

**turn
2us**



**Bennett Institute
for Public Policy
Cambridge**

A Model of Thriving

Executive summary

Anti-poverty charities often focus on the effects and consequences of poverty. But the focus of Turn2us is ‘to help people thrive and not just survive’ (see [our strategy document](#)). We’ve partnered with researchers from the Bennett Institute of Public Policy at Cambridge University and people with a lived experience of financial hardship, in order to find answers to the question ‘what does it mean to thrive?’.

Our commitment to co-producing our work means that existing models of thriving developed for other contexts are inadequate for understanding what thriving entails for people who use our services. We brought together three sets of expertise to develop the bespoke model of thriving explored in this report: co-production partners who have experienced poverty; staff who challenge it at Turn2us and academics who understand the latest research on the issue. The result is a model of thriving that is sensitive to the lived experience of Turn2us’ stakeholders, practical for the charity’s work and technically rigorous.

Thank you to the following people who contributed to the researching and writing of the report:

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
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| - Antonietta Coley | - Mark Fabian |
| - David Samson | - Oliver Bellamy |
| - Gladys Eyeregba | - Sara Willcocks |
| - Rudi | - Yamini Cinamon Nair |



What does the research say?

We found many factors that play a role in people’s ability to thrive. These can be grouped under three headings; the means, the process and the outcomes.

Means like money, health, education, and freedom from discrimination give you the space to start an ongoing process of understanding yourself and what you want to do in life. The outcomes of doing this are varied, but include contentment, a sense of meaning and purpose, and strong relationships with others. These outcomes indicate that you are thriving.

This report outlines the model of thriving and explores its underpinnings in more detail.



What does this mean for Turn2us?

Having a co-produced model of thriving can allow Turn2us to act at the cutting edge of anti-poverty programmes and policy, advocacy and practice. There is potential for this work to define what anti-poverty success looks like both within Turn2us and potentially across the sector.

We intend to work with our sectoral partners to disseminate the theory. This may involve refining and generalising it through further rounds of co-production so that it is appropriate to the needs of other charities and stakeholders.

“We brought together three sets of expertise to develop the bespoke model of thriving explored in this report”



Part one:

A model of thriving; Means, process and outcomes

Means

Our means are the resources that allow us to be who we want to be and do what we want to do. These means vary from person to person and change over time, but we all have basic needs like food and medicine. If our basic needs are not secure then we cannot thrive. They must come first.

In our discussions, two types of means in particular stood out: **practical means**, and **justice-focused means**.

Practical means are specific to each person. If we cannot afford nutritional food, for example, our thriving will be held back. Justice-focused means are about whether social, political, and economic conditions will help or hinder our thriving. If we are frequently disrespected just because we're black, for example, it will hurt our thriving.



Our co-production partners emphasised the following practical means:

- **Financial security**, including housing and bills
- **Health**, both physical and mental
- **Advocates** and allies
- **Access** to the welfare and legal system
- **Support** from friends, family, and the community, and being able to ask for it
- **Education** and Justice-focused
- **Time** to think and plan
- **Resilience** and coping skills



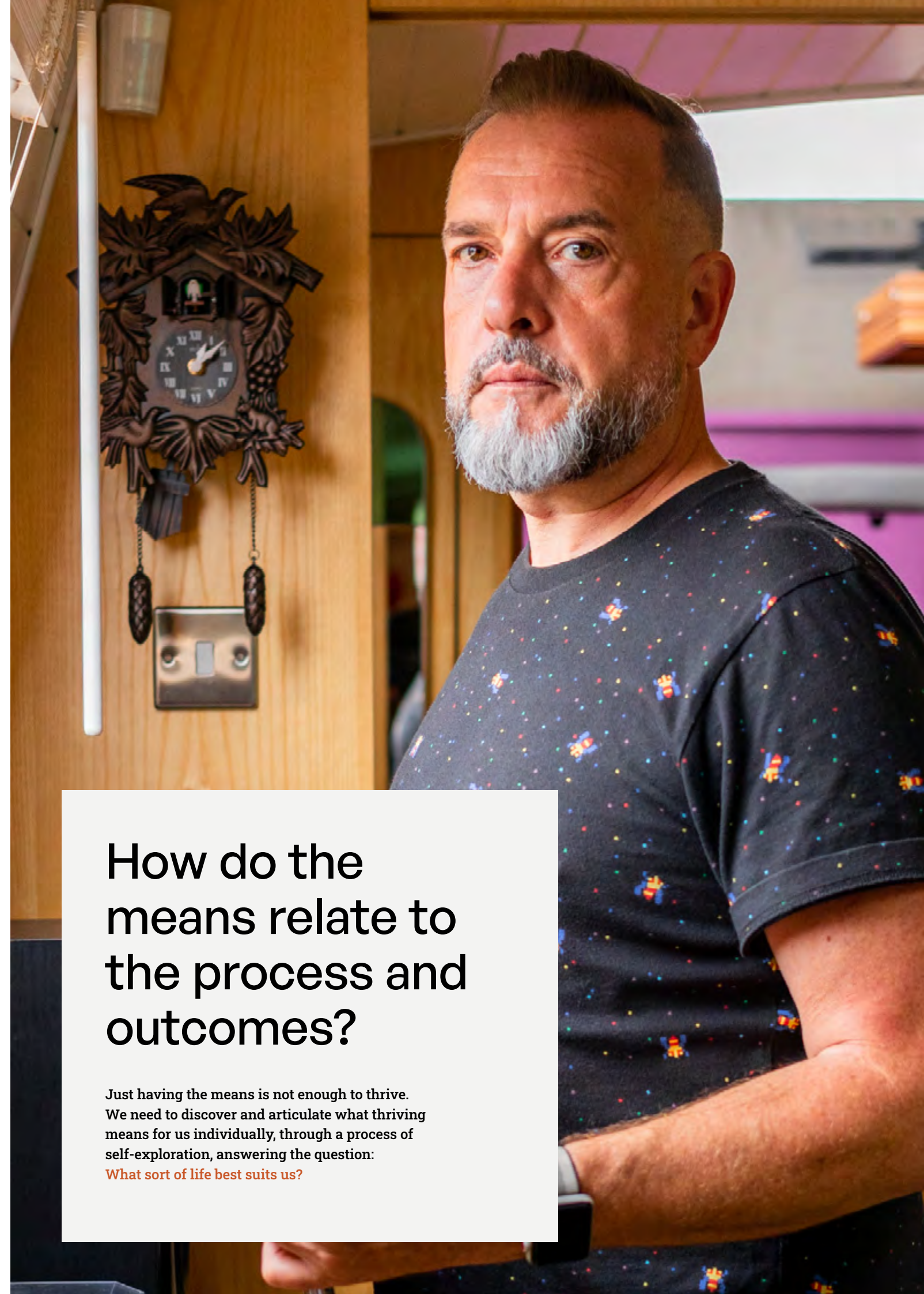
Our discussions on justice focused on

- Freedom from **racism, sexism, classism, domestic violence** and **oppression**
- Overcoming **marginalisation** and **stigma** from **disability** and **unemployment**
- Challenging **cultural expectations**, like heterosexuality or materialism

How do the means relate to the process and outcomes?

Just having the means is not enough to thrive. We need to discover and articulate what thriving means for us individually, through a process of self-exploration, answering the question:

What sort of life best suits us?





Process

Once the means are secure, we have the ability to explore different activities and values. Through this process, we learn what makes us thrive.

A frequent theme of our discussions was that thriving is more than material. Having our basic needs met is the most important thing for thriving, but we also need to discover what thriving means for us individually. What job would we enjoy? Is there a neighbourhood we love living in? Where can we find good friends?

Our research found that we might initially use our means on things that don't suit us, perhaps because of cultural expectations or family pressure. But if we have the time, money, support, and freedom to keep experimenting, we will find our way. Having the time and capacity to not only identify what our individual motivations are but to also pursue them is a strong indicator that the process we are talking about is actually happening. As we grow and change over time, we may re-examine what enjoyable activities we choose to do, and what means we need to do them.

How does the process relate to the means and the outcomes?

If we have limited set of practical or justice focused **means** (such as low income or an oppressive environment) we may never get to explore certain opportunities that could help us thrive. Moreover, these two types of means intersect. For example, if we have income but there's limited disabled access in our area, we can't convert that income into the activities we want to do.

We will know which activities and values are right for us based on whether they give rise to **outcomes** like meaning and purpose in our life and nourishing relationships with other people. We will care about being good at activities that suit us and so we will pursue them independently, and we will get a rush of achievement as our competence in them grows. Activities that aren't right for us will leave us feeling cold, bored, and alienated.

“Having our basic needs met is the most important thing for thriving, but we also need to discover what thriving means for us individually.”



changed
perceptions
of poverty -
free from
shame

THRIVING

OUTCOME

PROCESS

MEANS

Thriving as a Tree:

A tree is a useful metaphor for understanding our model of thriving, as shown right in figure 1. The **means** can be represented with the basic requirements for a healthy tree: roots (material needs) and soil quality (justice). The **process** is the trunk and branches of the tree: we grow in our own unique ways to take the shape we want. The **outcomes** are the leaves and flowers, which let us know that a tree is really thriving.

The tree metaphor helps us apply the model of thriving. If we have financial security but we are held back by racism or other forms of prejudice, then it is social justice we need. If we have found our calling but we are still struggling to flower, then we are probably lacking the practical means to achieve their goals. The tree metaphor also reflects that thriving is different for each of us and changes over time as our needs change. We need to be sensitive to how people are growing, and help them adapt to shocks like unemployment just as a tree needs time to adapt to losing a branch.

Outcomes

Following the process of learning about what motivates us, certain outcomes, such as strong relationships, a sense of purpose, taking charge of our lives and feeling at peace with ourselves, indicates that we are thriving.

The most important outcome was **strong relationships** that are mutually supportive and enriching. We are more likely to build these when we're around people who share our values. Another important outcome was a **sense of purpose**: a feeling that what we're doing is important and helping other people. We feel **in charge of our lives** when we can invest our time, energy, and resources as we would like, and we're free from oppression. Finally, when our means are secure and we can do the things that suit us, we feel **contentment** and at **peace with ourselves**.

How do the outcomes relate to the means and the process?

The outcomes are enabled by our means and come about from the process of learning what it is we enjoy doing. The outcomes are a rich mix of things but they all require having the space to imagine what is important to us and the opportunity to work towards it at our own pace.



Part two: Understanding the themes in more detail

Our research discovered several key themes that, together, formulate our model of thriving.

Means

- Basic needs are essential
- Thriving is something more than material
- Oppression and marginalisation impacts thriving

Process

- Thriving is subjective
- We need time and space to learn about ourselves

Outcomes

- Relationships are crucial
- We find meaning and purpose
- We feel a sense of autonomy and at peace with ourselves

What follows next is a breakdown of each of these themes, whenever possible, in the words of our co-production partners, whose views were centred in the research process.



“Our research also showed that income and the like, whilst important, were far from the only consideration.”

Means

Basic needs are essential: Throughout our conversations, a central theme has been the need for practical means to be met in order to thrive.

In order for someone to thrive, it might be four or five things that need to happen, you know, look a bit underneath... They might not have been able to move their housing, but we might have been able to get rid of the abusive partner for them, or support the child with additional funding... So I think they have to be prepared to do a little bit of case work... and increasingly so because of COVID and because of the fragility of people's mental health, the fragility of, of the, you know, they've been asked to become workers at home with the children who may have individual needs... So I think that's the thing Turn2us really just do need to give their workers: the ability to have some good counselling skills... and I know that means money training means money but it's an investment in your organisation... in fairness to Turn2us they are not social workers, but I think they've become the starting point for many people to start that journey. – **Toni**

I've just had a text message from my GP saying that the MRI is showing [my arthritis] is getting worse, and that really saddens me because they don't want to give me a knee replacement and therefore, that actually a real block to thriving, and that's health, whether it be emotional, mental or physical. – **Toni**

Because if I didn't have a roof over my head, I can't even think about any other thing. If I cannot feed myself or my children. I cannot think about studying. So that has to happen first. – **Gladys**

Thriving is something more than material: Our research also showed that income and the like, whilst important, were far from the only consideration. Thriving was something rich and multi-layered and included things like mental health and well-being under its remit.



I've always got a dictionary to hand and [in] the definition of thrive one of them mentions is “prosper, prosperity”. But one, it simply says “grow well”, yeah, and I'm a great advocate of that phrase really, because it, security, my life I've had good money, earning very good money... I wasn't thriving at all. I was depressed. – **James**

I think that getting out of the poverty cycle is much more than just having money. I've been really poor for the past year, due to the pandemic and I'm really struggling financially, but I still feel I am thriving because I have been using some of these tools (talking to others, helping others, resting, prioritising what matters). Exercise will be my last challenge, due to the body pain I've been experiencing, I have no energy to move and that is having serious repercussions on my overall health. – **Filipa**

Our working group emphasized that we should include a political dimension to thriving. There are cultural and institutional structures that impact our thriving. If we experience racism, ableism, patriarchy, and such like then we are liable to have our thriving negatively impacted. This suggests that social justice is critical if we want everyone to thrive.

As a disabled person, just like anybody else I have dreams and aspirations about where to go in my life, and as well as many other people, many of those dreams are not fulfilled. And some of that is related to disability because it is quite difficult to work your way up in the world of business as a disabled person... When I left University with a master's degree, and after my bachelor's degree, and I was looking for work, I was told, because I didn't get any job interviews... answer telephones – **Rudi**



“I would say thriving is a subjective feeling, because if I had gone with my previous definition of thriving, I think that was like a social construct – what society thinks: you should be in a place [home], you should be married etc..”

Process

Thriving is subjective: Whilst our means are relatively objective needs, thriving itself was described as subjective. That is to say, thriving is about our own specific emotional life and particular circumstances.

Similarly, thriving shifts and evolves as we do. This speaks to the process of learning about what values and activities motivate us is life-long. Many of our working group spoke of times they thought they were thriving but later discovered that they had been acting under misguided values.

I would say thriving is a subjective feeling, because if I had gone with my previous definition of thriving, I think that was like a social construct – what society thinks: you should be in a place [home], you should be married etc.. So my current thriving, as a single mother, is not seen as an ideal; it's being frowned on. But it's my subjective feeling. I am happy within myself. Yesterday, I was having a discussion with one of my classmates and he was feeling sorry for me: "Oh, I know it must have been really difficult for you". I said: "well, it is but don't feel sorry for me because I am in a better place now. I feel much happier than where I was before". So yeah, I would say it is subjective....what I feel within myself not what someone will tell me. – **Gladys**

The other aspect about thriving I would think is that it's incredibly individual how one person's sense of happiness and thriving and well-being, cannot be kind of taken wholesale into somebody else's life. I wouldn't want anybody else to live my life not because it's good or bad, but just because the things which you enjoy are incredibly individual and you should have the opportunity to make them as individual as you wish. – **James**

We need time and space to learn about ourselves: The process of learning about ourselves depends on having the time and space to pause from present problems and imagine a better future. Co-production partners all spoke about times in their life when their thriving was impeded because they had internalised the values of others and were unable to live in accordance with their own authentic values. For example, one person put up with domestic abuse due to the internalisation of patriarchal values. Here we can also see how justice focused means are crucial to thriving.

I have been in therapy for seven years, when I was younger, and it just absolutely opened up my life and it opened up options and it was so helpful for me to see why I was caring where the roots of that came from – "why do I over care?" And they say don't they, you know, even in other professions, but they say to social workers that social workers go into the job so that they can ignore their own needs and care for other people. – **Toni**



“Co-production partners all spoke about times in their life when their thriving was impeded because they had internalised the values of others and were unable to live how they really wanted to.”



Outcomes

Relationships are crucial: The most common theme across all the conversations was relationships – with friends, family, the community, or intimate partners. When these were healthy they were a key source and catalyst of thriving: they made us feel like we were thriving or deepened that feeling if we felt it already. Importantly, we tended to develop relationships more easily and thoroughly with people who we met while pursuing activities we want to do and living with our values.

Someone to talk to, so yeah, like, loving relationships. It could be a handful of people that I know really love me and I love them. Sometimes you need people to help pick you up, and just tell you that you're great and be there for, but also, like, giving love to other people is such an important thing.
– Abby

If your family are okay, then you feel that life is better that you are thriving, even if the money isn't there to do so. – Toni

We find meaning and purpose:
Co-production partners said they knew when they were thriving because they had a sense of meaning and purpose. What exactly gives us this feeling will be determined subjectively. Helping others was a common theme of activities that brought meaning and purpose, as they make us feel 'useful' and connected to friends, family, and community. Co-production partners also commented on how the decay of community infrastructure - the disappearance of youth centres, public sports facilities, and the like - has had a corrosive impact on the thriving of already marginalised people.

So, thriving is partly my job, but looking after my mom I was thriving, I felt it wasn't, I didn't have money, and it was difficult, but I found I was thriving because I was doing something where that was, you know, was enriching to me. – Toni

We feel a sense of freedom and at peace with ourselves:
Besides meaning and purpose, the research also suggests that a sense of freedom and competence indicated we are thriving. People spoke of the significance of 'feeling good at things', whether it was football or being able to drive despite being in a wheelchair. They also spoke of the uplifting effect of 'being in charge of one's life' and not being prevented from desired actions by abusive partners, brainless bureaucracy, or social stigma.



The times in my life when I was thriving is when I finally made the decision to leave my marriage... going through what I went through, my marriage, and after I got to the position of leaving it, I got clear insight now that actually this is me now. I'm actually thriving, being on my own, standing on my feet, and saying no to putting up with domestic abuse, and being independent really, and being happy. – Gladys

But the thriving part of that was when, and it's going to sound terribly cliché but you have to see it from the perspective of being spinal injured, driving along San Francisco Bay, with my newly acquired girlfriend sitting next to me, and feeling really rather magnificent and then my disability didn't seem to be there anymore, because I was sitting in a regular car driving along a regular road with a regular person sitting next to me. And so that was thriving for me and it had bugger all to do with work. – Rudi

“People spoke of the significance of ‘feeling good at things’, whether it was football or being able to drive despite being in a wheelchair.”

A poem by Toni, co-production partner

I fell from my life of security,
Did not see it coming, looking the other way,
Caring role required, loved ones are so ill,
The need to leave work,
To fall so far, it was a crash and burn.

Reached the depths of a feeling, embracing despair,
Lost myself in there, my identify shifted so fast.
I became invisible,
Looking back, money, food, shelter in abundance,
Feeling great, active in the community, grounded.

Tasting life's comforts, never reflecting, or feeling scared,
The warm hug of providence and abundance,
Loss hits like a brick wall, cemented my fate.

Then, out of the blue, a connection reached out,
It was Turn2Us wrapping around me like a guardian angel,
Mindful and present, tolerant, and accepting.

Nourishing me quietly and without pressure,
Helpful, the benefits calculator allowed improved access,
Then grant giving, volunteers like guardians of hope on the phone,
Relevant and embracing, improving outcomes,
Turn2Us are outward facing, transparent, a philosophy rooted in hope,
Improving lives,
An agenda of giving and empowerment.

Values I cherished all my life,
I was invited in,
Assisted to raise my voice again in co-production vibes,
No longer communities without a voice,

Enabling my lost voice to resonate again,
Central to structural change,
Shaping innovative service provision,
A voice once lost in the translation of poverty and despair,
Hear my lions roar in whispers of confidence,

A radical acceptance,
Rooted in reality,
Validated and valued, shaping our welfare state
Bridging the wealth gaps unseen,
Co-production brings hope of an everyday voice in the world,

It affirms, through quiet acceptance, enabling me to rise again in dignity,
I am seen in plain sight and heard, to tell you my back story
To thrive again, to have meaning, a plenty.

“Reached the
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