

Concerned about the safety and well-being of someone in prison?

If you feel that your family member could be experiencing significant health or safety issues while in prison, there are a range of supports available to them and some steps that you can also take to pass on your concerns to the correctional authorities.

What kind of mental health support is available in prison?

All prisoners are assessed and those identified as being at risk of suicide, self-harm or mental illness are closely monitored throughout their sentence. There are mental health professionals in all Victorian prisons. Prisoners in most prisons also have a Case Manager and can ask for psychological help at any stage.

There are observation cells in prison for those prisoners who are at high risk of suicide or self-harm or who have already harmed themselves. These prisoners are closely supervised and checked regularly by a mental health worker.

If a prisoner has been transferred to a psychiatric facility during their sentence they may be at one of several locations:

- **Acute Assessment Unit (AAU):** Male prisoners assessed as being seriously mentally ill and/or at risk may stay in the 15-bed short stay assessment unit at the Melbourne Assessment Prison (MAP). The multi-disciplinary staff in this unit provide psychiatric assessments and a range of therapies, interventions and support. Prisoners may be transferred to and from the AAU from other Victorian prisons during their sentence
- **Marrmak Integrated Mental Health Service:** Female prisoners can stay in the 20-bed Specialist Unit at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. It also provides outpatient and outreach services
- **Thomas Embling Hospital:** Male and female prisoners who are in need of intensive and ongoing psychiatric assessment and/or treatment may be transferred to this 100-bed secure hospital in Fairfield

Can prisoners get help for drug problems while they are in prison?

All prisons in Victoria have drug and alcohol treatment providers. Prisoners who have a history of drug use will be regularly reviewed and a plan of action will be implemented.

For those who were dependent on heroin prior to imprisonment, there is an opioid substitution program (managed methadone and buprenorphine treatments) in prison to help prisoners cope with withdrawal.

Drug detector (sniffer) dogs are used to detect drugs in searches of prison cells, vehicles, visitors, prisoners and property. Urine testing is also used to detect drug use among prisoners.

Health

Your family member will have access to general health services while in prison either by appointment at a clinic in the prison or transfer to a hospital as required. Families will generally not have access to this information unless it is deemed critical. Some health issues may only be partly resolved while they are in prison given that health care options are not as broad as in the general community. It is advisable to arrange an appointment with their GP as the prisoner may require further medical attention post release.

A prisoner can also be exposed to new health issues while in prison such as Hepatitis C. It is important to be aware of how to manage these issues, and encourage the prisoner to have a health check after release.

You can get further information from the Hepatitis C Council.

How safe is my relative?

Although violence and sexual assault do occur in prison, it is far less frequent than media stereotypes of prison might suggest. Prisoners who keep a low profile and do not get involved in 'prison politics' can usually avoid trouble.

If you have reason to believe that the prisoner is getting bullied ('stood-over') in prison you should tell a prison staff member immediately. You should have some information for prison staff to go on before you inform them such as being told about an incident to simply noticing a change in the prisoner's behaviour that has made you feel worried.

Your relative may have told you not to tell prison staff about their situation because they fear that talking to authorities about another prisoner will make their situation worse. In such situations, you can consider informing a prison supervisor anonymously by phone call or letter.

I am worried that my relative will try to hurt themselves

Who may be particularly vulnerable?

Aside from those who have a history of suicide and/or self-harm, prisoners at higher risk include those:

- Who are 'first timers' or on remand
- Who have suffered a recent death of a friend or family member or a broken relationship
- With a history of depression or other psychological disturbances or substance misuse

What signs can you look for?

The prisoner might seem unusually quiet and withdrawn, or just not interested in things. They may look like they have stopped taking care of themselves. They may express a loss of hope for the future or a loss of meaning in their life. They may have told you that they are scared for their personal safety, or that they are feeling intense despair and that things are out of their control. In some cases, a suicidal person may drop 'hints' about their intentions, for example saying something like "You won't have to worry about me much longer anyway."

Responses that are helpful

- Ask the prisoner directly whether they want to self-harm or commit suicide. This question will not 'put the idea in their head' but may allow them to express something that they have kept bottled up for fear of worrying people

- Let them know you are there for them to talk to if they need to and encourage them to get psychological help
- Accept and acknowledge that the prisoner is in pain, without judging them
- Be available to the person, but also set reasonable limits about how often you can visit them in prison, send letters or speak on the phone
- Make it clear from your behaviour that the person does not need to self-harm in order to receive love and caring from you. Be consistent with caring gestures towards the prisoner, even if they are not always returned. Don't withdraw your love from the person

Look after yourself

- Educate yourself about self-harm behaviour and suicide
- Be honest with yourself about how self-harm makes you feel. Don't pretend to yourself that it's okay if it's not

What should I do?

If you have concerns about the prisoner in prison:

For the prisoner:

- Report your concern to staff in the visits centre before you leave the prison, or
- If you are uncomfortable talking in the visits centre, report concerns to staff at the reception area of the prison, or
- Ring the prison and speak to a prison supervisor

For yourself:

- **Ring the VACRO Family Support Team, or**
- **If the prisoner is in the Melbourne Assessment Prison, you can call the VACRO Family Liaison Worker**

All prisons have strict reporting procedures which require staff to respond to concerns about prisoners' suicide and self-harm risk and to inform higher prison authorities, who can organise for the prisoner to be monitored.

Some useful contacts are:

- **Care Ring 13 61 69**
- **Suicide Help Line 1300 651 251**
- **Lifeline 13 11 14**