

# Counselling in prisons

Counsellors working with offenders in prison face specific challenges. **Peter Jones** describes how the Counselling in Prisons Network is attempting to address these

There is no doubt that delivering counselling in prisons can be extremely challenging for the counsellor, both ethically and personally. Burnout happens very quickly. Counsellors need to be resilient, both physically and emotionally, and have adequate means of support. On a daily basis, the counsellor working in the prison environment must wrestle with a range of diverse and complex issues, including security, confidentiality and, perhaps most significant of all, how to develop the therapeutic relationship to promote psychological growth in an environment that mitigates against such processes.

This article will endeavour to explore some of the key issues surrounding working therapeutically with offenders as well as the work of the Counselling in Prisons Network (the Network), which I founded five years ago, following a realisation that many counsellors within the criminal justice system were working in isolation, often feeling unsupported and with little acknowledgment of their work or in some cases their actual existence as professionals.

## Overview

Counsellors working in prison settings tend to be a mix of full and part time; some are volunteers; some work for statutory bodies; some for the third sector. There was, I discovered, no sense of clear, joined-up working. Consequently, this often impacted on quality and sometimes accountability, within the criminal justice system. The Network seeks to address these primary issues through its key aims and objectives and has provided a process to help 'join up' counsellors, and ensure that their work is acknowledged by both peers and other professionals.

Five years on, and with over 100 members coming from all over the UK, the organisation is widely recognised

and well established as the key network for counsellors working and seeking to work in the criminal justice system; in 2011 it was welcomed into the World Health Organisation's prison and health network and in 2009 Lord David Ramsbotham, formerly Chief Inspector of Prisons, agreed to become its patron.

My introduction to this field of counselling had originally been through a telephone helpline and counselling service that I had set up for male rape victims in Hull in 1997. A local prison in the area had left a message on the helpline requesting help for a prisoner who had been gang raped on a wing of the prison. I responded to this request, setting up one of the first counselling services in a prison in the UK. Within three months, 45 people had referred themselves to this service. However, it became clear to me very quickly that there was an ethical dilemma of working with someone therapeutically then expecting them to survive in a dysfunctional environment that was potentially antitherapeutic. After much thought and reflection, I decided to withdraw the service and explore a more ethical way in terms of providing therapeutic services within the custodial environment. The founding of the Counselling in Prisons Network was a partial response to some of these ethical dilemmas and challenges.

The Network is a member-led organisation, which operates at a local

level. In addition to a website, which provides networking opportunities for counsellors in prison settings, we also have a professional network of counsellors, known as regional leads, who cover the whole of the UK and act as networking links. We hold networking days to highlight the work of therapists working in prisons; and once a year we have a two-day international conference. Our fifth conference will take place in June.

In addition, we have a quarterly expert reference group of advisors and regional leads. The purpose of this group is to provide leadership and direction and to develop international partnerships – we have just developed one with the Netherlands. There are considerable cultural differences in how counsellors work in prison settings in the UK and abroad; in general, I would say that we make things far too complex here, with too much red tape and bureaucracy, whereas in other parts of the world – Iceland for example – they have much more empowering systems.

## Challenges

Because counsellors work therapeutically, they are generally perceived by the prison establishments as being a positive intervention for offenders, some of whom will have been required to see a counsellor because it is a condition of their sentence planning.

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Preferably, there will have been involvement from healthcare or Probation Service specialists. Sometimes offenders self-refer; it depends on the ethics and philosophy of the establishment.

What is very important is to separate the therapeutic goal of counsellors working in prisons from that of the prison itself. Counsellors are not part of the system. As such, they can communicate hope and are in a position to provide non-judgmental therapeutic interventions. As a network we have built on this and have developed good relationships with prisons; the keynote speaker at this year's conference will be a prison governor.

Alongside categorising prisons from the high secure (category A) to low secure (category C), another useful way of looking at them is as individual communities, each with its own set of rules, hierarchy, culture, social norms and 'personality'. The regime is key to the ethical issues that arise, and the efficacy of counselling may well depend on how well the therapist and the therapeutic provision can readily connect with the particular institution. Therefore, the Network seeks to work with each establishment just as they are, taking into account different ways of working, which can produce different ethical dilemmas.

So, how do you build up a therapeutic relationship with an offender in prison? Sex offenders, such as paedophiles, for example, are not always an easy group of people to work with because they can often challenge the counsellor's own value system.

Things may be complicated further by prisoners' unique backgrounds and the offence. For example, a counsellor

may find themselves working with an offender who was sexually abused but has been sentenced to custodial care for attacking their perpetrator. In this area of work, therefore, we need a very clear view of how supervision fits in and therapists joining the Network have to sign up to say that they are having supervision.

Security too can be a challenge. In prison, power is with the person with the keys. Paradoxically, counsellors strive to not be viewed as part of the system, yet it is still often the counsellor locking the door at the end of the therapy session and leaving the prisoner in the locked room. The issue of security of the establishment is generally unique to working in custodial settings. The counsellor needs to be cognisant of balancing the various risks including risk to self and to others; it can be a thorny issue but one that needs to be worked with on a daily basis.

Confidentiality can also be problematical and requires careful consideration and reflection. For example, an inmate may tell a therapist that he wishes to escape; what does the therapist do with this information? Or, in the case of record-keeping, who keeps the records? Where should they be kept? Who can they be shared with? This requires some agreement with the counsellee on what can and cannot be shared.

### The Network's aims

In 2010 the Counselling in Prisons Network published its five-year strategy, 'Promoting excellence in therapy in prisons', outlining the vision and future direction of the Network and the work of counselling in prisons. The strategy set out a



number of work streams to be explored over the next few years. Within the strategy document there is an ethical framework for counsellors who are working in the criminal justice system. It is based on the *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* of BACP, and adapted to fit counsellors working in prison settings. The framework seeks to contextualise the therapeutic work within the regime and weigh up the various factors that may influence the decision-making process. It identifies three factors that affect ethical decision-making by counsellors working in prisons: risk; confidentiality; and the health of the therapist. Different ethical dilemmas emerge depending on the balance of these three factors, and it is the particular prison regime which links the three factors together. Simply having an ethical framework seeks to acknowledge the complexities of working in such a challenging environment.

The Network's vision is to pool

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the spirituality within prisons is not necessarily religious. It emerges out of helping offenders make sense of who they are and where they are going. That is the key therapeutic goal for those counsellors working in prison: helping offenders make sense of their own suffering, and acknowledging it. In a way, it is a form of existentialism, asking: Who am I? Where am I going?

### The future

The feedback for the Network to date has been very positive. Members often express that it gives them a networking support 'fix'. The first year's conference was described by some as 'healing' with others saying that they felt they 'belonged' and were recognised by peers. In terms of the future development of this work, I would like to see counselling and therapy with offenders as a key mainstream non-pharmacological intervention. There is so much potential within counselling in the criminal justice system and this needs to be acknowledged and built upon. The Network sees this as a key aim and one that it will continue to pursue. I would like to see a specific training programme for counsellors working in prisons, and I am keen to offer my services as an expert in the field. The Network is now recognised as the leading organisation in Europe for counsellors working in prisons and, significantly, the conference this year will be held at Newbold Revel, the HMP Training centre, which is a sign of how much progress we have made. The Network has come a long way in five years, but this is still a new field with plenty to explore and debate. I very much look forward to the next stage of the journey. ■

*Peter Jones, RMN, MA, FBACP, FHEA. Peter is a Fellow of BACP and Chair of the Counselling in Prisons Network. He has authored several books including Interventions in Criminal Justice, which will be published by Pavilion in January 2013. The Network's 5th annual conference takes place on 7 June at Newbold Revel in Warwickshire. For more details, please email Peter Jones. [petesu@corfe-mullen.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:petesu@corfe-mullen.freeserve.co.uk) [www.pn.counselling.co.uk](http://www.pn.counselling.co.uk)*

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expertise and best practice, to identify research agendas and develop excellence in working with offenders, with a view to pushing back the boundaries of understanding, and to challenge existing practice. We are also working to ensure there is more accountability and an evidence base in order to continually raise ethical standards. We work with other organisations, such as the Probation Service, and are becoming more high profile. We contribute to consultations on Green and White Papers, have put questions to parliament and, while at times the answers might be quite vague, we are nevertheless working nationally at a socio-political level to raise the profile and educate – both essential to making counselling in prisons more mainstream.

A key plank is to begin to develop an evidence base to underpin the work of counsellors working therapeutically in the criminal justice system. There is currently a lack of research evidence to build on, despite there appearing to be significant anecdotal evidence that

suggests working therapeutically with offenders is not only effective but essential in addressing the root causes of challenging issues. Many people who come into contact with the criminal justice system often have complex childhood backgrounds. For example, they may have been in and out of care homes, and been passed around like a parcel.

### The spiritual within prisons

Counselling in prisons has changed me, both as a counsellor and as a person. Working with brokenness and broken lives, shapes you. You either become hardened and cynical or you develop empathy. Some people become dissociated, or split, or just can't be themselves. Their persona in prison can become something they 'switch on'. For a counsellor, a capacity for compassion is a given.

It might appear that in the harshness of the prison regime, spirituality could struggle to survive; but I certainly believe it can. There are of, course, prison chaplains, but