

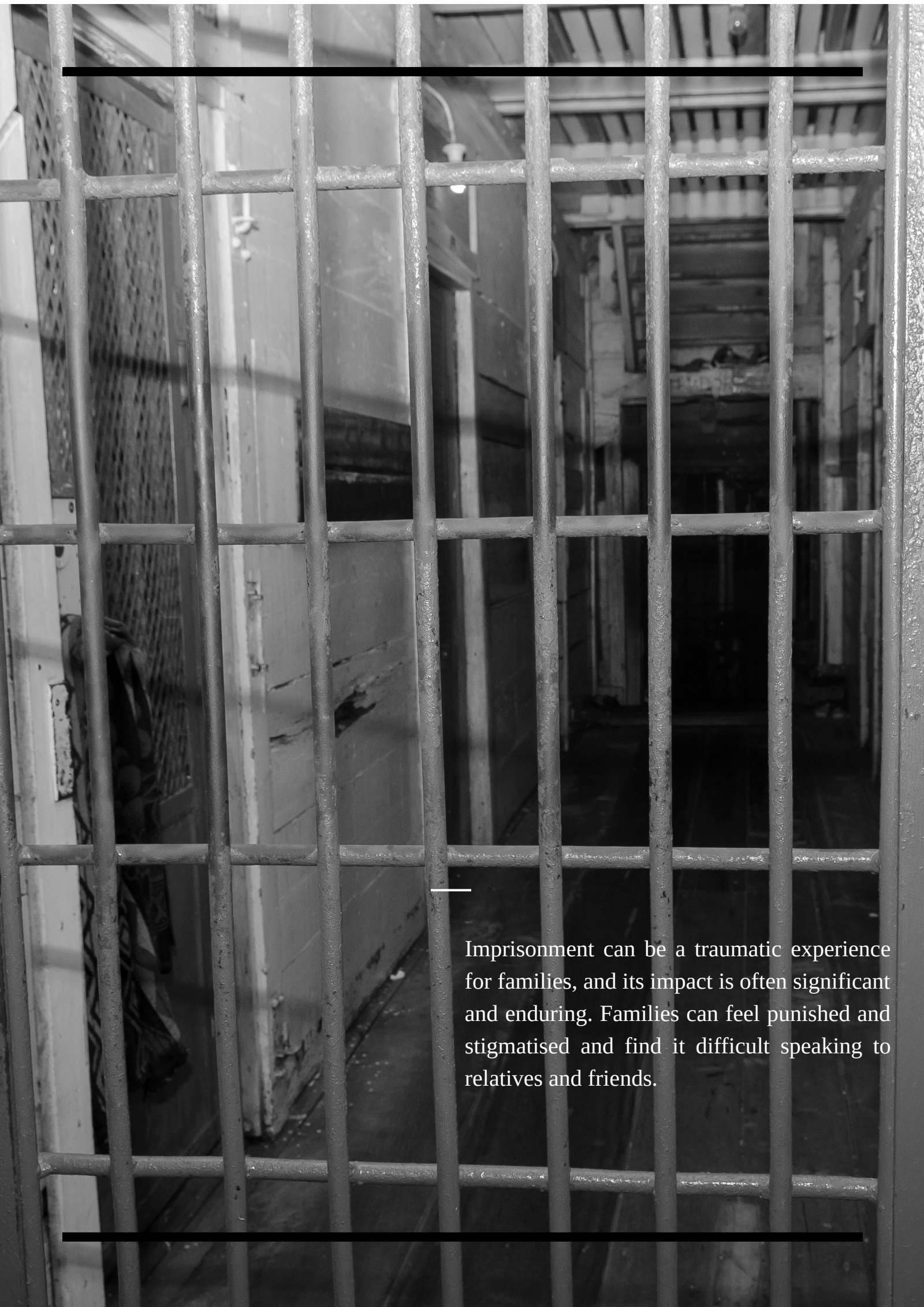


Support Pack for Families of Prisoners



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Imprisonment can be a traumatic experience for families, and its impact is often significant and enduring. Families can feel punished and stigmatised and find it difficult speaking to relatives and friends.

Introduction

When someone you care about has been accused of an offence, it can be an enormous shock. From contact with the police, through to court cases and beyond, each stage brings its own challenges, and you may experience mixed emotions. You might also find it difficult to express these concerns and feelings to others, even within your family.



This booklet has been created to help you and your family during this difficult time. Whilst some of the information may feel daunting to read at first, take your time and focus on the sections that feel relevant to you. You can return to the other sections when you are ready. Throughout this process it is important to remember that you are not alone. To remind you of this, comments from those in a similar situation have been highlighted throughout the booklet.

“ You initially feel powerless. Talking to those in a similar situation can really help. ”

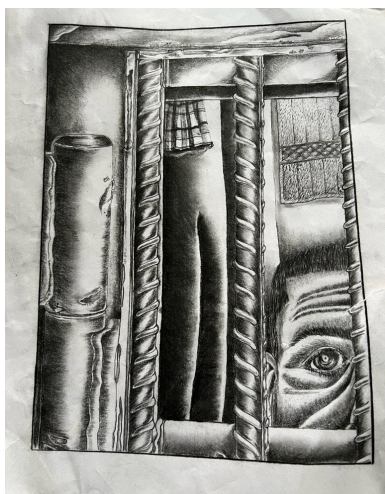
It can be hard to explain how you feel to others, or why you made certain choices. If there are sections that help to express your feelings, it may be useful to ask family members and friends to read the booklet. As a result of sharing, you may find that the booklet will help those around you to better understand your decisions.

Understanding what has happened can be a difficult first step. How can it be that a person you care about has been imprisoned? There must be an explanation or misunderstanding. The straightforward answer is simply that there is no one reason. Many different factors can contribute to why someone has been imprisoned. It can help to draw a distinction between the person your family member is, and the things they have been accused of doing. Knowing that good people can do bad things may also help.

Initial feelings



"No-one explained anything. I knew he was getting kept in but I didn't know where."



"I'm not sure whether I am strong enough to do this....."



"I'm worried about the impact this will have on the children."



The emotional journey



I wish I'd known that other people felt the same.



You are likely to have very mixed feelings about everything. It can feel like your whole world is turned upside down. This is normal - here are some common reactions to a family member or friend being imprisoned. It might help you to add some of your own feelings and concerns below.



Disbelief

- Denying
- Minimising
- Blocking out what's happened
-
-



Anger

- At other people
- The justice system
- Your family member
- Yourself
-



Sadness

- Feeling very low
- Experiencing a sense of loss for the relationship you once shared
- Isolated and unable to talk to anyone
-



Acceptance

- Finding a new way forward
- Feeling hopeful again
- Realising there is a future, albeit different than you once expected
-

When someone is convicted of a serious offence, the sense of stigma and shame can be intense. You might feel very exposed and vulnerable, and this can be really hard. It can help to speak to someone you trust and can allow you the time you need. Again, it might help to remember that you are not alone, and that others are experiencing a similar situation.


How can I avoid this breaking up my family/group of friends?

An arrest in the family doesn't just affect relationships with the family member, it also puts other relationships under a lot of strain. Everybody deals with things in their own way. There is no right or wrong way to feel. It is important to try and understand the way others are feeling, and remember that everyone reacts differently to difficult situations.

It can be helpful to know how others have reacted; below are two different reactions to one family member's situation. You may be able to relate to their responses. Both of these reactions are understandable:

DAUGHTER

In Denial
<p>Very angry - believes her father is innocent and has been set up. Found the court case and idea of her father being sent to prison very upsetting. She is looking for justice for him, and is angry at her brother's reaction.</p>

SON

Betrayed
<p>Devastated - was very close to his father. Doesn't want any further contact with him. Worried about his work, home life, and the reaction of their local community to what his father has done.</p>

Talking to those who have gone through similar experiences may also help you to better understand, and help, your own family.

Dealing with different reactions

Talk to Each Other

If possible, get everyone together and explain how you are each thinking and feeling. Remember everyone's feelings are valid, and that no one else is responsible for your family member's actions.

Establish Common Ground

Can you compromise to support others and put the things you disagree with to the side?

Allow for Change

Let yourself and others change their minds, overreact, and behave a bit out of character.

Seek Support

Your relationships may be under strain. See the 'useful contacts' section for organisations who may be able to support you.

Taking Care of Yourself

It is often the case when dealing with the effects of someone's offending behaviour that we put ourselves last. Perhaps you feel you need to be strong for everyone else. Remember that your life is important too. You should take time to work through your own thoughts and feelings and express them with those you trust. You don't need to feel like you're on your own. It is also important to prioritise your physical health.

How can I distract myself and get through the day?

It might be hard to know how to fill your time and thinking about relaxing could be the last thing on your mind. However, it's worth taking small steps. Even 20 minutes out in the day can reduce stress levels.

Here are some simple ideas. They are not a quick fix, but a place to start.

1 Make contact with someone

It could be a friend, a family member or someone neutral like a professional you work with.

2 Take yourself out the house

Plan to get out the house, whether it's to a favourite place, somewhere you don't expect to meet anyone, or out in the garden.

3 Writing

Write down your thoughts. Keeping a diary can help clear your mind. There's no need to share it with anyone unless you want to.



“

I thought if I allowed myself to get upset, I'd never get better.

”

Supporting Children

Children can feel confused or distressed when they find out the truth if adults have not been open and honest. However, it is vital that information is given in a way that is right for their age and stage of development.

How do I talk to the children about what is happening?

The situation can be distressing for children. Often how to tell them can be one of the most difficult decisions a parent or guardian can face. It might feel easier for adults not to acknowledge the situation to ensure that the child does not worry. Generally, it is better for the child to know about the offence and what has happened.

Bear in mind every situation is unique. In some situations, a child may be too young to understand, while in others the child will be able to make sense of this, or they may have seen the family member being arrested. Some children may have heard about what's happened from peers at school; others may even know the victim of the crime.

Preparing for the conversation

Try and separate your own feelings from what the child needs to know. You may feel very angry yourself, but that shouldn't influence what you say or how you say it. Think carefully about the language you'll use. It might be helpful to explain that good people can make bad choices, and when they do there are consequences.

Try putting yourself in the child's position - how will it feel to hear this information? Listen to their thoughts and concerns. Think through any questions they might have or how they might react. Preparing for this in advance can help you respond kindly and clearly. Make sure they know they can ask questions at any time, and be prepared to talk about this as they grow and develop. Like you they may also find it easier to write down or draw their thoughts and feelings.

Who else can help?



To join a support group for family members of prisoners contact:

SSYDR: Specialists in Sustained Youth Development and Research

Email: info@ssydr.org
Director: Magda Wills



If you have concerns regarding children it can help to contact their school.

Ministry of Education

Phone: 223-7900

Webpage:

<https://www.education.gov.gy>



If you or anyone you know is struggling to deal with the situation contact:

Mental Health Unit

Address: 252 Quamina Street,
South Cummingsburg.



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