

## Living with Separation

“ The loneliness was awful at the beginning, but you come to realise you just have to get on with it. ”

This booklet is for individuals experiencing the imprisonment of a family member. It explains the impact that separation can have on you, your imprisoned partner and the children involved. It also offers practical help about how to cope with your changing roles.



£1.00

# Living with Separation

an Outsiders guide for the partners and families of prisoners



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*This booklet 'Living with Separation' is one of a series of information booklets for families of prisoners and offenders called 'The Outsiders' published by Action for Prisoners' Families (APF).*

*Action for Prisoners' Families is a membership organisation which works for the benefit of prisoners' and offenders' families by representing their views and those who work with them, and promoting effective work with those families.*

### The Outsiders

Sent to prison  
Living with separation  
Telling the children  
Preparing for release

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*Freephone support helpline offering information, advice and guidance to prisoners' and offenders' families*

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## Loss and separation - how might you feel?

If you are separated by imprisonment from a relative, the pain may be present for a lot of, if not all, the time. There are constant reminders – the visits, the phone calls, the letters sent or received. You may have to save money to buy things for your relative. And then there is time, endless time, the counting of days until release. There are the disappointments when you don't get a letter you expected, a visit is cancelled, they are refused parole. There are constant reminders of the absence in your life.

However, you might also feel relieved that your partner has gone into prison. Your life may be much simpler without them, particularly if they were violent or using drugs. There may even be relief that your partner has gone to prison and is out of your life temporarily. However, presuming you are sad that he has been sentenced to prison, it may help to come to terms with this pain if you think about the stages of grief, as many people report experiencing it.

First – A shock, disbelief, numbness and awful tiredness that may seem to fill you up and rob you of all energy or the will to do anything. This tiredness can last a long time.

Second – An acute and often terrible pain of loss.

Third – Anger at your loss, at the person missing, at the event which led to the loss, even anger at yourself, or a feeling of guilt.

Fourth – A gradual recovery from the intense pain and coping with every day life again.

Somewhere along the way, there may be a great need to feel sorry (or angry) not only for the person imprisoned, but for yourself, caught in a situation you didn't plan or want.

## Will your relationship change?

For both the imprisoned person and the partner at home, there isn't any 'going back to normal'. Life will never be the same again.

The period of living with separation can pass through various stages, all bringing their own uncertainties and difficulties such as:

- Bail
- Remand in custody
- Trial
- Sentence
- Appeal
- Transfer to another prison
- Living through the sentence on the outside
- Living with an indeterminate sentence e.g. if your partner is a lifer
- Preparation for release/resettlement
- Release

You may find it helps to think of your experience in two ways:

The pain of imprisonment has other sides to it. There is the terrible frustration of feeling that your special person belongs at home with you, but you can only see them for what seems like just a few minutes each week (if that – some prisoners will only be entitled to visits every fortnight). Aisha desperately missed her husband Muhammad:

“ It's the little things that upset me. Last Tuesday I cooked a chicken though I don't usually bother as I'm on my own. I took it out of the oven and got quite tearful - I was thinking, he should be here to eat this chicken with me. Silly little things like that. ”

Some of your pain will be renewed each time you leave a visit. Or if you feared the imprisonment, it may almost be a relief not to have to fear it any longer, because it's finally happened. These feelings are perfectly normal.

## The shared experience

All prisoners' families share a similar experience of the criminal justice system, and in particular of the prison visiting system. You will inevitably be caught up in this yourself, though arrangements may vary from one prison to another.

Knowing that so many other families are going through the same experience may help you, and indeed there can be a spirit of comradeship in prison waiting areas as everyone complains about delays in getting 'processed' through the system, transport difficulties etc.

If you are willing to be friendly, you can gain a lot of information about the prison by just chatting to people. But it is also important to be wary: gossip can travel fast among prisoners, so do not say anything indiscreet or too personal in case inappropriate information is passed between prisoners and causes distress or other problems.

If you would like to get in touch with a prisoners' family support service, where you can discuss any concerns you have more freely, you can ring the **Offenders' Families Helpline Freephone 0808 808 2003** or visit its website; [www.offendersfamilies.org](http://www.offendersfamilies.org). They offer support and information on any issues relating to the imprisonment of a family member. You could also sign up to **Prison Chat UK** – an online chat forum [www.prisonchatuk.com](http://www.prisonchatuk.com) and **Prisoners' Families Voices** [www.prisonersfamiliesvoices.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.prisonersfamiliesvoices.blogspot.co.uk)

## Your personal experience

The way you deal with separation, and with coping on your own will depend on:

1. The kind of relationship you have with your family member, and how much responsibility you took on before they went to prison.
2. What support you can expect to get from family, friends and your local community.
3. Your feelings about your family member's imprisonment and the (alleged) offence.
4. The ages of your children if you have any; whether or not you were pregnant at the time your partner was arrested; your relationship with the children.
5. How well you take care of yourself – such as how much time and space you allow yourself for good physical and emotional health and to do the things you enjoy.

## Loneliness and isolation

Imprisonment, and the feeling of being labelled a prisoner's partner, parent or other relative can compound the sense of isolation experienced by those left on the outside while their relative is in prison. One woman described it as "the silence of my own world, somehow more hostile than any prison wing".

Here are some other ways families have described their experiences:

"It is so difficult to explain to anyone out here what loving someone who is away from you can be like."

"I feel awkward going out alone. We always used to go places together."

"The loneliness was awful at the beginning, but you come to realise you just have to get on with it."

“ I didn't plan to be on my own, and time doesn't make it easier. It just gets harder - I can see no end to it. ”

“ I'm so lonely - even with five children - especially at night when they're in bed. It's hard not being able to share problems. ”

“ There's nobody else in my position that I can talk to, so I tend to have a rosy view of everybody else's life, thinking their life's great. ”

“ The thing I find most difficult is the fact that it will be years before we are together. ”

Isolation can mean something different to everyone. The obvious effect is loneliness, but it can also lead to loss of confidence, anxiety and depression. In these states of mind you are less likely to be able to tackle things and cope on your own. It would be silly to pretend

that overcoming loneliness and isolation is easy. Some of its causes may be hard to change, and some of its effects - depression, loss of confidence - can stay with you for a long time.

Many families have said how helpful it has been to talk to someone else who is visiting a partner in prison. The Offenders' Families Helpline Freephone 0808 808 2003 will also be able to give you information about what support is available in your area.



## How can you lessen the effects of imprisonment on your children?

See if there is anyone in your immediate family you can talk to and trust.

- Can you talk to your children's teachers?
- Can you share your concerns with other mothers whose children may have experienced some form of separation?

There is more information on imprisonment and children in the Outsiders booklet 'Telling the Children' which is available from prison visitors' centres and from Action for Prisoners' Families. APF has also published three children's storybooks and a comic-style magazine dealing with issues affecting children with a parent in prison. For further details about 'Danny's Mum' (4-6 age group), 'Tommy's Dad' (4-7 age group), 'Finding Dad' (8-11 age group) and 'It's a Tough Time for Everyone' (9-14 age group) contact APF.

## How can you feel like you're a person in your own right?

Remember it's okay to want some time away from your children - so you need to try and create some time and space for yourself. Is there a class you could go to, a hobby you'd like to take up, some voluntary work that interests you - or would you rather just meet up with friends?

## Finding help and building support

“ No one wants to know you when you're in trouble. ”

When things get too much, sometimes everything you do seems to make it worse for you, your child and your partner. It all seems such a terrible struggle balancing everything, with so little time for yourself and maybe not enough money.

When asked what sort of help they would find most useful prisoners' relatives identified four kinds of help:

1. Practical help – with money, transport, child care and other needs.
2. Better visiting arrangements and ways of keeping in touch – including longer time, more privacy and improved facilities for keeping in touch such as skype or e-mail.
3. Meeting people in a similar situation, to share experiences, support one another and have access to more information. Prison Chat UK's online community ([www.prisonchatuk.com](http://www.prisonchatuk.com)) and Prisoners' Families Voices Blogspot ([www.prisonersfamiliesvoices.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.prisonersfamiliesvoices.blogspot.co.uk)) may be helpful if you want to share experiences with people in a similar situation on-line.
4. Someone to talk to and help with relationship issues, depression, children and emotional issues. The Offenders' Families Helpline 0808 808 2003 may be able to suggest who can help.

## Practical and expert help

If you are claiming benefits or you are on a low income, you should be able to claim for travel costs for two visits every four weeks from the Assisted Prison Visits Unit (APVU). This will include an allowance for meals and an overnight stay in certain circumstances. To get these costs paid, you should

get hold of an APVU form 2022 from the visitors' centre, prison or on-line at [www.apvu.gov.uk](http://www.apvu.gov.uk) and send it to **Assisted Prison Visits Unit, PO Box 2152, Birmingham, B15 1SD**.

You can phone the APVU on: **0300 063 2100** Mon-Fri 9-5. Textphone: **0845 304 0800** (times as above).

Fax: 0121 626 3474 (24 hrs).

You can also email: **assisted.prison.visits@noms.gsi.gov.uk**.

**www.gov.uk** is also good for other information about staying in touch with someone in prison.

If you are asking for an information pack you need to include your full postal address. If you have access to the internet you can download an information booklet. Information in Welsh, a number of other languages, Braille and on audio cassette is available from the Assisted Prison Visits Unit.

It may at first seem daunting, asking for help, and it can depend on knowing where to look and knowing you can trust the source of help.

Many relatives of prisoners don't know what help is available through support organisations or groups and in some cases are reluctant, even fearful, about asking for support from statutory services like GPs or health visitors. Family and friends are high on the list of support networks.

Support from family and friends, can have 'strings attached.' Before asking them, carefully consider whether you want them to know about your situation.

## What sort of help would be right for you?

Family and friends may be able to help but some find the need for mutual support from others who are going through similar experiences helpful. The Prisoners' Families Helpline will be able to tell you if there are any support groups available in your area, or you could think about setting one up yourself. APF can give you help on how to do this.

If you are having problems with your relationship with your partner in prison you may not want to share it with your family who may not be detached enough to offer you objective advice. You may also find this too intimate a matter to discuss with a support group, so maybe you need to talk things over with a skilled listener or counsellor or chat online at Family Lives: [www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)

## Losing intimacy

You may find the loss of intimacy difficult, limited communication and loss of chances to share commonplace events with each other difficult. It may seem that only the prisoner has lost his or her freedom, but the partners left at home have also suffered a great loss.

Unlike prisons in some other countries, for example Canada, there are no conjugal visits (where you can have some private time for intimacy with your partner) allowed in British prisons.

Amy recalled:

*“I really ached because we couldn't be a true married couple. We couldn't go to bed together or be together. I remember this hitting me very strongly.”*

Aisha agreed:

*“Celibacy is a sacrifice - a very big sacrifice. But it's not just that. I miss him not being with me. It's like if something goes through my mind, I can't ring him up and ask him. So it's always waiting. I might write it down for later.”*

Some women report extreme jealousy on the part of their partners in prison:

*“He is worried about me going out with other men. That was the big problem. He just wouldn't believe me. He said he'd heard so much from other men inside about wives and girlfriends clearing off and leaving them, sending them Dear John letters.”*

Jack explains what it feels like from a prisoner's point of view:

*“I used to listen to other guys who'd had a phone call or a letter from their wives or girlfriends and they'd say, She's going out. Who's taking her home?”*

## Depression

Depression is one of the most common illnesses, and it is one which a prisoner's partner is very likely to experience at some point, because it is a normal stage in any grieving process, and it is also an effect of isolation, loneliness, low self esteem and unexpressed anger. Here are some of the signs and symptoms by which you can recognise depression:

You may feel:

**Low, blue or sad** – ‘Life's so dull.’

**Despair** – ‘There's no hope!’

**Helpless** – ‘There's nothing I can do.’

**Guilty** – ‘I blame myself.’

**Ashamed** – ‘I never thought I'd feel this low!’

**Empty** – ‘I don't have any feelings nowadays.’

**Isolated** – ‘No-one cares!’





**Worthless** – ‘I’ve made such a mess of my life.’

**Unloved/unwanted** – ‘I’ve got nobody to live for.’

**Irritable** – ‘I fly off the handle over the smallest thing!’

You may have:

**Indigestion and wind, constipation or diarrhoea**

**Increased/decreased appetite** – leading to weight gain/weight loss

**Palpitations** – your heart races or thumps – and chest pains

**Sleep problems** – insomnia or you can’t wake up

**Painful joints and aching muscles**

**Fatigue** – you’re tired all the time

**Headaches**

**Agitation** – you feel restless and fidgety; or you are terribly slow with speech/movements

**Dry, itchy skin**

When these feelings last a long time or begin to disrupt your life, you may need help.

## How can you help yourself?

Recognise that your needs are important. Tell yourself you deserve to feel better, and you deserve to get some help if you need it. You have probably given a great deal to other people in your life. Now you need something for yourself.

### Talk to someone

Depression needs to be talked about. Being able to talk with someone may not solve your problems but it can at least reduce the burden of loneliness.

### Let yourself cry

One of the things that stops us talking is the fear of breaking down and crying in front of somebody else. But to cry on someone’s shoulder can relieve the isolation of never showing anyone how bad you are feeling.

### Take regular exercise

Studies have shown that regular exercise does help reduce feelings of depression. It can also be a useful way to meet new friends. If you have not been used to regular exercise then it is important to start gently, try walking more or go swimming.

### Don’t punish yourself

We tend to believe we have no right to be depressed. We tell ourselves: ‘I should be able to pull myself together!’ You need to recognise that there is a good reason for you feeling the way you do and you need to be good to yourself.

### Allow yourself to be angry

Allowing yourself to feel anger if you are depressed can be very strengthening. It reduces the feelings of guilt and self-blame. Once we start to feel anger we need to decide what to do about it. It can give us the energy to allow us to make demands on other people, or to start doing new things for ourselves.

### Learn to be realistic

When you are depressed you think in terms of extremes, and this can affect your mood even more. You may think that nobody wants to see you. Nobody understands or cares. Start by asking yourself how you would see things and the type of things you would do, if you were not feeling so upset as you are now.

### Taking pills

Doctors commonly prescribe anti-depressants and sleeping tablets for depression, anxiety and insomnia. For some people they can be an effective treatment.

They can't remove the cause of the problem, but they may be able to help you better cope with it. There can of course be a problem with becoming dependent on or addicted to pills.

Though we can take pills to suppress painful feelings for a time, usually we have to face those feelings so that we can eventually cope better with the future.

### Stress and ill health

Studies have shown that ongoing stress can weaken the body's immune system. The hormones and body chemicals produced by stress can disrupt the work of the cells that fight disease.

If we cope badly with stress, it can result in a breakdown in physical health or emotional well-being. A breakdown of this sort is as much about an inability or a lack of opportunity to communicate problems to others as it is about not coping with those problems.



### When a relationship breaks down

Imprisonment will inevitably change relationships within a family. Many couples find ways of adjusting to these changes, although this can often be a difficult and painful process. Others however do reach the conclusion that it would be best to end the relationship. The times of greatest stress on relationships seem to be at the beginning and the end of a prison sentence.

The needs of the children are of course of major importance when a relationship breaks down, and if this happens to you it is vital to discuss issues around access to prison visits so that children may continue to see their parent in prison. Children under the age of eighteen cannot visit a prison on their own, so they will need some help. However you feel, remember it may be very important for the children to maintain a link with their parent. There may also be important issues about release if

the prisoner is coming up for parole or is eligible for Home Detention Curfew (HDC) and will need somewhere to live.

### Special visits

A 'special visit' can be arranged through the prison chaplain or the probation service in a more private setting than a crowded visits room when a partner or close relative has needed to discuss very delicate personal issues or break some bad news. If you have such an issue to discuss ask the chaplain to arrange a special visit.

You could seek help from **Marriage Care 0845 660 6000** [www.marriagecare.org.uk](http://www.marriagecare.org.uk) or talk to a **Family Lives worker 0808 800 2222**, or the **Single Parents Network: [www.onespace.org.uk](http://www.onespace.org.uk)**

If you feel things have reached a point where you need solicitors, choose a firm that specialises in family/marital law. To save costs you may like to choose a firm near the prison in case lawyers need to visit the prisoner. Make sure to find

out about whether you will get any legal support first.

It will be important to find a way of letting the children know about the changes or breakdown of your relationship. Talk to them in an open and honest way about the other parent, and try to do it without bitterness. Encourage the children to talk about their own feelings about the separation and breakdown of the relationship.

Remember that whatever has happened between you and the children's parent in prison, it may be very important for them to have a continuing relationship or link with them, and you may have to be prepared to allow this, and perhaps arrange for them to be taken to the prison by grandparents or other relatives, even if you do not wish to continue visiting yourself.

## Separation and changing roles

Remember that people grow and change continuously throughout their lives. When the structures of their lives change, their roles change rapidly. The imprisonment of a parent or a partner changes relationships within the family and also within the wider community.

One male prisoner said of his partner outside:

*"She has built a new circle of friends and learned to be independent."*

Some women are very conscious of the changed role forced upon them by their partner's imprisonment. For some, they are pleased their partner is in prison, particularly if they were a victim of domestic violence or their criminal activities impacted on their lives.

Once a person finds the strength to do things alone, making decisions previously made by someone else, they may like this new independence.

One woman said:

*"Now I do everything myself - and that's the way I want to keep it!"*

Indeed, for some women, the husband's imprisonment can mean there are fewer problems:

*"When he went away at the start the children didn't really notice that much, because he had a drink problem and he was away from home a lot anyway. The way he was, he was a hopeless father, and so to be honest it was better for us when he landed up in prison. I manage well now with the kids."*

*"He didn't understand that I've changed, become more independent. I try to deal with things myself."*

*"If it hadn't been for my oldest girl, I couldn't have coped. I don't like being on my own. Oh God - it was awful! I had depended so much on him and then all of a sudden I had to do everything on my own. But I did manage it and now I'm much stronger and more independent."*

In time, the partner outside may grow in confidence and get used to assuming responsibility – and this may be hard to give up. Tension arises when the prisoner returns home and assumes everything will be as they left it and not recognising how difficult family life and decision-making has been. For further information, please refer to the Outsider booklet entitled 'Preparing for Release' in this series.



## Keeping your partner informed and involved

Maintaining a relationship will include keeping your partner in prison up to date with the gradual changes at home. If they have been away for a long time, the children will have grown and you will also have changed. You may now have a different role within the family as well as new friends and social life.

It is very important to find ways of maintaining a parenting role during a prison sentence even if you are no longer a couple. This woman describes the system she and her husband worked out for their 10 year old son:

“ Now we've got the visits properly sussed. As soon as we walk into that visiting room, Mark is John's responsibility. If Mark's naughty, it's John who has to tell him off. John has to take control on visits - otherwise when he comes home he'll suddenly turn into the kind of dad who shouts at his son. Mark waltzes into the prison and doesn't seem phased by it at all. He treats it as his second home! ”

Two women had devised an ingenious way of keeping their husbands up to date with changes in the home. They took photographs of every part of their house or flat and sent them to the prisoners, who stuck them up on the walls of their cells. Other women involved their partners in the choice of household items by sending catalogues and brochures into the prison or discussing their children's education, so that the choice would be a shared one. Such strategies can also help prepare the prisoner for taking responsibilities on release. Some prisons may also have homework clubs where children can bring in their homework to work on with their parents.

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