

COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

Introduction

Everyone has something they would like to be different. It might be eating better, procrastinating less, losing weight, getting on better with family. Wishing for change is easy. Going for a run is harder. Getting into the habit of exercising is harder still. Yet if prisoners – or any of us – are to make changes, we need to build a commitment to change, with a clear sense of its value, and a detailed plan for how to get there.

Consider a prisoner whose relationship with her family has fractured during remand, trial and imprisonment. Let's imagine, too, that she's missing her family, thinking about time spent with them, and wondering what will happen on her release. She might think about changing. For example, she might:

- Desire to change, thinking "I miss my family – I wish our relationship was better."
- Consider her ability to change: "If I worked on it, I could make my relationship with my mum better."
- Identify reasons to change: "If we got on better, time in prison would feel more manageable, and I'd be set to rebuild my life when I'm out."
- Feel a need to act: "I need to show my family I'm becoming a better person."

These thoughts help to build a will to change. But to act, she will need to go further. She might:

- Commit to action: "I'm going to show my family I've changed."
- Act: "I know I need to think more about how my family feel – I've been trying the active listening skills I learned on my course."
- Take specific steps: "I'm planning what I'll say to my mum when she visits. I'm going to tell her that I know it's my fault I'm here, and take responsibility for what happens next."

These different kinds of talk all contribute to change. Greater motivation, and different kinds of motivation (rational reasons as well as emotional needs) justify action. Concrete plans make these good intentions real. To help a prisoner commit to change, we can:

- Welcome and encourage change talk. The more the prisoner thinks and talks about making a change, the better. "That's a great idea, tell me more about what you're thinking."

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- Introduce different kinds of change talk. The more different kinds of change talk there are, the more likely a prisoner can work towards action. “It’s great that you’re thinking about change, what’s driving that for you?”
- Nudge the prisoner towards change talk about specific actions: “I can tell you really want to change – what do you think your first step could be?”

How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. Encourage and echo change talk:** Any talk about change is positive: encourage it. Cynicism and discouragement achieve nothing. Making changes takes time, effort and opportunity: your encouragement and support can make a huge difference. Repeat back what you hear from prisoners: “So you’re saying that you want to come out better than you went in? That sounds worthwhile.”
- B. Build on change talk:** Prisoners may start talking about change in limited or half-hearted ways. They may not want to reveal their hopes and fears initially, for fear of cynicism or mockery. Listen for hints that they’re ready to change and amplify them. For example, if a prisoner tells you: “I’d like to get a place on the course – but I’ll probably just get moved again,” focus on what they want and how they can work towards it, not what could go wrong. “That’s a great idea, let’s get your application done.”
- C. Nudge:** Help prisoners turn their wishes into goals, their goals into plans, and their plans into action. If a prisoner tells you they wish things were different, ask them why that matters to them, and whether they think they could make things different. If a prisoner tells you they are ready to change, ask them what their first step is going to be.
- D. Support during setbacks:** It takes time to build a trusting relationship in which a prisoner is ready to work with you towards change. It takes time – and applications, and support – to develop an idea about change into action. There are almost always setbacks, disappointments and relapses. Be prepared to go back to a prisoner who’s had a disappointing visit, a loss of privileges, or a failed application. This is the point at which they will most need encouragement and support to rebuild their goals and plans. Be ready to talk to them afresh about change, and help them get back on the path they want to follow.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Feeling locked into following these change steps as a sequence:** The different kinds of change talk presented above are a way of categorising and thinking about moving towards change. They are not a rigid model, and different

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people will think about and work towards change differently. For example, if a prisoner feels an intense need to change – “I have to get my life on track” – we may not help by asking their reasons for change. They may be ready to act now. When talking about change, don’t feel you need to move gradually through the steps: “They’ve told me what they desire, next I need to find out if they think they can change.” Instead, try to allow conversation to flow naturally between different kinds of change talk. “They’ve told me what they desire, I wonder if they’ve thought about concrete plans yet... not yet, maybe let’s talk about their reasons for changing first instead.” We can use these types of change talk flexibly to build towards action.

- **Getting too involved:** When we are fighting to help a prisoner change, we may become emotionally involved, both in the change, and with them. We might feel excited and proud when they succeed, disappointed and let down when they struggle. This is understandable – but it’s also a sign we should pause, review the situation, and exercise caution. We may become too involved; our professionalism may lapse. Partly, this can be driven by a prison officer’s self-image as a saviour. When we spot ourselves feeling this involvement – or see it in our colleagues – we need to do two things. First, stop and recall that we are playing a professional role, and that our relationship with any given prisoner is temporary. We can make a big difference to them, but there are limits to the role we can, and should, play. Second, report any conversations about which we – or a colleague – might be concerned.

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:

- What kinds of situations is it best to use commitment to change? On the flip side are there certain situations when it is inappropriate to use this technique?
- Would you adapt your 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.

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- 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?