

# Working with Incarcerated Individuals Preparing for Reentry: Tips for MRE Practitioners

## Background

In 2009, more than seven million adults were incarcerated in the United States. Annual prisoner release rates have been rising due to budget cuts and prison crowding. Nearly 650,000 people are released from state and federal prison yearly and a 2002 study reported that within three years of their release, 67% of former prisoners were arrested again and 52% were incarcerated again. In order to address these high recidivism rates, a variety of reentry initiatives were created. Reentry involves programs targeted to help offenders as they transition back to communities after they are released from prison. The program strategies consist of both pre-release services (education, mental health assessment, substance abuse treatment) and post-release services (job placement and helping ex-offenders access available support services). Marriage/relationship education (MRE) is another appropriate intervention for both pre-release and post-release service. Studies show that individuals with strong financial and emotional support from family members are less likely to return to prison. This Tip



Sheet is for practitioners who work with prisoners about to be released or with individuals who have recently been released. It provides tips regarding specific MRE skills appropriate for this target population.

## Relationship Challenges for Families and Couples when a Loved One is Incarcerated

Adults who have been incarcerated, and those close to them, may not have experienced healthy relationships or seen healthy relationships modeled. Showing inmates and their families what a healthy relationship looks like can help them recognize unhealthy relationship issues that may be present, such as domestic violence. Further, partners and family members of prisoners may feel anger and resentment toward their incarcerated loved one as a result of dealing with everyday stress made worse by the fact that their family member isn't present. For example, with no choice in the matter, a partner may suddenly become a single parent. This lack of choice can cause the parent to feel additional relationship strain and negative feelings toward his or her incarcerated partner.

Prison creates communication barriers that can damage relationships. After their release, inmates often find themselves trying to reconnect or even start over with family, loved ones, and friends. Inmates may develop certain personality characteristics to adapt to prison life. These characteristics often conflict with the characteristics

needed to manage healthy relationships. For example, inmates may develop a “prison mask” as a coping method, which can take the form of suppressed emotions and withdrawal from healthy social interactions. Inmates also may not be able to move past their mistakes and may view themselves in a negative light.

## MRE and Reentry

Improving relationship skills can lead to healthy, more positive interactions with partners and other family members during incarceration and following inmates’ release. Before teaching skills and behavior changes, be prepared to discuss basic questions like, “What does a healthy relationship look like?”, “What is good communication?” and “What are gender roles?”. Review what forgiveness is and why it is important (See the NHMRC Tip Sheet: [Why Forgiveness Matters](#)), as well as basic emotions and what physiological processes are associated with them, like the “fight or flight” response.

## Preparing for Release

Communication can define the quality of incarcerated individuals’ relationships with spouses and family members. Because physical contact is limited and, in some cases, not allowed, offenders must rely on verbal and/or written communication to maintain bonds with their loved ones. When working with individuals before reentry, practitioners can highlight how important quality communication with spouses and family members is to maintaining healthy relationships. Because phone calls and visits are limited, it is vital for offenders to learn how to get the most value from this time. Teach participants how to use active listening skills to show emotional support while they are not physically present in their loved ones’

lives. Written letters can be an alternative form of discussion when contact is not allowed. The benefits of improved communication skills are not limited to an offender’s family members; his or her cellmates and the staff at the correctional facility also can experience more positive interactions with the offender as a result of progress made in this area.

Prepare inmates with problem solving skills and speaking techniques. They will need to use these skills on difficult topics like asking loved ones for forgiveness. Have them complete exercises in class that will help them focus on forgiving people who have hurt them in the past. They will probably need to work on forgiving themselves, too. You may want to teach participants visualization and/or breathing techniques useful in helping them forgive.

Assist family members and partners in managing realistic expectations. Communicating about different expectations gives an offender and his or her loved ones the chance to problem solve and renegotiate responsibilities before he or she is back in the home and conflict can arise. For example, an offender may expect that a household will be neat and orderly. However, the partner who has been running the household may not have the same standards for cleanliness. Discussing these different viewpoints will allow both partners to express their values and preferences and reach a compromise. Whenever possible, have couples or the inmate and his or her family members talk about this together in class.

Each correctional facility has its own unique rules regarding who and what can be brought into their facility. You will need to coordinate with the administrator and determine who will facilitate the workshops. These requirements may vary for each

location where you plan to provide workshops. The security level of the facility and the administrators' willingness to support the workshop delivery plan will affect whether you can offer MRE to the incarcerated individual and his or her partner/family together. Encourage the inmate's partner to review the same or similar information if the setting does not allow for them to both attend. This way, during phone calls and visits, they can practice the skills learned together.

## After Release

After the inmate is released, communication skills will be central to interviewing for jobs and reconnecting with family and friends. You can also help participants not react quickly or negatively to certain situations by giving them tools to help them recognize and regulate their emotions. The ability to solve problems and conflicts constructively will be necessary both in their personal lives and in the workplace, so you may want to consider having them practice these skills over and over again. Forgiveness will probably be an issue, whether it's the ex-offender forgiving himself or herself or others, or the ex-offender's family forgiving him or her. Even if the inmates were able to work on this while incarcerated, it still may not be resolved. Encourage participants that forgiveness is a process and will take time. Exercises focused on forgiveness will be effective during this period, too.

Communicating about expectations with loved ones will be central to the success of the relationship when the inmate is released. Recently released individuals may struggle with reinstating themselves into a leadership role within the family, handling finances, and making decisions for themselves and their families. Couples often struggle with how to share the responsibilities after incarceration. The partner on the outside may

be more independent and used to taking the lead most of the time. You can encourage couples to talk openly and calmly about household tasks and be open to shifting tasks around if something isn't working out. These skills could also be practiced in class.

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD symptoms can develop after experiencing incarceration. Practitioners should be able to teach what symptoms to look for and be able to provide appropriate referrals. You may also want to discuss how these psychological changes can negatively affect relationships with partners, children, and other family members. Consider having a PTSD expert come to your class to facilitate a discussion.

## Conclusion

Incarcerated adults face unique challenges to maintaining positive relationships with their families during incarceration and upon reentry. These challenges result from both physical barriers to communication and the psychological adaptations inmates and their families may make to cope with the situation. MRE classes can assist couples and families in developing the skills they need to maintain positive relationships during incarceration and after. Developing these supports may be a strategy to reduce recidivism.

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