



*This booklet 'Living with Separation' 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

Designed by Nicola Kenwood  
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Unit 21, Carlson Court  
116 Putney Bridge Road, London, SW15 2NQ  
Tel: 0208 812 3600 Fax: 0208 871 0473  
E-mail: [info@actionpf.org.uk](mailto:info@actionpf.org.uk)  
[www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk](http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk)



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

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# Living with separation

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# Living with separation

## *Loss and separation - how might you feel?*

If you are separated by imprisonment from a relative, the pain may be present for a lot of, if not all, the time. There are constant reminders – the visits, the phone calls, the letters sent or received. You may have to save money to buy things for the prisoner. And then there is time, endless time, the counting of days until release. There are the disappointments when you don't get a letter you expected, a visit is cancelled, they are refused parole. There are constant reminders of the absence in your life.

Losing someone who matters to you could be one of the most disturbing experiences in life. The separation of imprisonment can lead to powerful feelings of grief. It may help to come to terms with this pain if you think about the stages of grief, as many people report experiencing it.

**First** - A shock, disbelief, numbness and awful tiredness that may seem to fill you up and rob you of all energy or the will to do anything. This tiredness can last a long time.

**Second** - An acute and often terrible pain of loss.

**Third** - Anger at your loss, at the person missing, at the event which led to the loss, even anger at yourself, or a feeling of guilt.

**Fourth** - A gradual recovery from the intense pain and coping with every day life again.

Somewhere along the way, there may be a great need to feel sorry (or angry) not only for the person imprisoned, but for yourself, caught in a situation you didn't plan or want. Given time this will pass but probably not easily.

The pain of imprisonment has other sides to it. There is the terrible frustration of feeling that your special person belongs at home with you, whereas you can only see them for what seems like just a few minutes each week. Aisha desperately missed her husband Muhammad:

*// It's the little things that upset me. Last Tuesday I cooked a chicken though I don't usually bother as I'm on my own. I took it out of the oven and got quite tearful – I was thinking, he should be here to eat this chicken with me. Silly little things like that. //*

Some of your pain will be renewed each time you leave a visit. Or if you feared the imprisonment, it may almost be a relief not to have to fear it any longer, because it's finally happened. These feelings are perfectly normal.

## Will your relationship change?

Yes. Your relationship may continue in another way, but it will not be the same. For both the imprisoned person and the partner at home, there isn't any 'going back to normal'. Life will never be the same again, although it may eventually be worse or better.

The period of living with separation can pass through various stages, all bringing their own uncertainties and difficulties. These stages may include:

- Bail
- Remand in custody
- Trial
- Sentence
- Appeal
- Transfer to another prison

- Living through the sentence on the outside
- Living with an indeterminate sentence e.g. if your partner is a lifer
- Preparation for release/resettlement
- Release

You may find it helps to think of your experience in two ways:

## The shared experience

All prisoners' families share a similar experience of the criminal justice system, and in particular of the prison visiting system. You will inevitably be caught up in this yourself, though arrangements may vary from one prison to another. Knowing that so many other families are going through the same experience may help you, and indeed there can be a spirit of comradeship in prison waiting areas as everyone complains about delays in getting 'processed' through the system, transport difficulties etc. If you are willing to be friendly, you can gain a lot of information about the prison by just chatting to people. But it is also important to be wary: gossip can travel fast among prisoners, so do not say anything indiscreet or too personal in case inappropriate information is passed between prisoners and causes distress or other problems.

If you would like to get in touch with a prisoners' family support service, where you can discuss any concerns you have more freely, you can ring the **Prisoners' Families Helpline Freephone 0808 808 2003**. They offer support and information on any issues relating to the imprisonment of a family member.

## Your personal experience

The way you deal with separation, and with coping on your own will depend on:

1. *The kind of relationship you have with your family member, and how much responsibility you took on before they went to prison.*
2. *What support you can expect to get from family, friends and your local community.*
3. *Your feelings about your family member's imprisonment and the (alleged) offence.*
4. *The ages of your children if you have any; whether or not you were pregnant at the time your partner was arrested; your relationship with the children.*
5. *How well you take care of yourself – such as how much time and space you allow yourself for good physical and emotional health and to do the things you enjoy.*



All the above points are unique to each person and to each family.

## Loneliness and isolation

Imprisonment, and the feeling of being labelled a prisoner's partner, can compound the sense of isolation experienced by those left on the outside while their partner is in prison. One woman described it as "the silence of my own world, somehow more hostile than any prison wing".

Here are some other ways families have described their experiences:

*// It is so difficult to explain to anyone out here what loving someone who is away from you can be like. //*

*// I feel awkward going out alone. We always used to go places together. //*

*// The loneliness was awful at the beginning, but you come to realise you just have to get on with it. //*

*// I didn't plan to be on my own, and time doesn't make it easier. It just gets harder – I can see no end to it. //*

*// I'm so lonely – even with five children – especially at night when they're in bed. It's hard not being able to share problems. //*

*// There's nobody else in my position that I can talk to, so I tend to have a rosy view of everybody else's life, thinking their life's great. //*

*// The thing I find most difficult is the fact that it will be years before we are together. //*



Isolation can mean something different to everyone. The obvious effect is loneliness, but it can also lead to loss of confidence, anxiety and depression. In these states you are less likely to be able to tackle things and cope on your own. It would be silly to pretend that overcoming loneliness and isolation is easy. Some of its causes may be hard to change, and some of its effects – depression, loss of confidence – can stay with you for a long time.

## How can you become less socially isolated?

Many families have said how helpful it has been to talk to someone else who is visiting a partner in prison. You could ask the staff in the prison visitors' centre if there is anyone you could talk to. The **Prisoners' Families Helpline Freephone 0808 808 2003** will also be able to give you information as to what support is available in your area.

## What can you do if your partner asks for your help when they get in trouble in prison?

Many problems can arise in prison. Some prisoners can face charges because of breaches of the prison disciplinary system and may have to undergo prison adjudication where they will have to go before a prison governor to answer the charge. If found guilty, they may face loss of prison status (i.e. be moved back to a 'basic' regime) and in very serious cases may even be moved from a lower security category to a higher one. This may mean that they are moved to another prison, and this can have a profound effect on you and your family. You may have to travel further to visit, or your partner may be put on closed visits (which take place in a cubicle with the prisoner behind glass or wire mesh) so that your time together is severely restricted.

Your relative may well feel very angry at this treatment, whether or not it was justified, and you may feel you want to complain on their behalf. This woman took her partner's side in this way during a visit:

*// Last Saturday I had a heated debate with one of the governors about the way Jeff is being mistreated. I was accused of being "anti-prison". I stood my ground and told the governor that his officers were immune to accountability. //*

This woman spoke up in the heat of the moment, and her action is certainly understandable. But after she got home she began to have her doubts:

*// I don't know whether what I did was the right thing or not, because Jeff's the one in prison who'll have to face any repercussions. It's OK for me, sitting at home and telling him to challenge this and fight that. But at the end of the day he's inside and there's hostility that he can't leave behind. //*

It is important to listen to any grievances that your relative in prison is feeling to show understanding and sympathy. If you feel the complaint is justified, pursue it through the official - and if necessary the legal channels - rather than there and then during your visit where you run the risk of upsetting both yourself, your partner/relative and even other families trying to enjoy their visits. There is a clear complaints procedure for prisoners should they feel they are being unfairly treated in any way. This procedure should have been explained to the prisoner on 'Reception' or 'Induction' when they first arrived at the prison. If they want more details they could ask their wing officer or see the information in the prison library.



The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman ([www.ppo.gov.uk](http://www.ppo.gov.uk) or 0845 010 7938) investigates complaints from prisoners (once they have been looked at within the prison) and is completely independent of both the Prison Service and the National Probation Service (NPS). You cannot make a complaint to the Ombudsman on behalf of a prisoner, though in the future this may change, so the prisoner will have to contact them.

The visitors' centre should be able to help you with the right information should you feel you or your relative have been mistreated in any way. There are a number of organisations and law firms specialising in prisoners' rights and conditions, for contact details ring the **Prisoners' Families Helpline 0808 808 2003 Freephone** or visit the helpline website [www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk](http://www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk).

## How can you lessen the effects of imprisonment on your children?

See if there is anyone in your immediate family you can talk to and trust. Can you talk to your children's teachers? Can you share your concerns with other mothers whose children may have experienced some form of separation? There is much more information on imprisonment and children in the free Outsiders booklet 'Telling the Children' which is available from prison visitors' centres and from the **Prisoners' Families Helpline Freephone 0808 808 2003**. You can also download useful free information about the effects of imprisonment on children by going to the Prisoners' Families Helpline website [www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk](http://www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk). APF has also published three children's storybooks dealing with issues affecting children with a parent in prison. For further details about 'Danny's Mum' (4-6 age group), 'Tommy's Dad' (4-7 age group) and 'Finding Dad' (8-11 age group) contact APF.

## How can you feel like you're a person in your own right?

Remember it's okay to want some time away from your children – so you need to create some time and space for yourself. First you need to find some good child care. Second, you need to decide how you want to spend this valuable time. Is there a class you could go to, a hobby you'd like to take up, some voluntary work that interests you – or would you rather just chill out with friends?

If you can just take a step in the direction of finding some support and sociable activities for yourself, you will soon find a way of ending your loneliness and isolation.

## Finding help and building support

*“ No-one wants to know you when you're in trouble ”*

When things get too much, sometimes everything you do seems to make it worse for you, your child and your partner. It all seems such a terrible struggle balancing everything, with so little time for yourself and not enough money.

You can get into such a state that you feel nobody can help you. You may feel, 'They don't know what it's like – how could they? They don't have to cope with any of this!'

A recent survey asked prisoners' relatives what sort of help they would find most useful. They identified four kinds of help:

1. *Practical help – with money, transport, child care and other needs.*
2. *Better visiting arrangements – including longer time, more privacy and improved facilities.*
3. *Meeting people in a similar situation, to share experiences, support one another and have access to more information.*
4. *Someone to talk to and help with relationship issues, depression, children and emotional issues.*



## Practical help

If you are claiming benefits or you are on a low income, you should be able to claim for travel costs for two visits every four weeks from the Assisted Prison Visits Unit (APVU). This will include an allowance for meals and an overnight stay in certain circumstances. To get these costs paid, you should get hold of an APVU form 2022 from the visitors' centre, prison or benefit office and send it to **Assisted Prison Visits Unit, PO Box 2152, Birmingham, B15 1SD.**

You can find out more about the Assisted Prison Visits Unit in another APF free 'Outsider' booklet '**Keeping in Touch**' (available from APF's offices, a visitor's centre or the **Prisoners' Family Helpline 0808 808 2003**). You can phone the APVS on: 0845 300 1423 (Mon to Fri 10:15–11:45 & 14:15–15:45). **Textphone:** 0845 304 0800 (times as above). **Fax:** 0121 626 3474 (24 hrs). You can also **e-mail:** [assisted.prison.visits@hmps.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:assisted.prison.visits@hmps.gsi.gov.uk). If you are asking for an information pack you need to include your full postal address. If you have access to the internet you can download an information booklet.

Information in Welsh, a number of foreign languages, Braille and on audio cassette is available from the Assisted Prison Visits Unit.

## Expert help

It may at first seem daunting, asking for help, and it can depend on knowing where to look and knowing you can trust the source of help.

Research has revealed that many relatives of prisoners didn't know what help was available through support organisations or groups and in some cases were reluctant, even fearful, about asking for support from statutory services like GPs or health visitors. Family and friends were instead high on the list of support networks.

Support from family and friends, can have 'strings attached.' Before asking them, carefully consider whether you want them to know you have a particular problem.

## What sort of help would be right for you?

Family and friends may be able to help but some find the need for mutual support from others who are going through similar experiences helpful. **The Prisoners' Families Helpline** will be able to tell you if there are any support groups available in your area.

If you are having problems with your relationship with your partner in prison you may not want to share it with your family who may not be detached enough to offer you objective advice. You may also find this too intimate a matter to discuss with a support group, so maybe you need to talk things over with an appropriately skilled listener or counsellor.

Or your children may be showing behavioural problems. Though your family and friends may offer you sympathy and support, this won't change the children's behaviour. Here you may need to speak to a specialist in this particular field. To find out where this expert advice is available you can ring the **Prisoners' Families Helpline Freephone 0808 808 2003**. Organisations like *Parentline Plus* (0808 800 2222) offer support to anyone caring for children, or the *Lone Parent Helpline* (0800 018 5026) and *Gingerbread* (0800 018 4318) if you are caring for children on your own.

## Losing your sexual partner

Another important aspect of change when one partner in a relationship is imprisoned is the loss of intimacy. This is accompanied by limited communication and loss of chances to share commonplace events with each other. It may seem that only the prisoner has lost his or her freedom, but the partners left at home have also suffered a

great loss. Unlike prisons in some other countries, for example Canada, there are no conjugal visits (where you can have some private time for intimacy with your partner) allowed in British prisons.

Amy recalled:

*// I really ached because we couldn't be a true married couple. We couldn't go to bed together or be together. I remember this hitting me very strongly. //*

Aisha agreed:

*// Celibacy is a sacrifice – a very big sacrifice. But it's not just that. I miss him not being with me. It's like if something goes through my mind, I can't ring him up and ask him. So it's always waiting. I might write it down for later, or I talk on a tape. //*

Some women report extreme jealousy on the part of their partners in prison:

*// He is worried about me going out with other men. That was the big problem. He just wouldn't believe me. He said he'd heard so much from other men inside about wives and girlfriends clearing off and leaving them, sending them Dear John letters. //*

Jack explains what it feels like from a prisoner's point of view:

*// I used to listen to other guys who'd had a phone call or a letter from their wives or girlfriends and they'd say, 'She's going out. Who's taking her home? //*

## Depression

Depression is one of the most common illnesses, and it is one which a prisoner's partner is very likely to experience at some point, because it is a normal stage in any grieving process, and it is also an effect of isolation, loneliness, low self esteem and unexpressed anger. Here are some of the signs and symptoms by which you can recognise depression:

You may feel:

**Low, blue or sad** – 'Life's so dull.'

**Despair** – 'There's no hope!'

**Helpless** – 'There's nothing I can do.'

**Guilty** – 'I blame myself.'

**Ashamed** – 'I never thought I'd feel this low!'

**Empty** – 'I don't have any feelings nowadays.'

**Isolated** – 'No-one cares!'

**Worthless** – 'I've made such a mess of my life.'

**Unloved/unwanted** – 'I've got nobody to live for.'

**Irritable** – 'I fly off the handle over the smallest thing!'

**No interest in sex** – 'I've gone completely cold.'

You may have:

**Indigestion and wind, constipation or diarrhoea**

**Increased/decreased appetite** – leading to weight gain/weight loss

**Palpitations** – your heart races or thumps – and chest pains

**Sleep problems** – insomnia or you can't wake up

**Painful joints and aching muscles**

**Fatigue** – you're tired all the time

**Headaches**

**Agitation** – you feel restless and fidgety; or you are terribly slow with speech/movements

**Dry, itchy skin**

When these feelings last a long time or begin to disrupt your life, then you may need help.



## How can you help yourself?

Recognise that your needs are important. Tell yourself you deserve to feel better, and you deserve to get some help if you need it. You have probably given a great deal to other people in your life. Now you need something for yourself.

### Talk to someone

Depression needs to be talked about. Being able to talk with someone may not solve your problems but it can at least reduce the burden of loneliness.

### Let yourself cry

One of the things that stops us talking is the fear of breaking down and crying in front of somebody else. But to cry on someone's shoulder can relieve the isolation of never showing anyone how bad you are feeling.

### Take regular exercise

Studies have shown that regular exercise does help reduce feelings of depression. It can also be a useful way to meet new friends. If you have not been used to regular exercise then it is important to start gently, try walking more or go swimming.

### Don't punish yourself

We tend to believe we have no right to be depressed. We tell ourselves: 'I should be able to pull myself together!' You need to recognise that there is a good reason for you feeling the way you do and you need to be good to yourself.

### Allow yourself to be angry

Allowing yourself to feel anger if you are depressed can be very strengthening. It reduces the feelings of guilt and self-blame. Once we start to feel anger we need to decide what to do about it. It can give us the energy to allow us to make demands on other people, or to start doing new things for ourselves.

## Learn to be realistic

When you are depressed you think in terms of extremes, and this can lower your mood even more. You may think that nobody wants to see you. Nobody understands or cares. Start by asking yourself how you would see things and the type of things you would do, if you were not feeling so upset as you are now.

## Taking pills

Doctors commonly prescribe anti-depressants and sleeping tablets for depression, anxiety and insomnia. For some people, some of the time they can be effective treatment and be helpful, for example, in breaking a habit like poor sleep or constant worrying. However they don't remove the cause of the problem, even when they are making you feel like you care less about it. In addition, there can be the problem of becoming dependent or addicted to the pills. Though we can take pills to suppress painful feelings for a time, usually we have to face those feelings so that we can cope better with the future.



## Stress and ill health

Studies have shown that ongoing stress – such as severe loneliness or a high level of recent life crises, depression or anxiety can weaken the body's immune system. The hormones and body chemicals produced by stress can disrupt the work of the cells that fight disease.

Also, under emotional stress, people often neglect their health. They miss check-ups, ignore symptoms, feel too tired or too short of time to take exercise; they risk becoming overweight and generally don't take enough care of themselves.

If we cope badly with stress, the conflict that builds up can lead to breakdown in physical health or emotional well-being. A breakdown

of this sort is as much about an inability or a lack of opportunity to communicate problems to others as it is about not coping with those problems.

## When a relationship breaks down

Imprisonment will inevitably change relationships within a family. Many couples find ways of adjusting to these changes, although this can often be a difficult and painful process. Others however do reach the distressing conclusion that it would be best to end the relationship. The times of greatest stress on relationships seem to be at the beginning and the end of a prison sentence.

The needs of the children are of course of major importance when a relationship breaks down, and if this happens to you it will be vital to discuss issues around access to prison visits so that children may continue to see their parent in prison. Children under the age of eighteen cannot visit a prison on their own, so they will need some help. However you feel, remember it may be very important for the children to maintain a link with their parent. There may also be important issues about release if the prisoner is coming up for parole or is eligible for Home Detention Curfew (HDC) and will need a home to go to.

## Special visits

A 'special visit' can be arranged through the prison chaplain or the probation service in a more private setting than a crowded visits room when a partner or close relative has needed to discuss very delicate personal issues or break some bad news. If you have such an issue to discuss ask the chaplain to arrange a special visit.

You could seek help from Relate, the relationship support organisation (**Helpline 0845 1304010 or 0845 4561310** for information on local services).

If you feel things have reached a point where you need solicitors, choose a firm that specialises in family/marital law. To save costs you may like to choose a firm near the prison in case lawyers need to visit the prisoner.

It will be important to find a way of letting the children know about the changes or breakdown of your relationship. Talk to them in an open and honest way about the other parent, and try to do it without bitterness. Encourage the children to talk about their own feelings about the separation and breakdown of the relationship.

Remember that whatever has happened between you and the children's parent in prison, it may be very important for them to have a continuing relationship or link with him or her, and you may have to be prepared to allow this, and perhaps arrange for them to be taken to the prison by grandparents or other relatives, even if you do not wish to continue visiting yourself.

## Separation and changing roles

Remember that people grow and change continuously throughout their life. When the structures of their lives change, their roles change rapidly. The imprisonment of a parent or a partner changes relationships within the family and also within the wider community.

One male prisoner said of his partner outside:

*// She has built a new circle of friends and learned to be independent. //*

Some women are very conscious of the changed role forced upon them by their partner's imprisonment:

Once a person finds the strength to do things alone, making decisions previously made by someone else, there may be comfort in this new strength.

*// He didn't understand that I've changed, become more independent. I try to deal with things myself. //*

*// If it hadn't been for my oldest girl, I couldn't have coped. I don't like being on my own. Oh God – it was awful! I had depended so much on him and then all of a sudden I had to do everything on my own. But I did manage it and now I'm much stronger and more independent. //*

In time, the outside partner may grow in confidence and get used to assuming responsibility – and this may be hard to give up. Tension arises when the prisoner returns home and assumes everything will be as s/he left it and not recognising how differently family life and decisions have been. For further information, please refer to the Outsider booklet entitled 'Preparing for Release' in this series.

One woman said:

*// Now I do everything myself – and that's the way I want to keep it! //*

Indeed, for some women, the husband's imprisonment can mean there are fewer problems:

*// When he went away at the start the children didn't really notice that much, because he had a drink problem and he was away from home a lot anyway. The way he was, he was a hopeless father, and so to be honest it was better for us when he landed up in prison. I manage well now with the kids. //*

## Keep your partner informed and involved

Maintaining a relationship will include keeping your partner in prison up to date with the gradual changes at home. If they have been away for a long time, the children will have grown and their partner will also have changed. They may now have a different role within the family as well as new friends and social life.

It is very important to find ways of maintaining a parenting role during a prison sentence. This woman describes the system she and her husband worked out for their 10 year old son:

*// Now we've got the visits properly sussed. As soon as we walk into that visiting room, Mark is John's responsibility. If Mark's naughty, it's John who has to tell him off. John has to take control on visits – otherwise when he comes home he'll suddenly turn into the kind of dad who shouts at his son. Mark waltzes into the prison and doesn't seem phased by it at all. He treats it as his second home! //*

Two women had devised an ingenious way of keeping their husbands up to date with changes in the home. They took photographs of every part of their house or flat and sent them to the prisoners, who stuck them up on the walls of their cells. Other women involved their partners in the choice of household items by sending catalogues and brochures into the prison or discussing their children's education, so that the choice would be a shared one. Such strategies can also help prepare the prisoner for taking responsibilities on release.