to get involved in the future if she recognises what's going on.

12 **We don't need to write structure down because we know people really well. We're a small team and we talk to each other and we know people's routines really well. Isn't that OK?**

There are two reasons why it's still important to agree and record structure in these circumstances

a. If you don't see each other work very often then you are probably being less consistent than you think and that the team would work better if it discussed and agreed the structures that all staff should follow

b. Staff leave, and the structures they have in their heads leave with them. The only responsible approach is to write it down.

Structure
Common concerns and problems

https://youtu.be/s_D2iTH6k7w

Other Resources & Links

Foundations of Good Support booklet

https://bit.ly/2RNLclw

Foundations of Good Support - Observation and Assessment Tool

https://bit.ly/2MvyTKV

Videos

Visit our Practice Development YouTube channel for even more helpful resources

Structure

https://youtu.be/ADYClgPTMUw

Structure in Practice

https://youtu.be/WMZGH5zB0i0

Visual Timetables - Why and how should we use them

https://youtu.be/wnqu_ttnRO8

Person Centred Active Support: What we mean by consistency

https://youtu.be/MIsvuzL8nq8

United
Response
support that changes with you