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***You're gonna make it: Reentry Planning at a Hawai'i Women's Prison***

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“I’ve been clean for over four years, and I quit smoking two and a half years ago,” says Penny, her eyes looking up, off to the left corner, with a furrowed forehead. She is trying to remember all the things she has accomplished since being in prison this time around. “Oh, yeah, I made amends with my oldest daughter, and have a good relationship with my youngest one now,” she adds with a confident smile.

Penny is around thirty-five years old. She is *hapa*, part Hawaiian and Portuguese. Her family is from the Wai‘anae Coast of O‘ahu, which is fifty-one percent Hawaiian and the most economically depressed area on O‘ahu (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

Penny’s black shinny hair is neatly pulled in to a tight ponytail. She could pass for a grown up cheerleader except for the homemade tattoos on her hands. She is dressed in clean blue hospital scrubs, the required uniform at the prison where she has been incarcerated for the last four years. She is in prison for selling drugs, an occupation mainly used to support her former drug habit.

Penny sits in a circle of twelve other incarcerated women who are participating in her *Modified Restorative Circle* (Walker, 2009). The Circle is a group reentry planning process designed in Hawai‘i for an incarcerated individual to make a transition plan for successful reintegration back into the community. The Modified Restorative Circle

process is slightly different from the *Restorative Circle* process developed in 2005 in Hawai'i (Walker, Sakai & Brady 2006).

In the original Restorative Circle, loved ones are invited and attend the group meeting, while the Modified Circle is for people whose loved ones are unable or unwilling to attend a Circle. Instead other incarcerated people attend the Modified Circles as supporters.

The Modified Circle grew out of providing a *Restorative and Solution-Focused Problem Solving Training* program for incarcerated people (Walker & Sakai, 2006). It was developed to demonstrate restorative justice and the power of reconciliation to people in the training program.

Since the first Modified Restorative Circle in 2006, thirty more, including Penny's, have been provided for both women and men. Currently, the Hawai'i prison system only allows the Modified Circles for demonstration purposes during the training program. The Modified Circle process, however, is a positive alternative to the Restorative Circle process, and hopefully it will eventually be allowed by Hawai'i's prison administration.

The original Restorative Circle and the Modified Restorative Circle (Circles) give individual imprisoned people the opportunity to explore what is needed for them to live a healthy and happy life. For most imprisoned people in Hawai'i, as elsewhere in the United States, this includes being drug free life.

The incarcerated individual who discusses, makes decisions and plans for her life, after gaining information generated by a group of caring supporters, drives the Circle

process. Both types of Circles meet criteria necessary for promoting *desistance* (Walker, 2009).

Desistance is the phenomenon where most people who commit crime, naturally and eventually stop doing it later in life (Rumgay, 2004; Maruna, 2006). Desistance is an ongoing process and “sustained desistance most likely requires a fundamental and intentional shift in a person’s sense of self” (Maruna, 2006, p. 17).

The Circles use *solution-focused brief therapy* language skills that identify a person’s abilities to create peaceful and happy lives, and helps people set goals for themselves (Walker, in Dejong & Berg, 2008). The Circles provide the elements that can successfully assist incarcerated people in re-scripting their life stories, including assisting them in reconciling with loved ones and the community. The Circles help imprisoned people find ways to meet their needs for reintegration into the community (Walker, 2009). These positive results promote desistance by helping shift a person’s image and sense of self.

Restorative Circles address an incarcerated person’s needs, and their first need considered is the need for reconciliation. Here reconciliation does not require that any repaired or continued relationships be achieved. Reconciliation can merely be “the process of making consistent or compatible” (Dictionary.com, 2007), and coming to terms with the fact the person is in prison, had a drug problem, lost custody of her children to child welfare, etc.

The major difference between the two Circles processes is that the reconciliation piece is much richer when loved ones participate because they provide how they were

affected and what can be done to repair the harm that they suffered. Without loved ones participating, incarcerated people having a Modified Circle can only speculate about how they have harmed others and what they might do to repair that harm. This critical thinking while done in a group, however, can be meaningful.

Usually in the Modified Circles, the incarcerated people decide that “walking the talk” and living a “clean and sober life” where they are independent, is a step toward reconciliation, which they can take regardless of others participating.

During a Modified Circle some incarcerated people address their need for reconciling with themselves, and what they need to do to forgive themselves. Often they decide that walking-the-talk also works for reconciling with and forgiving themselves.

Sometimes if they believe it will not upset victims, they write apology letters asking what they might do to repair the harm. In some cases where others have custody of their children, they may write a letter and say that it is sent in good faith for the sake of the children. In these cases often their prison counselor reviews and signs the letter indicating this is true.

The incarcerated people in this program are quick to recognize that they have created trust problems with others and that only they have the power to rebuild it. Writing a letter as a result of a Modified Circle in at least one case, led to an incarcerated person being restored into the family after his mother contacted him in response to a letter he wrote his former girlfriend’s grandmother. The grandmother contacted his mother in praise of the man writing her and thanking her for all she had done for him previously. His mother was moved by his newly found gratitude and contacted him.

Penny has waited twelve weeks to have her Modified Circle. Two other women who wanted one cannot because the training program is ending.

After Penny lists what she is most proud of having accomplished, each woman supporting her in the Circle, says what they like most about Penny and what her strengths are. The list of positive attributes eventually grows to 63 items including: “Honest, speaks up, loving, giving, productive, determined, creative, willing, visionary, humble.”

The Circle is a moving experience. Not only is Penny hearing what other people like about her for the first time, but her incarcerated friends are emotionally touched too. Some have tears in their eyes, including one who says, “You’re determined and loving. I know you’re gonna make it.”

The Circles generate inspiration, positive thoughts and emotions, something that the current system fails at providing because it focuses almost exclusively on deficits and what is wrong with people.

People need positive emotional experiences to change (Kast, 1994). The Circles are a welcome and needed intervention. We are requesting another grant to continue the Restorative & Solution-Focused Problem Solving Training because the women strongly advocated for it, saying they “learned things in it to help keep me out of prison.”

We have also been successful in gaining state legislative support for the Restorative Circle program (Brady & Walker, 2008). Although the current governor has refused to fund it, we are confident eventually we can get the Modified Circles institutionalized in Hawai‘i.

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