

## Action for Prisoners' Families Briefing

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### Promoting Good Mental Health in Prisons - Guidance for prisoners' families

Whilst not everybody has a mental illness *everybody* has 'mental health'. Mental health influences how we think and feel about ourselves and others and how we interpret events. Mental health also affects our ability to cope with change, life events, and our relationships<sup>1</sup>.

This guidance outlines how prisoners can be supported in maintaining as good mental health as possible. First, however, you need to take care of your own health. Think about how the guidance given here could apply to you too!

This fact sheet is based on a presentation given by James Ward to families at a 'Family Voices' event in Durham. This work is supported by Lloyds TSB Foundation for England and Wales.

#### What factors can affect mental health?

The list of factors in the box below could describe the experience of being imprisoned, or the experience of having a loved one imprisoned. However, the list doesn't have anything to do with being in, or visiting, prison. It is a list of risk factors for mental health difficulties. That's not to say if you have some, or even all, of these things going on you will definitely develop mental health problems but they put a person at an increased risk of it. Regardless of what label you put on it, it's clear that if you're experiencing these things you're having a pretty rough time of it and your ability to support, provide and be there for other people depends upon your ability to look after yourself.

Exposure to traumatic and uncontrollable events
Ongoing stress
Significant changes to lifestyle
Feelings of guilt or shame
Being socially isolated
Economic pressures

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<sup>1</sup> Mental Health First Aid England. <http://www.mhfaengland.org.uk>

## Mental Health in Prison

Approximately 70% of people in prison will suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder at some stage during their sentence<sup>2</sup>. The life experiences of many people in prison combined with effects of imprisonment such as feelings of shame or isolation are, it goes without saying, also a recipe for poor mental health. This is particularly the case for women in prison who experience poorer mental health than their male counterparts<sup>3</sup> and is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the use of self-harm in women's prisons where recorded rates are much higher than those in the community and in men's prisons.

### Self-Harm

Self-harm is commonly misunderstood and understandably causes a great deal of concern. A lot of people see self-harm as a failed suicide attempt or as attention seeking behaviour. People who self-harm often describe it as a way of helping them to survive distress or cope with overwhelming emotions rather than to end their life. As one woman in prison said:

*"it was a strange release, it was like all of your pain and problems had literally just floated away from me. When I first self harmed it was after I'd been raped so it was a massive release for me"*

A lot of people describe emotions or distress building up in them like a pressure cooker and self-harm is a way of releasing those feelings without exploding. Although many people would like to find another way of coping with these feelings self-harm may be the only way they know at that time. This then is about staying alive and not about suicide.

Self-harm is often very private and people who do self-harm often don't want to draw attention to their actions. The real rates of self-harm in the community cannot be known because people are often able to take care of their own injuries. One reason self-harm in prisons is so high compared to the community may be because it is easier to detect and record or because people in prison don't have access to items like plasters and bandages to take care of their own injuries.

The most common forms of self-harm are cutting, overdosing or self-strangulation. One way of thinking about self-harm is to realise that everyone does it in some way or another. Some people drink too much, some smoke or eat too much. Others may over exercise or work too hard or bottle things up too much. All of these are harmful in some way.

<sup>2</sup> Prison Reform Trust Bromley Briefing (2010)

<sup>3</sup> Stewart D, (2008). The problems and needs of newly sentenced prisoners: results from a national survey, Ministry of Justice research series 16/08.

## Supporting someone in prison

If you don't have experience of being in prison it's hard for you, as a family member, to know what help is available. This makes the role of supporting or caring for someone in prison much harder than offering support in the community. From talking to women in prison about what support they find helpful to promote good mental health they suggested four coping mechanisms which everyone could bear in mind:

### 1. Talk and listen

The one thing women found most useful in the management of their self-harm was not psychological therapies or interventions but having someone to listen to them when they needed it. This is not always as easy as it sounds, especially if you're outside and they're in prison, but listening is something most people can do. The cliché of a problem shared is a problem halved is often true. Most prisons will have a Listener Scheme where prisoners are trained by the Samaritans and offer a totally confidential listening service. If this isn't available there may be provisions for people in prison to call the Samaritans direct free of charge.

### 2. Don't be afraid of saying the wrong thing or asking the wrong question

A number of families of people in prison say they feel they have to keep visits and phone calls up beat or happy whilst secretly being really worried about the other person and how they are coping. Similarly people in prison often feel unable to say how they are feeling as they don't want to worry their friends or families on the outside. This means that things are left unsaid during the little contact people have. Remember the first point above! Asking about self-harm or even suicide is not going to put the thought into the person's head or give them ideas. Asking someone how they're feeling or coping gives the person the choice to talk about how they're feeling.

The importance of humour was also stressed – don't be afraid to be yourself. It's okay to laugh, even when things are grim.

### 3. Encourage self-help and take control of your own mental health

Using self-help strategies may not only improve mental health but also give the person a little more control, which is a really important thing for people in prison. Most libraries will stock self-help books (or they can be requested). A little knowledge and understanding can be useful in managing mental health; by helping people to realise they're not alone. If books aren't available in the prison, families might be able to find information in their local library, or on the internet to send in.

Small things can also make a big difference to mental health. Being in prison means you can't just go for a walk to let off some steam. But going to the gym or exercising in their cell could do the same job. Being active and learning new things is also important. Encourage the person to find a job or class in the prison. It is also important to celebrate successes such as passing an exam or completing a piece of work in small ways such as treating themselves to a chocolate bar.

#### 4. Communicate with the prison staff as much as possible

There is often concern that talking to a member of staff will make things worse for the person in prison. They may also feel that if they are seen talking to an officer they will be labelled a 'grass'. Raising concerns then can be a bit of a leap of faith. However, ultimately prison staff are there to ensure the safety and well-being of those who are in prison. Even those who work closely with prisoners can't know everything that is going on and so any information you provide could be useful in ensuring their well-being.

**People to raise your concerns with:**

Visits staff  
Staff in the visitors' centre  
Family liaison staff  
Safer Custody staff  
The Chaplaincy  
Offender Managers (probation staff)  
Offenders' Families Helpline **0808 808 2003**

The Duty Governor should also be able to speak to you if you are very concerned about your family member's state of mental health.

If you have got to know staff on visits a little then you could always have a quick word with them. Some prisons may have staff on visits with a specific brief to talk to visitors about their concerns. Some prisons also have an 'at risk' line where you can phone with any concerns you have about the prisoner's wellbeing. A lot of chaplains also take calls from concerned families or friends. All prisons also have set targets for answering letters that they receive, so writing to the governor is also an option.

#### Who else can help?

The following is a list of outside organisations which may be able to advise you or provide information around concerns you have about the mental health of someone in prison:

**Offenders' Families Helpline:** 0808 808 2003 [www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org](http://www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org)

**Rethink** have several factsheets on its website on various aspects of the criminal justice system and mental health [http://www.rethink.org/living\\_with\\_mental\\_illness/criminal\\_justice/index.html](http://www.rethink.org/living_with_mental_illness/criminal_justice/index.html)

**Mental Health Foundation** <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/getting-help/?view=Standard>

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