

## OFFERING HOPE & A NEW BEGINNING

### Mental Health Matters

Mental health is about the way you think and feel and your ability to deal with life's ups and downs. Everyone's mental health fluctuates. We all have times when we feel stressed or frightened but usually these feelings pass.

Yet for some it can develop into a more serious problem with sudden mood changes. They experience a darkness that never seems to lift. They feel that life is spiralling out of control.

Mental health is a major issue in prisons.

*'Within our prisons the problems of our society are concentrated. Today we have 1,533 individuals in our care - 72% left school between 14 and 16 years of age, 50% have no formal qualifications. 60% were unemployed, 89% have a history of alcohol and/or drug misuse, 30% were receiving psychiatric or community mental health support before entering prison.'* - Ronnie Armour, Director General NI Prison Service - Jan 2020

'Prisoners,' says James, 'use terms like *my head's wrecked* or *I can't deal with this* instead of better expressing their issues, a problem I suffer from myself instead of asking for help.

Mental health covers depression, anxiety, stress, and much more. And it can spiral quickly and lead to self-harm and even suicide.

Those with mental health issues find that programmes and work within the prison help give a sense of purpose and motivation. Others have simply been supported by



the kindness of someone sitting with them and actively listening to their struggles without judgement.

But there's a stigma about mental health and often people don't fully understand its effects.

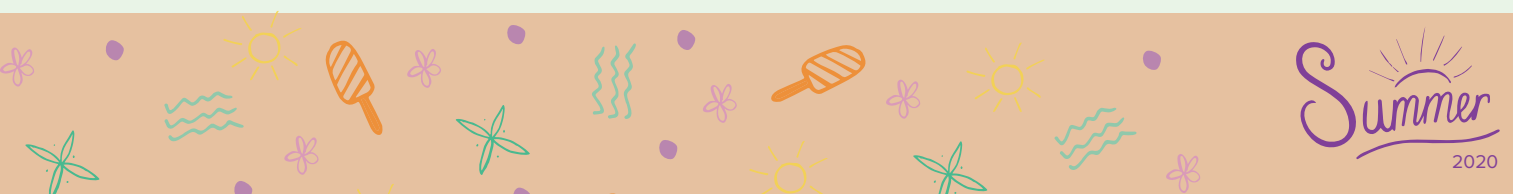
Members of a support group for those suffering from depression meet once a week to socialise and support each other. Even if it's just to say *you are not alone*. One guy shared how he had gone to the shop not because he needed food but just for a chat with the person at the counter, only to find it was self-service! Everyone laughed, but I understood his loneliness.

Since the lockdown, more people are suffering from mental health issues.

Personally, I miss seeing my friends and family. I miss mixing with others and I'm stuck alone in my flat. I've gotten through these last ten weeks by gaming, painting, and cycling. Keeping a routine is vital for mental health but it's been tough. A weekly phone call from the PF Voices of Hope choir has kept me connected and that's been a real blessing. We must find small mercies to keep us going.

More needs to be done to help and support one other. Light will always shine through the dark times. No matter how dark it gets, we can get through this one day at a time.'

**James - Christian. Artist. Gamer. Mental health friend.**



## No Dark is Too Dark for God

Last May, Kate did a month placement with us as part of her theology degree with Belfast Bible College. She completed her dissertation on the mental health of prisoners and ex-prisoners. Some PF staff and the Voices of Hope choir kindly helped in her research.

'I found it difficult,' said Kate, 'to hear of the challenges prisoners and ex-prisoners face [regarding] their mental health. Yet it was encouraging to personally see how God is moving, showing hope and redemption in a time of hopelessness and seeming despair.'

The most common ways in which it manifests itself are through depression, anxiety, anger, and eating disorders.

Stemming from these are links with suicide and self-harm, which have alarming statistics. The probability of committing suicide upon release is eight times more likely than the general population for men. And for women it's thirty-six times more in Northern Ireland.

While on my placement with PF, every individual who bravely opened up expressed feelings of despair, emptiness, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. To not only be within a prison cell physically but mentally, only increases the distress and hopelessness, leaving them feeling there is no way out.

I was deeply drawn to the work of PF after hearing of the



hope they bring to those behind and beyond bars. This is not a false hope but a hope to cling to; a lifesaving hope. It's so important for them to hear that just because of their current position it doesn't mean they are not a human created by God or beyond His Love.

For many, the struggle with mental health doesn't simply disappear. We aren't promised a life without struggles.

However, we are promised hope and this is something we need to pray about. It's a hope that anchors the soul when we're overwhelmed. Not only is this hope living, but in Christ, this hope is within us.

*Psalm 139:12 says, 'even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.'*

There is no darkness that His radiance can't break into. That brings hope even in uncertain times and reminds us of the hope we have in Christ. I encourage you to pray on for those struggling with mental health. No dark is too dark for God'.

## Wash Your Hands

Benny has been in and out of prison for many years and often committed a crime just to get back inside where he felt safe and loved. He found it difficult to cope with life in 'the outside world' and suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts.

God changed his life four years ago and lifted his depression.

Today, he has just completed Bible College training and is working full-time for an employer who wanted to give him a second chance when he got out of prison.

During these past weeks, many people have been asked to stop working or have lost their jobs but for Benny, he has been even busier.

We contacted him to make sure he was okay and able to get to work as the trains and buses were on a reduced

schedule. He said he was worried about going to work as he didn't want to catch the virus but was very happy to still be in a job. His employer had been good to him by changing his hours to suit public transport.

When we asked him how work was going, he replied, "Busier than ever. I'm now making hand washes, you know the ones you use when you go in and out of all the shops? We make them. Thousands of them. In fact, we can't make enough of them. The only thing stopping us making more is that we are going to run out of bottles!"

So, the next time you go into a shop and you're asked to wash your hands with the anti-bacterial wash, you might well know one of the fellas that made it!



## Family Ministry in Lockdown

Research recognises that regular contact with family plays an important role in improving mental wellbeing for both prisoners and their families.

With the lockdown, family visits in prison are temporarily suspended and prisoners' families are struggling with this lack of contact. Although home visits for our Family Workers have been put on hold, Tracie and Sandra have adapted to find new ways to minister, but its not been without its struggles and frustrations.

'After four weeks into lockdown', says Sandra, 'some were talking about *exit strategies* but I have to admit, after making what seemed like my hundredth phone call, it dawned on me how much life has changed. It was going to be a long time before we would return to anything that resembles 'normal' life.

Family work was never designed to be done over a phone - not long term at least. Since the restrictions were announced, most of my time has been spent catching up with my families over the phone. At Easter I raided my local Tesco's for cards to send to the families I support and to show them they hadn't been forgotten. With fear and anxiety taking hold of people's hearts and minds, I wanted to point them to the One who conquered the grave, and who is fully in control, and who says '*do not fear.*'

In May, Tracie and I contacted the families with children to offer the Boredom Buster activity packs, which Joanne put together.



Many were incredibly grateful for the call and we safely delivered them to 180 families. Food and essential items were also delivered to those struggling with loneliness and isolation. Our *Hands Up* programme has been busier than ever. We have never seen a greater need for those receiving these meals, with many facing the question of where their next one will come from.

One single mum with two teenage children and a younger child was extremely grateful for food parcels.

'I can't thank you enough...I can't put into words what your support has done for me and my children.. thank you, and thank God for sending you my way, I'll always remember.'

## Much More Than A Little Gift

'Many of the men I work with,' says Neil 'are struggling financially and mentally with the restrictions of lockdown.

We've had several men contact us for help with food, electric, gas, and with loneliness and isolation. Providing Aftercare under lockdown conditions has been very difficult. To reduce the amount of travel required, I've restricted home visits to emergency situations only and make essential work journeys once or twice a week.

Moving around has become very stressful. Gloves, masks, seat covers, hand wash, anti-bacterial sprays, and some home-made PPE are carefully boxed in the boot of my car. Picking up essential items from the supermarket is a frustrating and even impossible task. Yet, we continue to meet the needs of the men we care for who need help. It was after one such difficult day that I returned home exhausted. I felt I had been swimming against the tide,



walking in quicksand, trying to help those in need with both hands tied behind my back. As I washed my hands for the 20th time that day I decided to check the post. It was there I found an amazing surprise. Sticking out of the letterbox was a white envelope with the words: *A little gift for Prison Fellowship from Mary & Gary.*

Mary and Gary faithfully support the work of Prison Fellowship and their gift lifted me so much. As I was struggling, they were praying and sending a *little gift*. For me this was much more. Thank you to everyone who supports us through giving a little gift each day – when all these little gifts are given, God allows us to *do exceedingly abundantly more than we ever could imagine.*'