



Improving Communication among Couples Experiencing Incarceration: Clinical and Policy Considerations

Katherine Durante, University of Utah

Eman Tadros, Syracuse University

Maintaining relationships is important when considering the rehabilitation of an incarcerated person. Physical separation due to incarceration, only worsened by the **high costs** of phone calls and visitation and stressful visitation policies, can cause **emotional withdrawal and relationship instability within couples**. Facility regulations limit the way partners can express themselves to each other and **disrupt the normal development of intimacy and commitment**, increasing the challenge of maintaining relationships.

The families most likely to be impacted by incarceration are those who already face economic and social disadvantages. Non-incarcerated partners often experience hardships such as financial insecurity, **housing instability** or homelessness, a reduction in childcare and other social supports, and a combination of chronic stress, **isolation**, shame, or stigma. The heightened stress may also lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse, as well as worsened mental and physical health.

Strong Intimate Relationships Can Lead to Overall Success

Among heterosexual, incarcerated men, those who can maintain strong relations with their intimate partners and family have a **higher rate** of success upon release. Strong intimate relationships can help to **limit future criminal activity**. Marriage can even serve as a “turning point” for incarcerated individuals to reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Moreover, **intimate relationship involvement** offers structure and financial stability and has additional mental and physical health benefits.

Supportive Communication as a Protective Factor

In our study, we examined if supportive communication can be a protective factor among heterosexual couples experiencing incarceration. That is, we explored if good communication skills and regularity can help to maintain intimate relations among these couples by facilitating relationship happiness and keeping them together during this volatile time. Communication plays a vital role in all of our relationships and **good communication** is necessary for maintaining intimate partnerships. Good communication skills and greater confidence in the ability to problem-solve in situations where there is a conflict with a partner are associated with greater **relationship satisfaction**, which aids in the maintenance of long-term viability and stability. On the other hand, contempt, disgust, defensiveness, and stonewalling in relationships can lead to **relationship dissolution**.

Our study revealed good communication skills and frequency can help couples achieve healthy relationships, even during stressful events that disrupt couple and family stability, such as incarceration. Recognizing the

broader impact on families, policies should be made to create a supportive environment for couples facing the challenges of separation.

1. Prisons and jails should expand **marriage and family therapy (MFT)** services for incarcerated persons and their partners. Therapies that focus on the family system, and not just the individual incarceration, can help couples increase their relationship satisfaction and communication skills, as well as address issues of power, privilege, racial discrimination, and historical trauma.
2. Prisons and jails should develop **facility-based relationship education (RE) programs** for couples experiencing incarceration to help strengthen relationships. These programs often focus on developing communication and problem-solving skills among partners and helping them to understand factors that impact the quality of their intimate relationship, including compatible expectations, commitment, forgiveness, and key risk factors of relationship failure. RE can also provide couples the chance to have physical contact with each other, communicate, and practice new skills.
3. Prisons and jails should adopt **Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Programming (PREP Inside and Out)** to help incarcerated couples maintain an intimate connection. PREP Inside and Out focuses on teaching couples proper communication skills to maintain healthy and lasting relationships. It was shown to be effective in Oklahoma correctional facilities at facilitating reentry success and lowering recidivism. Specifically, it was shown to help couples increase their communication skills, relationship confidence and dedication, and relationship satisfaction.
4. Prisons and jails should adopt family-friendly policies. Strengthening family relationships can help to reduce **recidivism**. Facilities should adopt policies that reduce barriers to communication, such as making phone calls free or cheap. They should also consider more flexible visitation schedules and rules that still maintain safety standards.

By integrating these recommendations, a comprehensive approach can be adopted to support and strengthen intimate relationships during incarceration, ultimately contributing to successful reentry and reducing the risk of recidivism.

Read more in Katherine A. Durante, Eman Tadros, Candis Braxton and Melanie Barbini, "Supportive Communication Skills as a Protective Factor among Couples Experiencing Incarceration." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 50, no. 11 (2023).