

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

Welcome Home?

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Preparing for the release of a family member from prison abroad may raise many questions. Despite the optimism of the anticipated release, it can also be a stressful time. This chapter provides information on the issues which arise when preparing for the return of a family member from prison abroad as well as suggestions for dealing with issues that may arise later on.

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1 Preparing for the release of your friend or relative

As the release of your relative from prison abroad gets closer, there are a number of issues that you may like to think about in terms of how the separation may have affected you both:

- **Loss of communication** - Visits, if they were possible at all, may not have contributed all that much to keeping communication going - talking about feelings may have been avoided because it was too painful or difficult. Communication through letters and phone-calls may have been restricted to urgent matters.
- **Change of roles** - You may have gained independence during your relative's imprisonment or you may have become responsible for their well-being in a way that was not the case before their arrest. Parents whose children are now grown-up may have found that they have resumed a responsibility for their son or daughter's welfare that they have not had for many years; partners may have found that they have taken on much more responsibility than before the imprisonment.
- **Experiences during imprisonment / absence** - Both of you have lived through many different things during the time your relative has been away in prison. It may take a long time to learn what it has really been like for each of you. In some cases, the person returning from prison may have led a very protected existence and may have difficulty adjusting to the responsibility of everyday life outside prison. In others, they may have had traumatic experiences, which may be very difficult for them to talk about.

- **Adjusting** - They may have been away for so long that they are totally disorientated and out of touch. They may, for example, have become unfamiliar with how much things cost or with getting around on public transport. Their children, if they have any, will have grown up in their absence and they may feel distanced from them.

- **Health** - They may return with health problems (physical or psychological) or with addiction to drugs or tranquillisers. The prison conditions they have endured may have led to physical health problems and their experiences during imprisonment can sometimes lead to mental health problems. The boredom of prison life may have led some people into using drugs.

- **Expectations** - You are each likely to have your own expectations of what will happen once the person is back. For example, both of you may have hopes for the person finding work, for living arrangements and for the relationship itself. If there are children, there may also be expectations around the person assuming the active role of being a parent once again.

Recognising how each of you may have been affected in these different ways can make it easier to accept each other's feelings and behaviour once your relative returns from prison abroad.

2 What about the day of release itself?

Ideally, you will have had some chance to communicate with your relative/partner about what they would like to happen when they arrive home. Some people like to plan a party to celebrate the return of their relative/partner. However, it is worth bearing in mind that for the person returning from prison, suddenly being surrounded by a lot of people may be quite daunting. Added to that is the likely availability of alcohol to which the person may have become unaccustomed.

Often the person is on a huge emotional high immediately after their return, which may last for several days. They may feel reluctant to take the steps necessary to involve themselves in everyday life e.g. signing on for benefits. It is important they do not feel pressurised and are allowed plenty of time and space to adjust whilst being encouraged and supported to get through the essential tasks. Talking to the Resettlement team at Prisoners Abroad may help both them and you through this time. It may also be useful for them to see a doctor who may be able to arrange any medical treatment or counselling that may be needed.

2 What helps:

- taking it slowly;
- allowing time to get reacquainted;
- not expecting it to be the same as before;
- some privacy and peace;
- honesty and openness;
- spending time, beforehand, talking with any children involved about the future;
- getting support from family, friends or professionals.

3 Longer term

Some returning prisoners adjust more easily than others to the longer-term impact of returning from prison abroad. This process of readjustment is not determined purely by the person's character - it is therefore not helpful to expect the person to "pull themselves together". What they may have been through is likely to have changed them as a person and they may need support in adjusting to life outside prison. Some returning prisoners have found being in a small room difficult; others find opening and shutting doors strange; many find it hard to get used to everyday life with its bills and worries. Most experience feelings of vulnerability, isolation and feeling like a stranger. There may have been many changes that have taken place in their absence which may take time to adjust to. Some find it easy enough to fall back into the familiarity of daily life whilst others struggle with the aftermath of their imprisonment and find it difficult to find their place in the everyday routines of being home. Some people also experience flash-backs relating to their experiences whilst away but may find it difficult to talk about how they are feeling.

What helps:

- keeping talking to each other
- allowing time for the person to readjust
- not expecting them to be the same as before
- making time for your own needs, relieving stress, expressing your feelings
- finding support, either separately or together - through friends, other family members or a professional agency
- negotiating your expectations of each other and the roles each of you takes on.

4 What support is available

• Prisoners Abroad

We have staff who are experienced in the issues arising for those returning from prison abroad and for their families. A specialist Resettlement Service is based at our office and you are welcome to contact us by telephone or arrange to come in. We can advise on welfare benefits, housing and arrange referrals to other agencies e.g. for help with employment or training. Resettlement staff can give you or your friend or relative the opportunity to talk through experiences, concerns and worries.

There are a number of factsheets on the Prisoners Abroad website which provide information for ex-prisoners returning to the UK. If you do not have access to the internet, please call your caseworker for copies. The topics covered include:

- general information on how Prisoners Abroad can help;
- finding employment;
- disclosing offences;
- returning to the UK and the sexual offences act 2003
- benefits information;
- accommodation; and
- medical information.

4.1 Local Probation Office

“Voluntary supervision” can be provided by your local office however, the amount of support this involves varies from one office to another. You can find contact details for your local probation office by contacting the National Probation Directorate:

NPD (Postal Enquiries)

Horseferry House

Dean Ryle Street

London SW1P 2AW

Tel: 020 7217 0659

Fax: 020 7217 0660

Website: <http://www.probation.homeoffice.gov.uk>

4.2 Health Problems

Your G.P. may be able to help both the person returning from prison abroad and any family members who are finding it difficult. They may be able to prescribe medication, or arrange counselling or additional support.

There are a number of organisations and telephone advice lines that can offer advice about specific issues e.g. drugs (FRANK), alcohol (Drinkline) and HIV/AIDS (National AIDS Helpline). You can find contact details for these and other organisations on our separate factsheet entitled ‘Family Support Organisations’ which is available by post or on our website.

4.3 Counselling

If you or your relative / partner is experiencing difficulties in your relationship, organisations such as Relate and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) can offer advice about seeking help. Again, contact details can be found at the back of this booklet.

If you require this leaflet in a large print format, please contact us. Our details are below.

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