

NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE

Introduction

Carl Cattermole describes the effect of negative thoughts, lack of support and lack of stimuli on a prisoner:

"Your mind is as sparse as the cell you're locked in. The tinny tinkle from the officers' keys echoes around your cell in the same way that the most minor thought can rattle round your head. Torturous over-thinking of a meaningless statement, a past trauma or a small conflict with someone on the wing can lead to spiralling neurosis you wouldn't be a part of if you were in the outside world or simply had something to distract you. That place will push you as low as you can go so if you're someone who can go low, expect to go lower."

This negative spiral can be deeply debilitating. A prisoner who feels stuck and lacks hope may struggle to take positive action to improve their situation. They may resort to despair and to self-harm. To help them, prison officers need to encourage them to turn negative thoughts and beliefs into positive thoughts and actions.

But unchecked optimism is no solution. Prisoners are in a miserable situation. Their worries and fears may be well-founded. Imagine a prisoner who can't get through to their partner. Telling them "It'll be fine," is neither realistic nor honest. Think about a prisoner who has been recalled to prison for breaching the terms of their licence. There's no easy consolation. Their current failures and worries may build on years of previous ones: failed jobs, failed relationships, failed releases.

We need to help prisoners towards realistic optimism. They're still locked up; they have made their mistakes. But there are still choices they can make, actions they can take, and things to work towards. When a prisoner hints at, or articulates, negativity, we can offer a realistic, positive alternative. For example, imagine a newly-arrived prisoner who tells you "I've ruined my life." Telling them "You're going to be absolutely fine" would be unrealistic and dishonest. Instead, we might say something like "Sure, this is a setback. But there are ways forward." We can offer realistic hope, as a first step towards positive action on their part.

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How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. **Acknowledge:** Before trying to tackle a prisoner's negative thoughts, acknowledge where they're coming from. You don't have to agree with everything. For example, you wouldn't want to validate statements like "No one cares about me" or "Nothing I can do here will make a difference." Simply try to recognise and acknowledge where the prisoner's thinking is coming from.
- B. **Use tactical agreement:** **Tactical agreement (strategy 14)** can show understanding and help you to find some common ground. In short: the tactical agreement technique is focused on finding something to agree on from what the prisoner is saying. It's not about agreeing with everything they are saying but finding an element of what they say to agree with. For example, an officer might agree with a prisoner who is in a negative mindset through saying that: "I can see why it feels like nothing is going to make a difference."
- C. **Challenge assumptions.** We can acknowledge there's something in what the prisoner says, but we also want to begin to challenge their assumptions. We might provide evidence ourselves. For example, we could challenge the idea that "Nothing I can do here will make a difference," by describing other prisoners we've worked with who were able to achieve things in prison. We could say something like "I worked with a prisoner last year who became a Listener. He found he was able to help others and get a better handle on his own emotions." We could use **Socratic questions (strategy 18)** to help. For example, we might ask "What would you like to be different when you're released?" Then, "What can you do now that would help you to work towards this?"
- D. **Offer alternatives:** Building on the acknowledgement and challenge, we can offer a hopeful, but realistic, alternative. For example, we might say something like "So there are courses and roles you can take on in the prison which will help you to work towards your goals once you're released." This hopeful alternative is particularly powerful when combined with a **commitment to action (Strategy 20)**. For example, we might conclude by asking "Shall I get you an application for that course now?"

Potential Pitfalls

- **Avoid excessive optimism or vagueness:** Prisoners have good cause to feel negative. Vague or excessive optimism is neither honest nor realistic. It's unlikely to be seen as credible by the prisoner, and so undermines their trust in us. When we challenge a negative statement, it may help to first think about

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the opposite of a negative statement – an unrealistic positive statement. Then seek the midpoint: realistic optimism. For example, if a prisoner says “No one cares about me,” an unrealistic positive response might be “Everybody cares about you.” A more realistic positive statement might be: “Your brother keeps visiting you, and I know your cellmate is looking out for you.”

Case Study

Officer Ali goes to check in on a prisoner who they noticed hasn't left their cell during association. They go to cell and speak to the prisoner (Dave) at their cell door.

- PO: Afternoon Dave. I noticed you haven't come out of your cell today. What's up?
- Dave: Look I am fine gov just leave me alone.
- PO: Are you sure? You don't seem yourself today.
- Dave shrugs his shoulders.
- PO: It's ok what's wrong?
- Dave: Alright gov. I am being released next week. I am scared. I don't see how I am not gonna end up back here again.
- PO: Dave don't be silly. There will be lots of opportunities for you when you are released.
- Dave: You don't get it gov. I won't be able to get a job. No one cares about me out there. My life is just fucked really.
- PO: I know it is hard, but you've got to believe you can get it right this time. I know you can get a job and connect with some people that will care for you.
- Dave: Look gov just leave me be alright. There is nothing you can do. I am screwed. Go away.

This is a **non-example** for several reasons:

- Firstly, the officer doesn't challenge the prisoner's assumptions about his chances upon release. If the officer asked more questions about why Dave feels the way they do, then they may have been able to offer a realistic and hopeful alternative view.
- Secondly, the officer offers a far too optimistic alternative to what the prisoner is feeling. They feel as though that they have no chance of being successful upon release and the officer says: “I know you can get a job and connect with some people that will care for you.”
- Lastly there may be something that the officer could do to help the prisoner even with only a week before their release. Knowing this support is available may have given Andy some small hope that things could be different for them upon their release this time.

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An example in this situation would be if officer Ali:

- Properly acknowledged the negative and showed that they really understood how the prisoner felt. They could have used the tactical agreement technique (**technique 14**) to try and make Dave feel as though his perspective has been acknowledged.
- Then challenged their assumptions about what they were saying. They could ask: “Why are you scared?” “Why do you feel like you could never get a job?” and “Why do you feel like no one cares about you?”. These questions would give the prisoner the opportunity to open up and give the officer a chance to challenge some of their assumptions
- Finally based on the information they had drawn they could then offer Dave a realistic but hopeful alternative for their future. Something which they could potentially believe. This may allow the officer to get the prisoner to commit to an action that would give them a better chance of success upon release.

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:

- Is it always possible to offer a realistic but hopeful alternative?
- Can you always change someone's mind if they feel negative about something?
- When would it be inappropriate to use this technique?

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?