

# WHAT IS SELF-NEGLECT AND WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

---

West of Berkshire Safeguarding Adults Board  
Webinar  
8<sup>th</sup> February 2023

Suzy Braye  
Emerita Professor of Social Work, University of Sussex  
Independent Adult Safeguarding Consultant

# Key questions about self-neglect

- How do we identify self-neglect?
- How can we understand it?
- Should we intervene and, if so, how?
- What's the legal position?
- How can we help?



# Definitions: a very wide spectrum

“Self-neglect covers a wide range of behaviour - neglecting to care for one’s personal hygiene, health or surroundings - and includes behaviour such as hoarding”  
(Care Act 2014 Statutory Guidance)

• Neglect of self-care

• Neglect of domestic environment

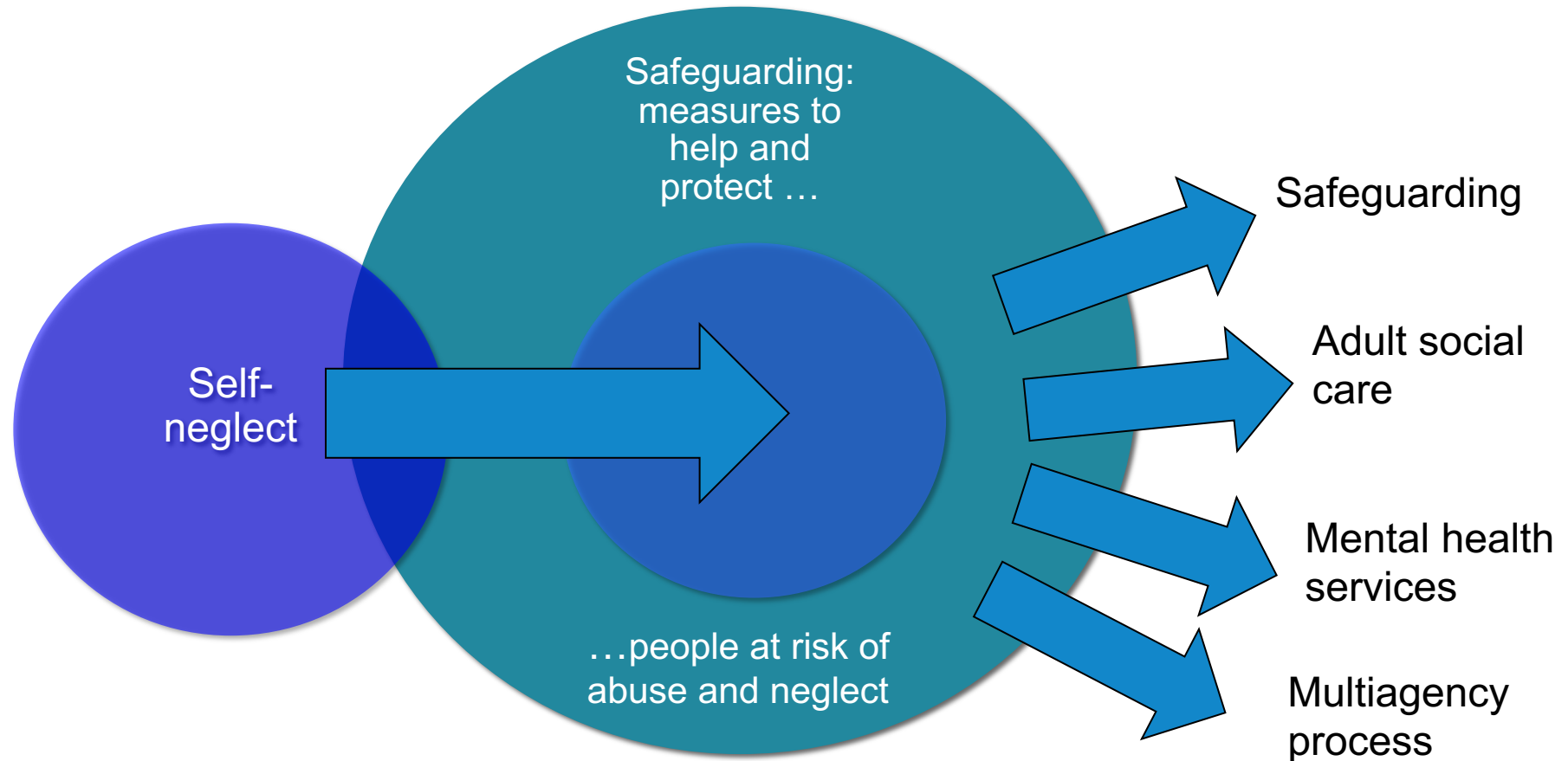
To such an extent as to endanger health, safety and/or wellbeing

Refusal of services that would reduce the risk of harm

Across a wide age spectrum

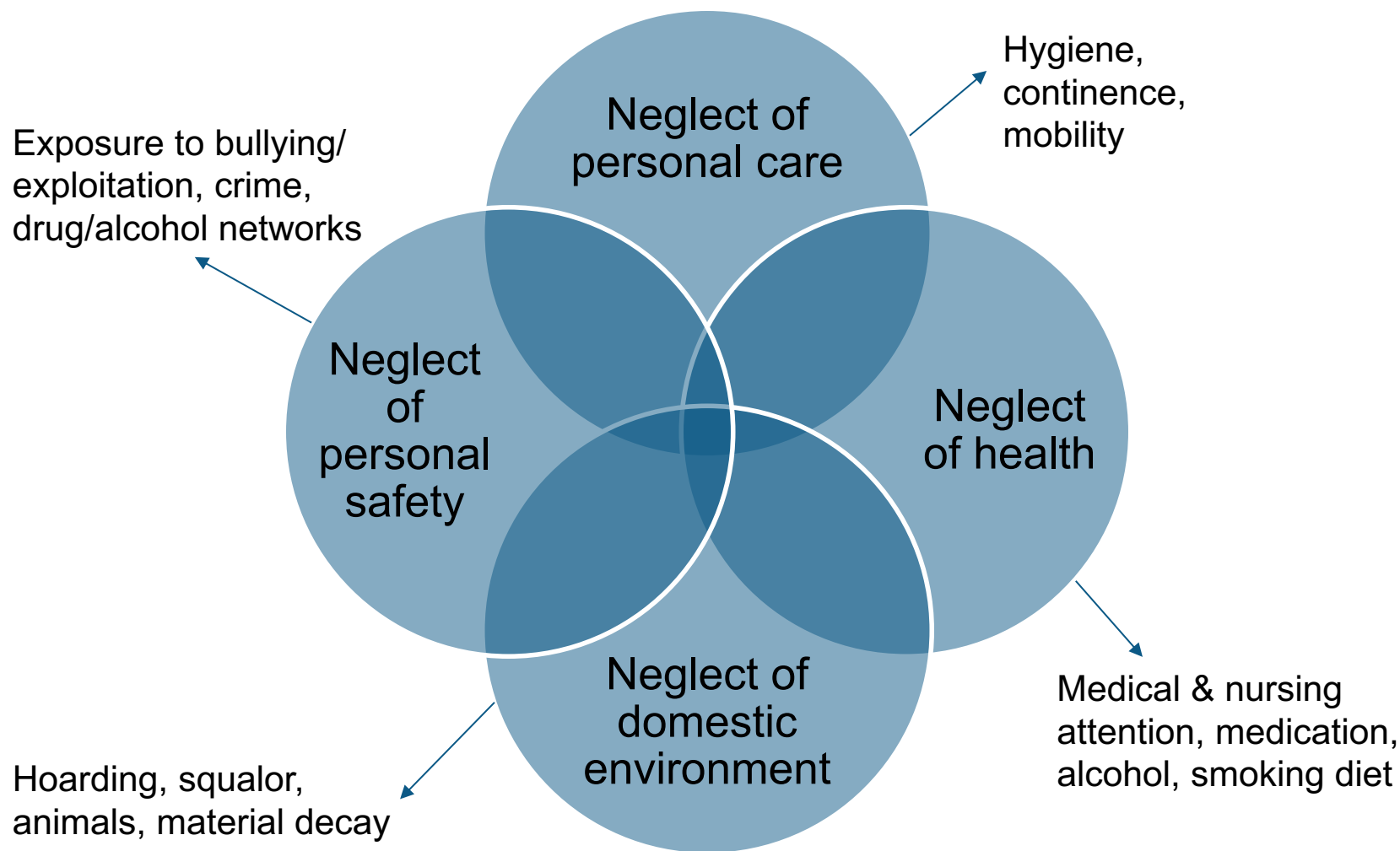
# Whose business is it?

## Impact of the Care Act 2014



Self-neglect is a form of abuse and neglect

# Self-neglect signs and symptoms



# Spotting signs and symptoms

- North-East ADASS video (3 minutes):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkixMdCs9mA>

# What do we know about causation?

- Self-neglect can be associated with
  - Physical ill-health
  - Mental ill-health
  - Substance dependencybut these don't cause the self-neglect
- The roots of self-neglect are most likely to lie in adverse life experience and are a way of coping with distress
- We therefore need to understand what the self-neglect means in the person's own life context – the 'meaning of the mess'

# Understanding the lived experience: neglect of self-care

- **Negative self-image:**  
demotivation
- **Different standards:**  
indifference to social appearance
- **Inability to self-care:**

I got it into my head that I'm unimportant, so it doesn't matter what I look like or what I smell like.

I'm drinking, I'm not washing; I wouldn't say I'm losing the will to live, that's a bit strong, but I don't care, I just don't care.

I wouldn't say I let my standards slip; I didn't have much standards to start with.

(It) makes me tired ... I get tired because daily routines are exhausting me, to do the simple things like get washed, put on clean clothes, wash my hair.

(As a carer) I always neglected my own feelings for instance, and I didn't address them, didn't look at them in fact, I thought 'no, no, my feelings don't come into it'.



# Understanding the lived experience: neglect of domestic environment

The only way I kept toys was hiding them.

“When I was a little boy, the war had just started; everything had a value to me ... everything in my eyes then, and indeed now, has potential use

I want things that belonged to people so that they have a connection to me.

I don't have time to make a note of everything in the paper that has an interest to me and so I'm very fearful of throwing something away.

- **Influence of the past:** childhood, loss
- **Positive value of hoarding:** a sense of connection, utility
- **Beyond control:** voices, obsessions

The distress of not collecting is more than the distress of doing it.

# The lived experience...

Chrissie's story: Raven Housing Trust (10 minutes)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kL43-yvK\\_8E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kL43-yvK_8E)

# So is it ever a lifestyle choice?

Life stories tell us otherwise ...

I got it into my head that I'm unimportant, so it doesn't matter what I look like or what I smell like.

"Well I don't know to be honest. Suddenly one day you think, 'What am I doing here?'"

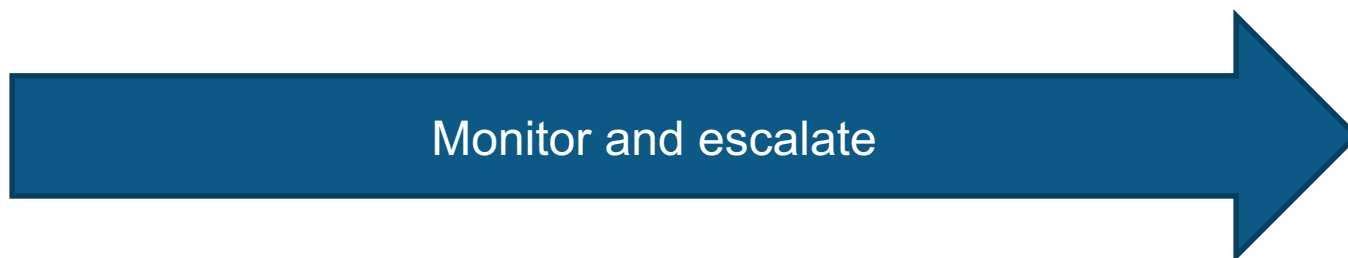
Your esteem, everything about you, you lose your way ... so now you're demeaning yourself as the person you knew you were.

"I used to wake up in the morning and cry when I saw the sheer overwhelming state... My war experience in Eastern Europe was scary, but nothing compared to what I was experiencing here."

# Does it constitute a safeguarding concern?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some self-care concerns but no harm or distress</li><li>• Property neglected but all services work</li><li>• Lack of amenities</li><li>• No support</li><li>• Clutter index 1-3</li><li>• Beginnings of non-engagement</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Refusing medical treatment where capacity is unclear and implications serious</li><li>• Clutter index 4-5</li><li>• Conditions impacting on wellbeing</li><li>• Non engagement</li><li>• Fire risk/gas leak potential</li><li>• Multiple concerns</li><li>• Chaotic behaviours where capacity is unclear</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-neglect is life-threatening</li><li>• Significant deterioration in health or wellbeing</li><li>• Imminent fire or gas leak risk</li><li>• Multiple significant concerns</li><li>• Access to property compromised</li><li>• Clutter index 6-9</li></ul>
<b>Respond from within your agency</b>	<b>Seek consultation with local authority safeguarding</b>	<b>Always report to safeguarding</b>

<https://hoardingdisordersuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/clutter-image-ratings.pdf>



# The local authority's legal duty (s.42)

To determine whether there is reasonable cause to suspect that an adult

- Has needs for care and support
- Is experiencing or at risk of abuse and neglect
- As a result of those needs, is unable to protect themselves from the abuse or neglect

If so, the local authority must make enquiries to enable it to decide whether any action should be taken and, if so, what and by whom

In a case of self-neglect, the duty to make enquiries is only triggered where the adult is unable to protect themselves “by controlling their own behaviour” (i.e. is not exercising a lifestyle choice)

But where the formal s.42 safeguarding duty is not triggered, that doesn't mean nothing should be done...



VS

### safeguarding

a response to keep someone safe and to ensure their needs are met

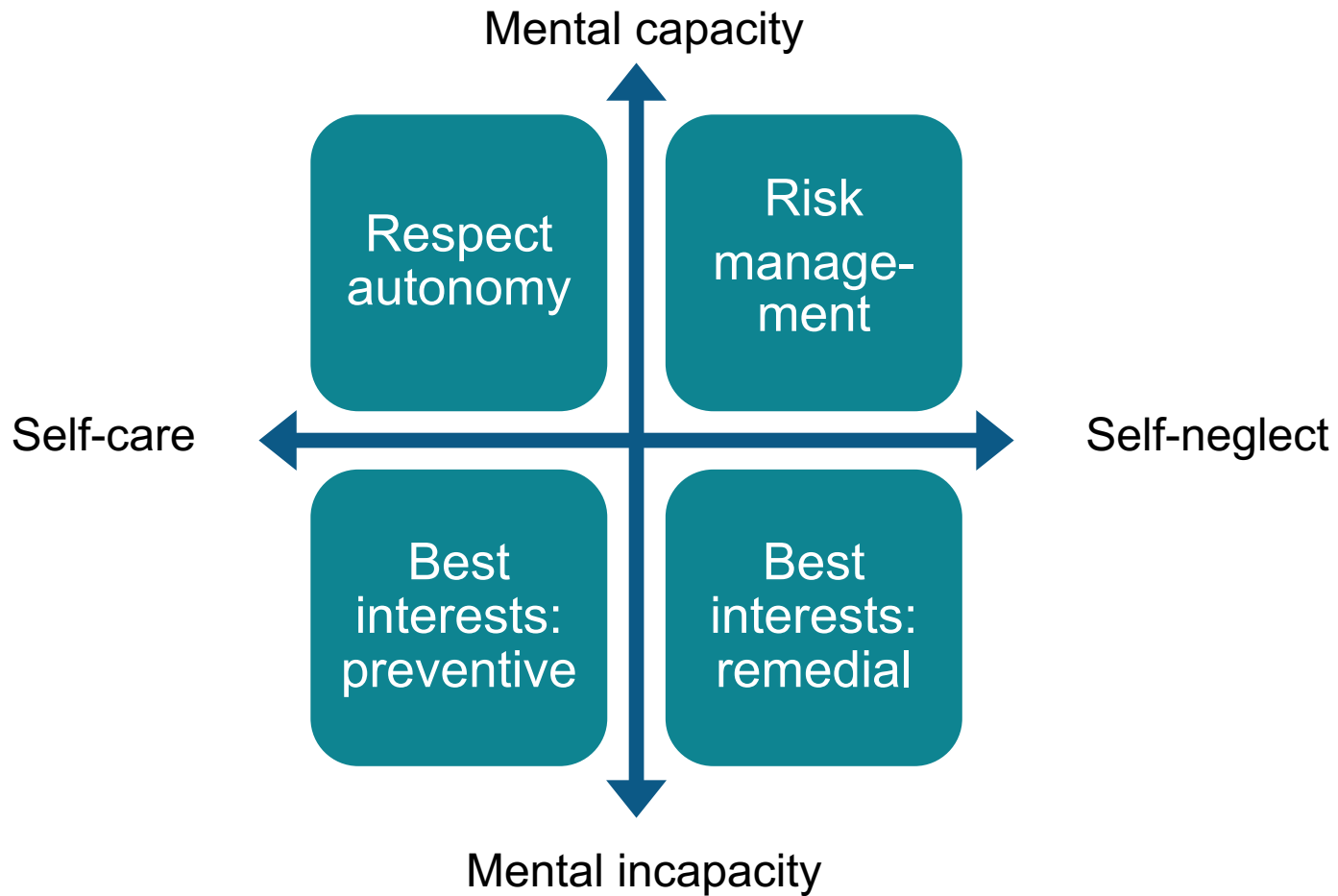
Ongoing support and monitoring: links into healthcare, care and support needs assessment, fire safety advice, multidisciplinary team meetings, MARM meetings

### Safeguarding


a formal response under s.42 Care Act 2014

Likely to involve all or any of these responses, with escalation of intervention if risk remains unmitigated and the potential for court action

# What has mental capacity got to do with it?



# Things to note about mental capacity



When someone appears to be at risk of harm as a result of their self-neglect, it is important to work out whether they have mental capacity to make decisions about how they live and about accepting support.

In many cases, where it is unclear whether they have capacity, a mental capacity assessment under the Mental Capacity Act 2005 will be needed. We can't rely on an assumption of capacity.

It is important to recognize that what someone says about their decision is not necessarily what they will do. Articulate use of language can hide difficulties enacting decisions in the moment – the person can 'talk the talk' but not 'walk the walk'.

In these circumstances, 'articulate and demonstrate' methods of assessment are necessary – don't just tell me, show me...

If someone is assessed as lacking mental capacity for a specific decision, we have a legal responsibility to make that decision on their behalf and, in doing so, to act in their best interests.



# How best to support someone who self-neglects: the voices of lived experience ...

They all said, 'we're not here to condemn you, we're here to help you' and I couldn't believe it. I thought I was going to get an enormous bollocking.

"Tenancy support ... weren't helping ... just leaving it for me to do. Whereas when x came, they were sort of hands on: '*Bumph! We've got to do this*' ... *shall we start cleaning up now?*'

The idea is not to get too pushy about it; people start getting panicky then, you know? 'You're interfering in my life,' that kinda thing.

Emotional connection/trust  
Relationship

Providing something  
useful/practical input

Respectful and honest  
engagement

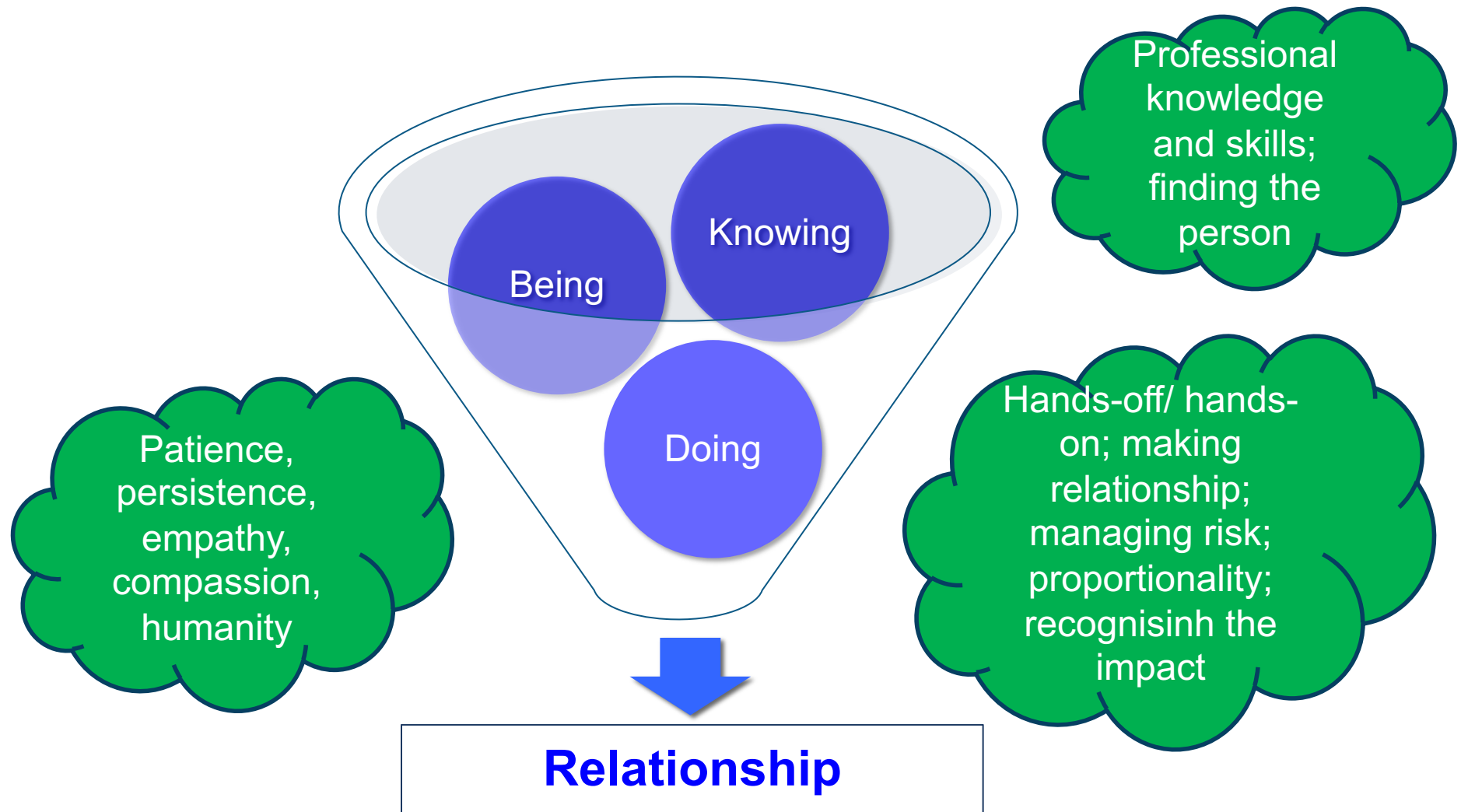
She got it into my head that I am important, that I am on this earth for a reason.

He has been human, that's the word I can use; he has been human.

He's down to earth, he doesn't beat around the bush. If there is something wrong he will tell you. If he thinks you need to get this sorted, he will tell you.

With me if you're too bossy, I will put my feet down and go like a stubborn mule; I will just sit and just fester.

# Knowing, Being, Doing



# In summary: practitioner approaches

## Practice with people who self-neglect is more effective where practitioners

Build rapport and trust, showing respect, empathy, persistence, and continuity

Seek to understand the meaning and significance of the self-neglect

Work patiently at the individual's pace of the individual

Keep the question of mental capacity in view

Identify risks and communicate about these with honesty

Have a strong understanding of legal powers and duties

Think flexibly about how family members and community resources can contribute

# In summary: organisational approaches

## Effective practice is best supported organisationally when

The SAB provides strong leadership

Agencies have shared understandings of self-neglect

There are clear referral routes, communication and decision-making systems

Longer-term supportive, relationship-based involvement is accepted as a pattern of work

Training and supervision challenge and support practitioners with the challenges

# Would you like further information?

West of Berkshire SAB resource page on self-neglect

<https://www.sabberkshirewest.co.uk/practitioners/self-neglect/>

- Definitions and understanding
- Policy and procedures: <https://www.berkshiresafeguardingadults.co.uk/west-berkshire/procedures/?proclD=1418>
- Safeguarding Adult Reviews
- Toolkit to aid assessment and evaluation of risk
- MARM guidance
- Learning materials: webinars and videos

## Two additional videos to watch

- Lambeth Safeguarding Adults Board – Working Together in Self-Neglect (3 minutes): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEXrczADeKo&t=1s>
- Keith's Story (14 minutes): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhmfptpwNZc>

# Are you concerned about an adult?

- In an emergency situation call the Police on 999
- If you think there has been a crime but it is not an emergency, call the Police on 101
- If you are concerned about yourself or another adult who may be being abused or neglected, contact Adult Social Care in the area in which the person lives, on the relevant number, email address or online form below:

**Reading** - call 0118 9373747 or email

at [CSAAdvice.Signposting@reading.gov.uk](mailto:CSAAdvice.Signposting@reading.gov.uk) or complete an online [form](#)

**West Berkshire** - call 01635 519056 or

email [safeguardingadults@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:safeguardingadults@westberks.gov.uk) or complete an online [form](#)

**Wokingham** call 0118 974 6371 or

email [Adultsafeguardinghub@wokingham.gov.uk](mailto:Adultsafeguardinghub@wokingham.gov.uk) or complete an online [form](#)

For help out of normal working hours contact the **Emergency Duty Team** on 01344 351 999 or email [edt@bracknell-forest.gov.uk](mailto:edt@bracknell-forest.gov.uk)

# Get in touch

For more information, please do get in touch:

Suzy Braye

[s.braye@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:s.braye@sussex.ac.uk)

