

Peer support for young people

If there are several young people affected by the imprisonment of a loved one who can come together either in person or online, it can be a very effective way of linking them up for group support.

Research shows that young people often keep the issue of imprisonment to themselves as they worry about people sharing information about them without their knowledge or consent. Privacy is important to many young people, and as a result, they may become isolated.

However, when given the opportunity to be with others, they are often free from the stigma attached to imprisonment issues as they know that everyone is in a similar situation. Being in a group does not mean they have to talk about the imprisonment directly – they often choose not to – but they can explore some concepts with others who are more likely to understand.

Group plans

This set of six supportive group sessions can be run by someone with the confidence and knowledge to work with a group of young people facing imprisonment issues. The sessions are designed to be between 40 minutes and 1 hour long. Each session has a theme and consists of four consistent elements so that the structure is known and provides a safe space for young people to talk.

Participation

Part of the principle of group safety is that participants are not forced to share if they do not want to. With this in mind, giving young people the power to 'pass' is helpful, with no questions asked and no comments made. Everyone should feel safe, validated and supported, regardless of where they are on their journey.

Facilitation

The sessions are designed to be an outline structure with room for flexibility, as the person running the sessions will know the group best. You can adapt the activities to the group, making them more straightforward for younger children or more in-depth for older children, for example. The groups work on the principle that feeling 'heard' is a powerful therapeutic healing tool, so the facilitator's role is to ensure that the space is fair, respectful and held. The structure of these sessions should work for virtual online groups and in-person groups.

Session 1 – Change

Required resources

A4 paper and writing/drawing materials.

Check-in

In a go-around, introduce yourself to the group. Share:

- The name you wish to be known by in the group
- How you feel about being here today
- Something you would like the group to know about you.

If this is the group's first session, you may wish to set group rules, explain the structure, etc. We are all here because we share a common experience, but that doesn't mean it's all we talk about.

Individual activity

Introduce the theme of changes. Everyone goes through changes in their lives, some big and some small. Some changes are good, but some can be difficult. Some are natural changes, such as things that happen to our bodies as we age, and some are less natural. Some we have more control over, and some we don't.

Individually, create a map of the changes in your life. You can make a list or draw them as a roadmap. Whatever works for you. As you create your changes, consider whether they are big or small, what feelings are attached to them and how much say you have in them.

Group activity

Choose one of the changes in your life to share with the group. It could be anything you want to talk about – 'positive' or 'negative', and it doesn't have to be about imprisonment. You can share your map if you wish, but you don't have to. You may wish to allow group discussion about changes after the go-around if there are themes or people have questions.

Check-out

A quote (attributed to Socrates) says, "The secret of change is to focus your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new". As a check-out, ask each person in a go-around to say a bit about whether they agree or disagree with this and why. It sounds very simple, but is it? What gets in the way?

Session 2 – Being apart

Required resources

Medium-sized lengths of different coloured string/wool

Check-in

In a go-around, introduce yourself to the group to bring yourself into the space. Share: Something that has changed for you in the last week, and what it was like for you

Individual activity

Introduce the theme of 'being apart': sometimes we can't be with someone or something that we want to, sometimes due to one of the changes we discussed in the previous session. Sometimes, the person (or thing – it could be a house or a pet, for example) that we are apart from is the result of a choice, and sometimes, it is something we have no control over. We might have all sorts of feelings about being apart; we might be glad if it was someone who made us feel bad, or we might feel sad if it was someone we loved. We might feel both at the same time, and it can be difficult and confusing. Or sometimes it's not!

We can think of ourselves as still attached to a person that we are apart from by an invisible string, made up of all sorts of things that we connect with that person. It could be happy memories of places we went, or times when they made us feel afraid – it could be anything.

Pick some of the lengths of string that represent a link with the person that you are apart from. For example, you might pick a yellow string to remember being out with them on a sunny day. Make a visible string by knotting or plaiting the strings together to make your 'invisible string' a bit more visible.

Group activity

Pick one of the strands in your invisible string to tell the group about in a go-around. What makes it link to the person or thing you are apart from? What sort of connection is it for you? Do you want to keep it, or wish you could cut it?

Check-out

Although we are apart from some people and things that we love and want to be close to, sometimes this isn't possible. However, we do have people who are still around us. In a go-around, ask each group member to name someone they are not apart from that they have in their lives as a supportive person (or thing).

Session 3 – Keeping connected

Required resources

Plain paper and writing/drawing materials.

Check-in

In a go-around, introduce yourself to the group to bring yourself into the space. Share: Something positive that has happened since the last session.

Individual activity

Introduce the theme of connection. When we are apart from people, we can find ways to stay connected to them. There are many ways to do this, such as imagining what they are doing, writing a letter, visiting, drawing or creating something, using messages, emails, phone calls or video calls.

Individually, create something you can use to connect to the person you are away from. You may wish to write them a letter or draw them something. You might write out a text conversation or just make a note of something you want to talk about in a phone conversation. You don't have to show anyone what you have done, and you don't have to give it to the person if you don't want to. This is just for you; we won't ask about it in the group.

Group activity

It is important to us as human beings that we feel connected with someone. This could be someone in our family, a friend, a trusted adult – anyone we can count on to be there for us.

Imagine that one of your friends has told you they don't have anyone they feel connected to. In a go-around, ask each person to give the imaginary friend some advice.

Check-out

As a go-around, each person can say one thing they want to say to the person they are apart from and/or a person they feel connected to.

Session 4 – Memories

Required resources

Paper and pens. An empty first aid box if you have one!

Check-in

In a go-around, introduce yourself to the group to bring yourself into the space. Share:
A memory that makes you smile.

Individual activity

Introduce the theme of memories. Memories of good times help us through the bad times and remind us that there is light, hope and better days ahead. It's important to make good memories so that we have them to support us when things aren't going so well.

Individually, create a memory board of good things that help us to feel hopeful and positive. It could be anything – big things like family holidays or something small like a joke a friend told you once.

Group activity

Imagine that we are creating a first aid kit for your mind. Instead of plasters and bandages, we will put in other things to help when our mind feels sad, such as a song, a favourite chocolate treat, photographs, tickets or receipts, a small item that reminds us of something, a book, poem or film that cheers us up, etc.

Collaborate on your first aid kit, each contributing at least one thing to the group kit (you could do this verbally or draw/write things to put in).

Check-out

As a go-around, each person can say one thing that supports them when they need a pick-me-up.

Session 5 – Forgiveness

Check-in

In a go-around, introduce yourself to the group to bring yourself into the space. Share:
A memory that you have made since the last session.

Individual activity

Introduce the theme of forgiveness. We are all hurt by someone from time to time – sometimes the person who hurt us didn't mean to, and sometimes they did. It can be hard to forgive someone for hurting us, but in the end, it hurts us more to hold on to the hurt. Forgiving someone isn't always easy and can take time, but it usually makes us feel better in the long run. Sometimes, we are the person who has hurt someone else, so this works both ways. Sometimes, we also need to forgive ourselves for something, too! Individually, draw around your hand on a piece of paper. In the palm, write why it is important to forgive. On each finger, write a way that you could do this.

Group activity

Imagine that your friend, Mo, has argued with another of your friends, Josh. Both of them have spoken to you about it, and both said the other said hurtful things to them. As a group, decide what your advice to each of them would be. How could they forgive each other? What do they need to move on? How might you help?

Check-out

As a go-around, each person can say one thing that they are grateful for.

Session 6 – Moving forward

Check-in

In a go-around, introduce yourself to the group to bring yourself into the space. Share: How you have found the sessions to be for you.

Individual activity

Introduce the theme of moving forward. Moving on can mean many things – it can mean moving on in your head or physically, like from one school to another. We're always moving somewhere as we go forward in life, and this means changes, sometimes big ones. New beginnings come up, which usually means endings of other things.

Individually, think about what 'moving on' means for you. Think back to a time when you had to move on. Perhaps it was moving from primary to secondary school or moving house. On one side of the paper, write what you were worried about beforehand; on the other, write how you feel about those worries now.

Group activity

Imagine yourself and those in your group in 5 years. How will you all have moved on from where you are today? How will you feel? What will you be doing? Together, you will write a postcard to your group in the future.

Check-out

Each group member can answer one of the following questions as a go-around:

- Something I have learned about myself is...
- Something I will remember about this group is....
- One thing I would change about this group is