

Tips for addressing barriers to working with people who've been in prison

Drug and alcohol workers have identified a range of barriers to providing services to people who've been in prison, barriers which can be understood in the context of the 'culture clash' – transitioning between the prison setting and the treatment setting. Most of these barriers can be overcome with time and support. Tips on how to address these barriers are given in the table below.

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TIPS FOR ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO WORKING WITH PEOPLE WHO'VE BEEN IN PRISON		
	BARRIER TO TREATMENT	TIPS FOR CLIENT SUPPORT
Pacing	A typical response to being in a confined space and the need for exercise.	Often people are unaware they're pacing and are prepared to stop when asked; they may need to be reminded a few times. Use the opportunity to walk and talk with the client. Suggest they take a walk outside to reduce excess energy and clear their minds.
Withholding emotions	A survival mechanism in prison is to be outwardly compliant while internally withdrawing and shutting down emotionally. People who've been in prison may take longer than others to feel comfortable expressing emotions during a program, particularly in group work and similar situations.	Acknowledge with the person one-to-one (not in a group setting) about why they appear to be not participating. Letting them know you understand and will support them to feel safe and give them time to adjust. Avoid misinterpreting this behaviour as a perceived lack of motivation to participate in the program. Building rapport and engagement will help the person feel emotionally safe.
Reluctant to share personal information	In prison, other people use a person's personal information against them. Information is power and is traded among inmates and officers for control over others. Divulging personal information makes a person vulnerable to this abuse and at times places the person and their family at risk. To stay safe, people do not share personal information.	Acknowledge with the person one-to-one (not in a group setting) the difficulty they may be having in sharing information due to their experience of being in prison. Give them time to adjust. Avoid misinterpreting this behaviour as a perceived lack of motivation to participate in the program. Building solid engagement and rapport and acknowledging the difference in expectations of the prison setting to the treatment setting will help the person feel emotionally safe and secure to divulge personal information. Clearly identifying privacy and confidentiality rules within the service can help a person feel more confident in sharing personal information. State how any information a person discloses about them or their family will be used, why personal information is needed by the service, who will have access to it and where it will be kept.
Being overwhelmed by the program's expectations	People in prison have a lot of time to themselves in their cells – approximately 20 hours a day. Participating in a treatment program and having to be part of group work, follow rosters and having other responsibilities can initially be overwhelming.	Be aware that the program's expectations can be overwhelming, and acknowledge this with the person. Allowing people time to adjust to the increase in activities and requirements to be fully participate will support them to remain in treatment.

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	BARRIER TO TREATMENT	WORKER TIPS FOR CLIENT SUPPORT
Not passing on information about other clients	In prison, you don't pass on information to staff about another person under any circumstances. This is considered the worst betrayal. People who are thought to be a 'dog' in prison can be seriously injured or killed.	In a treatment setting, peer support is a vital part of treatment. People are asked to help others by informing staff if someone is going to use drugs or break service rules in some other way. Support a client by acknowledging the different environments and clearly explaining the benefits of the peer support systems in place. Letting them know you understand will support them to feel safe and give them time to adjust. It may be worthwhile discussing these issues in a group setting and allowing people who have reported or been reported on by another person the opportunity to discuss the positives and negatives of the system.
Having restricted family contact	Prisons usually allow frequent family phone contact and visits. When a person's participating in a treatment program, family contact can be more restricted (e.g. having an eligibility wait time) and this can be distressing. Being unable to be in contact with their family when in the community, can feel like a further punishment or sanction and can be confusing and frustrating. A person's family may be geographically closer now than when the person was in prison (they may have been unable to visit because of the prison's location and lack of transport) and restrictions on contact when they are now so close can be difficult, it places continuing treatment at risk.	Recognise that people who've been to prison may be used to having more contact with their family and be aware of the emotional impact and possible confusion of this restriction in a community setting. Your service should consider developing family-inclusive practice strategies and talk with the person about options to include family in their treatment. If restrictions on family contact are a part of the treatment service, you need to clearly explain the reasons behind this to the person and the family in order to prevent the feeling of continued punishment post release and to reduce distress levels.  The NADA toolkit <i>Tools for Change: A New Way of Working with Families and Carers</i> (NADA 2009) has a range of information which can help drug and alcohol services implement family-inclusive practice strategies.
Current legal concerns	Having a current or outstanding legal concern can often exclude someone from accessing a drug and alcohol residential treatment service. If the person does enter a service with legal concerns, they may be distressed, anxious or distracted as they wait for important advice from their legal service.	Talk to the person about their legal concerns and what you can do to support them. External services may be able to provide legal advice and/or court support when your service is unable to assist. Sometimes just making or receiving a phone call from their lawyer can greatly reduce a person's stress. Acknowledging and addressing these issues can go a long way to helping them feel able to remain and participate fully in treatment.  For information on providing court support see <i>Supporting Your Client in Court: Tips for Drug and Alcohol Workers</i> .