

# How to...

# Look after your mental health in prison

A guide written for male prisoners



Mental Health  
Foundation

**“I was in prison in 2011 and it was my first time ever. I remember feeling so scared and I did not know what to think about this very dark place. It felt cold and dreary, nothing like home.”**

Being in prison can be a very difficult experience. The environment, the rules and regulations and lack of personal control can all have an impact on your mental health. In general, people in prison have a higher chance of developing poor mental health.

Older prisoners, those with a physical or learning disability, and other vulnerable groups are especially at risk of experiencing poor mental health whilst in prison.

All quotes in this booklet are from prisoners at HMP Parc, Bridgend.



These charcoal drawings were made by prisoners who took part in a creative evaluation workshop for the Parc Prison Self-management Programme.

## Introduction

This booklet is about ways to look after your mental health in a prison setting.

**“I also had to understand and accept that I was in prison because of my own actions and consequences. The consequence was a prison sentence. Yet, even though I am a prisoner, I can still achieve and make a success of my life.”**

Mental health is about the way you think and feel and your ability to deal with ups and downs. Looking after your mental health in prison can help you:

- Cope better with life in the prison environment
- Make positive changes to improve your wellbeing
- Build better support networks with family, other inmates and professionals who can help.

Everyone’s mental health fluctuates. We all have times when we feel down, stressed or frightened. Most of the time these feelings pass, but sometimes they develop into a more serious problem.

Self-harm is a serious problem in prison. Although the statistics for self-harm are higher for women than men in prison, if self-harm is an issue for you,

you can ask for support from the mental health team.

**“Jail can be scary, the unfamiliar surroundings, the loud noises, a routine that revolves around time...”**

There are lots of factors that affect our mental health. Two areas that have a huge impact on your mental health are bereavement and substance abuse.

## **Bereavement and loss**

Prison staff tell us that they are aware that when a prisoner experiences a bereavement, not enough is done. One of the greatest hardships of prison is missing out on family events and the most difficult can be the death and funeral of a loved one.

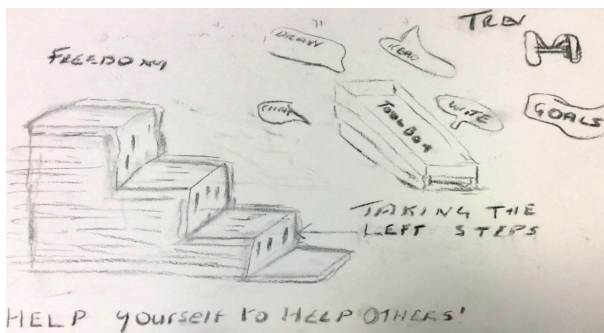
There are a number of special licences that may be possible for you to access in order to visit a dying relative or attend a funeral. Please ask staff to see if you are able to apply for such a licence.

Alternatively, you may be able to attend a funeral or visit a dying relative under escort. This means having a minimum of two officers with you and may include the use of restraints if the risk assessment says that it's necessary.

If you do experience a bereavement, you should be offered pastoral care from the chaplain who can support you during this difficult time. It's important to request that the chaplain visits you again if that will be helpful.

Sharing the news with people you trust is important, whether this means talking to officers, prisoners, Listeners or calling the Samaritans. Try not to bottle up the news, as that is likely to cause more harm than good.

If you are struggling after a bereavement you should ask for support. **For further information you can contact the Prison Reform Trust. Their contact information is at the end of this pamphlet.**



## Substance abuse

It has been widely documented that there are many drugs circulating in prisons. This represents challenges both if you are someone who has regularly used drugs in the past or someone who hasn't used drugs before.



One way of thinking about this is that you are likely to feel a great deal worse after taking drugs, compared to before. The synthetic marijuana drug, Spice or K2, is extremely addictive and has horrendous side effects such as vomiting and seizures.

The status of drugs is complex in the prison system. If you are able to, it is best to say “no” and keep saying “no” to drugs.

For further information for you and/or your family and friends the following organisations may be of help:

### **Adfam**

**[www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)**

Works to support families impacted by drugs and alcohol; supporting people through information, prison visitors' centres, and outreach work.

## **Alcoholics Anonymous**

**[www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)**

The national organisation for people who have problems with alcohol or are addicted. You can phone their confidential helpline on **0845 769 7555**.

## **Release**

**[www.release.org.uk](http://www.release.org.uk)**

Offering specialist services concerning drugs and the provides free and confidential advice to drug users, their families and friends, and others about legal issues relating to drugs. Their helpline number is **0856 4500 215**.

## **Frank**

**[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)**

Frank offers free, confidential advice, 24 hours a day. You can phone them on **0300 123 6600**. You can talk to Frank in 120 languages.

**The following chapters describe 10 tips for looking after your mental health in prison that have come from prisoners themselves as well as researchers working in prison...**

## Tip 1: Take care of yourself

**“I have no-one. No-one sits with me or talks to me on the wing.”**

When people feel sad or depressed they can neglect themselves. Keeping regular hygiene routines such as washing, shaving, wearing clean clothes is often the first thing to go when we are struggling with our mental health.

Prisoners tell us that it's hard to get motivated to take care of their appearance when they feel low. Being unkempt and uncared for can affect how other people think of us and lead to an even stronger sense of isolation.

Building a regular hygiene routine can help bring consistency to life in a prison environment. Showering and shaving everyday are simple goals that make a big difference to our self-esteem. These can go a long way to protecting ourselves from being overwhelmed by poor mental health.

The same thing goes for eating a healthy balanced diet. Choosing what you eat may be one of the few things that you have control over in prison, so make the most of it:

- Eat three regular meals a day even when it's the last thing you feel like doing

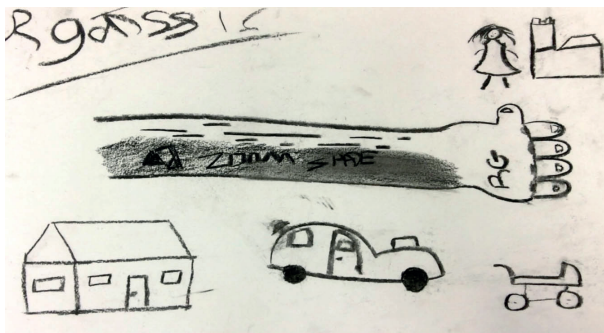


- Drink plenty of water
- Include lots of different types of fruit and vegetables
- Choose a 'Healthy Option' at least once a day
- Eat fewer high sugar foods

A diet that's good for your physical health is also good for your mental health. If you would like to find out more, ask the prison library or Healthcare if they can print information from the following links:

Mind booklet: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mood/#.Wubhb4VOJPY>

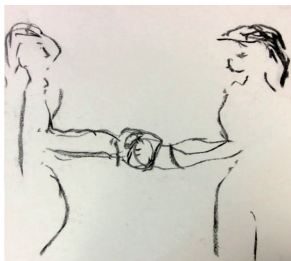
British Dietetic Association Factsheet:  
<https://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/foodmood.pdf>



## Tip 2: A problem shared is a problem halved

**“When I first came to prison I was scared and I didn’t know which way to turn, who I could trust, what I had to do, no one helped me. I felt lost.”**

Asking for support and help in a new situation is not a sign of weakness. Finding out about routines, rules and what’s available to make life easier in prison is very important for your wellbeing. It may be surprising that for many prisoners, time in prison is the first opportunity they have had to turn their lives around, improve their health and access the services they need.



Talking about personal thoughts and feelings isn’t easy. Prisoners tell us that finding someone they trust to talk to can be difficult. Talking about feelings can be hard so it may be useful to plan what you want to say in advance. Talk to **Health Care**, the **Chaplain** or **Wing Staff** to support you.

**“I had a problem and I shared it with these guys last week and we all talked about the different ways of dealing with it. That was really useful.”**

Talking can be a way to cope with a problem you have been carrying in your head for a while. In many prisons there are prisoners who have been trained as Listeners and they offer a confidential service. Talking to someone who is experiencing the same situation can help you to feel less isolated and feeling listened to can help you feel more supported.

**“Now I ain’t saying I am cured and life is great, because it is far from it but I know there is support and if you are feeling low or think what’s the point anymore- don’t suffer in silence. Speak to a listener, Chaplain or support mentor because these people are there whenever you need them. So if it is early hours and you need to talk, remember to press your bell and ask for a listener.”**



## Tip 3: Get active

**“Keeping yourself busy is key. I feel better when I am busy.”**

Regular physical activity and exercise can help your physical and mental health.

Researchers have found that even moderate exercise in a prison setting has a positive effect on mental health and is effective in reducing the risk of depression<sup>1</sup>.



You might want to visit the gym and exercise facilities. It doesn't have to be sports-related exercise though – it could be gardening or animal husbandry. Anything that gets you moving can make you feel better.

If you are slightly older, find out if the prison offers any special 'Wellman' programmes to help you manage weight and blood pressure as well as any long term health conditions.

Sometimes prisoners have to spend up to 23 hours a day in their cells, so learning individual exercises

that can be carried out in limited spaces can be helpful.

Set yourself achievable goals such as getting a little fitter or losing some weight. Working towards goals (see tip 7) can help you to focus and achieving them can help to improve your self-esteem.

**“I am going to the gym and have joined the outdoor walking club. I still set goals in relation to the gym.”**

There are useful booklets and videos available that tell you more about the benefits of exercise and help you create a simple exercise routine.

Ask your prison library if they can access them for you, for example: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-using-exercise>



## Tip 4: Learn something new

**“Now I am learning to read and write so I can send a letter to my wife in my own handwriting.”**

The one thing that prisoners have is time. This time can be taken up with worry or feeling angry. It can also provide the opportunity to learn a new skill or develop an interest. Learning can help build confidence and a sense of self-worth. Learning can be good for our wellbeing, especially when it's something that you want to do and comes at a stage when you are ready to benefit from it.

There may be more opportunities to learn new skills in prison than you might expect. This might be cooking in the kitchen or gardening. Some prisons have peer mentoring schemes so you could become a peer mentor or think about career development. You could also improve reading or writing and gain some qualifications. Or you could become a listener or mentor.

Learning something new or developing a skill can take you away from your current surroundings. This can have a positive impact on your mental health.

**“Since being in here I have done my Art GCSE and Art A level. Before I came in here I couldn't read or write and so I was so chuffed with the A\* at GCSE.”**

## Tip 5: Think more positively

**“I am quite a negative person but now I look on the bright side. I am here (in prison) for six years, six months but I am not here as long as others. That is the way I look at it.”**

In difficult situations, your thoughts are more likely to be negative. This can lead to feeling anxious, guilty or angry. This negative thinking can become habitual, particularly when life is challenging.

Over time this can lead to depression or become a barrier to making changes and improvements to our lives.





**THOUGHTS  
CREATE  
FEELINGS**

**FEELINGS  
CREATE  
BEHAVIOUR**



**BEHAVIOUR  
REINFORCES  
THOUGHTS**





It's important to challenge negative thoughts to maintain our mental health. Developing a more positive thinking habit takes time but can make a difference to the way you feel and behave. The following can help you to change negative thought patterns to become more positive:

### **Become more self-aware**

Try to identify and understand where the negative thoughts come from. This might be directly from being in prison but it is also likely that they are a result of past experiences.

### **Become more self-disciplined**

Be aware of when you have negative thoughts and how they impact on you. Try to make a positive decision to make a change to improve things.

### **Reframe things in a more positive way**

Positive statements can encourage us to cope in difficult circumstances. Try to build up a list of positive phrases that you can use. Here are some ideas from other prisoners:

- I am worth more than I think
- I have survived before, I will survive now
- There is always a point
- I can learn from this
- I can laugh
- I don't need to rush, I can take things slowly



## **Become more focused on solutions**

When things get difficult, it's helpful to focus on the solution and not the problem. Be aware that there are some things you can control and some things you can't. Try not to focus too much on the things that you have no control over.

An example one prisoner gave was that rather than getting upset by a lockdown preventing him from going to the gym, he used the time to do a workout in his cell instead.

Living Life to the Full (l1ttf.com) has lots of really useful worksheets to help you work with these issues. Ask the prison library or Healthcare if they can print some for you to use.

## **Tip 6: Think about reducing stress through meditation, mindfulness and relaxation**

**“In prison you have a lot of time behind the door...”**

Research has shown that regular meditation can help reduce stress levels in prisoners<sup>2</sup>, particularly if stress has been maintained over a long period of time.

**“Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing and yoga. It helps us become more aware of our thoughts and feelings so that, instead of being overwhelmed by them, we’re better able to manage them.”<sup>3</sup>**

Mindfulness is a simple practice to learn that has also been shown to have positive benefits in combating stress, anxiety and depression as well as physical problems such as high blood pressure and chronic pain.

You can practice mindfulness alone or in a group. There are several courses run by trained mindfulness coaches in some prisons now, but there are also books and audio courses available. Check your prison library or ask the Health Care team.

Here is a one-minute mindfulness breathing exercise you can practice anywhere at any time:

Take a minute to observe your breathing. Breathe naturally and notice the time between each breathe in and out. When your mind wanders, just gently bring it back to the breathing. You can continue for longer than one minute if you want to.

If you find mindfulness difficult, you can also use relaxation techniques to reduce stress. These can help to:

- slow your heart rate down
- make your breathing slower and deeper
- relax muscles
- lower blood pressure
- increase blood flow to the brain

These physical responses will also help you to feel calmer and less anxious or agitated. You can practice relaxation in a group or alone.

The Mental Health Foundation has a useful booklet, **“How to look after your mental health using Mindfulness”**, which the prison library or Healthcare could download for you.

## Tip 7. Begin to make plans

**“I now draw pictures for other inmates so that they can send it to their loved ones in their letters, for their kids or for birthdays.”**

Setting goals may seem impossible in prison, but achieving small things can make a real difference to your wellbeing. Having a goal to work towards can build your sense of self-worth and confidence. Here are some examples of goals below that prisoners have set. These may depend on what's available in the prison:

- To look after myself and shower every day
- To learn a language
- To become a Listener
- To maintain my job in the garden
- To control my anger
- To write a letter every week to my family and friends
- To attend art classes and learn how to draw.
- To learn how to play guitar

Having a clear sense of what you want to achieve can give you a focus in prison. Goal-setting links well with positive thinking and being solution-focused.

Start practising with a 'Quick Win' goal, something you can achieve within the next week or so. This will help you understand what motivates you and will also help build your confidence. For example, this could be cleaning your teeth at the same times each day.

During this time, think about one or two bigger goals that you would like to achieve in the medium term and longer term. You should try and make these **SMART** goals:

**S**

**Make it Specific**

What do you want to do?

**M**

**Make it Measurable**

How will you know when you have completed your goal? How can you measure it? Is it possible to get it done?

**A**

**Make it Attainable**

How can the goal be completed?  
What steps will you take?

**R**

**Make it Relevant**

Can you explain why this goal is important to you?

**T**

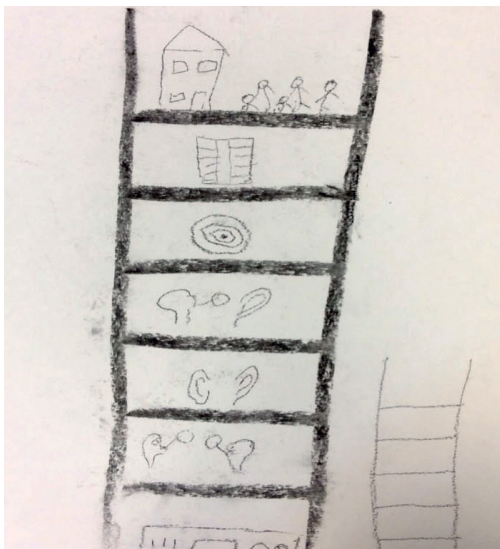
**Make it Time-bound**

It can be helpful to set yourself a time limit to complete the goal.

Break these down into smaller 'step-by-step' goals. By breaking your bigger goal into smaller achievable steps makes it more manageable and helps you to see the progress you're making.

If you want, let people know what you are hoping to achieve and accept their encouragement and support.

**"Get back to the wife and kids and never look back. I want to be anger free and learn to read."**



## Tip 8: Try to keep in touch

**“I couldn’t believe how hard it was for my family and all I did was worry about them, being away from them made me sink into a dark place. But they are the ones who made me strong”**

Maintaining contact with friends and loved ones outside of prison can be very difficult. You may feel that they don’t want anything to do with you or that you have let them down but it is important for you (and them) to keep communication lines open. Maintaining regular contact with people in the outside community can help you survive the day to day stress of being in prison. It keeps you in touch with the outside world and can inspire you to work towards a different life in the future.

Research recognises that regular contact with family and friends can play an important role in helping prisoners through their sentence, including improving mental wellbeing for both prisoners and their families.<sup>4</sup>

Find out about visiting times and the application process for visitors as soon as you can. Establishing regular visits can give you something to look forward to. Prisons often set up family visit days to help keep prisoners and their children in touch. Charities such as Barnardo’s work with prisons in the UK to support prisoners’ families to maintain good contact with each other.





Remember that your family may find it difficult to get to visit for all sorts of reasons, such as distance and cost of travel. It is important to respect and understand what they might be going through. Find out if your prison offers family support services and do make use of them.

It is still possible to have regular visitors even if you have lost contact with your family or have no family and friends that can visit. The National Association of Prison Visitors has volunteers who will visit regularly. The aim of the association is to extend the hand of friendship and promote the value of friendship. They help prisoners keep a link with the outside and a sense of belonging to community. Here is a quote from their website:

**“Having a visitor means a lot. It means that someone from outside is bothered enough about me to come and visit.”**

## Tip 9: Aim to build more positive relationships

**“I have no-one. No-one sits with me or talks to me on the wing.”**

Being ‘inside’ means living closely with lots of different types of people, for example, other prisoners and prison officers. This can be very stressful and intimidating. Even though it’s a crowded and noisy environment with little privacy, it can be very lonely and isolating.

Having good relationships can help our physical and mental health. A supporting relationship enhances our wellbeing and can be a buffer from the negative effects of stress in our lives.<sup>5</sup>

A positive relationship needs time and attention given to it. If you want someone to be there for you and to listen to you, then you need to do the same in return.

- An important place to start is building a positive relationship **with yourself**. Being kind to yourself regularly is one of the best things you can do for your mental wellbeing.

For example, having personal time to do something you choose like reading, meditating or drawing.

- We have already mentioned the value of keeping in contact with **family and friends** and how that can keep you connected to the world outside.
- Other **inmates** can be a valuable source of peer support. They understand what you are going through and may have useful tips that can help you to survive day to day. One way of connecting with other like-minded prisoners is to join a course or activity that interests you:

**“Now I am friends with Toby and Derek...we can communicate with each other because they have been on the same course. We have formed a mini-membership club because we have some things in common with other people who have been on the course.”**

- You may not be able to have a friendship with the **prison staff** but if you can connect positively with the staff and professionals it can bring benefits of support and guidance when you need it.

Being around positive people can make us happier. Equally, our wellbeing can be negatively affected by harmful relationships, leaving us unhappy.

**“I am a highly distressed person so I bottle it up a lot, so it was good to talk in a group. I keep talking to people now.”**

## Here are some features of positive and negative relationships:

### Good Relationship

---

Caring

Listening

Equal

Kind

Supportive

### A Good Enough Relationship

---

Realistic

Steady

A compromise

Just enough

Informative

### Poor Relationship

---

Ignoring

Stressful

Blaming

Controlling

Draining

Distant

Patronising

Critical

Manipulative

## Tip 10: Doing good does you good

**“It makes me feel better that people recognise me for my artwork”**

It's true that doing good feels good but this is actually backed up by research.<sup>6</sup>

Being a part of a social network leads to a feeling of belonging. Face-to-face activities such as volunteering can help reduce loneliness and isolation.

Helping others in need, especially those who are less fortunate than yourself, can provide a real sense of perspective. This can enable you to stop focusing on what you feel you are missing, and help you to feel more positive.

Being kind can improve confidence, happiness and optimism. It can also contribute to a more positive community. There are also physical benefits such as; reducing stress, decreasing feelings of anger and hostility, and studies show that helping others can even help us live longer!

It may seem hard to think of ways of doing good whilst in prison so here are some suggestions:

- Connect with a charity or helping organisation, maybe you could become

a Listener, Healthcare Champion or peer supporter

- Teach another inmate a skill that you have, for example, model-making, playing guitar, literacy
- Spend time with someone who is going through difficulties

**“People helped me with what to do and what to say. And by advising me it gave me strength to respond and challenge. This has helped me and people stopped picking on me.”**

- Write to family or friends to tell them you love them
- Send a thank-you note to someone who has helped

Regular small acts of kindness can positively change your attitude to life. You may also discover a new direction like the prisoner in this quote below:

**“I want to work with the homeless – I used to run pubs and now I want to run a café for the homeless, where people can drop in and keep warm.”**



## Useful Information

### Mental Health Foundation

Offers information on mental health, mental health problems, self-help and how to get help.

**[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)**

### The Samaritans

Provides emotional support 24 hours a day.

**[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)**

**Telephone 116 123**

### Prisoners Advice Service

Offers free legal advice and support to adult prisoners throughout England and Wales.

**[www.prisonersadvice.org.uk](http://www.prisonersadvice.org.uk)**

Prisoners Advice Service, PO Box 46199,  
London EC1M 4XA

### Prison Reform Trust

The Prison Reform Trust has an Advice Team who can provide information on prison rules and life inside prison.

**[www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk)**

FREEPOST ND6125 London EC1B 1PN

Their free information line is open 3.30pm-5.30pm on Monday and Thursday, and 10.30am-12.30pm on Wednesday. The number is 0808 802 0060 and does not need to be put on your pin.

## References

1. Battaglia, C et al (2015) Participation in 9 month physical exercise programme enhances psychological wellbeing in a prison population. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 25, 343-354.
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continue our vital work:

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Our mission is to help people understand, protect and sustain their mental health.

Prevention is at the heart of what we do, because the best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place.

We inform and influence the development of evidence-based mental health policy at national and local government level. In tandem, we help people to access information about the steps they can take to reduce their mental health risks and increase their resilience. We want to empower people to take action when problems are at an early stage. This work is informed by our long history of working directly with people living with or at risk of developing mental health problems.

The Mental Health Foundation is a UK charity that relies on public donations and grant funding to deliver and campaign for good mental health for all.



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