

A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES COPING WITH LIFE AFTER ARREST

INTRODUCTION

The arrest of a family member is a very difficult experience to deal with. However, there is help at hand. This page will provide advice on how to cope with the initial shock, and the implications of an arrest. You will also learn how Jigsaw Visitors' Centre can help you through with information, advice and support.



How families are affected

Having a family member sent to prison is a frightening and traumatic experience, especially when family members see it happening. Many partners struggle to come to terms with what has happened for some time afterwards, reporting that they feel as though they are stuck in a bad dream. For some, a partners' arrest may come completely out of the blue, while others may have been fearing such an event for some time – either way, partners are often left feeling stunned and overwhelmed. Witnessing arrests and police searches can be especially terrifying for children. Regardless of their age, children tend to be profoundly affected – children who are able to understand what has happened may feel devastated to have a family member taken away from them, while younger children, and even babies, will sense the heightened emotions and stress in the adults around them. The effects on children often continue to be felt long after the arrest. Many have recurring nightmares, and often fear that their other parent, or other family members, will also be taken away from them. In cases where the arrest receives coverage from the media, children of all ages will also have to deal with the difficulty of increased attention and their friends' reactions to events. In a high number of cases, children also suffer the disruption of being put into the care of neighbours or relatives, or even the stress of being taken to a police station and having their situation dealt with by social services. Occasionally, however, children are surprisingly at ease with what has happened, and even draw attention to the matter at uncomfortable times. This can be an added strain for parents and other family members.

Coming to terms with what has happened

In the immediate aftermath of an arrest, families face a number of difficulties. Many struggle with feelings of shame and guilt, particularly when an arrest is of a violent or sexual nature. Coverage of the arrest in the media can also bring unwanted attention, and make families feel as if the whole

world knows what has happened and is judging them. However, it is important to remember that any crime committed does not reflect on your own character. Some families suffer harassment from neighbours or complete strangers, sometimes through threatening phone calls or notes. In these circumstances, it is vital that people keep a record of what happens and seek assistance from the Police. The Police or a Housing Association may be able to help if you feel you may be forced to move to an area that can afford you greater safety.

How to tell people about what has happened

While the impact of an arrest can be shattering, it is important to decide how to tell family, friends and neighbours about what has happened. The most important thing is to consider just what you feel comfortable telling people, and not to feel obliged to divulge anything that you feel uncomfortable talking about. Explaining the matter to children can also be complicated. Most families find that, even if they make brave attempts to try to cover up the fact that a family member is in prison, children tend to be smart enough to figure out the truth. More often than not, it is better to be honest with your children as soon as you feel able to deal with the matter truthfully – while the immediate impact may hurt them, it is usually best to give children as long as possible to adjust to what has happened.

When you will have first contact

Although prisoners cannot receive incoming calls, you should be able to speak to them shortly after their imprisonment. Most prisoners are given the opportunity to make one free call home during their first 24 hours in prison. In the event that the prison phones are especially busy, you should still hear from them by the next day at the latest, unless on a Public Protection order where their numbers will have to be checked.

Who to talk to about worries you may have

Some family members worry that their relative may be at risk of self-harm or suicide. In such instances, you can either call the prison and request to speak to the Control Room who will deal with the situation for you, or telephone the free Prisoners' Families Helpline service on 0808 808 2003. Some people find it hard to talk to the prison directly. In these circumstances, the Jigsaw Visitors' Centre is on hand to provide a friendly and experienced means of support. Our visitors' centre offers information and advice, as well as facilities for children. You can speak to us about any matters concerning you in complete confidence, whether you are struggling to deal with emotional stress, financial concerns, loneliness and discrimination, feelings of isolation or childcare concerns. You can telephone Jigsaw on 0113 203 2581 or pop in and visit us on any day of the week (see opening times here). More information is also available through our Information Brochure. You can also call the prison and ask for the chaplain, who will be able to arrange to visit your relative on your behalf. Simply contact the prison's multi-faith team on 0113 203 2704.

Dealing with financial concerns

In some instances, the arrested partner has been claiming income support. If this is the case for you, you will need to transfer the support claim to yourself at your nearest post office. As your family will now be treated as a 'One Income' family, you may be entitled to additional benefits – you can find out if you are due further support by visiting your local Jobcentre Plus, Social Security office or Citizens' Advice Bureau. Many families find it hard to cope financially when a partner is sent to prison, especially if they need to bring up children. Families can end up in debt, which can cause further anxiety. It is important to consider how you can live within your means, make savings wherever possible and to ensure that you can pay for anything that your children need. It is also crucial to carefully consider the potential risks before taking on any debt. As well as taking care to keep the financial situation as healthy as possible at home, it is also important to be open with your partner about any concerns involving money. Many attempt to hide the truth of financial difficulties from their partners, but it is important to make sure that everyone is aware of financial constraints and possible problems. Odd as it may seem, many families find that they are actually better off when a family member goes to prison. This is sometimes the case when someone had a problem with drugs, alcohol or gambling. Getting into good habits whilst a partner is in prison can have many long-term benefits. Jigsaw can help you get in touch with agencies who can give advice on financial matters, and the One Parent Families free phone service (0800 018026) is also able to offer information and support about coping with debt.

Coping with life after an arrest

Learning to cope with the separation and altered circumstances caused by an arrest is something that takes a long time. Helping children to deal with the loss of a parent is especially difficult, and the major changes to day-to-day life can make things a struggle. In addition to an increased responsibility for their children's well-being, parents also need to ensure that they maintain good communication with their partner in prison. This is especially important, as many parents can fall into the trap of believing that there is nothing that their imprisoned partner can do to help their situation on the outside. However, communication of problems can help everyone, with the parent on the outside feeling glad to get things off their chest, and the parent on the inside glad to feel well-informed of how their family are doing. Often, imprisoned parents can have a positive effect by assuring children that they are coping well and helping talk through problems. Keeping the imprisoned parent abreast of news and difficulties can also make it easier for families to slip back into 'normal' life once the sentence is over. If someone coming out of prison is suddenly faced with difficult problems to deal with, or is suddenly made aware of major changes that have taken place in their home, they may find it hard to readjust to life outside. Even in cases where the prison term is relatively short, it is important that single parent families take advantage of the help available to them. In addition to the services provided by Jigsaw, organisations like Gingerbread (The Lone Parent Helpline – 0808 802 0925) specialise in offering lone parents advice and support.