



# Anxiety

A self help guide  
for people in prison

#BreakTheSilence  
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# **Anxiety**

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**“Bad with your nerves”**

**“A worrier”**

**“Stressed out”**

**“Unable to relax”**

**“Tense and nervous”**

... are all phrases we might use to describe someone who has a problem with anxiety. If someone has too much stress for too long, anxiety is very often the result. This booklet is about anxiety, and aims to help you to:

- See whether or not you may be suffering from symptoms of anxiety.
- Understand what anxiety is, what can cause it, and what can keep it going.
- Overcome your anxiety by learning better ways of coping with it.

The booklet has been written by psychologists and people who have experienced prison.

## **Is it normal to feel anxious?**

Anxiety is something we all experience from time to time. It is a normal response to situations that we see as a threat to us. For example, if we had to go into hospital, or to court, or if we have to attend a prison adjudication or wing review board, it would be normal to feel anxious. Anxiety at certain levels can even be helpful in some situations, like when we need to act under pressure, or cope with an emergency. Most people feel anxious at first when they come to prison. This is a normal response.

## **Some anxiety is not at all helpful because:**

- Symptoms of anxiety, whilst not dangerous, can be **uncomfortable**.
- Symptoms can also be **frightening** particularly if someone does not know that these symptoms are just signs of anxiety.
- Sometimes people with anxiety symptoms **worry** that they may have something seriously wrong with them. This worry can then produce more anxiety symptoms which of course increases the worry!
- When anxiety is severe and goes on for a long time it **can stop people doing what they want to do**.

Many people experience a problem with anxiety at some point in their life and often this is linked with stress. Anxiety is a common problem for people in prison.

## **How can this guide help me?**

It may seem that nothing can help to ease anxiety. Perhaps you have experienced it for a long time and worrying feels like a habit. Or you may feel that your anxiety has been caused by being in prison. But there are things you can do to reduce your anxiety and make it feel better. Perhaps the first step is to see whether or not you have a problem with anxiety.

## **Do I have a problem with anxiety?**

- “Whenever the cell door opens or closes I jump and feel worried.”
- “Sometimes during association my heart starts to pound, and I start to sweat. Having to be amongst lots of people in prison makes me tense and sometimes I snap at others even though I don’t mean to”.



- “When I’m waiting for a visit or looking to see if I have got a letter my throat feels tight and my mouth goes dry. I begin to get panicky and it feels like I’m going to stop breathing”.
- “Sometimes for no reason when I’m out on the landing my mind starts to race, I feel like I’m going to lose control and go mad or something”.
- “I feel angry and irritable and on edge all the time”.

These are some typical experiences of people who suffer from anxiety in prison. If you are suffering from anxiety you may have thoughts like these yourself. Sometimes it is possible to have anxiety and not even know it, particularly if you don’t think of yourself as an anxious person. People often mistake symptoms of anxiety for a physical illness. Therefore, the first step in learning to deal with anxiety is seeing whether anxiety is a problem for you.

**Anxiety can affect us in at least four different ways. It affects:**

- The way we feel.
- The way we think.
- The way our body works.
- The way we behave.

**In order to check out whether you may be suffering from anxiety, place a tick next to those symptoms you experience regularly:**

**How you feel**

- Anxious, nervous, worried, frightened ☐
- Feeling something dreadful is going to happen ☐
- Tense, stressed, uptight, on edge, unsettled ☐
- Unreal, strange, woozy, detached ☐
- Panicky ☐

### **How you think**

- Constant worrying ☐
- Can't concentrate ☐
- Thoughts racing ☐
- Mind jumping from one thing to another ☐
- Imagining the worst and dwelling on it ☐

### **Common thoughts**

- "I'm losing control" ☐
- "I'm cracking up" ☐
- "I'm going to faint" ☐
- "My legs are going to collapse" ☐
- "I'm going to have a heart attack" ☐
- "I'm going to make a fool of myself" ☐
- "I can't cope" ☐
- "I've got to get out" ☐
- "I'm finished" ☐

### **What happens to your body**

- Heart pounds, races, skips a beat ☐
- Chest feels tight or painful ☐
- Tingling or numbness in toes or fingers ☐
- Stomach churning or butterflies ☐
- Having to go to the toilet ☐
- Jumpy or restless ☐
- Tense muscles ☐
- Body aching ☐
- Sweating ☐
- Breathing changes ☐
- Dizzy, light headed ☐

### **What you do**

- Pace up and down ☐
- Start things and not finish ☐
- Fidget ☐
- Stay on the go all of the time ☐
- Talk quickly or more than usual ☐



- Become snappy and irritable ☐
- Drink alcohol (Hooch perhaps) ☐
- Use drugs ☐
- Want to smoke more ☐
- Want to eat more (or less) ☐
- Avoid feared situations ☐
- Shut yourself away from others ☐

If you are regularly experiencing some or all of these symptoms, then it is likely that you have anxiety.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the feeling we get when our body responds to a frightening or threatening experience. It has been called the **fight or flight** response and is simply your body preparing for action, either to fight danger or run away from it as fast as possible. The purpose of the physical symptoms of anxiety, therefore, is to prepare your body to cope with threat. To understand what is happening in your body, imagine for a minute that you hear someone creeping up behind you. You feel you are about to be attacked. As soon as you are aware of the threat your muscles tense ready for action. Your heart beats faster to carry blood to your muscles and brain, where it is most needed. You breathe faster to provide oxygen which is needed for energy. You sweat to stop your body overheating. Your mouth becomes dry and your tummy has butterflies. If you then realise that the attacker is in fact a friend, the feelings die away, but you may feel shaky and weak after the experience.



The **fight or flight response** is a really basic system that probably goes back to the days of cave men, and is present in animals who depend on it for their survival. Fortunately, we are not often nowadays in such life or death situations, but unfortunately many of the stresses we do face can't be fought or run away from. So the symptoms don't help, in fact they often make us feel worse, especially if we don't understand them.

## **What causes anxiety?**

There may be many reasons why someone becomes anxious.

- Some people may have an anxious personality and have learned to worry.
- Others may have had a lot of stressful things to cope with, for example bereavements, redundancy, divorce, going to court, or going to prison.
- Prison brings many pressures and often people in prison find it difficult to cope.

## **What keeps anxiety going?**

Sometimes anxiety can go on and on, and become a life long problem. There can be a number of reasons for this:

- If someone has an anxious personality and is a worrier, then they will probably be in the habit of feeling anxious.
- Sometimes people have ongoing stresses over a number of years, which means they develop the habit of being anxious.
- **Circle of anxiety** – As the bodily symptoms of anxiety can be frightening, unusual and unpleasant, people often react by thinking that there is something physically wrong, or that something truly awful is going to happen. This in itself causes more symptoms, and so a circle develops. It can be like a roundabout you can't get off. It can look a bit like this:



- **Fear of Fear** – Someone who has experienced anxiety in a certain situation may start to predict feeling anxious, and become frightened of the symptoms themselves, this in turn actually causes the very symptoms that are feared.

**Fear of anxious symptoms coming on** —————→ **Causes bodily symptoms**

**Avoidance** - once an anxiety circle has developed, with lots of anxious thoughts increasing the anxiety symptoms, avoidance is often used as a way of coping. It is natural to avoid something that is dangerous, but the sorts of things that people tend to avoid when they suffer from anxiety are most often not real dangers but places that make them anxious; for example, shops, eating in public, crowded places, going to association or going out on the prison exercise yard.

Not only are these things not dangerous, but they are quite useful. Avoiding them can make life very inconvenient and difficult. This sort of avoidance can also result in a great loss of confidence which can affect how good you feel about yourself, which in turn makes you feel more anxious.

### **To summarise**

- Anxiety is often the body's response to stress, although some of us may be a bit more prone to anxiety and worry than others.
- When we are suffering from anxiety, whilst it can be unpleasant, it is our body's normal response to threat or danger and is not dangerous.
- Anxiety symptoms are part of the fight or flight response and are intended to be helpful in spurring us into action.
- Anxiety becomes a problem when the symptoms are:
  - severe and unpleasant;
  - going on too long;
  - happening too often;
  - causing us to worry that there is something seriously wrong;
  - stopping us doing what we want to do.
- Anxiety often becomes a vicious circle where our symptoms, thoughts and behaviour keep the anxiety going.

**Now spend a few moments trying to write down any of these ways that your anxiety may be being kept going.**

Unpleasant/frightening symptoms you experience:

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Your beliefs and thoughts about these symptoms:

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Everyday things that you are avoiding:

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Current stresses in your life:

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**How can I manage my anxiety better?**

As we have learned, anxiety is not an illness and so can't be cured. If we can break into the circle of anxiety, however, we can learn ways of reducing our anxiety and getting it to be more manageable. We can work on at least four different areas:

- 1. Understanding our anxiety better.
- 2. Reducing physical symptoms.
- 3. Altering our thoughts related to anxiety.
- 4. Changing our behaviours related to anxiety.

## 1. Understanding anxiety

You may already by now have some ideas about what is causing your anxiety. The following sections will give advice on how to break out of the vicious circle that keeps anxiety going. Before you can do this though, it is really useful for you to understand your own anxiety better. Is your anxiety related to certain situations, places or people? Is it worse at particular times of the day? Are there realistic worries you have that would make anyone anxious?

The following two exercises should help you to understand your anxiety better.

- **Anxiety Diary** - for a period of two weeks (or longer if you prefer) keep an hourly diary of your anxiety and activity level. Rate your anxiety from 0-10. Note down anything that seems important. Where were you at the time, who were you with, what were you doing, what were you thinking about? You may start to become more aware of situations that make you anxious or that you may even be avoiding. What is your general level of stress like?



This information will help you begin to tackle your anxiety.

- **Worry** - if you become aware that you have a realistic worry or problem that you feel may be causing you anxiety, a **problem solving** approach may help.

A good way to begin is to write down a problem. Define it as clearly as you can, for example “I don’t get on with people”, is too vague, something like “John appears to have stopped talking to me and this is upsetting me” is better.

Next, write down as many possible solutions as you can. It doesn't matter how silly you may think the solutions are, the point is to think of as many as you can. Try to think how you have solved similar problems in the past. Ask a friend or Listener what they might do. Think to yourself what you might advise a friend to do if they had the same problem, e.g. possible solutions:

- ask John what is wrong
- check with others if he's not talking to them
- be pleasant to John
- tell yourself, "so what if John's not talking?"
- talk to someone else instead of John

**If you have a problem that may be making you anxious, try writing it below:**

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**Now list as many possible solutions as you can:**

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Choose what seems like the best solution and write down all the steps it would take to achieve that solution. Who might help? What might go wrong? Often it is helpful to think, “What is the worst thing that could happen?” If you can think of a plan to cope with this, your anxiety might reduce.

If you are trying to come up with a plan to tackle a problem that has been worrying you for some time, it is often helpful to discuss this with someone else whose opinion you value. If your worry is one that you have no control over, and can do nothing about, try just accepting this and letting it go.

### Stress - general tips

Prison life is often stressful, and it is easy for pressures to build up. We can't always control the stress that comes from events around us but we can find ways to reduce the pressure we put on ourselves:

- Try to identify situations you find stressful by noticing the beginnings of tension, for example tightness in the back of your neck or clenching your fists.
- Take steps to tackle what it is about these situations that you find stressful.
- Make sure you have time for things you enjoy. Try to do something you find relaxing each day, e.g: drawing, reading, watching TV, exercising, perhaps jogging on the exercise yard if possible, or meditating.
- Talk to family and friends as often as you can.
- Try and make sure you get the right amount of sleep.





- Try and eat a well balanced diet. Whenever fruit or salad is available make sure you take it.
- Take regular exercise. Ask to go to the gym or work out your own exercise routine, if you can, even if this means sit-ups and press-ups in your cell.
- Learn to relax. (See if books or tapes on relaxation techniques are available in the library. If not, put in a special order to the librarian. They will be only too glad to help).



## 2. Reducing physical symptoms

### **Relaxation**

In order to reduce the severity of physical symptoms it is useful to nip them in the bud, by recognising the early signs of tension.

Once you have noticed early signs of tension you can prevent anxiety becoming too severe by using relaxation techniques. Some people can relax through exercise, listening to music, watching TV, or reading a book.

For others it is more helpful to have a set of exercises to follow. Some might find yoga helpful. Check if there is a class in the prison. Check if Healthcare staff know of, or run stress management courses.



Relaxation is a skill like any other which needs to be learned, and takes time. The following exercise teaches deep muscle relaxation, and many people find it very helpful in reducing overall levels of tension and anxiety.

## **Deep muscle relaxation**

It is helpful to read the instructions first and to learn them eventually. Choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed to begin with. Any time spent in your cell is a good time to practice. Lie down, on the floor or on the bed, get comfortable, close your eyes. Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly: in two-three and out two-three. Say the words calm or relax to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax. You should breathe in when tensing and breathe out when you relax.

Starting with your hands, clench one fist tightly. Think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm.

Study the tension for a few seconds and then relax your hand, saying relax in your mind. Notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling, this is the relaxation beginning to develop.

Do the same with the other hand. Then move to the forearms, the biceps, the shoulders, the neck and so on until you have tensed and relaxed as many muscle groups as you can think of.

Each time you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they're relaxed. Don't try to relax, just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they're relaxed and when they're tense. Enjoy the sensation.

**It is useful to stick to the same order as you work through the muscle groups:**

- **Hands** - clench fist, then relax.
- **Arms** - bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.

- **Neck** - press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.
- **Face** - there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.
- **Chest** - take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.
- **Stomach** - tense your stomach muscles as tight as you can and relax.
- **Buttocks** - squeeze your buttocks together, and relax.
- **Legs** - straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face. Finish by wiggling your toes.



### **To make best use of relaxation you need to:**

- Practice daily.
- Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- Learn to relax without having to tense muscles.
- Use parts of the relaxation to help in difficult situations, eg breathing slowly.
- Develop a more relaxed way of dealing with life.

Remember relaxation is a skill like any other and takes time to learn. Keep a note of how anxious you feel before and after relaxation, rating your anxiety 1-10.

## **Controlled breathing**

Over-breathing: it is very common when someone becomes anxious for changes to occur in their breathing. They can begin to gulp air, thinking that they are going to suffocate, or can begin to breathe really quickly. This means they end up with the wrong amount of carbon-dioxide. This has the effect of making them feel dizzy and therefore more anxious.

Try to recognise if you are doing this and slow your breathing down. Getting into a regular rhythm of in two-three and out two-three will soon return your breathing to normal. Some people find it helpful to use the second hand of a watch to time their breathing. Other people have found breathing into a paper bag or cupped hands helpful. For this to work you must cover your nose and mouth.

It takes at least three minutes of slow breathing or breathing into a bag, for your breathing to return to normal.

## **Distraction**

If you take your mind off your symptoms you will find that the symptoms often disappear. Try to look around you. Study things in detail, look at your surroundings, try to talk to people. Again, you need to distract yourself for at least three minutes before symptoms will begin to reduce.

Whilst relaxation, breathing exercises and distraction techniques can help reduce anxiety it is vitally important to realise that anxiety is not harmful or dangerous. Even if we did not use these techniques, nothing awful would happen. Anxiety cannot harm us, but it can be uncomfortable. These techniques can help reduce this discomfort.

### 3. Altering your thoughts related to anxiety

We have seen the role that thoughts have in keeping going the vicious circle of anxiety. Sometimes there may also be pictures in your mind.

To give an example, imagine you are exercising one day. All of a sudden you get a pain in your chest and feel really breathless. The thought goes through your mind, “I’m having a heart attack”. This thought is, of course, very frightening, and so your heart starts to beat faster which makes you think “there really must be something wrong with my heart”. You may very well have a picture of yourself ending up in hospital.



**Now think about the following questions and write down the answers:**

1. What are the thoughts that most often go through your mind when you feel anxious?

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2. Do you have any pictures of what might happen?

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3. Are there any thoughts that make you feel worse?

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It isn't always that easy to know what thoughts are making your anxiety worse.

The sort of thoughts that make people anxious can come and go in a flash, and may be so much of a habit that they are automatic. They may be so familiar that they just feel like part of you.

Try to imagine the last time you felt very anxious. Try to run through it like a film, in as much detail as you can. See if you can write down any frightening thoughts now. No thought is too small or too silly. Even "oh no" or "here we go again" can increase tension and anxiety.

**Frightening thoughts:**

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Once you know what it is you are thinking, you can begin to fight back, and break the circle.

**In particular, ask yourself:**

- Am I exaggerating, e.g. "everything is bound to go wrong it always does".
- Am I jumping to conclusions, e.g. "I have a pain in my chest therefore it must be my heart".
- Am I predicting the future? e.g. "I know I'm not going to be able to cope".

Use these questions to help yourself answer back. A good way of doing this is to write two columns - one for your thoughts that make you anxious, and the other for a more balanced thought, e.g:

<b>Anxious Thought</b>	<b>Balanced Thought</b>
The dizzy feeling means i'm going to faint	I have had it many times before and have not fainted. I have fainted once and that felt really different.
I'm going mad	I have not gone mad yet, and the doctor tells me anxiety is not madness

Write down some of your thoughts now and write as many answers as you can. This question might also help. What would you say to a friend who was thinking that way?

The aim is to get faster at catching these anxious thoughts and answering back almost instantly. It takes a lot of practice, but really does work.

**4. Changing behaviour related to anxiety**

- Try to notice when you are avoiding things and when you can try to tackle these fears, not all at once but in a gradual way.
- Set yourself very small goals.

**Write down here goals that you would like to tackle. Start with the easiest first and tick off any activity you achieve.**

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- People often get into the habit of escaping from situations that make them anxious. Instead of escaping try gradually to increase how long you stay in a situation that makes you anxious. Anxiety often reaches a peak, then starts to go away naturally. If you stay in an anxious situation what do you predict will happen to your anxiety? People often think it will just keep getting worse and worse. This is not the case. It will start to come down.





- People not only avoid situations and try to leave, they also often do things to make themselves feel more safe, e.g. hanging on to something, lying down, checking. These safety behaviours may help at the time, but they also help to keep the anxiety going because the anxious person never learns that nothing awful would have happened. For example, if someone hangs onto a rail to stop themselves collapsing, they may believe they would have collapsed had the rail not been there. Also, imagine how frightening it would be if no rail was available to hold on to.
- Try to do things to test out whether your anxious thoughts are realistic? E.g. “would I really faint if I didn’t leave?”

It really is very important to recognise that the more you avoid something, the more difficult it will seem to overcome, which will in turn make you more anxious.

## **What treatment is available for anxiety?**

- Most people with anxiety can benefit from self-help such as this leaflet.
- A member of the health care staff or one of the prison staff may also be able to give you further help in dealing with anxiety.
- Occasionally, doctors prescribe tablets for anxiety. These should only be taken for short spells to get over specific anxiety provoking situations.
- Your doctor may also refer you to a mental health worker if your anxiety does not respond to self-help alone.
- Many people find meditation or yoga to be helpful.

## **Where can I find help if I think I am suffering from anxiety?**

First, we hope you will use the advice in this booklet, on your own or with someone else to help you. You should find it helpful. If, having used the booklet, you feel you need more help, you should discuss this with a member of staff, (prison officer, probation officer, psychologist, teacher, nurse or chaplain) who will tell you about alternative treatments and services available. Alternatively, the Listeners Service may be of help.

## **There are a number of self-help books that other people have found helpful.**

- Helen Kennerley: Managing Anxiety.
- David Burns: The Feeling Good Handbook.
- Dr Clare Weeks: Self Help for your Nerves.
- Susan Jeffers: Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway.
- Kevin Meares and Mark Freeston: Overcoming Worry

## **There are also booklets in this series on:**

- Depression and Low Mood
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

These publications are available at

- [www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp)
- or telephone the Patient Information Centre 0191 223 2545

## **Useful organisations**

- **Apex Charitable Trust**

Tel: 01744 612 898

Unit 1, Ruskin Leisure Ltd, Ruskin Drive, St Helens,  
Merseyside, WA10 6RP

Aims to improve the employment prospects of ex-offenders  
and the long-term unemployed by providing services, training

- **Combat Stress**

Helpline: 0800 138 1619

The Chief Executive, Combat Stress, Tyrwhitt House,  
Oaklawn Road, Leatherhead, Surrey KT22 0BX

The UK's leading military charity specialising in the care of  
Veterans' mental health. We treat conditions such as Post  
Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety  
disorders. Our services are free of charge to the Veteran.

- **Creative and Supportive Trust**

Tel: 0207 281 9928

Unit1, Lysander Mews, Lysander Grove, Upper Holloway,  
London, N19 3QP

Provides education and training, welfare advice and support  
to women in prison, ex-offenders, women from drug and  
alcohol rehabilitation and from psychiatric units.

- **Criminal Cases Review Commission**

Tel: 0121 233 1473

5 St Philip's Place, Birmingham, B3 2PW

An independent body, set up under the Criminal Appeal Act  
1995 to investigate the possible miscarriage of justice.

- **MIND**

Tel: 0300 123 3393

15 -19 Broadway, London, E15 4BQ

Working for a better life for people in mental distress, and  
campaigning for their rights.

Helpline available Mon - Fri, 9am - 6pm

- NACRO

Helpline: 020 7840 1212

Park Place, 10-12 Lawn Lane, London, SW8 1UD

Offers resettlement information, housing projects and employment training before and after release.

- National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux

Contact your local office who can direct you to local groups who can help.

Head Office: Myddelton House, 115-123 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9LZ

Offers advice, information or advocacy on a wide range of issues.

- PACT – Prison Advice and Care Trust

Tel: 0207 735 9535

Park Place, 12 Lawn Lane, Vauxhall, London SW8 1UD

Provides a range of services to both prisoners and their families.

- Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Groups (POPS)

Tel: 0161 702 1000

1079 Rochdale Road, Blackley, Manchester, M9 8AJ

Offers advice, information and moral support to anyone who has a loved one in prison.

- Prison Fellowship (England & Wales)

Tel: 020 7799 2500

PO Box 68226, London, SW1P 9WR

Offers support to prisoners, families and ex-offenders.

Although based on a Christian ethos services are offered regardless of belief.

- Prison Phoenix Trust

Tel: 01865 512 521

PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF

Using meditation and yoga, the trust encourages prisoners to find personal freedom inside UK prisons by giving workshops and through correspondence.

- Prison Reform Trust

Tel: 020 7251 5070

15 Northburgh Street, London, EC1V 0JR

Campaigns for better conditions in prison and the greater use of alternatives to custody.

- Prisoners' Advice Service

Helpline: 0845 430 8923

Tel: 020 7253 3323

PO Box 46199, London, EC1M 4XA

Takes up prisoners' complaints about their treatment within the prison system.

- Samaritans (There should be a freephone available on your wing)

Tel: 0845 790 9090

Providing confidential, emotional support to anyone in need.

- Sexual Health Line - Tel: 0800 567 123 (24hours)

- Stonham Housing Association

Tel: 0845 155 1234

Head Office: 2 Gosforth Park Way, Gosforth Business Park, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE12 8ET

Provides housing for ex-offenders, suitable for men and women of all ages.

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