

This booklet is one of a series of information booklets for families of prisoners called 'The Outsiders' published by Action for Prisoners' Families (APF), the national federation of services supporting families of prisoners.

APF works to increase awareness of the issues for children, young people and families when a parent, partner or other close relative is sent to prison. If you have any comments about the information in this booklet we would very much like to hear from you.

The Outsiders

Sent to prison
Keeping in touch
Living with separation
Telling the children
Preparing for release

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Freephone support helpline offering information, advice and guidance to prisoners' families

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Preparing for release

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Living together again

“We’ve been separated for so long – what will it be like living together again?”

Separation, loss of constant communication and change of roles can lead to difficulties when a prisoner is released. The prisoner has led a very protected existence, isolated from the responsibility of earning or paying out money. They may not even be aware of how much it now costs to keep a house warm, how much it costs to put food on the table every week, or how much a loaf of bread costs.

The partner who returns from prison may expect to be the centre of attention in family life. A man who was imprisoned a decade ago may come home expecting his children to ask permission to go out to play, just as they did when they were small before he left. Even for a prisoner who has had regular visits from the children, it can be a real shock to discover that here on the outside, away from the artificial setting of a prison visiting room, they have become young adults, living quite independent lives. It can be even more of a shock to realise that his wife or partner has also become independent and self-reliant.

The wife of a former prisoner said:

“It’s been very hard for both of us. It’s like getting to know each other all over again. I know it was only two years, but both of us had changed so much – especially me. I’d got really independent. The youngsters had grown up another two years. There was a new child in the house as well, a new person for him to get to know. I find it difficult having to account for everything now.”

Another woman agreed:

“Since he got out, there has been a hell of a lot of change. It was very hard. He just couldn’t understand that I had taken over his part as well. The children had to get used to him being round the house again. When he got out he told them, “I’m the boss now”. He has now accepted that I have changed and become more independent, and he now lets me do my own thing.”

Release is traumatic for everyone. Emotions are heightened and expectations of yourself and others may be totally unrealistic. One woman admitted that she and her partner both made mistakes when he first came out of prison:

“All that people in prison can see is the light at the end of the tunnel. They think that after getting out of prison, life will be wonderful. I’d say to them, “You need to remember that life’s harder outside prison than it is inside.” I think looking back I started off on the wrong foot too when he first came out. I used to try and shield him from everything and that was a big mistake. Now I’ve had enough of walking on eggshells and I think it’s about time he grew up.”

The place the prisoner occupied before arrest is no longer there. A new place has to be created, and it may require immense effort, commitment and perhaps outside help to achieve a new set of relationships that work for everyone in the family. One ex-prisoner said:

“I think the visits system contributed to the breakdown in our communications. We weren’t able to express how we were feeling. All the anger is only coming out now. Reality hit when I came out.”

An ex-prisoner's wife described her own communications problems:

“One of the things I think prison does to people is to make them learn to switch off. He can cut himself off and I find it really hurtful sometimes. When he goes into one of his silent moods he'll cut himself off from Sarah [their young daughter] as well. He'll come in and just ignore us and this makes me feel very resentful.”

There may be other worries, such as what the neighbours will think when a new member of the family suddenly appears from nowhere:

“We'd moved house while he was inside, and when he first came to live here on his release I was nervous about people on the estate knowing about his background. I'd been here on my own for so many years and was known for going to church and never having men to stay or anything. I know people can be friends with you one day and look the other way the next, so I didn't want my husband telling the neighbours anything about being in prison. But he did and it turned out fine.”



Concerns about Release

“I'm so worried about when he comes home – there's bound to be so many problems.”

A survey of prisoners' families suggested that they had the following concerns about release:

- Trouble finding a job
- Financial worries
- Learning to live together again
- Getting on with the children
- Sexual anxieties
- 'Home' partner's worries about giving up independence
- Worried that the ex-prisoner will go back on drugs or alcohol, and may commit crimes as a result

Some partners expressed their own fears:

“We've become so different individually that it just might not work any more.”

“I've heard of couples breaking up after release and I'm afraid that will happen to us.”

“He's always claimed he's innocent. They call this IDOM [in denial of murder] and because he won't do the offending behaviour programmes he may never get a parole date.”

“The kids are going to need a lot of help to cope with this. Their father keeps treating them like they're six-year-olds - and they're both teenagers now.”

Finding a job


Many couples say that employment problems are top of the list – the difficulty of finding and keeping a job now that you have to declare your criminal convictions, and the financial problems that inevitably follow. Some ex-prisoners may have to manage on a small discharge grant while waiting for their first benefits. Many tell of fruitless attempts to find employment; of possible jobs not coming off when employers learned of their convictions; of rejection following honest disclosure. As one ex-prisoner said:

“The first thing that happens when you go for a job is they say to you, “Where have you been working?” At that point you either tell the truth, which carries the risk that you won’t get the job – or you tell lies.”

Many job application forms now contain a question about previous criminal convictions. Some agencies advise ex-prisoners to fill in the form honestly, but to write a covering letter providing reassurance about risk and asking for a chance to prove oneself. This strategy can sometimes, though by no means always, bring success. Another useful piece of advice is to gain training in a particular job by volunteering to work for nothing for a few months. This means surviving on state benefits alone while seeking paid employment, but it also means getting skills training and building up a CV for future use. Occasionally volunteers are taken on as paid employees by the organisation they have been volunteering for, although no-one should take up volunteering with this expectation.

Even if your partner is lucky enough to get work, it can be very difficult to adjust to the daily grind of a steady job. Sometimes it is a matter of a complete change of attitude. After ten years inside, this ex-prisoner had real problems settling down to his job as a painter and decorator:

“At first I didn’t want to work. I expected things to come to me on a plate, and it took three or four months to realise that if you want anything you have to get it for yourself. I thought I was owed stuff, but my wife made me realise that you get nothing for nothing. She made me get into the routine of work and by doing that she actually saved me. Without her I would definitely have been tempted to go back to crime. For the first time in 25 years I knew how to work properly and I started to quite enjoy it. I found I got a buzz from jobs where I was in charge and people were asking me what to do. It took me a long time to realise I’d been a parasite, living off other members of society.”



Going back to crime

“I’m afraid he’ll go back to committing crime – what can I do to stop him?”

Many people say their next greatest fear is that their partners will go back to their old ways – and indeed, this is a real risk, particularly if legitimate paid work is hard to come by. This ex-prisoner explained:

“One of the hardest things in those first few months I was out was getting people to realise I wasn’t the same Dave – that we’d got nothing in common any more. For ages they’d say things like, “Come on, got a vanload of DVDs. Pick it up, drive it round here and you’ll get two grand for half an hour’s work”. Most of my friends had been thieves and I don’t have anything to do with them any more – so I don’t have any mates.”

Another ex-prisoner agreed:

“When you’ve decided to change it’s the loneliest thing in the world. I knew I could either, go back into my old world and be a somebody – or I could come into this other (non-criminal) world and be a nobody. I didn’t know anybody in this world – I didn’t know their rules. It was terrifying. They might find out about my past and reject me. If I went back to my lot they’d accept me because they’re my people.”

This is where your support as a partner can really make all the difference. An ex-prisoner’s wife said:

“He has said he could pick up the phone and make contact with people from his former life and that was something that alarmed me. But he never has done that and I’ve just had to trust him. I believe he sincerely wants to be straight, and we’ve made a completely fresh start with our own new friends.”

Problems with drink and drugs

In prison, people with drug and alcohol habits may have received help to give them up, and they may have successfully completed addiction programmes and have been declared drug-free.

It may however be much more difficult to keep up their ‘clean’ status on release. Though drugs are obtainable in many prisons, there are units which are drug-free and the programmes are based on total abstinence. The reality of the world outside prison is of course very different. Alcohol and drugs are readily available and may be acceptable in the society to which the prisoner returns. Many ex-prisoners describe being taken out to the pub for a celebratory drink on their first night of freedom:

“It was Christmas Eve and I went up Piccadilly to meet my wife in a pub and there were hundreds of people there – it was horrendous. I saw her and my main concern was getting across the road without getting run over. We went in the pub and there were all these people singing and dancing. I had one drink and it went straight to my head. I just wanted to run off but I fought to control myself.”

Alcohol abuse is a major problem that released prisoners and their families have to face. Some families may assume that – regardless of the degree of alcohol dependency when the person was arrested – months or years of no drinking at all will have cured the problem. It would be good if this were true but for most people it is not. They did not give up drinking voluntarily, and they will be celebrating their freedom with alcohol. For many that may not necessarily be a problem, but others will want to use drink to take away the pain of problems that they feel are too tough to face any other way. Families know that drinking does not help solve the problems, but can in fact make them much worse – especially when the money needed for rent and food starts to disappear on alcohol.

The same problem will of course apply to drugs misuse, and in both cases an ex-prisoner will lose the energy and clear head needed to get a job and plan the future.

If there was an issue over alcohol or drugs before the person was arrested, it may be helpful for you to talk about their problem with someone knowledgeable long before the release date. You may also need to talk openly about these issues with the person in prison who may be unaware of the family’s fears. Either way, it is an issue that needs addressing because it can contribute to a breakdown in relationships if it is not dealt with.



For help, contact:

- Drinkline 0800 917 82 82
- National Drugs Helpline 0800 77 66 00
or visit www.talktofrank.com
- Adfam Helpline 020 7928 8923
- Alcoholics Anonymous 0845 769 7555



Sexual Relationships

“I am really worried about getting back into a sexual relationship – won't it be difficult for both of us after so long?”

Several couples described the difficulties of years of being close over many years, while their partner is in prison, without the accompanying physical intimacy, and then coming home and having to resume a sexual relationship.

A male ex-prisoner said:

“When I got home the adjusting was terrible. We were strangers really, though we'd been sitting at the same table in the visits rooms for years. When I first came home I said, "Can we sort out single beds?" I was so used to kipping on my own in my cell. She was really hurt by that I think. We'd got married years before but it was like starting again.”

Talking about your personal feelings during the enforced separation of imprisonment can be very hard. During the visits you may have avoided talking about deep feelings because it felt too strange or was too painful, and could lead to rows. There was never enough time to say what you wanted to say.

When that period of separation ends, it may be even harder to talk

about your expectations of each other. Repeated paroles and finally release, accompanied by these powerful expectations, can lead to catastrophe. You or your partner might expect a compassionate leave to become a passionate leave – and if it does not happen that way it can be disastrous for a relationship.

As the outside partner, you may have found that during the long period of not having sex you got quite used to sleeping alone. You may have got used to having your children snuggle close for mutual companionship. Years without a relationship with any partner may lead to fears about the ability to relate to each other at any level. On release it may be that only one of the partners wants to resume a sexual relationship at that time. Even between a couple who are strong and loving, it may be that time is needed to rebuild trust and to feel comfortable with the physical side of the relationship.

It is important to remember that these problems are nearly always temporary, and can usually be resolved if both partners are prepared to be patient and accepting of each other.

What if you are not attracted to each other any longer?

There is evidence from wartime studies that men long separated from female companionship may seek just that – companionship, tenderness, a listening ear – even mothering instead of partnering. Your partner may not immediately want a sexual relationship when you are back living together again. This doesn't mean he will not eventually want to resume it – especially if you had a reasonably good relationship before he went to prison – but he may not be ready when you are first reunited.

Women may feel the same – whether they were the person in prison or the person left at home. Couples attempting to resume sexual relations following a conviction of a sexual offence may find it

particularly difficult. If a relationship was not very good before the separation, it is not likely to be better when that separation is over. Some women have reported that after years of 'just visiting' with no physical intimacy possible, they have become very shy of intimacy with the partner they want to welcome home. They need time to get re-acquainted with their own partner.

At first this may be a purely practical problem. When a partner is first released, the house may be full of people who want to see him, talk to him, and have a cup of tea or a drink with him to welcome him home. As well as in-laws, parents, children, other relatives, friends and neighbours there may be social workers and his probation officer. The reunited partners will at first have very little time, privacy or peace to allow them to rediscover each other. One wife said:

“It was hard to find time to be with him on my own. His family and friends were always around.”

It can be easy to forget that six months, six years or half a lifetime of separation makes great changes in people. The couple who once knew each other well as young people starting a life together may now have become strangers in mid-life. If you feel like this, do try and remember that your feelings are completely normal.

Talking to each other

Many people find it hard to speak honestly about their feelings about themselves and their partner, especially their sexual feelings, behaviour, expectations and fantasies. It may be hardest of all to talk about this to their own partner. If, on your prison visits you are able to try and talk about how you feel, it will make it easier to adjust during the period after release.

However it is done, the recovery of intimacy after a long separation, or the decision not to return to that relationship, takes a lot of

thought. Perhaps this may cause pain to one or both of the partners and needs a great deal of work and support.

Relate, the relationship counselling organisation, is experienced in helping people work through their relationship difficulties and reach their own decisions on the right way forward. You can contact them on **RELATELINE 0845 130 4010**, Relate's telephone helpline: to see how they can help you. You can also visit their website at www.relate.org.uk.

Coming to terms with what your partner did

If your partner has been convicted of sexual offences, you, above all people, may find it very hard to discuss, particularly if those offences were against your own children. Your partner may not be allowed by social services to come home if your children are in the house, and you may have to face the very difficult choice between your partner and the children. This divorced woman has a child by her first marriage and she faces just this choice when her partner Alan, serving a six year sentence for repeatedly exposing himself to women, is released:

“It's never occurred to me that Alan could be any risk to Shaun because what he did was expose himself to females. But social services are saying he can't live with us till Shaun is 18 – and he'll only be 16 when Alan comes out. It's not only that either – we've just heard that if Alan rings me and Shaun picks up the phone, there could be problems. He was pulled over by the governor the other day and told, 'If we find out you've spoken to Shaun we'll stop all your phone calls.’”

Women in this situation may have very mixed feelings towards their partners. A woman may believe her husband is guilty but still want him back. She may hate him for his offences, or she may be so revolted by it all that she wants no communication at all. Or she may want him back enough to put their children in care. If the man's

offences were against his own children, there may be powerful and unresolved feelings to deal with, no matter where he goes after release.

What are the children's feelings? Do the children need, or feel in need of, protection from him? Do you as his wife feel you will have to watch him all the time? His offence may have been against someone other than her children, but the children may have strong feelings for or against their father's return into the family home. Even if the wife has been visiting regularly, the prospect of his actually returning to the family home may totally change the way she feels about contact with him.

The more serious the problems you and your partner are facing, and the harder it is to talk about them, the more important it is to talk. Some people find it easier to talk to each other if they first have separate or possibly joint counselling. A skilled counsellor may help both of you realise that it is okay to share feelings, no matter what those feelings are. A trained person may help you both realise that feelings expressed may be safer than feelings hidden.

Temporary Release/Home Detention Curfew (HDC)

Not all prisoners are eligible for temporary release (which used to be known as 'home leave') or Home Detention Curfew. For example, prisoners serving sentences of less than one year and Category A prisoners are not eligible. Different rules also apply to people serving life sentences. Temporary release allows prisoners to spend time with their families, go for job interviews or job searches, and to readjust to life outside.

In periods of temporary release, you may be struck by the unreality of the situation, and tensions in the family may start to become evident. Here are some things that ex-prisoners and their partners have said about temporary release:

“ He was just very tense and couldn't relax all weekend.

“ He found it difficult to settle into family life – the outside world seemed so unreal.”

“ The kids had just got used to him being around, then when he had to go back they couldn't understand it.”

“ Home leaves are so artificial; they don't really prepare you for release at all. You're not worried about money, you don't know about all the domestic problems because your wife keeps all that from you to make the weekend nice. So you're quite protected.”

“ Home leaves are great – it gives us a chance to talk. But we are no longer as young as we used to be, and the family circle demands a lot of time and attention.”

Adjusting to family life again

Prisoners learn routine. Prisons may be noisy and sometimes dangerous environments, but in prison meals arrive, someone provides heat, lights go on and off, staff come and go.

No matter how much someone is looking forward to coming home from prison, they will have got used to a particular way of life, and this can cause major problems on returning home. Suddenly there are new noises, or no noise at night, so the house seems eerily silent. Routines they never even realised they had have changed while they were away. Children have grown up and now have to catch a bus to school every morning. You will have changed in many ways, some of which they may not like. There are bills, rent and council tax to be



paid, benefits to be sorted, repairs to be done, children's new shoes to be bought. If your partner has been in prison for several years, your spending may seem wildly extravagant and can be a source of irritation or worse, real friction. This wife gives a graphic description of what it was like when her husband came home after a ten-year prison term:

“In the early days it was like having a child in the house. I had to teach him how to use a cash point machine, he'd never done a week's shopping at Tesco's. I remember the first time I took him out to buy a pair of jeans and it was so embarrassing. The shop wanted £30 for one of the cheaper pairs, and he wasn't prepared to pay more than £15! I had to guide him out of the shop. Outside I said to him, “The last time you purchased any item was in 1994 – you've missed a whole decade – get real!””

Prisoners returning home after a long sentence find that nothing quite belongs to them in the way things used to. The babies you left behind are grown up – or think they are. Their parents seem old or they or other relatives may have died. The corner shop is closed and wine bars may have sprung up. Even some streets are not where they remember them being. Too many things seem to be wrong in some way. They may feel like a stranger when they were looking forward to being at home.

All this can be very disorienting. It can make people feel unvalued, frustrated, even angry at the world, at the family and most of all at themselves. The anger can rise to a great rage or a feeling of furious powerlessness and alienation from everyone and everything around them.

The family has a lot of adapting to do as well. An important issue is that the control of the family will have transferred to the partner

left at home, often the mother. The eldest son may have become the 'man of the family', who now feels he has to compete with his father for pride of place. Children who may have been sharing their mother's bed for mutual companionship and comfort during their father's absence may now be ousted – just at a time when the uncertainty caused by these changes in their lives may make them feel more dependent upon their mother's comfort.

This ex-prisoner describes how he felt when he finally returned after a long prison sentence:

“Those first six or seven months I was out were really hopeless. I'd done nearly ten years inside and everything had changed. I couldn't get used to the bright colours – everything in prison is grey or dark blue. Then there were all those children and dogs – you don't see them in prison. Then the traffic – everything had changed – the one way system, the traffic wardens were terrible. It took me ages to get back to driving a car. Then with my wife it was a constant slog because I'd come back expecting to find someone who needed me. I expected to be useful but she made me feel like a bit of a eunuch. Then I was jealous as well, because I felt she was sharing herself too much with the kids and grandkids.”

His wife tells what it was like from her point of view:

“There were a lot of problems for us the first seven months that he was home. It's like prisoners have been living in a world where what they say goes – they get respect of a kind. And then suddenly here he was, living with a woman who was very independent, a woman who could cope perfectly well on her own. He didn't even like me answering him back. In those first seven months we went through every stage you would have gone through if you'd met someone, courted

them, got engaged to them. The arguments, the shouting at each other, the walking out on each other – no different to a lot of other courtships, except we crammed it all into seven months. The kids were all grown up and I'd got none of them living with me when he came out of prison, but they still visited. Just the small amount they did visit, he couldn't handle it. He wanted me to himself. I think after seven months I'd had enough. I could have walked away, easy. But then we sat down and we said, "Come on, where are we going from here?" So we gave it another try and it's worked.”



Maintaining Relationships

We all know that any relationship is not easy. We all experience problems getting on with our partner, children, brothers and sisters or the people at work. All relationships are subject to the stresses and strains of everyday life.

Maintaining a relationship while one partner is imprisoned and then working through changes of living together again will be hard work. However in a recent survey two-thirds of people released from prison and their partners said they felt their relationship had been strengthened by the difficulties they had had to face over the years of separation. As one ex-prisoner said:

“Now my values have completely changed and I don't think I will ever go back to crime. In all the neighbours' eyes it was a waste of time her having me back to live, because they were sure I was going to go off again. So it was great them seeing us holding hands and walking down the road because I'd proved them all wrong.”

Who can help?

Resettlement

Nacro's Resettlement Plus Helpline (email helpline@nacro.org.uk) provides information and advice for prisoners and their families. Ring 020 7840 6464 (families can call free on 0800 0181 259). The Helpline is part of Nacro's Resettlement Service, which gives small grants to prisoners and prisoners' families in need. Contact the Welfare Administrator at 169 Clapham Road, London SW9 0PU Tel: 020 7582 6500.

Apex Charitable Trust helps people with criminal records to obtain appropriate jobs or self-employment by providing them with the skills they need in the labour market and by working with employers to break down the barriers to their employment. Its helpline 0870 608 4567 offers confidential advice and information to enquirers. It covers a range of issues that affect ex-offenders seeking employment

Gambling

Gamblers Anonymous (UK)
Helpline 020 7384 3040

Alcohol and drug use

Drinkline 0800 917 82 82
National Drugs Helpline 0800 77 66 00 or visit
www.talktofrank.com
Adfam Helpline 020 7928 8923
Alcoholics Anonymous 0845 769 7555

Relationships

RelateLine 0845 130 4010

General

Prisoners Families Helpline 0808 808 2003