

# FACTSHEET

## Happy families?

89 – 93 Fonthill Road  
Finsbury Park London N4 3JH  
Tel 020 7561 6820 Fax 020 7561 6821  
info@prisonersabroad.org.uk www.prisonersabroad.org.uk  
Charity Number 1093710



**This factsheet is intended for people who will be returning to their family in the UK after being released from prison abroad. We do appreciate that this will not apply to everybody currently detained overseas. Despite feeling optimistic about your release, it can also be a stressful time and raise many questions. We have tried to provide information on the issues which may arise when preparing for your return to your family as well as suggestions for dealing with issues that may arise later on.**

### Contents

1	Preparing for your release.....	1
2	What about the day of release itself? .....	2
2.1	What helps: .....	3
3	Longer term.....	3
3.1	What helps: .....	3
4	What support is available .....	3
4.1	Prisoners Abroad .....	3
4.2	Health Problems.....	4
4.3	Counselling .....	4

## **1 Preparing for your release**

As your release from prison abroad gets closer, there are a number of issues that you may like to think about in terms of how the separation from your family 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, or you may have avoided telling your family about life in prison to prevent them from worrying about you.
- **Change of roles** – Your family may have gained independence during your period of imprisonment or may have become responsible for their well-being in a way that was not the case before your 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 you have been away in prison. It may take a long time to learn what it has really been like for each of you. You may have led a very protected, structured existence within the strict confines of prison life and may have difficulty adjusting to the responsibility of everyday life outside. Or you may have had traumatic experiences which you find very difficult to talk about.
- **Adjusting** – You may have been away for so long that you feel totally disorientated and out of touch with life in the UK. You may, for example, have become unfamiliar with how much things cost or with getting around on public transport. You may also have children, who have grown up in your absence and the time spent apart means that you may feel distanced from them.
- **Health** – Imprisonment can affect your physical and mental health in many ways. You may have endured poor conditions which have had an effect on your physical health. Some people find that their experiences during a period of imprisonment in prison have led to mental health problems, or they may have developed a dependency on tranquilisers or drugs as a method of dealing with the boredom of prison life.
- **Expectations** - You are each likely to have your own expectations of what will happen once you get back. For example, both of you may have hopes in terms of finding work, for living arrangements and for any relationships you left behind. If there are children, there may also be expectations about 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 you return 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 you would like to happen when you arrive home. Some people like to plan a party to celebrate the return of their relative/partner. Consider whether this is something you want - suddenly being surrounded by a lot of people after a period of separation may be quite daunting.

You may find yourself on a huge emotional high immediately after your return, which may last for several days. However, you will also need to take the practical steps necessary to get into the process of everyday life (e.g. signing on for benefits). It may be difficult for you to strike the balance between allowing yourself time and space to adjust and getting through the essential tasks. It may also be difficult for your family to know whether any encouragement they give you in this respect may feel to you like pressure. Talking to the Resettlement team at Prisoners Abroad may help both them and you through this time.

It may also be useful for you to see a doctor who may be able to arrange any medical treatment or counselling that may be needed.

## **2.1 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 – you cannot be expected to simply “pull yourself together”. What your family may need to understand and appreciate is that what you have been through is likely to have changed you as a person and that you 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 your 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.

### **3.1 What helps:**

- keeping talking to each other
- allowing time for you to readjust
- not expecting them to be the same as before
- making time for your own needs, relieving stress, expressing your feelings, and allowing your family to do the same
- 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**

### **4.1 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 family the opportunity to talk through experiences, concerns and worries. Please read our other factsheets regarding Resettlement assistance for further details of our services.

## **4.2 Health Problems**

Your G.P. may be able to help you 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), HIV/AIDS (National AIDS Helpline) and mental health issues (MIND). You can find contact details for these and other organisations on our separate factsheet of useful organisations.

## **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 on the factsheet mentioned above.

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

Tel: 020 7561 6820

Email: [info@PrisonersAbroad.org.uk](mailto:info@PrisonersAbroad.org.uk)

Mail: Prisoners Abroad  
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London  
N4 3JH