



EMPOWER PRACTICE GUIDE

2024

Part One: Background and Theory

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Juno acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise the deep relationship and care that First Peoples have with this land. We recognise the ongoing survival and cultural wisdom of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and other First Nations peoples around the world.

PROGRAM ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Juno has worked in partnership with the Economic Mobility Exchange™ to adapt this powerful approach to poverty disruption and trauma recovery. This approach internationally has consistently seen women achieve employment aspirations, increase income – with the flagship EMPath© program seeing increased income of an average of 183% – and improve their stability in housing and family. This model has been employed in the US, UK and Netherlands and assisted over 200,000 people in the last decade (reference).

The philanthropic support of the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, Phyllis Connor Memorial Trust, Darebin Council and the Inner North Community Foundation has enabled Juno to pilot and continue this model in Victoria.

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Juno's EMPower Program has been internationally recognised for its thought leadership and the adaptation of the model for an Australia context, being awarded 'Most Impactful Award' by the Economic Mobility Exchange in 2024.

CONTENTS

Purpose of the guide	4
Development and Adaptation	4
What is EMPower?	5
Neuroscience evidence-base.....	6
Further reading and resources on executive functioning skills:.....	7
EMPower’s approach	7
Theory of change.....	9
Reference list - Part one	10

PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE

The purpose of this practice guide is to document the theories, philosophy, evidence base, and practice approaches that underpin Juno's economic mobility coaching program, EMPower. This guide supports coaches and practitioners with a clear framework to ensure their approach is evidence-based and trauma-informed.

The guide is structured into three distinct parts:

Part 1. Theory and Research: Outlines the theoretical and research foundations behind the program.

Part 2. Spirit of Coaching: Delves into the coaching approach, including its philosophy and application.

Part 3. Delivery: Describes practical aspects such as forms and processes relevant to the program.

The practice guidelines and tools have been adapted for use in Australia by Juno coaches and the program development team. This guide encapsulates refined learnings and approaches and aims to explain the program in an engaging, accessible format. It is best used in conjunction with the EMPower Mobility Mentoring online training, which delves deeper into the neuroscience of trauma and recovery and underpins the development of the program.

DEVELOPMENT AND ADAPTATION

Partnership: Juno has collaborated with EMPower since 2018, gaining knowledge and training in the model as a member of the Economic Mobility Exchange.

Adaptation: Between 2019-2020, Juno adapted the resources for the Australian context.

Pilot Program: The pilot program began in March 2021 and concluded in September 2023, supporting 38 women (cis and trans).

Measurement & Evaluation: A final evaluation report of the pilot program was delivered by For Purpose Evaluations in November 2023. You can read it here: [Endline Evaluation Report of EMPower Pilot Program](#)

WHAT IS EMPOWER?

EMPower (Economic Mobility Power) is an evidence-based coaching program created by Juno, adapted from a successful model pioneered by the Boston-based organisation, Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath).

Developed in collaboration with Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child, this model has been adapted globally, with Juno being the first organisation to implement it in Australia. EMPower is designed to address gender-specific poverty and trauma, supporting women, trans and gender diverse people who have experienced homelessness and family violence. The program aims to help participants rebuild their direction and confidence, achieve their goals, and move towards greater economic independence. It recognises that the cycle of poverty can persist even after a crisis and works to break this cycle by helping participants build the necessary skills and mindset for long-term economic security.

EMPower is dedicated to rebuilding economic security and supporting recovery from trauma through a holistic, person-centered, and strengths-based approach. Recognising that economic independence requires integrated planning across various life domains—family, wellbeing, financial management, career and education, income, and employment—our program helps participants develop executive functioning skills by setting staged goals, rebuilding confidence, engaging in group work, and progressively working towards greater economic security.

The approach is unique in that it is both **trauma-informed** and **trauma-responsive**. It is designed to rewire and strengthen parts of the brain affected by trauma and the impacts of toxic stress. This program is grounded in a deep understanding of how trauma impacts brain functioning as well as recognition of the systemic barriers faced by women, trans and gender diverse people, particularly those who have experienced homelessness and family violence. We approach these challenges with a gendered perspective, acknowledging how experiences of stress and trauma impact feelings of security and safety. Our intersectional feminist lens addresses the intersecting factors contributing to homelessness and trauma, recognising the patriarchal forces that lead to high rates of violence and homelessness among women, trans and gender-diverse people, and children.

Grounded in neuroscience research, EMPower acknowledges how the trauma of homelessness and family violence impact the prefrontal cortex of the brain and cause severe mental and emotional fatigue. Coaches support participants in exploring their priorities, setting goals, and making tangible life changes by building awareness, practicing, and strengthening these executive functioning skills in a supportive, collaborative coaching environment.

Led by coaches trained in EMPower's Mobility Mentoring program, EMPower reflects Juno's commitment to an intersectional feminist and trauma-informed approach, aligning with the Federal Government's official [National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032](#), specifically, within the Healing and Recovery pillar.

NEUROSCIENCE EVIDENCE-BASE

EMPower is an adaptation of the Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath) program. Both based in Boston, EMPower spent many years working with Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child to better understand how experiences of toxic stress, living in poverty, and trauma impact brain functioning. This research led to the development of an evidence-based coaching model designed to literally rebuild neural networks, helping participants develop the skills necessary for achieving economic success.

The model is deeply informed by brain science research which identifies the impacts of trauma on the pre-frontal cortex and in particular, executive functioning skills. When an individual encounters frequent and ongoing stress, trauma or crisis, the limbic system (especially the amygdala) in the brain is constantly activated and powerful signals of stress or fear can cause the pre-frontal cortex of the brain to become swamped and waves of emotion to drown out executive functioning skills (Casey et al, 2011). According to the Center on the Developing Child, executive functioning skills underlie the capacity to self-regulate, plan and meet goals, follow multiple-step directions even when interrupted, display self-control, and stay focused despite distractions. The pre-frontal cortex is also known as the integration point; where necessary information from the brain and body come together and meaning is made. Therefore, experiencing the hugely significant traumas of homelessness or family violence can keep the limbic system in a constant state of alert, which in turn impacts the pre-frontal cortex and essential executive functioning skills. It is important to note that the individual's access to support and how much love, safety and boundaries they have around them will influence the degree of traumatic imprint (Howard, 2024). This highlights the absolute importance of adopting a trauma-informed approach and creating safety and transparency within the coaching relationship.

While trauma negatively impacts executive functioning, the brain's plasticity, and especially the plasticity of the pre-frontal cortex means that these functions can be improved with targeted interventions and support. Neuroplasticity refers to *"the physiological changes in the brain that happen as the result of our interactions with our environment. From the time the brain begins to develop in utero until the day we die, the connections among the cells in our brains reorganize in response to our changing needs. This dynamic process allows us to learn from and adapt to different experiences"* (Campbell, 2009). Effective interventions include providing a safe and collaborative environment, using staged goal-setting techniques, and offering support in managing stress and emotional responses. The relational, therapeutic core of the model is guided by our broader Juno

frameworks of an intersectional feminist lens, trauma-informed care, anti-oppressive practice and a strengths-based approach.

By setting and working towards smaller goals and receiving ongoing support and recognition for their progress, participants gradually rebuild these key skills. The more these executive functioning skills are practiced, the more the 'brain physically develops increasingly rich networks of neural connections in the areas of the prefrontal cortex that support these functions' (Babcock, 2014, p.8). Strengthening these active neural pathways can also enable better decision-making and belief in one's abilities in the longer term. This research from Harvard University and Theory of Change developed by EMPower provides evidence that these skills and mindsets are developed through interaction with others, and that they are strengthened over time through repeated practice and as participants experience small wins which increases their feelings of success (Babcock, 2014). Similarly, research by behaviour scientist, BJ Fogg highlights that it is this achievement of "low hanging fruits" and experiencing small wins, and specifically the feeling of success that builds the momentum and capacity for further growth and aspiration. Key to the success of goal achievement is the ongoing recognition and celebration between coach and participant of the time and effort being put in by the participant to achieve their goals.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES ON EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS:

- › Dan Siegel's explanation: [Hand Model of the Brain](#)
- › Executive Function and Self-Regulations Skills: [Harvard University Center on the Developing Child](#)
- › Video on Executive Functioning Skills by Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: [YouTube Video](#)

EMPOWER'S APPROACH

1. Evidence-Based Tools: Employs evidence-based tools and approaches designed to reduce personal stress, improve decision-making and foster resilience.
2. Goal setting Across Life Domains: Coaches support participants to set staged goals across many life domains, including wellbeing, family stability, career, financial management, education, training and employment. Importantly, these goals are created by the participant and unique to their own specific situation.
3. Coaching Conversations: We use the coaching conversations as a vehicle for change.
4. Motivational Techniques: We use motivational techniques, including motivational interviewing, incentives and rewards to help women reach their goals and set increasingly challenging ones.
5. Group Work: Group-based workshops; aligning to the different pillars of the bridge, to network and connect in with relevant services and supports.

The program is based on the concept of 'coaching navigation' where participants acquire skills, knowledge and resources through active skill building with the coach providing a scaffold of support until it is no longer needed. Skills such as metacognition (the ability to reflect on one's thought processes), working memory and mental flexibility are what enable future-oriented decisions, planning and goal achievement, which are linked to the ability to maintain study and employment. For participants to achieve and maintain outcomes, they explore what is important to them in appointments with their coach and then set goals within the interrelated domains of family stability, wellbeing, financial management, career and education, income and employment. The model works by supporting them to build awareness, practice and strengthen executive skills through active goal setting and achievement towards goals whilst creating tangible changes and shifts in their lives.

One of the core aims of coaching is to reconnect participants to their own solutions, helping them to rebuild trust in their capabilities and decision-making. This self-trust and sense of choice and agency are frequently eroded by the manipulation and control experienced within family violence. This approach, combined with clear goal setting and action, can help to create significant change and progress in participant's lives. Through the use of generative questions and motivational interviewing, the coach elicits participants' own unique reasons and motivations for change, enabling them to realise behaviour change and move closer to their goals.

The coach provides a structure for the participant to practice key self-regulation skills, such as comparing and weighing up multiple priorities, goal-setting, and problem-solving. The use of the goal action plan and reviewing goals in each appointment helps to build these skills. The use of the goal action plan creates clear structure and accountability for clients and allows the coach to check in on their client's progress and commitment to their goals. The coach also delivers key messages to the participant that affirm their belief in the participant's ability to progress, providing a platform to build positive identities, self-efficacy, and motivation. The role of the coach is to facilitate supportive conversations, ask powerful questions that elicit motivation for change, and hold the client accountable for what they are wanting to create in their life.

THEORY OF CHANGE

The Theory of Change diagram illustrates how what we do creates change. Reading from the bottom up, it sets out the EMPower program's key activities and the outcomes we aim to influence. It illustrates the causal pathways from our activities, through a series of interim outcomes, to impact the lives of participants participating in the program, as well as to inform improved pathways for participants who have experienced homelessness and family violence to achieve economic independence.

The EMPower Bridge serves as the program's central tool. It forms the basis of the Theory of Change, is the planning tool for participants to map their life goals and is used for evaluating the program's success. It is an important visual tool for participants to be able to see where they are in different life domains and contemplate where they want to be. The long-term aim of EMPower, as described in our Theory of Change, is:

"Participants have economic independence and are free from poverty. They are self-sufficient, independent, connected, well-resourced and safe. They have a sense of agency, achievement and self-determination. They thrive."

The EMPower Theory of Change reflects a progression of enhanced capacity and capability building of women and non-binary people participating in the program; capability building informs decision-making across the inter-relationships of family and housing, health and connection, financial wellbeing and budget, career and education, and income and employment. At the completion of the program our goals are:

- › Participants have economic independence and are free from poverty
- › They are self-sufficient, independent, connected, well-resourced and safe
- › Women and non-binary people thrive because they have a sense of agency, achievement and self-determination.

EMPower Theory of Change: [Theory of Change](#)

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