

A Gift Of Listening For Hawaii's Inmates

By Lorenn Walker and Ted Sakai

"We were crazy. Pushing down a old tourist lady for a purse, and doing the rest of that stuff, it was all nuts. I can't believe we did it. It was the drugs."

This is one inmate's assessment of his and his fellow inmates' past criminal behavior. They are sitting in a classroom where 18 inmates are broken up into four groups of four or five inmates each. The inmates, along with approximately 300 others, have lived together at this all-male minimum-security prison in Hawaii for the last year. They were selected to be the first group to participate in an innovative program in restorative justice and solution-focused facilitation skills. As part of this training, the groups are discussing who was affected by their criminal behavior.

The inmates were chosen to participate in this pilot inmate-training program by their counselors in a drug treatment program at Waiawa Correctional Facility on the island of O'ahu. The criteria used by the counselors in choosing inmates for the training, is that they are respected leaders by other inmates in the prison and have demonstrated a sincere willingness to change their lives.

Waiawa is about 20 miles from Honolulu, at the end of an old one-lane road that winds up into low-lying mountains. Bright green banana trees and other lush tropical foliage surround the prison, which has an expansive view of Pearl Harbor and the Pacific Ocean. Waiawa is a rehabilitative facility where inmates farm the land and eat the food they grow. It is a former World War II U.S. military base that the federal government leases to the state of Hawaii with the stipulation that education and treatment will be provided to the inmates.

Program Description

“Restorative Justice as a Solution-Focused Approach to Conflict and Wrongdoing” facilitator training is a 12-week program designed to help inmates learn self-control and getting along with others. The total 24 hours of training are scheduled as two-hour sessions for one evening each week, which covers topics such as listening skills development, using open-ended questions, resiliency development and protective factors, using communication for conflict resolution, restorative justice and forgiveness. The inmates are taught that effective facilitators are competent, self-aware people who listen carefully, and who exercise control when their emotions are triggered. They are also taught emotional intelligence skills. These skills include: “self-awareness; identifying, expressing and managing feelings; impulse control and delaying gratification; and handling stress and anxiety.”¹ Emotional intelligence enables one to be aware of the feelings of others and to better manage relationships.

Listening is the primary communication skill taught — and one that they practice most often, both during the training and as homework during the week between training sessions. The inmates must report weekly on their homework practice. Homework entails practicing the skills that they are introduced to weekly; discussing their practice and experience with other inmates in the training; logging their practice in a journal; and reviewing any handouts for discussion at later training sessions. Each inmate

receives a paperback copy of *Man’s Search for Meaning*, by Viktor Frankl, who describes what he learned while being a prisoner in a concentration camp. The book is used to discuss resiliency. No reading skills are required to participate in the training and the program does not stigmatize any inmates who cannot read. It is assumed that some inmates have reading difficulties and cannot read the book; however, following the solution-focused approach it assumes that those who cannot read may become motivated to learn how as a result of having the book, and hearing from the other inmates what the book is about.

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The program trainers are two women, a public health educator and a family therapist. They have worked together since 2001, providing restorative justice and solution-focused processes to offenders, crime victims and others affected by crime. The trainers were both domestic violence victims in their youth. One was a juvenile offender, and both are recognized internationally as accomplished amateur athletes.

The five main program components are: 1) experiential learning — applied and participatory; 2) strength-based training; 3) the solution-focused approach; 4) restorative justice; and 5) forgiveness as a learned skill.

Experiential learning. The training is conducted as a group meeting where inmates increase their expertise through experience and practice. Inmates begin and end the sessions sitting in a large circle with two co-trainers, breaking into small circles and dyads for work during most of each training session. The activities include practicing listening and the specific practice of compassionate listening²; finding strengths in photographs of seemingly poverty stricken people and situations; and numerous role plays for gaining insight into emotional and cognitive responses. Larger group discussion follows the activities. Experiential learning has been found more effective than traditional classroom lectures or simply telling people how they should think and behave.³

Strength-based training. The training is strength-based, focusing on what is positive about the inmate and his life. Research shows that focusing on strengths rather

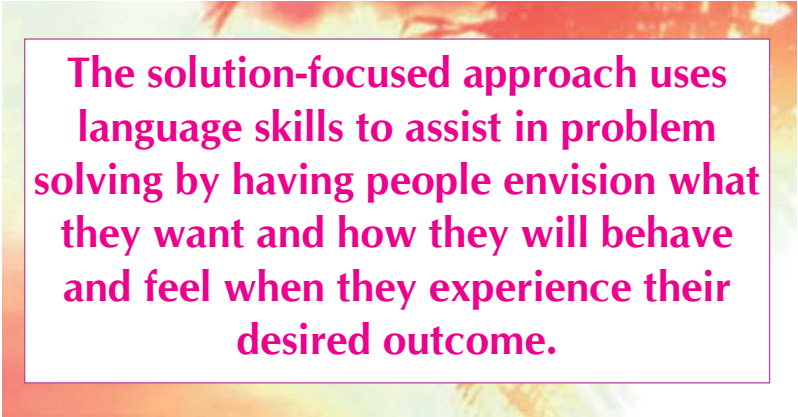
than deficits generates more positive behavior.⁴ In corrections, it has also been shown that inmate interventions are more effective for reducing recidivism when reinforcements are mostly positive and not negative.⁵

The weekly meetings always open with all inmates

sharing something that happened since the last session for which they are grateful. Sometimes it is big developments such as, “My dad wrote me after four years!” Other times it is appreciation for simple things: “I didn’t get written up or into any trouble,” or “I’m still alive.”

The training sessions always end with each inmate complimenting another inmate. “I want to compliment Frank for diffusing a potentially hostile situation in our dorm last week. He respected both of the fighting inmates and saved everyone a lot of grief.” Sometimes the inmates get up and give each other rough bear hugs or give a fist-to-fist handshake, emotionally displaying gratitude toward each other. Giving compliments is part of the solution-focused model that the training uses.

Solution-focused approach. The training follows the solution-focused approach to problem solving as developed by Insoo Kim Berg and Steve deShazer.⁶ Berg is an internationally recognized author and therapist who provided her expertise and guidance during the training program’s development. Her suggestions included that the training begin and end on strength-based ideas, and to use a scaling question to help inmates learn how to self-access their interactions with others (e.g., “On a case of 1 to 10 how close would you say you are to staying calm in spite of



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being angry, where 10 is you are very confident and 1 is you are back to your old ways? What number would you say you are at right now?”).

The solution-focused approach uses language skills to assist in problem solving by having people envision what they want and how they will behave and feel when they experience their desired outcome. Instead of focusing on what is unwanted, thinking and talking about how terrible it is and why the problem exists, the solution-focused approach asks people what they specifically want and asks them to remember how they have succeeded in other areas. As social psychologist Albert Bandura pointed out back in 1977, self-efficacy transfers — as one succeeds in one area, the ability to succeed transfers to other areas.⁷

Solution-focused trainers and therapists are expert listeners who find out what clients care about and what they want. Throughout the training, inmates are asked to imagine in great detail how their lives will be different without their overriding problem and how exactly they will behave and feel without the problem. The trainers take great care to consistently point out the inmates' strengths: “Wow, you've been clean and sober for two years!” They also constantly ask the inmates how they managed to overcome difficulties and succeed in the past. Focusing on how to repeat positive and successful behavior is easier than trying to change negative behavior.⁸

Restorative Justice. More than 90 percent of all American inmates plead guilty to an offense before imprisonment.⁹ These inmates need to take responsibility for their offenses. Getting angry with offenders and then punishing them is not usually effective in getting them to take responsibility for their behavior. For most offenders to genuinely take responsibility, they need to consider how their behavior affected people and what might be done to repair the harm it caused. This is what restorative justice is all about.

The training introduces inmates to the three basic restorative justice questions: 1) Who was affected by the wrongdoing? 2) How were they affected? 3) What might be done to repair the harm?¹⁰ Asking these questions takes the focus off offenders and puts it where it should be, on the innocent people hurt by the behavior. How we respond to wrongdoing is important. Focusing only on why an offender committed a crime, without considering the harm caused to their victims and the community, creates an unhealthy system — with a lot self-absorbed inmates.

Most people working in corrections and the criminal justice system know how much offenders feel sorry for themselves. The system mainly concentrates on offenders, with little regard for their victims. Likewise, offenders rarely consider the victims or even how their behavior affects their own families. Considering victims is the first step in developing empathy and rehabilitation for offenders, which

probably explains why victims prefer it and why some evidence shows it is more effective at decreasing recidivism than the current system.¹¹

Forgiveness. Inmates in the program are introduced to forgiveness as a life skill, using a theory and set of principles developed by Fred Luskin.¹² Elements of Luskin's teachings include the following ideas: just as everyone has hurt others, everyone has also been hurt in life; hanging on to old wounds and carrying around resentment and hostility keeps people unhappy; the energy it takes to imagine a just revenge for someone who was harmful can be better used for creating a positive life. The philosophy is: “The only person you can control is yourself.” This is the same lesson Frankl discusses in *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Inmates learn what forgiveness is and what it is not. Forgiveness is letting go of resentment. Forgiveness does not mean that bad behavior is condoned or forgotten, or that the offender has to even know that he or she has been forgiven — forgiveness can even be extended to people who are deceased.

After learning about the concept of forgiveness, inmates share stories of how they forgave people who seriously hurt them as children. One Waiawa inmate who was in the program forgave both his parents for committing suicide. His father killed himself when the inmate was 10, and his mother killed herself when he was 13. He was subsequently raised in foster homes, where he suffered abuse. He recognized that as a youth “many people reached out to help,” but he rejected the offers. Instead, he became a heroin addict and bank robber who spent most of his adult life (the last 30 years) in prison. He functioned in life by being isolated from people and completely avoiding his painful emotions associated with the loss of his parents and the suffering of his childhood. The training showed him healthy practices for dealing with his emotions — practices that he says help him feel confident that he will not use drugs in the future. Facing painful emotions is vital in overcoming anxiety and developing positive emotional health.¹³

Another Waiawa inmate who was in jail for a drug offense forgave the man who shot and killed his father, who died in his arms when he was 10 years old. The shooter also killed his aunt and seriously wounded his mother and is serving his sentence in another prison. The inmate struggled with his feelings of revenge for many years. Learning that forgiveness can be something extended by the victim to benefit the victim (and not necessarily the offender) helped the inmate deal with his pain and not remain focused on retribution against the shooter.

The Hawaii Forgiveness Project¹⁴ gave each of the two inmates discussed above a Student of Forgiveness Award because they forgave the serious harms they experienced and because they took responsibility for their own poor

behavior. The Forgiveness Project publishes a booklet of real-life stories about forgiveness and included the stories written by the two inmates in its August 2005 publication.

Training Outcomes

An assessment of 16 inmate surveys (two inmates were unavailable for the survey) on the effectiveness of the training showed that they found it helpful in teaching them new skills. Of the inmates surveyed, 13 specifically stated their appreciation for learning listening and communication skills. One inmate said, "We were given a gift, the gift of learning to listen." Learning to listen is a significant outcome because it is a prerequisite for the development of empathy.

One inmate from the training relapsed and used drugs several days after his release. He violated his parole but turned himself in to his parole officer and is currently in a drug treatment program and again compliant with his parole conditions. Five inmates from the training also requested Restorative Circles. The Restorative Circle process was also developed at Waiawa prison along with this inmate training program. A Restorative Circle is a group process for individual inmates and their loved ones to assist with reconciliation and transition planning for the inmate.¹⁵ The circles are additional support for inmates and provide healing for their families. The process is also an attempt to decrease recidivism.

Lots of light bulbs turned on for the inmates. The "aha" moments meant that they went from having dull, unenthusiastic demeanors, to being bright and excited people. They learned some skills that gave them more hope for their lives. During the training, they often commented on how grateful they were for it and said such things as: "Learning all I have here makes me glad I went to prison!" and "I thought this was going to be the same old thing and I was blown away to learn and experience all I did in this circle."

Conclusion

This is an inexpensive training program that can improve a prison. The cost of the program was approximately \$7,000, including the cost of books purchased for the inmates. The former warden said: "This program is helping to transform the culture of the prison organization from one of anger and hostility to caring and compassion. It shows people how to focus on positives and not negatives. It shows inmates a different way to resolve problems, instead of through retaliation and violence, which is their typical response to disputes. This program gave meaning to some of the principles taught at the substance abuse therapeutic community."

To date no recidivism outcomes of the program have been completed, but an evaluation on this will hopefully be conducted within the next twenty-four months. Funds to provide the program again were obtained. Another group of inmates is being selected to begin training in November 2006.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁵ Walker, L., T. Sakai and K. Brady. 2006. Restorative circles — A reentry planning process for Hawaii inmates. *Federal Probation*, 70(1):33-37.

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