

MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION IN PRISONS: A MANAGEMENT CHECKLIST (Taken from `Mental Health Promotion in Prisons: WHO (Regional Office for Europe) Health in Prisons Project

A concept of care, positive expectations and respect should permeate all prisons. These values should be promoted and encouraged by managers at all levels through strategic planning, training and efforts to shape the attitudes of staff and prisoners. Without such a vision, prisons carry obvious dangers for the mental health of prisoners and staff; but where imprisonment is used as an opportunity for efforts to improve prisoners' self-esteem, life chances, and ability to lead useful and law-abiding lives, the mental health of prisoners and staff can be maintained and promoted.

Prisons should analyse, evaluate and review their procedures regularly, in accordance with the principles set out in the foregoing paragraph. A checklist follows of areas for managers to consider.

1 Reception

Reception into any type of prison can be a traumatic and frightening experience - even where a prisoner has simply been moved from another prison. The reception area and procedures should be organised in such a way as to minimise mental distress. Wherever possible, facilities should be provided to enable prisoners to make early contact with their families. Experience has indicated a particularly high risk of suicide in the first month that a prisoner spends in a new prison, with heightened risk during the first days. Reception staff should be trained to detect signs of mental illness and acute distress and to take appropriate action.

Early opportunities should be found to impart information crucial to the maintenance of prisoners' health, on such matters as sexual health and the dangers of sharing syringes, and information on what to do and whom to approach if they feel depressed or anxious. Procedures should ensure that all prisoners receive and understand the information given and that, so far as possible, the information is provided in accordance with their cultural traditions. (For example, it is not acceptable in some cultures to talk freely about sexual matters.)

2 Induction

There should be a well-organised procedure to introduce prisoners to the regime of the prison in such a way as to support and maximise their ability to cope with prison life. Information, for example on sexual health and the dangers of sharing syringes, and on what to do if they feel depressed or anxious, which should have been given to prisoners during the reception process, should be reinforced during the induction period. Again, the information should be in a language and cultural setting understandable to the prisoners. Wherever possible, prisoners should be encouraged and helped to make and maintain contact with their families and friends outside prison.

3 A Clean Environment

The environment of the prison should give a clear message to prisoners that management and staff have positive expectations of them and respect for them. An uncared-for environment lowers self-esteem.

4 A Controlled Environment

Staff must be in charge of the whole prison at all times. Overcrowding and poor design can contribute to loss of control by staff and bullying by inmates, particularly where cell-sharing is unavoidable. Prisons should adopt clear anti-bullying strategies, including support for victims of bullying, and should pay due regard to prisoners' histories (for example, whether a prisoner has a history of violence, especially of an extreme, sexual or irrational kind, or bullying, including emotional bullying) before requiring other prisoners to share their cells. In cases where such a prisoner has to share a cell, staff must ensure the safety to those in their charge by monitoring the situation closely and being available to provide help if needed.

5. Management and Staff: Support for Prisoners

Supporting individual prisoners as they serve their sentences and look towards their eventual release should be an important part of the work of prison officers. "Key worker", "Mentor", "Supporter" and "Personal Officer" schemes all require staff to take on this role. Ability in this area should be looked for in potential new recruits. Staff should be trained, supported and given appropriate recognition and reward for this aspect of their work. Time should be built into the regime of the prison for staff to listen to prisoners and deal with their questions and complaints. Staff also require training in basic mental health issues and in recognising and dealing with mental disorder.

Staff should be alert to signs of prisoners undergoing an emotional crisis and in need of extra support - following, for example, disturbing news from their families or an assault in prison - and management should ensure that such support is provided. Someone should be available to talk to such prisoners and help them to cope with the feelings aroused. Prison health care centres may be used to provide short-term accommodation in such circumstances, with staff on hand to help the prisoner. Stress counselling, as well as treatment of physical injuries, should always be offered to prisoners following assaults.

6. Management and Colleagues: Support for Staff

Staff need to feel that their individual worth is recognised. They should feel that their work is valued and appreciated, and their concerns understood, by management: these values should be reflected in the way staff interact with their colleagues and with prisoners. Support should be available for staff who have been in stressful situations; for example, staff may need counselling after traumatic incidents such as hostage incidents or the discovery of a suicide.

Stress counselling, as well as treatment of physical injuries, should always be offered to staff following assaults. Management should be alert to signs of staff undergoing an emotional crisis and in need of extra support - following, for example, bereavement - and should ensure that such support is provided.

7. Contact with Families, Friends and the Outside Community

Family and friendship ties are important sources of support and should be promoted.

Although imprisonment requires the imposition of some constraints on visits, letters and telephone calls, the conditions surrounding these means of maintaining contact should be kept as normal as possible. Links between prisons and the outside community (for example, through volunteer visitors representing welfare, educational religious, vocational or leisure pursuits organisations, or events allowing the public into prisons) should be encouraged and facilitated where possible.

8. Activities

Activities should be available to enable prisoners to make the best use of their time in prison.

- Workplaces and classrooms can offer an environment in which prisoners can be kept busy or diverted enough to achieve a temporary mental "escape" from the pressures of imprisonment.
- Educational and vocational courses and Physical Education have a major role to play in improving self-esteem and fitting prisoners for release. Research has shown the effectiveness of physical exercise in reducing distress and particularly depression, while access to the arts has been shown to have major impact on self-esteem and confidence, promoting better relaxation, improved sleep, increased energy and improved anger management.
- Education in parenting skills can help to prevent the perpetuation of cycles of parental abuse and neglect which can be a contributory factor to mental illness and criminal behaviour.
- Training people to forestall depression, by such means as cognitive therapies, coping skills and life skills can significantly improve mental health by promoting self-help.
- Religious and spiritual beliefs can contribute significantly to mental well-being. Staff should respect the spiritual beliefs of prisoners, and opportunities and facilities should be provided for the practice of religion and for the development of spiritual awareness.

9. Privacy and Confidentiality

Some opportunities should be provided for personal space and privacy. Whenever necessary, (for example during medical consultations), prisoners should be interviewed in private rather than in the presence of other prisoners, and whenever possible in the absence of prison discipline officers. Confidentiality must be seen to be respected.

10. Individuality

Choices should be made available to prisoners, to the extent that this is feasible within the constraints imposed by custody. Where staff have to handle prisoners' personal property they should do so with due care, respect and sensitivity.