

Opening the window on a very dark day: A program evaluation of the Peer Support Team at the Kingston Prison for Women

Although some research on the effectiveness of peer counselling programs has been conducted within men's prisons, there is little literature available on the effectiveness of peer counselling with women in prison. Of the few studies that do exist, however, there is a strong suggestion that prisons for women provide fertile ground for peer-counselling programs.⁽²⁾

A recent evaluation of the Peer Support Team at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario, corroborated these findings. The evaluation used both qualitative (interviews with peer counsellors) and quantitative (a survey distributed to the inmate population) methods of assessment. According to the results, both the prisoners trained as peer counsellors and the prisoners who themselves received peer counselling felt more self-confidence, empowerment and self-efficacy. The Peer Support Team Co-ordinated by the Psychology Department at the Prison for Women, the Peer Support Team program has two central components: a six-week training session for prospective peer counsellors, and the actual peer-counselling sessions that take place between the trained peer counsellor and a woman in distress. What the counsellors said... Interviews were conducted with 12 women who had completed the peer counsellor training.

These women said the emotional, psychological and behavioural effects of childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence were the predominant mental health problems faced by prisoners at the Prison for Women. As well, these women highlighted the difficulty of healing emotionally in a punitive setting.

Those interviewed said the Peer Support Team training session helped to address these problems through both the educational aspect of the training (topics include sexual abuse, domestic violence, anger, sexism, racism, homophobia, self-injury and suicide) and the discussion component of each session.

Most participants said not only did the peer-counselling training help them develop the skills necessary to help others in distress, but they also personally benefited from the program. The group discussions were about topics intimately related to the participants' lives, so peer counsellors learned they were not alone in their struggles, and thus they felt less isolated.

This finding is perhaps one of the most significant because, as research on trauma and recovery has highlighted, breaking the silence surrounding experiences such as childhood sexual abuse and realizing that others too have survived similar abuses are central to healing from traumatic experiences.⁽³⁾

Interview participants also found the Peer Support Team training, both in its philosophy and in its structure, to be a welcome contrast to some of the damaging effects of both their life experiences and the prison environment itself. The women pointed to the inconsistency, distrust and lack of safety that had pervaded their lives and the prison setting. In contrast, the training provided a consistent, safe space focused on mutuality and trust, and it demonstrated that staff trusted the peer counsellors by giving them responsibility for counselling women in distress. This gave the participants increased feelings of self-worth.

Over the past decade, researchers and clinicians have outlined the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse,⁽⁴⁾ the effects of violence on the battered woman,⁽⁵⁾ and the psychological trauma resulting from sexual and physical violence in general.⁽⁶⁾ Among the most common repercussions are an impaired sense of safety and personal boundaries, feelings of overwhelming powerlessness and immobility, difficulties with trust, and self-hatred.

Prison intensifies the psychological effects of being subjected (as a child or as an adult) to sexual or physical assault. The controlled and punitive setting replicates the dynamics of any abusive relationship where the victim is without power or dignity.

In contrast, the training session offered an atmosphere of trust, mutuality and respect and encouraged the participant's sense of autonomy and self-efficacy. What the consumers said... In addition to the interviews, a survey was used to gather information on the use of the peer support service within the general prisoner population.

According to the survey, 81% of the 53 respondents valued the existence of the Peer Support Team even if they had never used a peer counselor in a crisis situation. The most frequently cited reasons for requesting to see a peer counselor were feelings of depression (33%), self-harm (22%) and flashbacks of abuse (22%). (Most respondents gave more than one reason for wanting to see a peer counselor.)

Respondents who had received peer counselling said the peer support helped to ease feelings of isolation and depression and helped them feel better about themselves. For example, respondents said they felt validated by the peer counselor.

Their comments showed how much they valued the counsellors:

- "She let me know it's not entirely my fault."
- "This place seems to spur people to use abuse towards each other. And it was nice to know that there are peers who don't feel that way."
- "I felt safe."

The average rating for helpfulness of peer counsellors was 4 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest possible rating. Recommendations Peer counsellors and survey respondents also recommended improvements to the overall Peer Support Team service. These recommendations fell into five categories:

1. Prisoners who completed the training session requested that its length be extended [from six weeks] to give them more time to explore the topics. Many women felt that because the training covered so many topics relevant to their lives, they needed more time to assimilate the information.
2. Survey respondents asked that inmates be better informed of the existence of the team service. They felt that upon incarceration, it would be useful to be told of the service because this initial adjustment period is generally the most difficult. (Since this study was conducted, the psychology

department has implemented this recommendation by telling each new prisoner about the Peer Support Team and the other psychological services available.)

3. Both interview participants and survey respondents appreciated the correctional officers who have been asked to join the Peer Support Team as "honorary" team members. Participants requested that this process continue.
4. Participants in the study requested that ex-addicts and former prisoners be asked to conduct training workshops. Women felt the involvement of these individuals, rather than "professionals," would help strengthen their ties to the outside community and to people with whom they have more in common.
5. Interview participants expressed the need for a formal Peer Support Team to be established for women once they leave the Prison for Women.

Summary Recently, it has been recognized that the vast majority of federally incarcerated women in Canada are survivors of childhood sexual abuse and need services to help them work through abuse and related issues.⁽⁷⁾ Recent studies conducted at the Prison for Women attest to the overwhelming need for programs that "empower women to make positive lifestyle changes within a context of education, support and recovery."⁽⁸⁾

In addition, a study of female prisoners in Colorado corroborates evidence of the high number of abused women who are incarcerated and emphasizes the importance of addressing imprisoned women's emotional needs so they can return to, and remain within, the mainstream community.⁽⁹⁾

The participants in this study described how the prison setting recreates the power imbalance, sense of insecurity, degradation and fear that are inherent in most abusive relationships and that can impede the healing of a woman's emotional scars. As the recent literature on trauma and victimization has clearly illustrated, an atmosphere of safety in which a woman can develop feelings of self-efficacy is crucial to overcoming traumatic experiences.

The results of this study show that, despite the overall punitive climate of a prison, Peer Support Team training helped create an atmosphere in which team members felt accepted and empowered. The team members' approach to peer counselling also reflected an awareness of the long-term psychological effects of severe abuse. This awareness guided their attempts to help restore equilibrium and control to the prisoners they were trying to help.

A firm understanding of the dynamics and psychological effects of violence and an attempt to provide restorative experiences of empowerment are rare in prison programming. The Peer Support Team stands as an innovative and powerful model of peer support programs and as a model for theoretical and practical treatment for incarcerated abuse survivors.

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"Women in Prison: The Treatment, the Control and the Experience," *Gender, Crime and Justice*, eds. P. Carlen and A. Worrall (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1987). And see D. Layton MacKenzie, I. Robinson and C. Campbell, "Long-term Incarceration of Female Offenders: Prison Adjustment and Coping," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 16, 2 (1989): 223-238. See also L. Inowlucki and J. Mai, "That It Comes from Us Alone and Not from Someone Who Stands behind Us and Says You Must - A Discussion of Contradictory Experiences with Stopping Drug Use in Jail," *Kriminologisches Journal*, 12,4(1980): 271-282. And see J. Clark and K. Boudin, "Community of Women Organize Themselves to Cope with the Aids Crisis: A Case Study from Bedford Hills Correctional Facility," *Social Justice*, 17, 2 (1990): 90-109.

(3)I. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). See also D. Howard, ed., *A Guide to Dynamics of Feminist Therapy* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1986). And see T. Laidlaw and C. Malmo, eds., *Healing Voices: Feminist Approaches to Therapy with Women* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1990).

(4)A. Browne and D. Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of the Research," *Psychological Bulletin*, 99 (1986): 66-77. See also S.E. Blume, *Secret Survivors: Uncovering Incest and Its Aftereffects in Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990). And see Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

(5)A. Browne, *When Battered Women Kill* (New York: The Free Press, 1987). See also K. Yllo and M. Bograd, *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse* (London: Sage Publications, 1988).

(6)L. Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). See also Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

(7)L. Axon, "Model and Exemplary Programs for Female Inmates - An International Review," report prepared for the Solicitor General of Canada, 1989. See also E. Adelberg and C. Currie, eds., *Too Few to Count: Canadian Women in Conflict with the Law* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1987). And see N. Deschepper, *Canadian Women in Conflict with the Law: Current Issues and Perspectives* (Ottawa: Status of Women Canada, 1989). And see I. Heney, "Report on Self-injurious Behaviour in the Kingston Prison for Women," unpublished report, Correctional Service of Canada, 1989.

(8)Deschepper, *Canadian Women in Conflict with the Law: Current Issues and Perspectives*, p. 24.

(9)S.E. Moss, "Women in Prison: A Case of Pervasive Neglect," *Women in Therapy*, 5, 2-3 (1986): 177-185.