

## 6. Coping with a family member in prison

### Guilt by association

Families of inmates have been called the 'invisible' victims of crime. Many families of inmates experience discrimination, often fuelled by widespread fear of crime, and negative beliefs about inmates.

Family members may find even relatives and friends are judgemental and fearful.

Media attention and community reaction can put great pressure on family, who may feel that they, as well as their family member, are on trial. People may give you a hard time about keeping in contact with someone in prison. You may find relationships with family and friends are strained, just when you most need support. This can be especially hard for children who may lose contact with extended family through no choice of their own. Sometimes families feel so ashamed of their family member that they assume others will judge them.

Fear of rejection can lead people to isolate themselves from others. It is important to give trusted friends and family a chance to support you, although some may find it hard to do.

Sometimes families may feel relief that their family member is in

prison. They may feel their family member will be safer in prison or have a better chance of getting the help they need. Having a family member in prison may also mean life at home is calmer, more predictable and perhaps safer. It may be hard to share this with others, and families may feel guilty that they feel this way. Contact with a counsellor, social worker or support group such as Kairos Prison Ministry Australia can be very helpful at this time. See their website for locations, [www.kairos.org.au](http://www.kairos.org.au) or call **9987 2016** for assistance.

### Grief and loss

Many families of inmates have said that the grief they felt when their family member went inside was as if someone had died. Even though they can still see their family member, or speak on the phone, the loss for the family is very real.

In some ways the grief can be harder to deal with than a death. Unlike a death, the experience of imprisonment seems to drag on indefinitely. When someone dies, friends, neighbours and relatives will usually be very supportive and understanding. Families of inmates often find people don't know what to say, or leave them feeling that

they too are 'in disgrace'. While bereaved families have the funeral and other rituals to help them, there are no rituals to help the families of prisoners cope with their loss. This lack of social support can make it difficult for families to express their sadness openly. As a result, they often hide their feelings from others and try to 'soldier on'.

Although this may seem to work in the short term, most people do better if they can talk through how they feel. Sometimes it's easier to talk with a counsellor or support group than with friends or family. See p.30 for information about services that may be able to assist.

## Looking after yourself

It may be hard to focus on your own needs when you're so worried about your family member's situation. However, you need to look after your health and wellbeing as well. It's easy to overlook signs of stress. Check the following list to identify ways that stress may be affecting you.

Everyone feels stress differently, so you will need to develop your own approach to managing it. The self-care suggestions that follow are a guide.

If you can't find strategies that work for you, or you find you're relying on alcohol or other drugs or other unhealthy behaviours to cope, you may find it helpful to talk with your doctor, or look for assistance from a psychologist, social worker or counsellor.

### Signs of stress

- > difficulty sleeping;
- > undereating or overeating;
- > difficulty communicating thoughts;
- > easily irritated;
- > muscle tension, headaches, stomach problems;
- > disorientation, confusion
- > difficulty concentrating;
- > reluctance to leave home;
- > feeling depressed, sad or hopeless;



- > mood swings and crying easily;
- > feelings of guilt and self-doubt;
- > increased use of alcohol and other drugs or gambling to escape or ease the pressure.

### Ways to ease stress

- > Talk with someone about your feelings – anger, sorrow and other emotions – even though it may be difficult. Don't let shame stop you from seeking support from family and friends, or getting outside help.
- > Eat healthy food and eat three meals a day.
- > Try to do some regular exercise.
- > Take time out to relax.
- > Get enough sleep.
- > Try to keep your worries in perspective and not make passing concerns into catastrophes.
- > Be gentle and patient with yourself; accept that it's impossible to do everything at once.
- > Take time for yourself; don't put off doing things that you enjoy and that bring meaning to your life.
- > Do something nice for your body, e.g. take a bubble bath, ask someone for a hug, or just stand up and stretch.
- > Write down your thoughts
- > Try an app that helps deal with stress

- > Do things that give your mind a rest, such as reading a book, taking a walk somewhere pleasant, watching a movie, or doing some gardening, cooking or something creative.
- > Try to remain hopeful even if there's no easy solution to the current situation.

### Living as the partner of an inmate

Partners of inmates have many adjustments to make. Having a partner in prison can impact on your financial situation (see p.90), your housing (p.85) and your social networks. If you have children, you'll have to adjust to being a sole parent (p.76). You'll also have to adjust to a relationship with your partner through visits, phone calls and letters, instead of being with them day to day.

### Intimacy

Intimacy is an important part of relationships and can be a difficult issue for inmates and their partners. Sexual expression is limited by the restrictions of prison visits. However, you can still share intimacy through hugging, kissing, handholding and talking during contact visits. You won't be permitted to do more than this, because you'll be expected to respect other people who are also having visits at the same time. Many factors can affect the closeness between you and your partner at visits.

You may feel anxious about visiting, or just tired from travelling. Your partner may feel guilty, or be worried about what's happening to them. Part of the frustration of being an inmate's partner is that visits won't always live up to your expectations.

### **Pressure from your partner in prison**

Inmates are cut off from the outside world. They have a lot of time to imagine things, and may become suspicious and fearful about losing their relationship with you. You can reassure them that you love them and value the relationship. Ultimately it's up to them to come to terms with the fact that they're in prison and can't control what happens on the outside. Partners often experience pressure to visit the inmate frequently. Comments such as 'you're the only one who visits me' or 'you're the only one I've got' can place considerable pressure on partners.

Although you may want to visit your partner every weekend, it may not be possible because of the cost, travelling time and the stress it places on you. Your partner may not be aware of what it's like for you on the outside. Try to talk with them about the pressures on you and arrange a realistic visiting plan together.

Partners often have to work out how much financial support they can give an inmate. However much you want to support your partner,

you also need to take care of your own and your children's needs.

Inmates receive three meals a day, have shelter and have some options for filling in time. Their basic needs are met. Relationships can become strained when an inmate remains dependent on their partner throughout their sentence and expects their partner to focus considerable attention on them.

The inmate's situation may not change much during that time. You may have to take on new roles and responsibilities as you cope in the community on your own. You may meet new people, take on new work responsibilities or move to a new area. You may develop new skills and confidence and you may have to become more independent because your partner isn't there. You'll have to adjust to changes in relationships with friends and family as children grow older and parents age. It can be hard for inmates to appreciate these changes, and this can put strain on the relationship, both while inmates are in prison and after release.

### **Communication between partners**

Communication is the most important ingredient for maintaining a close relationship with your partner. It's important to share what's going on with your partner, including both the positive and the negative events.

Partners say they feel guilty about

enjoying activities while their partner is in prison. However, you still have your own life and have every right to take part in enjoyable activities. It's okay to be positive and tell your partner about things that are enjoyable, even though they can't be a part of it.

You may fear that you'll make your partner's life even harder by telling them about the difficulties in your life. Ultimately, honest communication is the best way to help you and your partner feel closer. It will help your partner feel involved and needed. It will also stop them from feeling angry if they find out that something happened and they were not told about it.

It may help to make a list before a phone call or a visit so that you don't forget important things to discuss.

Good communication involves recognising what your partner may be experiencing and how this may impact on their communication with you. The ways that inmates cope with living with other inmates (emotional withdrawal, being guarded about personal issues, and not getting involved) are exactly the sort of reactions that can damage relationships with people on the outside.

Inmates may be silent or uncomfortable during visits with you and the children. They may feel that talking about life in prison is boring or frightening and therefore feel they have nothing to say. These

may be important factors to keep in mind when you communicate with your partner.

Inmates have a lot of time to think between visits and restricted opportunities to resolve issues. As a result, they can sometimes blow minor disagreements out of proportion.

Sometimes a small argument on a visit can spiral out of control afterwards, leading them to become suspicious, angry and defensive. Try to resolve minor disputes during visits when possible rather than leaving issues unresolved.

## Dealing with relationship breakdown

Many couples will find ways of coping with the pressure of a partner in prison, but some relationships break down. Often the beginning and the end of a sentence are the times when there's the most stress on relationships. Sometimes having a partner in prison gives you time to think about whether you really want the relationship to continue. You may become more aware of aspects of the relationship that haven't been working for you, such as violence in the home, or controlling tactics by your partner. You may find it helpful to talk to a counsellor to assist you at this time. **See p.30** for services that may help.

If you're not getting along with

your partner and don't want to have contact, don't use children to relay messages to your partner. Doing this can lead to children feeling torn between their parents. It's important that children can still have the opportunity to talk with parents on the phone. Relationships between parents may be strained but where it is safe, children should still have the chance to sustain relationships with both parents.

## Parents of inmates

Parents of inmates frequently experience strong and conflicting emotions about their child's situation. Common reactions include:

### Denial/disbelief

Parents often struggle to come to terms with the idea that their child is being accused of criminal behaviour. They may feel that this doesn't fit with the person they know and raised, or that their family doesn't have the characteristics usually associated with criminality. They may assure their child that they believe in their innocence, and refuse to accept any indications of possible guilt.

### Anger

Parents can be outraged that their child has committed a crime. They may feel resentful and angry, with questions such as: Why did they do it? How could they cause us so much pain?

Parents sometimes feel anger towards the police and the justice system. This may be particularly so if they believe their child to be innocent. Parents may feel their child was set up or 'framed', that they are not being given a fair trial or adequate representation in court, or that they are somehow different from other people in the prison system.

### Worry

No matter how old the inmate is or how serious the offence, they're still a parent's child. Parents often feel deeply concerned about their child's health and safety in prison.

### Guilt

They may feel guilty about negative feelings towards their child. It can be helpful to separate what your child did (their behaviour) from how you feel about them (the person). You can disapprove of someone's behaviour but still love the person.

Parents of inmates may feel guilty if they don't want to support their child by putting up bail, paying out their debts (**see Chapter 11 'Money issues' on p.90**) or taking them back home when they're released. Many parents report finding it hard to say no to demands from their child in prison, and feeling guilty if they do.

### Shame

Parents often worry about telling others that their child is in prison. They may be embarrassed.

Parents may decide not to tell their friends in case they're judged as bad parents or rejected by their association with a criminal. Secrecy can increase a parent's sense of shame and humiliation.

### **Isolation and alienation**

Friends or extended family may reject the inmate and condemn the parent's continuing feelings of loyalty or concern for them. Parents may feel that no one could possibly understand what they're going through, and this can give them a sense of being different from other parents and isolated from their social networks.

### **Relief**

Parents may experience a great sense of relief when their child is in prison. Their child might have been abusing alcohol and other drugs, or might have been endangering themselves or others. It's comforting to know that they're now being closely monitored and are off the streets. For some inmates, prison might be the first time that they will access treatment for mental health issues, among other things, and this can be a big relief to parents.

### **Self-blame**

Parents may feel that they're in some way responsible for their child's actions. They may compare themselves to other families who don't have children in prison. People commit crimes for all sorts

of reasons, such as to support a drug habit, to get out of debt or because of mental health or personality problems.

### **Uncertainty**

Parents may feel overwhelmed with conflicting feelings and may become very confused about what to do, about what their own needs are, and how and whether they'll continue to support their child.

## **How much support should parents give?**

Parents might have to ask themselves the following questions:

- > Should I put up the money for bail?
- > Should I put money into their inmate account?
- > How much should I put in?
- > Should I visit them every weekend?
- > Should I let them live with me when they get released?

There are really no 'shoulds' or 'musts'. Many parents set limits to the support they're able to give. For example, they may decide that it's too hard having their son or daughter living at home with them anymore. It's important to think about your own needs and limitations, and those of others in the family. If there is a history of violence, it is more important to put the safety of yourself and others first.

It may also be worth considering whether you should allow your



child to avoid responsibility for their own actions by paying any of their debts. There may be differing views in the family regarding the level of support to be provided to the inmate. Where there's ongoing

conflict in the family, it may be helpful to talk through the issues together with a counsellor or support worker. Contact CRC on **9288 8700** or see **p.30** for services that may be able to help.

## Need help?

Note that charges may apply for calls from mobile phones, so check before calling. Check with your local library for free Internet access.

### Community Restorative Centre (CRC)



Information, advice and support for prisoners, former prisoners and their families.

**9288 8700**

[www.crcnsw.org.au](http://www.crcnsw.org.au)

### Community Health Centres

Provide counselling and a range of other health-related services. To find your nearest service phone:

**9391 9000**

[www.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au)

### Family Drug Support



Information, referral and support groups for families and friends affected by the drug use of someone close to them.

**1300 368 186**

[www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

### Fams



Fams aims to support the delivery of quality services by non-government, not-for-profit organisations working with vulnerable children, young people, families and communities. For assistance call:

**8354 3799**

[www.fams.asn.au](http://www.fams.asn.au)

### Kairos

A community-based Christian ministry that provides services and programs for offenders and their families.

**02 9987 2016**

[kairos.org.au](http://kairos.org.au)

### Relationships Australia



Provides relationship counselling to couples, individuals and families.

**1300 364 277**

[www.relationshipsnsw.org.au](http://www.relationshipsnsw.org.au)



## SHINE for Kids

Services include support, advocacy and referral for children of inmates, inmates and carers. See **p.75** for more details.



Silverwater.....	<b>9714 3000</b>
Parklea.....	<b>9933 7900</b>
Windsor .....	<b>4573 3900</b>
Kariong .....	<b>4340 3836</b>
Bathurst.....	<b>6328 9900</b>
Cessnock.....	<b>4993 6800</b>
Wellington.....	<b>6845 5000</b>
Junee.....	<b>6934 6000</b>
Kempsey .....	<b>6561 3800</b>

Call **9714 3000** for details about Nowra and Goulburn services.

[www.shineforkids.org.au](http://www.shineforkids.org.au)

## Telephone counselling:

### Lifeline

Free and confidential telephone counselling open 24 hours. Crisis support and suicide prevention



**13 11 14**

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

### Lifeline – Domestic violence / Family violence / Sexual violence

**1800 RESPECT** is a national phone assistance and referral for people affected by sexual assault, family violence and domestic violence.

**1800 737 732**

[www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)

## ParentLine NSW



Parent Line is a telephone counselling, information and referral service for parents of children ages 0 to 18 who live in New South Wales. Mon - Fri 9am to 9pm / Sat - Sun 4pm to 9pm

**1300 1300 52**

[www.parentline.org.au](http://www.parentline.org.au)

## Mensline Australia



Family counselling, information and referral for men.

**1300 789 978**

[www.mensline.org.au](http://www.mensline.org.au)

## Domestic violence services:

### Domestic Violence Legal Contact Line

A Community Legal Centre specialising in free advice on domestic violence.

**8745 6999 or 1800 810 784**

Mon & Thurs 1.30pm – 4.30pm

Tue & Fri 9.30am -12.30pm

### Domestic Violence Line

This is a NSW statewide telephone crisis counselling and referral service for women and persons who identify as female. The service provides advice about safety, AVOs and child protection 24/7. This service is run by Family & Community Services.

**1800 656 463**

[www.facs.nsw.gov.au/domestic-violence/helpline](http://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/domestic-violence/helpline)