

Ending the sentence of addiction

Send Prison has the only RAPt unit for women in the country and is offering a lifeline to women who thought they had reached a dead end. The programme is no easy option – but the results for those involved can be extraordinary, as DDN found out on a recent visit.

➤ Looking round the expectant circle of faces, Navlet takes a moment to savour the importance of the occasion.

Falteringly at first, she begins to describe the steps of a very personal journey. Her voice becomes stronger and more confident as she hears the murmurs of encouragement. From time to time she breaks off to dab at her eyes with a tissue. Then she reaches the end of her second side of A4, heaves an enormous sigh, and breaks into a grin that lights up the room.

Until recently, Navlet's life was dictated by the need for crack cocaine. When the consequences led her to Holloway Prison, she was furious at the interruption, enraged by any intervention, and hostile to those who tried to help her. Her transformation to the calm serene woman sitting in the room today is nothing short of miraculous to the prison staff who knew her in the early days. To the RAPt counsellors at Send Prison's addictions treatment unit, it is confirmation that what they do works, and that the RAPt programme can turn lives around beyond recognition.

Since RAPt – Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust – began work in 1992, more than 3,000 prisoners have been through the intensive, 12-step, abstinence-based programme. Beginning with a project at HMP Downview, it was the first time substance abuse treatment programmes had been brought into UK prisons. It's a tough regime, demanding complete abstinence from drugs and alcohol from those who choose to participate – but for those who are serious about overcoming their substance problem, the outlook is hopeful: follow-up research on graduates shows a significantly higher chance of staying 'clean' – and a significantly lower rate of reconviction.

With half of all crimes drug related, according to the Home Office, and most of those entering prison having a history of drug use, it's not difficult to see prison as a logical place to tackle the cycle of drug addiction, crime and imprisonment. With each problematic drug user in the community costing the country an estimated £11,000 – a total of up to £18.8 billion a year – it has been a logical decision for the government to increase investment to prison-based drug treatment services to around £61 million a year.

Which leaves the tough choice down to the prisoner: serve the sentence while maintaining the habit every which way possible through a network of handy contacts inside – then released for more of

the same, back inside, here we go round again. Or... do they take the step towards a life changing decision, to apply for a RAPt programme?

Send Prison has the only women's RAPt addictions treatment unit in the country. Talking to prisoners who have been sent from a variety of prisons to undergo the course, highlights the choices they often face.

'I was into glue at 13, heavy drugs by 30. I would also drink, and I attempted suicide,' one says. 'My

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parents were on drugs, now my children are on drugs. I thought if I don't try and change something now, my kids don't stand a chance.'

A look round the cells at Send sums up more about the women's motivation than they could explain in a week: noticeboards crammed with photos of young children and babies. Crayoned 'I miss you mummy' pictures that should be stuck on the fridge at home.

One prisoner explained that she'd applied for the programme 'just to get out of where I was'. She tried it, railed against the 12 steps, and found herself back where she started, at her former prison. This time she's doing it for the right reasons, she says. She expects the experience to be difficult and intense, but she's going to complete it, because this time she wants to be clean.

Prisoners hear about the addictions treatment

unit through their prison induction programme, or through CARAT (Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare) teams, which are in every prison and play a guiding part in prisoners' progress before and after release.

If they decide they are interested, they go into an induction phase, where they are assessed for suitability and their drug-taking history is reviewed. This is the first difficult part, according to Sharon Hayman, a counsellor at Send, because they have to agree to have their medication reviewed.

'Quite a few have medication problems apart from their drug addiction – valium or whatever.' The counsellors work hand in hand with healthcare to get them assessed properly and look at any mood altering medication. Everything must come out in the wash here, including drug-taking history 'because quite often they've been assessed as being psychotic, or having psychotic episodes – but they haven't told you they've been on crack,' says Sharon. 'It's at this stage we really find out who the women are.'

The preparation is a two-way process. As part of the two-week induction, the women are prepared for treatment, told about group therapy, and familiarised with the whole idea of what's about to happen.

Then comes the intensive bit: three months of the primary drug programme – the 'action phase', where the inmate has to commit themselves to building up a detailed inventory of their personal defects to share and analyse with their counsellor and the rest of the group.

If you have dedicated your life to drug taking to the exclusion of all else – your partner, your children, your own welfare – this is not an easy thing to do, as the inmates explain. None of them said it was easy; in fact none of them said anything other than that it was a deeply painful, personal experience. 'You have to go through the experience of 'being broken down before you can be built back up', one explained.

'It was hard and I felt vulnerable. It was hard bringing out the past,' said another.

All had come to this stage by learning tough lessons – 'I didn't want to do this. But I lost my mum, my brother, my friends to drugs, and I'm only 25'.

But there was a sense of what more can life throw at me? – 'I'd had enough of life. I'd come to breaking point,' said one. 'Before, I just wanted to die,' added another, and there were nods of agreement.

This may all sound desperately depressing, but



Breaking free from drugs: The RAPT unit is offering these women counselling, support and friendship in their efforts to rid themselves of addiction. The programme is firm but fair, say participants, who include new graduate Navlet (far right). An unexpected bonus is the strong friendship that's borne of sharing experience of an intensely difficult and personally challenging programme.

the atmosphere in the unit is decidedly upbeat. It's obvious that the RAPT team count for much of this. Talking without staff present, the women speak in reverent tones about their firm but fair approach. RAPT manager Geraldine O'Sullivan, Sharon and her fellow counsellors take no nonsense, and cheating is not tolerated lightly (the women must agree not to associate with their mates on other wings, while they are in the drug-free unit), but the care and support they offer has given many of the women a resolve they never thought they had. The culture is polite, respectful and encouraging; Steve Murdy, residential senior officer, constantly refers to 'our ladies' with discernable pride.

From entering the unit, the women have been made to share experiences, successes, failures, and their cells – a culture shock for those who have become used to the privilege of a single room.

'The prisoners change rooms regularly,' Sharon explains. 'The first room change we have, everyone up in arms, then the older ones go "they do it all the time!" It's part of the process of learning to share, to open up, and excavate the past.'

It's also a useful introduction to peer support – an element of RAPT's programme that is credited with much of its success. More than 80 per cent of staff who work on RAPT programmes are themselves in recovery from addiction. Others who complete the programme successfully are encouraged to come back and attend sessions to help others. After 11 years of using crack and heroin, Lorraine graduated successfully and now comes back to do peer support at the unit. Her encouragement is particularly valuable: she failed the first time and was sent back to main block. She knows what it's like to struggle through real lows, and eventually succeed.

According to RAPT manager Geraldine, being in the only women's RAPT unit gives a unique opportunity for many of the inmates to experience

'connectiveness' with other women and gain strength from sharing their situation. Away from a home life that too often involves being caught up between a partner and the need for drugs, 'prisoners can sometimes make friends with women for the first time in their life,' she says.

The other element of the programme that improves the chance of long-term prospects of success, is the strong link to aftercare – once they've left the programme, and later when they leave prison. One way they do this is by introducing family conferences, explains Sharon. Members of the prisoner's family can come in and do a facilitated session with a counsellor, 'looking at how it's been for them'.

For many inmates, 'it's a chance to start talking to their families, getting honest'. One woman, close to graduation, explained how she was about to meet her mother after years of being ostracised for her prison sentence; her brother was even coming over from Australia. Being drug free gives options that some have only fantasised about for years.

The other important follow-up is secondary care in the community. 'We really push for that,' says Sharon, 'because we find they can do really well in prison, leave the gate, and 'bingo' – it's all gone wrong within moments.'

Watching Navlet at her graduation ceremony is like seeing someone truly converted, and the circle of inmates who congratulate her in turn are visibly inspired.

'Everyone supported me. Counsellors each gave me different things. I'm grateful,' she tells the room, which includes Steve the unit manager, Geraldine the RAPT manager, Sharon the counsellor, Governor Ritchie, over from main block for the occasion, and Anna Stealey, down from RAPT head office in London.

Looking round at her fellow inmates, Navlet adds: 'I feel honoured. For the first time I have real, honest, sober, clean friends.' **DDN**

The RAPT 12 Steps

- 1 We admitted that we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.
- 2 We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- 3 We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of god as we understood him.
- 4 We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- 5 We admitted to god, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- 6 We were entirely ready to have god remove all these defects of character.
- 7 We humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.
- 8 We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
- 9 We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
- 10 We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
- 11 We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with god, as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out.
- 12 Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to addicts, and to practise these principles in all our affairs.