

Introducing restorative justice into the prison settings in Serbia

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The aim

- To present the program entitled *Raising awareness about the impact of the criminal offence on the victim and about restorative justice*
- The focus is on the methodological approach applied, with particular emphasis on:
 - Introducing communication framework in the spirit of restorative justice in a prison setting
 - Using yoga and its synergetic effects when combined with restorative approaches in working with prisoners

About the program

- Developed and piloted by VDS in 2015
- Within larger project *Promotion of alternative sanctions and restorative justice*
- In partnership with Foundation Center for democracy
- First program based on restorative justice principles that was implemented in the Serbian prison for female offenders

Program goals

- Better understanding of and positive approach to oneself and others, and overall personal growth
- Becoming familiar with restorative justice and communication skills in the spirit of restorative justice
- Raising awareness about impact of criminal offense on victim as well as about needs of victims of various harming behaviors
 - In order to prevent future victimization and offending
- Becoming familiar with yoga and mindfulness and their transformative/restorative potential

Methodological framework

- Six workshops
 - Introduction, introducing communication framework, enhancing positive image about one's own self
 - Recognizing different forms of victimization and its impact on victims
 - Possible reactions to harmful events in everyday life
 - Raising awareness about needs of victims and perpetrators and the possibilities of RJ in dealing with consequences of a crime and preventing new problems
 - Raising awareness about importance of support, activating one's own resources and about restorative approaches
 - Evaluation through writing letters to those female prisoners harmed
- Six prisoners (out of ten at the beginning) attended all workshops
- Interactive work and experiential learning

Metodological framework

- Setting ground rules of work at the beginning, with communication rules in the spirit of RJ included, taking care that the rules are obeyed
- Principle *From further to closer* – gradual opening stories of inmates' personal experience of victimization as well as their victimizing behavior toward others
- Emphasizing the value of each woman (positive potentials and strengths)
- Encouraging mutual respect and support of women in the group (congratulating, shaking hands, complimenting, etc.)
- Mindfulness as the part of communication and yoga exercise
- Yoga exercises at the beginning of every workshop
- During the breaks and at the end of workshops: relaxing content, dancing, singing, togetherness through standing in the circle with holding hands...
- Flexibility: adaptation of content to the needs of inmates

Communication framework

- Listening and respecting each other, regardless whether one agrees or not
- Mutual recognition and self-respect
- Allowing/accepting existence of different understandings/experiencing of the same events by different people
- No accusation of others and self-blaming – empowering I talk instead of **YOU, THEY** talk.
- Acceptance of responsibility for what one says
- Thinking and checking understanding before reacting
- **The focus on the present moment/mindfulness**

The place of yoga in the program

- At the beginning of every workshop for making transition between previous activities and workshop
- Gradual introduction of new elements / starting with simple mindfulness exercise at the first workshop and finishing with more complex one at the final workshop
- Instructions of individual exercise between workshops

Yoga/mindfulness exercises

- Yoga nidra – deep relaxation exercise/peace within oneself as a precondition for the peace in relationships with others
 - Breathing and mind/thoughts control exercises
 - Concentration and focusing on present moment exercise in order to:
 - Learn to live with full consciousness of what is going “here and now”, within and around ourselves,
 - Easier recognition of own and others’ feelings and needs, leading to decrease of automatic reactions, and violent conflicts
- Strengthening one’s connection with body/learning to love own body and support for body parts that have problems
- Feeling of joy and love exercise/ accordance of oneself with surrounding
- Sending positive vibrations to others and strengthening relationships with others

Main outcomes of the program

- Understanding of the impact of crime on victims and their families increased
- Understanding of the impact of crime on prisoners and their families increased
- Became familiar with and accepted restorative justice principles in general, and in particular, restorative way of communicating with others
- Became familiar with and accepted yoga/ mindfulness exercises

Program evaluation

- Evaluation of the entire program:
 - Oral evaluation after every workshop
 - Writing letter to the person they harmed - at the final workshop
 - Follow-up interviews one month later
 - Evaluation meeting of VDS team
 - Evaluation by Lorenn Walker

Analysis of the letters and follow-up interviews

- Female prisoners improved overall knowledge related to the program content
- They showed readiness to apologise to persons they harmed
- They recognized that the program influenced them in terms to change themselves in a positive way, particularly in terms of desistance from hurting other people through a crime
- They recognized the potential of restorative mechanisms (particularly restorative dialogue)
- They learnt communication skills, particularly those in the spirit of restorative justice, to focus on a present moment and to use yoga exercises
- They found out that yoga exercises are useful and they recognized that being able to relax and be concentrated is important for their future life
- They pointed to the importance of regular practicing exercises (particularly with the instructor)



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