

EMOTIONAL CONSTANCY

Introduction

Imagine having surgery. If the operation is tricky, we don't want to hear the surgeon sounding worried or snapping at nurses. When the surgery ends, we'd rather the surgeon didn't get too excited either. If we get scared, or tired, or frustrated, we'd hope the medics deal with us calmly and gently. Professionals show emotional constancy: they stay calm when things are going well and when they're going badly.

Surgeons usually deal with one patient at a time. Patients usually want their help. Prison officers enjoy neither of these privileges. Moreover, prison officers experience the full spectrum of human emotion: anger, fear, disappointment, excitement, delight, pride. Surgeons finish surgery and may never see the patient again: prison officers may encounter the same prisoner, behaving the same way, day after day after day. We may be driven to frustration by their behaviour – then thrilled to see a young man who entered scared and angry complete the course he needs for his release.

Prison officers face a rollercoaster of emotion. To do our job effectively, we need to project the same emotional constancy we'd expect of surgeons, pilots or firefighters under pressure, for two reasons.

First, the impression of calm we project is an important part of our professional persona. Reacting calmly to the struggles and trials we face day-to-day shows that we are a mature professional. It makes us look more responsible in the eyes of colleagues and prisoners. Being calm under pressure is essential. Second, people reflect the behaviour they encounter. If one person is terse, or rude, or loud, others will match that, often instinctively. If we display anger, or disappointment, or frustration, we encourage prisoners to respond in the same way. Conversely, if we display calm and emotional constancy, we encourage them to do the same. We can model how to behave, teaching prisoners to respond appropriately.

The benefits of this are obvious when we're upset or angry – but they apply when we're pleased or excited too. If a prisoner has achieved something great, we'll want to share our pleasure and excitement with them. But gushing praise or emotion may embarrass the prisoner or make us look immature. It's best to respond calmly and strategically to good news and bad, to happiness and frustration. As one Unlocked participant put it, with a "really, really angry prisoner," he makes sure to stay "as calm as I possibly can." He'll remind a prisoner that they may disagree, but they're having a conversation. "It works", he says, "nine times out of ten."

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How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. **Slow down and plan.** There are times when we need to rush to a situation: if another officer has called for urgent assistance, for example. Usually, we don't. It's better to arrive ten seconds later – and ten percent calmer – than to arrive fast but flustered. As you move towards a situation or challenge, slow down slightly. Use this time to think: what am I feeling right now? What might I be projecting? What do I want to project?
- B. **Monitor your emotions.** During any interaction, monitor your emotions: what am I projecting? Could I be calmer? This is easier when we're working alongside another officer. While they're speaking and acting, take a step back – metaphorically – and assess how things are going. How am I feeling? What do I want to project? What should I say next? How should I say it?
- C. **Avoid emotive words.** Emotive words come easily when we're frustrated. We may use them about a prisoner – "You're being really annoying" – or about our own feelings: "I'm fed up with this." However true such statements may be, they don't build relationships. Really, all they do is vent our frustration. Whenever possible, think it, bottle it up, and don't say it.
- D. **Reflect.** None of this is easy, and no one gets it right every time. It's a skill to keep learning across your career. So, after every interaction, think: did I project the emotional constancy I wanted to project? What did my words, my tone and my body language suggest? How could I do this differently next time?

Potential Pitfalls

- **Losing our temper:** Prison life is tough, working with prisoners is tough, and at the end of a long shift it can be easy to lose our temper. It's not ideal, but it's not the end of the world. This is why rewinding and reviewing is integral to using this strategy effectively. We can use this to identify triggers – what was it that wound us up? If we can recognise when and why our emotional constancy slipped, we can plan what to do differently: stepping back, choosing different words, or calling for help sooner, for example. We can also consider making amends and apologising to the prisoner or officer involved. When things go wrong, use it as an opportunity to learn and improve.
- **Too much constancy:** There's a balance to strike. Showing frustration or happiness can undermine our authority. But no one wants to work with a robot. This strategy is designed to help because it's easy to lose control of our emotions when we face difficult situations. Sometimes, however, a carefully worded display of emotion can be very powerful. Articulating our frustration might show a prisoner they've crossed the line. "I'll admit I'm getting a little

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frustrated now, because I've asked you to do this three times, and you've kept ignoring me..." Sometimes, we might carefully exaggerate our emotions to make a point. And we'll naturally be pleased when a prisoner makes a change or achieves something. What we're suggesting here is being strategic: choosing when and how to show emotion, not just responding instinctively.

Case Study

Officer Miley is unlocking prisoners for education and work. The officer passes a cell which is occupied by a prisoner who is currently locked up under rule 45. The prisoner in the cell asks officer Miley to be unlocked. The officer explains that they can't unlock the prisoner due to them being locked up under prison rule 45 and that "it would get them in a lot of trouble". The prisoner then makes an offensive comment about officer Miley's appearance. The officer responds immediately trying not to show their emotion but says "you can't speak to me like that. That is very offensive to me. I actually cannot believe you think that is ok. You need to take a long hard look at yourself".

This is a **non-example** for several reasons. Firstly, the officer didn't slow down and find some time to think about how they were going to respond to the inappropriate comment from the prisoner. They could have paused a moment before responding to help calm their emotions and plan their response. Secondly, the officer loses their temper and uses emotive words when responding to the prisoner. Rather than preventing conflict this is likely to escalate the situation.

In this situation **an example would be** if the officer really took some time to slow down before responding to the prisoner. This would allow them some time to carefully plan their response and try to remain emotionally constant. This would also help the officer to avoid using emotive words and rather use more neutral language to deal with the situation. In this situation it is possible to effectively challenge the prisoner through **code switching (strategy 6)** while also remaining emotionally constant.

Mitigations to using this technique

Consider the following questions to think about the circumstances when you would and wouldn't choose to use this technique:

- In your current working context, what situations would you choose to show emotion rather than remain emotionally constant?
- The prison officer role can be emotionally challenging. Is it always possible to mute your emotions?
- Would you adapt the use of this technique dependent on the prisoner that you are speaking to?

Final Reflection Questions

Answer these final questions to help to consolidate your learning and consider how you will use this technique in your day-to-day practice in your current working context.

- What is the goal? What are prison officers looking to achieve by using this technique?
- Why should this technique work? How should prisoners behave differently?
- What do you need to do? Outline the key success checks you need to meet to apply this technique?
- What are the pitfalls? When shouldn't we use this technique? What barriers do you foresee to using this technique? How could you overcome them?