My experience:

I have lived with mental health issues for over a decade now. I live with debilitating anxiety and phobias, and experience bouts of depression. As my mental health worsened, I found myself unable to continue working, and was consequently referred to a disability employment provider. It was terribly uncomfortable to have to sit in an open plan office and describe my mental health challenges to a stranger. I have now endured that multiple times, having been rotated through providers for various reasons.

What I found was:

* A lack of understanding of the impacts of my conditions – what training/qualifications do providers have? In my experience, not a lot that was useful. On one occasion the worker that I sat down in front of had the week previously been my local barista.
* A lack of empathy – “you just need to find yourself a job, because the government says so, or you’ll lose your payment”. Actually, I’m having trouble doing that, and that’s why I’m here. Alternatively – empathy without any assistance. “You can’t work? Well, off you go and I’ll tick the box I need to tick so you keep getting your payment”.
* Unhelpful “help” – if you do an activity it will exempt you from looking for work obligations. From memory that activity was a Certificate II of office skills, when I had previously worked in government offices for a living.

The last provider I went to, the worker would take me into a private room for my weekly appointments, which was nice as it catered to my anxiety. It also meant she could spend the entirety of the appointment time slot telling me about whatever man she was hooking up with that week. I was just grateful that for another week I wasn’t going to be homeless, as I was ticking that mutual obligation box. Eventually she told me she was getting audited and needed to be seen to be actually assisting clients. She told me to either find a job or go and study. I enrolled in a 4 year university degree, to give myself some time away from the system that wasn’t helping me. This was not my preference. This meant another 4 years of living below the poverty line, when what I really wanted, and had all along, was to be supported to find meaningful work.

I have now finished my university degree. This wasn’t easy but I found the university to be supportive of my needs. As for what next – I go back into the system, and I don’t feel hopeful about it. I am still in need of support to find and to manage work. My mental health challenges remain.

What do I want?

* Relationships – services should be built on relationships. Get to know me. Let’s have coffee. Let’s work together. (No, I don’t want to know about your boyfriend…)
* Flexibility – the welfare system has rigid boxes, and we don’t all fit in them. There NEEDS to be flexibility to accommodate the individual.
* Innovation – anyone read Cottam? Cottam, H. (2019). *Radical help: How can we remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state*. Virago.
* Incentives – that benefit the client at the forefront. If the client does all the work and finds themselves a job, and all the provider does is remind them that they need a job or they’ll lose their welfare payment, then why should the provider benefit? They haven’t done anything. I wonder this often. There’s lots of people getting paid, and over a decade later I’m still jobless…