

When Violence Lifts: What I Learned Working with Children and Adults in Prison

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Violence is usually discussed as an act. In my experience, it is more accurately understood as a process failure one that unfolds long before a knife is lifted or a life is lost.

I led a recovery option department in the UK's final prison for children and young people, and in adult men and women high security some prisoners had disengaged almost entirely from their inner capacity to react and respond. What I learned challenged many of my assumptions about suffering, responsibility, and recovery.

My initial assumptions and why they were wrong

When I was first asked to work with young offenders, I will be honest: I saw knives in my mind. I thought I did not have the knowledge required.

I also carried another assumption. I believed that long-term prisoners, having endured years of suffering was ready to accept a recovery potential option. I assumed that the children and youths, with years of crime ahead of them, would not yet listen.

That assumption was inaccurate.

What I learned very quickly was this: suffering alone does not organize behavior. Safety does.

What the disturbed children taught me

Many of the young people I worked with had never encountered calm, strong adult men who could say "no" without cruelty. Many had no fathers. For some, prison officers were the first men in their lives to model boundaries without violence.

What surprised me most was how quickly they responded.

There was no need for explanation, persuasion, or moral instruction. Constructive attention intact, non-intrusive, and

respectful worked immediately. They recognized integrity instantly, both male and female.

What they needed was not fixing. They needed support for abilities that were already present.

It was not age that mattered.

Adults who had given up responding

Alongside this work, I worked with men and women had given up on contact with what I can describe as their inner observer.

They were compliant, functional, and present but inwardly disengaged. When that responder goes offline, people do not recover through pressure, explanation, or force. They comply, collapse, or disappear inwardly.

Only quiet, intact attention may reach this vacant empty state of consciousness.

And when that agency returns, for some people it returns with emotional suffering not because something new has been added, but because something long suppressed is finally active again.

A man in the dark

There was one man the prison officers believed was suicidal. He sat huddled in the dark, in the corner of his cell, day and night. They referred him to our ICTp program.

I asked him whether he would consider seeing one of our team. I told him he did not have to talk. It was structural alignment support, nothing imposed.

He agreed.

After the appointment, prison staff contacted us, concerned. They said he had become extremely angry. He had harmed no one but the anger was unmistakable.

We said this was great news.

In our observation, the anger had previously been turned inward as self-destruction. What they were witnessing was not deterioration. It was recovery manifesting. Suicide risk was certain under the referral conditions.

Post the anger pain surfaced: profound sadness. He had lost his family through his own action. The grief had been unreachable previously and it was being internalized and suppressed. Previously, it had expressed itself as self-harm and collapse.

What we were seeing now was contact.

Anger returned first as self-protection. Then grief followed because it was finally safe.

Recovery is a sequence, not an emotional state.

What this means for suicide and violence prevention

We often mistake compliance for recovery and calm for safety. In reality, suppressed anger and unfelt grief are far more dangerous than visible emotion held within containment.

Violence is not a moral defect. It is a systems failure.

When responsibility is not processed when harm is denied, displaced, or projected it does not disappear. It manifests structurally, at behavioral and bodily levels, as inevitable failure: suicide, violence, collapse, homicide.

You cannot police your way out of this. You cannot medicate your way out of this.

But systems can be repaired.

Children do not need dominance. They need reliable strength.

Adults do not need coercion. They need restored agency.

Recovery does not begin with punishment or explanation. It begins when a person feels safe enough to respond again.

A person who has deteriorated to violence has been failed.

We are not projecting blame. Just reporting on the facts.