



'Group work can be intimidating... clients feel powerless and you are between them and their drug of choice... By splitting the group in half, with one half acting the cravings and the other half resisting, you can see the different types of cravings that affect individuals and how hard they try to fight them.'

Taking on the schoolyard bully

Changing clients' drug habits can start with making them realise they have a choice and don't need to be bullied by cravings, as Chris Robin's training sessions demonstrate.

'Clients will often throw their hands up and say they didn't have any choice: "I'm a crack head, of course I took it when he offered it to me"'

Chris Robin trains people to understand their clients and the thought processes that can hamper their progress in drug services. He teaches workers to help their own clients understand the cravings and triggers that lurk 'like schoolyard bullies, knowing when someone is vulnerable and when to strike'.

He tells clients what to look out for when doing one-to-one assessments, and the first rule is not to take any hostile reactions personally. 'Clients can see workers as the enemy because you are the person trying to stop them using drugs and keeping them away from the buzz,' he points out. Furthermore,

clients are 'their own personal psychologists', experts on themselves, who will provide you with lots of information and seem to be prepared to make concessions – 'but in reality they are acting to protect the buzz'.

Group work can help to unravel the reason for chasing drugs. You can get clients to talk about what the buzz means to them personally, says Robin, and the group setting can help them realise that everyone has these feelings: 'Starting from when you were a baby or a small child you naturally enjoyed altered states of consciousness, such as getting dizzy on a roundabout.'

It's important to get the dynamic of group work right. He believes these sessions work best with two people leading, particularly if they have contrasting

personalities. 'Group work can be intimidating... clients feel powerless and you are between them and their drug of choice,' he says. Group sessions can work particularly well when looking at cravings: 'By splitting the group in half, with one half acting the cravings and the other half resisting, you can see the different types of cravings that affect individuals and how hard they try to fight them.'

He cautions to proceed gently when getting clients out of their comfort zones, 'as drug workers are always told to do'. Wanting to stay in our comfort zones is human nature, he points out and 'clients need to be coaxed and cajoled out, not forced... they need to be reminded that humans might be creatures of habit, but these habits can be changed.'

Don't get angry, stay even

What do you do when confronted by a client acting the tough guy? Marjella Green has developed techniques for calming the situation.

Most people instinctively try to calm an aggressive person's behaviour by staying calm themselves, says Marjella Green, an expert in anger management.

Most of it's common sense and being aware of your body language and tone, she says. But there are other strategies you can learn to divert an outburst. Know the risks, says Green, and assess the space you're working in so you cannot be caught off-guard. At the most practical level, 'be aware of exits and be able to call for assistance'.

Looking for early signs of aggression can head off a confrontation. Often the body language gives away a client's intentions. An attentive professional can spot subtle changes in facial expression, says Green. They might begin to pace around, even before raising their voice.

'It's important to be aware of different cultures' use of facial expressions and attitudes to personal space, so as not to misinterpret signals', she points out.

Understanding the causes behind the aggression is an essential step to understanding what can trigger it. 'Often people's aggressive behaviour stems from not being understood or accepted, or it may be used as a barrier or persona – especially when they feel they cannot appear vulnerable, such as in prison.'

Green suggests taking a staged approach to managing a client's aggression. 'First you should allow them to pre-vent,' she says, splitting the word to signify venting the anger – letting it out and getting it off their chest to diffuse a situation. 'It also

helps to recognise four main types of anger: lightning, as in quick to strike but soon over; tornado, that thrives off chaos; flood, that builds up slowly and surges over long periods; and a volcano, that's slow to erupt and slow to cool.'

Take control of yourself in an aggressive situation, set the tone and follow a structured approach, she advises. Ensure you are calm by taking deep breaths, relax your body language and repeat your coping strategies in your head. Then allow the person as much as control as possible, encouraging them to problem-solve.

'If this does not diffuse the situation you must take control,' says Green. 'Make them aware of options... it's up to you to restore order and set expectations for the future.'