

Getting the message about evidence-based practice directly to people in prison

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This current edition of the Prison Service Journal has provided insights into the need for, and application of, evidence-based practice within prisons and the wider Criminal Justice System. It is clear from the articles included that if we want to improve the outcomes for the people within our care, then using evidence to inform practice and policy decisions is the best approach. While the use of evidence-based practice has gained momentum within organisations and Government departments, direct promotion to service users is less common.¹

The specialist expertise required to deliver interventions within prisons, along with the costs of delivery, mean that access to interventions can be limited. However, directly providing people in prison with the evidence about what strategies, approaches, and activities they could independently undertake could be one avenue worthy of further exploration. This article presents an overview of recent approaches taken by HMPPS staff to use radio to communicate evidence-based tips and suggestions to people in prison, focused on promoting positive psychological wellbeing. While there is limited evidence on which methods of communicating evidence-based practice to service-users are the most effective, there is some evidence that the use of mass media may be one option to explore given that such approaches ensure consistency of messaging.²

Prison Radio

National Prison Radio (NPR) is the world's first national radio station for people in prison. It broadcasts into prison cells across England and Wales, via the in-cell television system, 24 hours per day, seven days per week. It began broadcasting in 2009 and has become a key communications channel to those serving prison

sentences. It's run by a charity, the Prison Radio Association (PRA), which emerged from a partnership project involving the BBC and HMPPS in 2006. The charity is independent, and is the driving force behind Prison Radio International, a growing global movement of people using audio in and around criminal justice settings for social good.

From its studios in HMPs Brixton and Styal, teams of radio professionals work with people serving sentences to produce and broadcast inspirational, informative, and entertaining radio programmes. The involvement of people serving sentences ensures that NPR's programmes are relevant and credible. The professional team ensures the quality of their programming is extremely high, and NPR has won some of the top radio industry awards, competing against national BBC and commercial radio networks.

All programmes are pre-recorded, and they're designed to deliver accurate information at scale, as well as sharing stories and engaging listeners in discussions that will increase their chances of living crime-free lives after release. The content is a mixture of music and speech. It's entertaining and varied, with the intention of drawing listeners in and encouraging them to stay tuned. It covers a huge range of subjects, all feeding into the pathways that are known to prevent reoffending, using the evidence base to support this.³

As a national service, NPR serves a vast community of people behind bars, with additional programmes produced in prisons across the country alongside those regular shows made in Brixton and Styal. Listeners communicate with the radio station by voicemail. A freephone number is available to everyone in prison, and the station receives around 45,000 calls every year. These range from song requests and shout outs, through to people sharing some of their most personal thoughts and experiences. These messages are the raw material that fuels the radio station. Content is derived

1. Dadich, A. (2009). Communicating evidence-based mental health care to service users. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 61(4), 199-210.

2. See footnote 1.

3. Accommodation, Education, Training, and Employment, Health, Drugs and Alcohol, Finance, Benefit, and Debt, Children and Families, and Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviour.

from the audience, and the presenters strive to represent the needs of their audience. As a result, it is extremely popular. Eighty-four per cent of those who can receive NPR listen at some point during the week, and 45 per cent tune in every day. The average listener consumes 9 hours of content every week. These figures are taken from the PRA's annual impact measurement processes for NPR in 2022/23. The internal PRA Research and Evaluation Team conducted randomised, face-to-face surveys in 10 prisons, and ran a survey within *Inside Time*, the national prison newspaper. In total, 800 prisoners were surveyed.

'Sorry to interrupt your day: The small things can make a big difference'

The first and second authors conducted a review of the prisoner wellbeing literature and identified a number of evidence-based strategies that people in prison could try to support their wellbeing, summarised as the 'Six Ways to Wellbeing':⁴

1. **Connect with others.** Social relationships act as a buffer against mental ill health. Feeling valued, having support from peers and contact with loved ones can all make a difference to prisoner wellbeing.
2. **Be physically active.** Taking part in regular physical activity can help to promote wellbeing, and lower levels of depression and anxiety. Such activities can also encourage social interactions.
3. **Take notice of the present moment.** Taking notice of the present moment can strengthen and broaden awareness of how the simple things can bring joy.
4. **Keep learning.** Continued learning through life encourages self-esteem and encourages a more active social life.
5. **Give.** Participating in social and community life, an interest in helping others, and acts of kindness come under the principle of 'give'.
6. **Build.** Building and promoting opportunities for prisoners to develop optimism, hope, meaning, and a sense of autonomy. Working

to develop and maintain the physical environment to help foster safety, decency, and rehabilitation.

The HMPPS Health and Social Care Team wanted to commission a radio programme to promote mental wellbeing that was evidence-based, useful for listeners, uplifting, innovative, and authentic. The 'Six Ways to Wellbeing' provided the evidence-base for the production team to develop the content for a series of prisoner engagement events. The concept of 'Sorry to interrupt your day' was subsequently born. Rather than following the usual scheduling process, a series of 20 'interruptions' were created.

Each short, of between 60 and 120 seconds, was broadcast at random points across the NPR schedule in Spring 2023. These 'interruptions' were produced to sound different to the programming surrounding them. They introduced simple, life-affirming, and positive things that listeners could do to manage some of the psychological challenges of being in prison. They were developed using a new format, using unique sound design with voices talking directly to the listener. Crucially, each invited listeners to take some sort of simple action that the evidence would suggest helpful to support positive wellbeing in prison.

NPR conducted surveys about the series across three prison sites and held a focus group at one site. One hundred and forty-five people in prison were surveyed, with a further four people taking part in a focus group. From the surveys, 52 per cent of respondents stated that they had heard the series and most people suggested that listening to the series had encouraged them to take part in one of the actions or activities discussed. This included keeping in touch with loved ones (60 per cent), taking part in exercise (51 per cent), reading a book or listening to music (49 per cent), doing something to feel good about themselves (47 per cent), and offering help or support to others (41 per cent). Nearly everyone also stated that mindfulness and mental health content on NPR was either 'useful' or 'very useful'. Feedback from the 4 women who took part in the focus group was also positive, with comments reflecting on the value of the content and impact it had had for them:

Social relationships act as a buffer against mental ill health. Feeling valued, having support from peers and contact with loved ones can all make a difference to prisoner wellbeing.

4. Netten, K. & Gibson, R. A. (2023). Prisoner Wellbeing: A synthesis of the evidence base. *Prison Service Journal*, 267, 21 – 28.

'It's given me the courage to speak to someone about my mental health and given me a big blue light to follow'.

'You can hear them smiling as they spoke, and laughing with each other. That's nice to hear'.

'In here, your attention span is all over. You've got so much to do with so little time, so short is good'.

'It helps people take care of themselves better, even if that's just taking a shower which makes you feel better. It also encourages people to talk to people'.

Thinking Matters

Thinking Matters is a joint HMPPS and NPR produced radio series designed to bring into focus topics evidentially linked to prisoner wellbeing and mental health. Based on reviews of the literature and internally HMPPS produced evidence-based practice summaries, a range of topics were identified as being pertinent areas to cover in the series. This was based on the factors known to impact on wellbeing in custody, and importantly, topics where prisoners had some level of control or autonomy over their improvement.^{5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15} Whilst this included topics intrinsically linked to the custodial environment, such as the sleeping conditions, the series' focus was in line with the evidence for empowering prisoners to find ways of building resilience and hope in custody, without the need to change the characteristics of custody that are

outside of the prisoner's control, and that we understand impact on wellbeing (known as deprivation factors).^{16 17}

Thinking Matters has now developed and aired two series, one in autumn 2021 and one in spring 2023. Both series included weekly episodes with HMPPS psychologists and men and women with lived experience of being in prison, discussing a variety of topics and introducing tools that might help listeners to feel more in control of their lives. Using the evidence base, series 2 followed on from the topics discussed in series 1 (sleep, managing anger, problem solving, relationships, and trauma), building on these discussions alongside introducing new topics. Series 2 covered rumination and worry, things that are good for the mind and body (sleep, nutrition, and exercise), prison debt, shame and self-compassion, navigating family dynamics and relationships, and psychological flexibility. These topics were not only selected based on the evidence of their importance, but on anecdotal evidence and prison safety projects where those with lived experience were able to articulate the areas that detrimentally impact their wellbeing in custody and, perhaps more importantly, the areas Thinking Matters could assist with through raising awareness of these topics and introducing guided practices that can be actively used by those currently in prison.

Overall, the content for series 2 focused on the goal of increasing self-compassion, aiming for listeners to find some solace in their experiences not just being theirs alone, nor what happened to them in their lives being their fault. Embedded throughout were key messages designed to empower listeners and promote hope and responsibility for making changes to their lives. This replicates the messaging associated with

5. Orjiakor, C. T., Ugwu, D. I., Eze, J. E., Ugwu, L. I., Ibeagha, P. N., Onu, D. U. (2017). Prolonged incarceration and prisoners' wellbeing: lived experiences of awaiting trial/pre-trial/remand prisoners in Nigeria. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 12, 1-15.
6. See footnote 4.
7. Poorebrahim, A., Lin, C., Imani, V., Griffiths, M.D., Pakpour, A.H. (2022). A Prospective Study Examining the Relationship Between Dispositional Mindfulness and Insomnia Among Male Prisoners in Iran: The Mediating Effect of Psychological Distress and Perceived Stress. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 1-12.
8. Cashin, A., Potter, E. and Buter, T. (2008). The relationship between exercise and hopelessness in prison, *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 15, 66-71.
9. Legrand, F.D., Ory, E., Herring, M.P. (2020). Evaluation of a brief interval exercise training (IET) intervention for first-time prisoners with elevated anxiety symptoms. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*, 33(5), 581-589.
10. Battaglia, C., di Cagno, A., Fiorilli, G., Giombini, A., Borriore, P., Baralla, F., Marchetti, M. & Pigozzi, F. (2014). Participation in a 9-month selected physical exercise programme enhances psychological well-being in a prison population, *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 25(5), 343-354.
11. Hammill, A., & Newby, R. (2015). The illicit economy, debt and prison violence: Is prisoner debt inevitable? *The Prison Service Journal*, 221, 30-35.
12. Zessin, U., Dickhauser, O., & Garbade, S. (2015). The Relationship Between Self-Compassion and Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being*, 7(3), 340-364.
13. See footnote 8.
14. Farmer, M. (2017). *The importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*. Ministry of Justice.
15. Dawson, D. L., & Moghaddam N. G. (2020). COVID-19: Psychological flexibility, coping, mental health, and wellbeing in the UK during the pandemic. *Journal of contextual behavioral science*, 17, 126-134.
16. Sykes, G. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
17. Thomas, C. W., & Foster, S. C. (1973). The importation model perspective on inmate social roles: An empirical test. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 14, 226-234.

Meditation series

compassion and self-compassion which has strong links with improving wellbeing and counteracts punitive narratives that surround prisoners.¹⁸ Importantly, whilst content was developed by HMPPS psychologists and NPR, the voices of those with lived experience of custody were essential. This included the co-host who excellently navigated the variety of topics and shared relatable experiences to the listeners. Following listener feedback from series 1, series 2 continued with the introduction of different skills and tools relevant to the topic of the episode, with psychologist and lived experience music choices reflecting the challenges of the topic with a focus on instilling hope in those listening. This aimed to provide space for guided practice, discussion and reflection, and the use of music for both entertainment and to evoke emotional connection to the material.¹⁹

Prison Radio Association conducted 90 random face-to-face surveys and two focus groups across two male and two female prisons in England. They found that people 'overwhelmingly agreed' that this content is necessary and extremely beneficial to have on the radio. Prisoners who completed surveys and engaged in the focus groups also reported that they would like to hear more. One prisoner stated:

'If I was going through similar things I would listen to feel like there's a support mechanism there and so you feel you're not the only one going through it so I think it's a really, really good thing to have on the prison radio.'

People described taking 'action' after hearing the content and described it having a positive effect on their wellbeing:

'I used to think negative but now I don't and it's all thanks to the things like you've been explaining.'

People disclosed being especially keen to hear more about relationships, and more real-life scenarios going forward. This is something that will be considered in the planning of any future series.

The series also acknowledged that people can cause themselves distress by doing this too much, especially if they are thinking about distressing or stressful events.

A beginner's introduction to meditation course delivered by Dr Emily Tarrant via NPR invited listeners to join in with guided meditations. Meditation involves focusing attention on a single thing to give our mind a rest from thoughts, and there is evidence to suggest that such activities can significantly improve prisoners' capacity to relax, and their self-esteem and optimism.²⁰ It was offered to listeners with the question 'Do you ever find yourself thinking over and over about events from the past or things that may happen in the future?' It was emphasised that this is very common, that most people do it a lot of the time, and the programme encouraged listeners to view it as such. The series also acknowledged that people can cause themselves distress by doing this too much, especially if they are thinking about distressing or stressful events. The aim of the series was to provide an introduction to meditation, with the hope that listeners would adopt this practice to not only help them manage their thoughts, but also to experience the calming effect on the body and mind, to boost wellbeing. Episodes invited listeners to join in with some meditations by following the guidance given.

From the same sample used in the *Thinking Matters* feedback sessions, all those asked stated that the meditation programme was extremely useful. Feedback also included that the course was very accessible to those who have not engaged in meditation previously. Some prisoners who tried it were surprised at how much they liked it, as they had been sceptical and struggled with meditation practice in the past. Moving forward, prisoners requested that more consideration be given to how prisoners can engage in meditation in an environment that is not always set up to support this practice, and ways to mitigate or manage barriers to this.

Reflections on the evidence for communicating evidence

Dadich (2009) conducted a systematic review to identify which methods are most effective for communicating evidence-based mental health care to

18. See footnote 12.

19. Sachs E Matthew, et al., (2016), Brain connectivity reflects human aesthetic responses to music, *Social and Affective Neuroscience*. 1-8.

20. Derlic, D. (2020). A Systematic Review of Literature: Alternative Offender Rehabilitation – Prison Yoga, Mindfulness and Meditation. *Journal of Correctional Health Care*, 26(4), 361-375.

service users, with the aim of improving mental health literacy amongst the public.²¹ While she acknowledges that robust evidence on this issue is lacking, she makes a number of recommendations for those considering communicating evidence-based materials to service users, ensuring that:

- ❑ Using approaches that are multi-method, and multi-levelled, so that people have a range of opportunities to engage and access consistent evidence-based information.
- ❑ Evidence and materials shared have a strong theoretical basis.
- ❑ The needs and experiences of key stakeholders (including service users) is taken into account.
- ❑ Co-production is used during development and implementation.
- ❑ Ensuring that evidence / materials are contextually appropriate to the setting in which the intervention is delivered.
- ❑ Considering perceived social norms and challenges.
- ❑ Providing ongoing opportunities to service users to further enhance their mental health literacy.

From the work described in this article, it is clear some of these recommendations have been attended to. For example, people in prison were involved in the development, production, and presentation of both the *Thinking Matters* and *Sorry to Interrupt Your Day* campaigns. The context of living in prison is central to all content on NPR, and the challenges of maintaining positive psychological wellbeing in prison has been considered within the programmes described, along with opportunities for feedback.

To build on this work, it will be important for future campaigns to consider how to make the approaches multi-method, and multi-levelled, with ongoing

opportunities for people to engage in additional material, signposting to where they can access further support or engage in additional materials to support their wellbeing, and find out more about the topics of focus. This could include exploring how else information is shared and communicated with people in prison and utilising these to communicate evidence-based practice directly, such as via self-service wing kiosks,²² in-cell technology,²³ and Virtual Campus.²⁴

Conclusion

The use of prison radio, and other media, to communicate evidence-based practice to people in prison is in its infancy. From the surveys conducted to date, feedback from people in prison on the campaigns described above has been positive, and their suggestions regarding what else might be useful to include in future programmes is helpful for NPR's planning of future content. It will be important for feedback on such programmes to continue to be gathered and explored, to ensure that future content is based on representative feedback.

It will also be important to explore the impact of these programmes for people living in prison and whether engagement in such material influences people's behaviour and wellbeing. This will need to be planned in advance of programmes going on air and consider a range of factors including: the aims of the content, the issues that the radio content was hoping to address, whether and how able people are to put the strategies described into practice, and what impact this has on them.

Not all prisons have NPR in their establishments. This means prisoners currently do not have equal access to content such as the programmes described in this article. Identifying how to improve access to prison radio could be an important next step for the organisation.

21. See footnote 1.

22. Self-service wing kiosks allow prisoners to complete administrative tasks (e.g., ordering items on canteen, bank account access, etc.) which previously needed to be completed via the paper-based applications system.

23. In-cell technology refers to in-cell telephony (telephones installed in prisoners' cells) and in-cell laptops. In-cell laptops provide access to the same functions as self-service wing kiosks. They also provide access to a content hub, where users can engage with entertainment, news, and educational materials.

24. Virtual Campus is an on-line education platform which enable users to engage in e-learning.