

Partners of prisoners

Having your partner in prison is a very stressful experience. Many partners have reported feeling as if they are doing a sentence themselves. The limitations of prison visits and telephone communication can make it difficult to communicate effectively, maintain a positive relationship and resolve issues.

There are many contradictory feelings that partners of prisoners report experiencing, such as feeling abandoned, angry, lonely, guilty, bewildered, humiliated, or depressed. It is also possible that partners surprise themselves with how well they cope in the prisoner's absence. Some will experience doubts about whether to continue the relationship. Feelings can seem overwhelming if they are bottled up; it is extremely important to talk to people and get support, either through your friends and family, or from a professional counsellor or social worker.

Adjustments to living as the partner of a prisoner

There are many financial, social and emotional adjustments that may accompany the imprisonment of your partner. If you have children, you will have to take on the role of a single parent.

Some practical things to remember are: Reminding your imprisoned partner to inform various people and authorities that they are in custody.

- Your partner will need to cancel his/her Centrelink payments. If Centrelink payments are not cancelled, the prisoner may be required to pay back money they have received
- If you are living in an Office of Housing property and your partner is on the lease, they will need to notify the Office of Housing to inform them that they are in prison. The Office of Housing may then revise the tenancy agreement and make any necessary alterations to the rent
- Your partner will need to write letters to inform their banks that they will not be making any transactions for a period of time, to cut off any utilities that are in their name or to have them changed over to another family member and to inform any direct debits that they will be unable to make payments

You can call Centrelink and the Office of Housing (look in the White Pages under 'Human Services, Department of' for your area office) for further information on these matters, or go to www.vacro.org.au/fork for more information on housing.

Communication

Being in a relationship and yet separated as a result of imprisonment can leave you feeling insecure and uncertain about your relationship. Communication is the most essential ingredient for maintaining a close relationship with your partner in prison. It is important to share what is going on with your partner, including both the positive and the negative events happening in your life. Partners sometimes report feeling guilty about enjoying activities while their partner is in prison. However, you still have your own life and have every right to take part in enjoyable activities. It is okay to be positive and tell your partner about things that were enjoyable, even though they can't be a part of it.

You may fear that you will make your partner's life even harder by telling them about the difficulties in your life. However, honest communication is likely to allow you and your partner to feel connected to one another. It will also allow your partner to feel involved and needed, and will prevent them from feeling left out when they find out that something happened and they were not told about it. It may help to make a list before a phone call or a visit so that you don't forget important things to discuss and share.

Part of good communication involves recognising what your partner may be experiencing and how this may affect their ability to communicate with you. The ways that prisoners cope inside prison (emotional withdrawal, being guarded about personal issues, and not getting involved) are exactly the sort of reactions that can damage relationships with people on the outside.

The boredom and routine of prison life may make prisoners silent or uncomfortable during visits with you and the children. They may feel that talking about prison life is boring or frightening and therefore feel they have nothing to say. These may be important factors to keep in mind when you communicate with your partner.

Prisoners have a lot of time to think between visits and little opportunity to resolve issues. As a consequence, prisoners can sometimes blow minor disagreements during visits out of proportion. Sometimes a small argument on a visit can lead to them distorting the nature of the entire relationship and they can become suspicious, angry and defensive. For this reason, it is usually best to resolve minor disputes during visits when possible rather than leaving issues unresolved.

Even if your relationship is strained, it is important that children have the chance to sustain a relationship with both parents where it is appropriate. If you are not getting along with your partner and do not want to have contact with them, do not use your children to relay messages to your partner. Doing so can lead to children feeling torn between their parents. If your partner has arranged to call and speak to the children at a particular time, it is important that you allow this contact to occur.

Feeling connected

Intimacy is an important part of relationships and can be a difficult issue for prisoners and their partners. Intimate contact is limited by the restrictions of prison visits. However, you can still share intimacy through hugging, kissing, handholding and talking during contact visits. Anything more will be unacceptable due to the need to respect the other people having visits around you. Your partner may also be eligible to have a residential visit with you, which allows for intimate contact with them through a private visit. They can speak to staff in their Prison Unit for more information.

Many factors can affect closeness between you and your partner on the day of a visit. For instance, feelings of anxiety and guilt, fatigue from travelling to the prison, or something your partner is experiencing in prison, can all influence your ability to feel connected. Part of the frustration of being a prisoner's partner is the fact that visits do not always live up to expectations. This can be due to a range of factors, some of which have nothing to do with your relationship.

Trust

It is hard for prisoners to keep up with the pace of change occurring for partners and this can place strain

on the relationship. Life in the real world continues on and partners need to become independent and take on added responsibilities and roles. On the inside, the prisoner often feels very dependent on their partner, and their situation does not change much over time.

Prisoners are cut off from what goes on in the outside world. They can therefore sometimes imagine situations that lead them to feel suspicious about you and fearful about losing the relationship with you. You can reassure them that you love them and that the relationship is important to you. However, when someone is in prison and cannot control what happens on the outside, it can sometimes be difficult to reduce their anxieties.

Partners feel pressure to visit the prisoner every weekend or to bring in items of property for them that may be expensive. Comments from the prisoner such as "You're the only one that visits me" or "You're the only one that I've got" can place considerable pressure on partners. You may hope to visit your partner every weekend, however it may not be possible given financial, time and emotional factors. Prisoners also may not be aware of what it's like for you 'on the outside', so it may be beneficial to let your partner know your limitations and arrange a realistic visiting plan together.

Partners often have to consider how they are going to financially support the prisoner during imprisonment. Once again, as much as you may want to support your partner, it is important to take care of your own and your family's needs. Prisoners receive three meals a day, shelter and have various activities to engage in. Their basic needs are catered for.

You can arrange a referral to a VACRO family counsellor or support worker by calling (03) 9605 1900.

Intervention Orders

If there was an intervention order made prior to your partner going to prison, and you now wish to visit your partner, you will need to get the intervention order revoked.

For more information on the procedure you will need to follow, you can contact any Magistrates Court in Victoria or ring (03) 9628 7991.