

Yale FOX INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP

# EMOTIONAL HEALTH SUPPORT PROGRAM

A NEW TOOL FOR REDUCING  
RECIDIVISM

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## INTRODUCTION

For decades, a wide range of scholars have turned their attention to understanding the processes through which recidivism, i.e. the phenomenon in which a previously incarcerated individual is returned to prison – occurs. This is an important question since, in many societies, recidivism rates are high and the societal costs are significant. For example, recent studies in the United States have found that after one, three and five years respectively, 50%, 67% and 76% return to prison.<sup>[1]</sup>

My analysis diverges from socio-economic studies to draw on research from psychology on the way in emotional intelligence contributes to an understanding of how to minimize recidivism.

High recidivism rates are costly. The United States spends more than \$74 billion annually on federal, state and local correction facilities. Amounting to \$31,286 per inmate.<sup>[5]</sup> This amount roughly equals the average cost of tuition and fees for private colleges.<sup>[6]</sup> The latter provides a positive experience and enriches a person's ability to live a fulfilling life, while the former seems a to put people on a hopeless Ferris wheel.

What we do know about the challenge of recidivism is that reintegration to society after prison is challenging. Ex-offenders are much more likely to struggle with substance abuse, the lack of adequate education and job skills, limited housing options, and mental health issues. Over 60% are unemployed in the year following release.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

Although solving recidivism requires a serious reform of the Justice system, we must also implement more modest solutions which will help released prisoners in handling their current reality. This is especially true for the first year after release which is the period in which return to prison is most likely. Given that male recidivists have relatively low emotional intelligence,<sup>[10]</sup> and provided that Emotional Intelligence is illustrated to be improvable.<sup>[11][12]</sup> In this brief, I argue that Emotional Intelligence interventions should be given to prisoners who will be released within 6 months. To complement this measure, a social adaptability survey should be given to ex-offenders within 3 months of their release. Emotional Intelligence interventions have been shown to improve social adaptability, and better social adaptability is very likely to minimize recidivism.

## WHAT ARE EMOTIONAL HEALTH SUPPORT PROGRAMS?

The Purpose of an Emotional Health Support Program is to improve the social adaptability of ex-offenders, to promote their reintegration to society, and as a result to reduce recidivism.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is “an ability to perceive one’s own and others’ emotions, to distinguish between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to utilize emotional information properly in guiding positive thoughts and behavior”.<sup>[13]</sup> The function of EI intervention is to improve this ability, which will help ex-offenders in several important arenas:

- ***Nurturing optimistic thoughts and behavior.*** Researchers found that optimists perform better in their jobs<sup>[14]</sup> and have higher educational achievements<sup>[14]</sup>; optimists tend to make specific, temporary, and external causal attributions: ‘the weather is bad today’, in contrast, pessimists make global, permanent, and internal attributions: ‘I am a terrible person.’
- ***Handling stress properly.*** Studies found that people with a better ability to handle stress have better job performance.<sup>[15]</sup> Considering the high possibility of being unemployed up to a year after release, it seems likely that handling stress properly can help ex-offenders better handle their time outside prison.
- ***Better Self-regulation.*** Self-regulation is “an ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses or moods. It is an ability to think before acting”<sup>[13]</sup>, and thus it helps to avoid serious conflicts and violence. Self-regulation is based on self-awareness, which is “an ability to recognize and understand one’s own moods, emotions, and motivations, as well as influence on others”.<sup>[13]</sup>
- ***Enhancing Empathy.*** Empathy is “an ability to understand others’ emotional signals, and to treat others correspondingly”.<sup>[13]</sup> The people who were best at identifying others’ emotions are more successful in both their social and work lives.<sup>[16]</sup>
- ***Controlling substance abuse.*** Emotional intelligence, self-esteem and drug use have a significant cross influence. In 2012, a study found that individuals with marijuana dependence have lower EI and lower self-esteem.<sup>[17]</sup> Another study in 2003 found that low emotional intelligence was a significant predictor of both alcohol-related problems and drug-related problems.<sup>[18]</sup>
- ***Building positive social relationships.*** High emotional intelligence individuals have more successful interpersonal relationships at work, exhibit less interpersonal aggression, and maintain better relationships with family and intimate partners.<sup>[19]</sup> Better social relations bring better social supports which greatly lowers the chances of recidivism.

All of these improvements culminate in a better measure of social adaptability. This means that the person will be able to live in accordance to social restrictions and cultural norms.<sup>[20]</sup> Consequently, better social adaptability promotes the reintegration process, and is likely to reduce recidivism.

## WHAT DO EMOTIONAL HEALTH SUPPORT PROGRAM FOCUS ON?

Emotional Health Support Programs focus on ex-offenders in the time period between 6 months before release to 6 months after release. In 2005, a study tracked 404,638 prisoners in 30 states after their release, and found that property offenders (82%), drug offenders (77%), public order offenders (74%) and violent offenders (71%) were the top four most likely to be rearrested for a new crime.<sup>[1]</sup> It will be efficient to spend more resources amongst these groups rather than divide it equally between all released prisoners.

It is essential to screen and assess the individuals while they are still in prison to determine if Emotional Health Support Program is appropriate for them. The corrections population consists largely of people who have significant and overlapping problems. Among jail inmates, 68% exhibit substance abuse or dependence,<sup>[21]</sup> 60% have no high school diploma or general equivalency diploma,<sup>[22]</sup> 30% were unemployed in the month before arrest,<sup>[23]</sup> 16% had serious mental health problems,<sup>[24]</sup> and 14% were homeless at some point during the year before they were arrested.<sup>[23]</sup> Not all inmates are a good fit for EI intervention, for example, mental health patients. In addition, drug addicts will need to go through formal rehabilitation prior to any EI treatment.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF EMOTIONAL HEALTH SUPPORT PROGRAMS

This program should include both inmates and people who make up the support systems for inmates in their reintegration in society. For the former, it is critical to start by screening and assessing inmates in order to distinguish mental health patients from normal inmates. Mental health patients should receive psychiatric treatment. They are not the target demography of Emotional Health Support Program. In addition, substance addicts should also be assessed to determine the severity of addiction. Corresponding treatment should be applied either prior of or at same time to EI intervention.

Subsequently, EI assessment should be applied to determine their needs. Based on the Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2003) model, Emotional Intelligence has four branches:

perceiving emotions, facilitating emotions, understanding emotions and managing emotions.<sup>[25]</sup> Emotional Intelligence intervention has four training sessions focusing on each of these four branches. For prisoners it seems desirable to offer a comprehensive program which will help inmates learn how to integrate emotional intelligence practices into their everyday lives, for example, have training sessions focusing on stress-handling, self-awareness and self-regulation.

In parallel to this program for inmates, another should be offered for the people whose role is to support the inmates in their attempt to reintegrate into society. These include families, guards, wardens and social-workers. An example for a similar program can be seen in the one which is conducted by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence in the context of school children. The center offers a complete training program for students, teachers, families and school leaders, covering preschool and high school. It includes online course work, 4 days of training, and access to online resources and supports.<sup>[26]</sup> This program can be adapted for the purpose of training these individuals to best support the emotional wellbeing of the former inmates.

Finally, at the end of first 3 months following release, a social adaptability survey, including self-report and third-party-report, should be administrated. According to the survey results, attention should be paid especially to individuals who show poor social adaptability. And further actions should be applied, for example, providing the individual public psychological counseling resources.

## SUMMARY OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Screening and assessing individuals in prisons within 6 months before release.* It is critical to screen and assess the individuals in prisons to determine their needs. Mental health patients are not target. Offenders with substance abuse and dependence should receive corresponding treatment. Emotional Intelligence assessment should be applied.
- *Applying EI Intervention tailored for inmates.* A special program for inmates, meant to help them learn how to integrate emotional intelligence practices into their everyday lives, for example, stress-handling, self-awareness and regulations. Property offenders, drug offenders, public order offenders and violent offenders should be the focus of these programs.
- *Devising an EI plan for people who will support the reintegration of the inmate.* An Emotional intelligence Intervention program should be adapted for and

initiated within the correction system, covering wardens, guards and families, and providing online resource and supports.

- *Implementing a Social Adaptability Testing Mechanism.* Upon release, individuals serving in prisons should provide 2 references. Social Adaptability Survey should be administered. According to the survey results, specific treatment should be given to individuals who exhibit poor social adaptability.

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