

LOSS INTERVENTION PROJECT FOR MALE ADULT PRISONERS

by Peter Hammersley and Dorothy Ayling

Background and Context

HMP Hewell Grange is an Adult Male Category D training prison with 180 prisoners. It has a strong emphasis on the equipping of men for resettlement in the community on release. This emphasis is partly addressed through a working out scheme by which men can be employed in industrial and commercial companies outside the prison in months leading to their release, employment on release being one of the factors that indicates reduced risk of re-offending. A second emphasis is maintenance and support of satisfactory family relationships during and after custody. In enhancing this second emphasis, The *Experience of Loss Intervention Project* was conceived as a way of addressing losses that were noted in pastoral contacts with prisoners.

The *Experience of Loss Intervention Project* arose from pastoral experience of chaplaincy staff, and from involvement of the chaplaincy department in the Health Service/Prisons Service partnership programme 'Healthy Prisons'. The contribution of the chaplaincy to this programme is in the area of mental health and wellbeing that concentrated on concern for improvement of emotional well-being of prisoners. This objective is, of course, shared with other health-care professionals.

The connection between loss in early life and later offending behaviour is well established in research literature. Attachment theory has created an understanding of the way in which quality of relationships between children and their parents at various stages of development is one of the important influences on anti-social behaviour and future criminal activities. For example, boys insecurely attached as infants are more likely than other children to behave aggressively by the time they reach school age. Research by Graham and Bowling (1996) indicated a correlation between the likelihood of young men developing criminal patterns of behaviour and their relationships with their parents. Studies in the latter half of the last century, especially in Britain, Finland, Sweden, New Zealand and the US,

suggested that the most important factors determining the likelihood of developing criminal behaviour could be grouped under four main risk factors: personal, family, educational and socioeconomic and community.

With these in mind, the scope of experiences of loss was extended beyond work already taking place in some prisons to those who have experienced loss through bereavement. Hence this project was located within the Health Plan for the prison, rather than Offending Behaviour Programmes; it set out to explore instances of loss in earlier life and to produce an intervention addressing whichever issues emerged within Hewell Grange Prison's population.

The Structure of the Project

The project's aims were to identify and assess the extent of loss experienced throughout life within the prison's population, to provide an intervention by which on-going unresolved issues of loss could be resolved, and to monitor the extent of improvement in personal and social well-being resulting from the intervention.

The programme consisted of three phases: a semi-structured interview to assess the extent of loss in life experience using a fourteen item questionnaire; an eight-session group intervention addressing life long issues of loss from childhood to adulthood prior to coming into prison and/or one to one counselling support; and a post-intervention interview to assess the degree of improvement in the participants' sense of personal and social well-being.

The Initial Interview

A member of the chaplaincy team saw every newly arrived prisoner for an induction interview. In addition to this an interview procedure was introduced as the first phase of the project. People were asked to identify any of thirteen life experiences they had, to indicate their age, and to confirm the frequency of the event/experience. In the case of loss by the death of a significant person, they were asked to say whether the death had been sudden or traumatic – suicide, murder, or road traffic accident. Each person's response was recorded and used both for a needs analysis for the selection of men who might benefit from the intervention to follow, and for providing a profile of the experience of a loss to be addressed in group intervention. Between November 2004 and May 2005, 250 prisoners were interviewed. In the light of the research about the effectiveness of loss interventions for the pilot intervention men were selected who could be considered to have

experienced complex forms of loss, taking into consideration the period of life when the loss occurred, the number of occurrences, and the cumulative effect of a variety of loss experiences in a short period of time. At the initial interview stage effort was made to be alert to alternative strategies which might be used in response to loss – such as the ‘talking it out approach’ or the ‘distraction by congenial activity approach’. The initial interview was an important start because it provided an opportunity for the co-ordinator of the programme to establish a degree of empathy which could be built upon in the subsequent group process.

The Group Intervention

A short term intervention consisting of two three hour sessions a day each week for a month was used as a process which combined didactic and experiential interactive methods. Group sessions aimed to raise men’s awareness of the nature of the loss and helped them explore strategies for resolving issues identified.

Interviews

At the beginning the co-ordinator conducting the interviews was concerned about positive or negative reactions men might have to the interview, namely whether they would refuse to answer or answer untruthfully. The men appeared open and friendly. Interviews become a place to share difficulties. It was not unusual for men to express surprise at the ending of the interview after twenty or thirty minutes. The final questions about whether there were additional experiences of loss often triggered talk about loss of job, relationships and other difficulties encountered during their prison experience. This assisted the release of tensions as men settled into the new establishment with greater opportunities for bridge building with their families. Many had chosen not to see their children and elderly relatives before arriving at an open prison because they did not want visits in closed conditions. The questionnaire highlighted how many apparently bright men had been expelled or walked out from school. They may then have then lived on the street or with peers. The loss of education and family support often led to a pattern of offending behaviour as is indicated in the literature.

It was not unusual to hear of multiple traumatic deaths. Some men with experience of complex loss and complicated grief pointed to the death of a close relative as the presenting problem. This was the easiest to articulate. Despite the breakdown of their support structures they had continued to

hold things together for other people. They had sometimes kept this burden secret because they had not previously been aware of the impact of the loss upon them nor had felt they had come into an appropriately safe place in which to entrust painful experiences. Some men, in talking about a particularly difficult loss, came to realise how this had precipitated offending behaviour, like alcohol dependence in coping with the death of a mother, the loss of a partner, the loss of a sibling killed in an accident, or the loss of a job because of their own injuries. Men involved with drugs often experienced many losses in childhood. They may have been in children's homes or had parents who were emotionally or physically absent. The absence of parental love and support left people vulnerable to the use of drugs, so masking distress at their loss. The initial interview gave them permission to talk about experiences, some for the first time in their lives. In response to these situations, one-to-one counselling support as well as an opportunity to participate in the group was offered.

Programme – Case Histories

People were selected for the programme on the basis of a score of five items or more at the interview which gave an indication of the likelihood of a pattern of complex loss experience being present — although circumstances of traumatic loss were not ruled out in cases where there were fewer items registered, as in the case of sudden violent loss in early childhood or adolescence.

Colin was from a mixed ethnic origin having moved between Jamaican and English cultures as a child. His father was emotionally distant and used wealth to manage relationships in his family. Colin respected his father but felt the need for affection which was not forthcoming. His mother had always been there for him and after her early death Colin reacted to the loss of her constant support. He had been in prison from youth onwards for drug related crimes. Each time he left prison he intended to stay clean but was unable to do so. He thought the reasons for this were related to difficulties of his childhood coupled with inability to get work because of his criminal record. Drug dealing was always the way out. His last relapse was precipitated by the neo-natal death of his son, leading to a breakdown of communication between his wife and himself. Before coming back to Hewell he had been at an establishment where an in-depth drug awareness programme helped him grasp that understanding himself was basic to meaningful life. He came to the programme wanting to learn as much as he could about himself and to move towards coping better.

He wanted to remain clean and saw self-knowledge and coping strategies as the only way this could happen. So he participated fully in the group. The work on his journey of grief enabled him to see where he and his wife had faced difficulties and why the breakdown had occurred. Listening to other people's difficulties helped him look differently at his own problems; he is now hoping that this insight will be beneficial when he leaves.

Malcolm was a first time offender in middle years. Prison meant a break with a well established pattern of life. He had been lucky enough to have a supportive and loving childhood. He was open about the alcoholism that lay behind his offence and had decided not to drink again. During the course he became aware of the event that led to excess drinking. His insight came as the group looked at loss as something leading to separation from loved ones but could also be a break with one's conception of a worthwhile identity. As a young man he had been manager of a large department store and had been required to make redundant a long-serving employee of a similar age to his father. This he found almost impossible and he started drinking. His insight came through looking at loss as something separating him from loved ones but also representing a break with the self he aspired to understand and accept. By going against his dearly held belief that someone older and wiser should be valued, he lost his positive image of himself as a man of respect and principle. Alcohol was used to compensate for this. This discovery became a bonus since his presence on the course was related to the death of two wives and the loss of children through miscarriage. His father had also been very ill and subsequently died.

Robert, in his late thirties, had been in prison many times. His attendance in the group was related to several serious accidents, in two when he had nearly been killed and in one when he was a fouryear old child. As a teenager he had sought out an uncle who used drugs and had been sidelined by the rest of the family. Since that time he had taken a cocktail of drugs. He was dyslexic and had been ridiculed at school. He had been expelled several times, the first time when he was eleven. Presently Robert is trying to make sense of his life and had learned to read and write immediately prior to the programme. However, the effect of the drugs on his brain and on his very low self esteem makes concentration and participation difficult at times. He can now tell his story but finds reflection in group discussion almost impossible. He profited from a couple of one to one sessions on issues raised by the programme.

Tony was a very intelligent man serving a long sentence. He knew how to comply on courses for the best report. He had experienced much loss in childhood: both his brother and his father had died by the time he was four. His mother disappeared, re-appearing later with a stepfather who physically abused him. He was in care when he was six and considered this to be a positive experience – he joined the cubs and liked it! A year later he was returned to his family for another two years of abuse before being put back in care. It was interesting to observe how a dichotomy of violence and trust alternately experienced as he grew up repeated in the way he responded to people as an adult. To those he did not like he was violent — but to his friends he was forgiving. He fitted into the programme effectively but resisted being reflective. Engaging him in reflection about his childhood experience was difficult. At his post programme interview the interviewer reflected back to him his loss of his mother's love, an experience he may well reflect on when the time is right.

The Post Intervention Interview

This assessed the degree of improvement in the participants' sense of personal and social well-being. It took the form of a semi-structured interview in two parts: a post-programme feedback sheet, and a discussion with the prisoner about things they had gained from participation in the programme.

Issues Raised by the Process

The programme addressed emotional wellbeing rather than focusing upon offending behaviours — although it recognised the interconnection between the two. It addressed root causes of crime in the light of insights drawn from attachment theory research relating to criminal behaviour. Its greatest difficulty lay in making it possible for prisoners to differentiate between this intervention and courses relating to the reduction of offending behaviour using a largely cognitive behavioural approach.

At the first group meeting a high degree of anxiety was expressed about the nature of the programme and its processes. This continued throughout the course. Initially men were reticent about expressing ideas and feelings in case they were reported elsewhere. Effort was made to deal with this as empathically and transparently as possible. The small group process was crucial to providing a safe holding environment within which the men could gain confidence and selfawareness. In the feedback one of the men commented specifically on the feeling of safety within the group which would not have been possible if it had been larger.

a) Expressing Anger

Anger in prison is often accompanied by violence. Anger may be a response to the experience of loss. The relatively high incidence of loss among the prison population, which in many cases is unresolved, is a contributory factor to anger latent or expressed in prisons. Whilst anger management courses address how to express anger appropriately, there is a need to articulate the underlying emotional conflicts associated with loss which need to be resolved.

b) Regime

Group members seemed to experience difficulty in stepping back from the all-pervasive nature of the prison regime. This made it difficult for some to reflect on their past life or on any life outside prison. They switched to current problems encountered in prison life to which the others related and thus found it easy to lose the thread of the session. It is hoped that this programme offers a means of connecting with the reality of life in its completeness not just with the resettlement programme. If it proves too difficult to reflect on loss in prison, the course might at least offer tools to explore past loss when ex-prisoners find strength and determination to face personal work that would be involved after release.

c) Ethnic minorities

Like other prisons, Hewell Grange includes a number of prisoners from ethnic minority groups. Staff are aware how far they need to include in the programme's processes aspects of responses to loss which may be culturally comprehensible within an Asian, African or Caribbean context. We are attempting to address the diversity issues which are implicit in the programmes process for ethnic minority participants.

d) Educational difficulties

Group sessions were devised with input and feedback from the men. Some participants were below basic level of literacy and consideration was given to how the programme could be made accessible to people who experienced these difficulties particularly from the assessment perspective. The use of drawing and art work as a mode of self-expression offers another way of addressing acute literacy deficiencies of some prisoners and enabling people articulate emotional experience.

Conclusion

The small group process has been crucial in providing a holding/supportive environment within which men have gained confidence and self-awareness. In feedback, one man commented specifically on the feeling of safety within the group which he felt would not have been possible if it had been larger. The aim throughout the programme was to make use of a process which is therapeutic in emphasis, relying on styles of interviewing and group interactions congruent with this approach. The programme resisted the temptation to resort to quantitative research methods that might rely upon psychometric measures, although it was realised that these methods may have a place in the future when assessing its long-term effects.

Peter Hammersley is Co-ordinating Chaplain at HMP Hewell Grange, Dorothy Ayling is a Chaplain at HMP Brockhill and Well- Being Programme Co-ordinator at HMP Hewell Grange.

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A full list of references is available from the author.