



How prisoners and their partners experience the maintenance of their relationship during a prison sentence.

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Abstract

Research shows that intimate relationships, and their maintenance via prison visits, have a positive impact on factors associated with prisoner well-being and reduced likelihood of recidivism. It is therefore in the interest of corrections, government, and wider society to enable prisoners to maintain healthy relationships with their family and intimate partners throughout their prison sentence. Despite this evidence, little is known about how prisoners experience the maintenance of a significant intimate relationship in prison. This study aims to explore heterosexual couples' experiences in maintaining their well-established intimate relationships, whilst the male partner is incarcerated. Four main themes were identified, namely: how they experienced *having a special connection* that they were motivated to maintain; *coping with challenges and threats* to that connection; *developing reciprocal behaviours* to meet those challenges; and *maintaining a belief in the future*. Implications for how the relational context of rehabilitation can best be supported is considered.

Introduction

Current methodologically sound evidence suggests that strong intimate relationships improve wellbeing and reduce the likelihood of antisocial behaviour, including criminal recidivism on release into the community. For example, longitudinal research with 500 young men (Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006) found that marriage was associated with a 35% reduction in the odds of engagement in crime via four mechanisms: social obligations that increase the costs of crime; changes in associations and routines; exertion of direct social control by the partner; and changes in self-identity. Indeed, the positive effects of prison visits

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3 in maintaining relationships and improving later recidivism on release into the community has
4 been noted (De Claire & Dixon, 2015). However, not all research has found positive effects.
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6 Rhule-Louie and McMahon, (2007) found that individuals choose partners that support each
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8 other's anti-social and criminal behaviours, which may serve to reinforce offending behaviour.
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10 Zamble and Quinsey (1997) highlighted the importance of the characteristics of relationships,
11
12 identifying relationship conflict as instrumental in recidivism. Whilst Andersen, Andersen, and
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14 Skov (2015) found that marriage reduced re-offending, but only when married to a non-
15
16 offending partner.
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23 The prisoner rehabilitation literature has therefore stressed the importance of
24
25 developing or maintaining 'good relationships' during prison sentences in order to reduce
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27 recidivism (Hairston, 1988; 1991). Within the literature 'good relationships' are characterised
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29 by being able to talk to each other, wanting to spend time together, seeking support and advice
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31 from each other and understanding each other's problems (La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro,
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33 2005). Indeed, La Vigne, et al. (2005) found that the maintenance of 'good quality'
34
35 relationships during a sentence is related to the successful development of the relationship post
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37 release and that maintenance of 'poor quality' relationships has the opposite effect.
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39 Maintenance of good relationships can also improve prisoner behaviour and well-being during
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41 a sentence. Within the prison environment Jiang and Winfree (2006) found that married men
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43 were 23% less likely to engage in rule-breaking behaviour suggesting continued influence even
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45 when partners are separated from each other. Segrin and Flora (2001) identified a possible
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47 mechanism for this relationship, that possessing a satisfying and committed marriage reduced
48
49 feelings of loneliness during incarceration. Indeed, Carcedo, et al. (2011) compared prisoners
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51 without a partner, those with a partner outside the prison, and those with a partner inside the
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53 prison and found a lower level of romantic loneliness and a higher level of sexual satisfaction
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3 and global, psychological, and environmental quality of life for the group of prisoners with a
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5 heterosexual partner inside prison. This suggests time spent together is an important factor.
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9 On the contrary, research tends to show that women in intimate relationships in prison
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11 have reduced well-being and poorer prison behaviour (Beer, Morgan, Garland, & Spanierman,
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13 2007), compared to those who are not in relationships. Bales and Mears (2010) also discovered
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15 that the positive effects of relationship maintenance associated with male prisoner future
16
17 recidivism was not held true for women prisoners. This gender difference suggests that
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19 investigations into male and female experiences need to be conducted separately.
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24 Considering the positive relationship that research has shown between maintenance of
25
26 good intimate relationships in the community and recidivism and wellbeing, it is beneficial to
27
28 understand what supports the maintenance of such relationships. Sternberg's (1986), Tripartite
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30 theory, states that love is comprised of; intimacy - which promotes closeness; passion - that
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32 motivates interactions; and commitment - the decision to stay together. The mutual balance of
33
34 these areas constitutes relationship success. During the life course of a relationship, including
35
36 through its challenges, there is likely more to its success than love. Indeed, relationship
37
38 satisfaction is considered important. Collins and Feeney (2000) found that responsive care
39
40 giving predicted perceptions of healthy relationship functioning. Campbell, Simpson, Boldry
41
42 and Kashy (2005), found that perceptions of frequent conflict negatively affected the sense of
43
44 satisfaction. Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2010) suggest that relationships continue despite
45
46 fluctuating satisfaction and that commitment may explain continuance through adversity.
47
48 Hampel and Vangelisti (2008) found couples' expectations of each other to be important in
49
50 relationship maintenance e.g., "if I am going through a hard time then my partner will support
51
52 me". However, over time partners are likely to violate expectations in relationships. Karremans
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54 and Van Lange (2008) found that individuals view themselves as more closely related to their
55
56 partner if they can forgive them. This relationship identity (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011) is
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3 functional, predicting spontaneous and pro-relationship responses to threat that help maintain
4 a relationship overtime.
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9 Unfortunately, the separation, which is a main feature of a prison sentence, can have a
10 negative effect on relationship maintenance. Institutional barriers create emotional withdrawal,
11 which can lead to disengagement from close personal relationships (Harman, Smith, & Egan,
12 2007) and a lack of time to resolve problems through personal contact exacerbates the problems
13 that couples experience (Accordino & Guerney, 1998). Despite this, prisoners and their
14 partners often maintain supportive relationships. Understanding the way couples maintain their
15 relationship despite the difficulties of a prison sentence is important. This knowledge may
16 inform good practice in developing support for prisoners and their partners during prison
17 sentences. Supporting the maintenance of good relationships may help to aid resettlement and
18 reduce recidivism.
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33 Although research has shown positive impacts of prison visits and relationship
34 maintenance for men, little research has examined how prisoners experience relationship
35 maintenance during their prison sentence. This study addresses this gap by exploring the
36 experiences of members of a heterosexual couple in maintaining their well-established intimate
37 relationships, whilst the male partner is incarcerated. A homogenous sample of male
38 participants were recruited from the male prison estate. As previous research suggests male
39 prisoners benefit from maintaining 'good' intimate relationships, it was considered that men
40 with well established relationships during their incarceration would provide a fruitful group of
41 people to learn from. However, as there are two important perspectives to be sought on any
42 given relationship, it was considered that talking to both partners would provide richer
43 information about the mechanisms through which long-term relationships are maintained
44 (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995). Therefore, this study recruited couples where both
45 members agreed they had well established relationships.
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Methodological approach

Participants

Male prisoners and their female partners attending a relationships programme in a UK based prison, facilitated by Her Majesty's Prison Service, were invited to take part in the study. Of 12 couples approached to take part, both members of the couple in four couples agreed to the interview, resulting in a sample of eight participants. Participation was not restricted by age, length of relationship, or type of index offence. Table 1 provides information about the sample characteristics.

Table 1 Participant characteristics within each couple (names anonymised)

Male name	Age	Index offence / Sentence length	Stage of sentence	No. previous sentences	Female name	Age	Length of relationship (at time of interview)
Neil	20	Theft	9 months into sentence	2	Ellen	19	6 years
Craig	23	Drug Supply	11 months into sentence	0	Julie	25	2 years
Adam	36	Burglary	12 months into sentence	9	Laura	25	7 years
Karl	22	Assault	6 months into sentence	1	Jenny	21	2 years

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted from the University Human Ethics Committee and National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Research Committee. All participants were

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2
3 screened for a history of violence in relationships and they were fully informed of the nature
4 of the study. Confidentiality issues and the right to withdraw were discussed and a debrief was
5 provided with links to support services.
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11 Following formal ethical approval individual interviews were conducted. The female
12 partners were interviewed first, in their own homes. Each interview with the female partner
13 was followed (within three days) by the interview with their male partner. Interviews with the
14 male partners were conducted in interview rooms in the prison. The interview schedule
15 consisted of six general and open-ended questions to facilitate an inductive approach and allow
16 the voices of this hard to reach group to be heard (Appendix 1). The questions provided the
17 interviewer with a flexible guide to aid a structured conversation. Additional prompts were
18 used to invite participants to reflect upon their experience.
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30 **Analytic Strategy**

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33 The audiotaped interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological
34 Analysis (IPA). IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) is an approach used extensively in
35 applied psychological research, which identifies patterns of meaning from in-depth qualitative
36 data. This method is apposite for interpreting the experience of individuals' relationships,
37 because it draws on a phenomenological literature, which sees experience as fundamentally
38 relational and contextual (e.g. see Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn 2011). Analysis involves detailed
39 coding of transcribed data and subsequent development of themes within those codes. This is
40 conducted with a dual focus, which Larkin and Thompson (2012) describe as '*giving voice*',
41 and '*making sense*' of participants' concerns through rigorous description *and* psychological
42 interpretation. In the case of this study, engaging participants who are difficult to access and
43 often not listened to an opportunity to explain their experiences and strengths in a way that may
44 influence future policy, is the element of '*giving voice*'. IPA has a commitment to an
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3 idiographic level of analysis and is most appropriate when trying to explore experience within
4 specific small samples and develop knowledge from a 'bottom-up' approach. In this case, the
5 study is trying to understand the participants' individual relationship experience, from their
6 perspective and within the context of the prison sentence. The IPA approach benefits from the
7 depth and richness of the data. The small sample size allows for the interpretation of the
8 participants' experiences that whilst grounded in their accounts goes beyond their
9 understanding therefore '*makes sense*' of their experience.

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12 The data was coded on a line-by-line basis, these codes were clustered and analysed.
13
14 The codes referred to each participant's experiences. This experiential material was explored
15 on a single case basis to identify emergent themes. Interpretive exploration of what the
16 experiences might mean to the participants continued throughout this process. The emergent
17 themes were established through triangulation between the three authors and descriptions
18 developed, which allowed exploration of the themes in relation to each other and the emergence
19 of the major themes. The detailed analysis required to '*make sense*' of this very specific cohorts
20 experience sacrifices breadth for depth. Therefore, when employing IPA developing
21 generalisations requires caution. Rather, the method allows the reader to consider the finding
22 in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge (Smith, et al. 2009).

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 **Results**

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46
47 Table 2 outlines the themes and subthemes identified by the researchers. The quotes
48 expressed in this section give a flavour of the themes.

49 50 51 52 **Table 2: Super-ordinate themes and sub-themes identified from interpretative** 53 54 **phenomenological analysis**

Super-ordinate Themes	Having a special connection	Coping with challenges and threats	Developing reciprocal behaviours	Maintaining a belief in the future
Sub-themes	Unique bond	Isolation/Loneliness	Commitment	Hope v Fear
	Knowing each other	Restriction	Feeling valued/valuing each other	Explanations of behaviour
	Relationship journey	Guilt/Shame/Responsibility		Involvement of others
		Powerlessness	Reassurance	
	Positive shared Identity	Insecurity	Managing conflict	
	Protection	Loss	Influence	
	Security/Stability		Coping	

Having a Special Connection

This theme was evident in all of the participants' accounts. They highlighted the strength and uniqueness of their bond, the positive identity and security it brought them, and the desire to care for and protect each other. They described an instant emotional and physical *connection* that grew into something unique. This occurred during a *relationship journey*, developing through *knowing each other*, into a *shared and positive identity*, and producing a feeling of *protection* and *security/stability*.

Karl: I thought she was beautiful straight away and she was just, it was just her personality and that she was cool, like we got on straight away she's like a girl version of me really so I just liked everything about her like/Yes, from the start we clicked like that like, mad, and just kept getting stronger and stronger and just got closer and closer, and I don't know it's like my love just keeps growing for her and she's told me she said

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3 she didn't think it was possible to love me any more, but she said she just loves me
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5 more and more everyday like and that makes me feel good as well, that's the exact same
6
7 way I feel about her.
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11 This was common to each participant, with each appraising the *connection* in their
12
13 relationship.
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16 Julie: I just know he's the one I think, it's just different I don't know we just really
17
18 bond you know we just there's something there/we just bonded really you know strong
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20 (pause) the bond is strong.
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24 Often the connection seemed hard-to-define for participants, but there were common
25
26 reference points. The way they experienced the *connection* emerges through minor themes,
27
28 which converge to create a fuller explanation. For example, some described the experience
29
30 through the *shared identity* of humour or *knowing each other*.
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34 Each participant emphasised a connection, describing how it manifested in a positive
35
36 view of themselves and their partner. In the accounts, the strong connection was associated
37
38 with *stability* and a *positive identity* for the relationship which they extended to themselves and
39
40 this provided hope for the future. Neil explains how Ellen makes him feel:
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44 Neil: It's trying to find stability, it's like that a relationship to have some sort of
45
46 stability in our lives, to um know that someone out there that cares, like you know, I
47
48 had my girlfriend. I had someone who loved me, she did make me feel special, she did
49
50 make me feel like yes I've something good. I've got something going for myself
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52 someone's still with me and I've obviously still got something, like you need that to
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54 carry on/ I think it is helping me to maintain a stable relationship well maintain a stable
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56 relationship with myself.
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3 Respondents describe *feeling protective* towards each other. There is a sense that this
4 connection *protects* participants, allowing them to feel *safe*. For example, Ellen describes
5 initially *feeling rescued* by her partner and how this is still the case:
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10 Ellen: ... he was just like my knight in shining armour, kind of thing, so he was just
11 everything basically which he still is now.
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16 In essence the special relationship stimulates participants to want to protect each other
17 and the positive view of themselves that the relationship provides. There is a drive to maintain
18 the relationship.
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24 Craig: To be able to come into prison and do a 4 ½ year sentence which is 2 years 3
25 months and still be strong you know even though you can't physically you know be in
26 contact with each other, but you can only talk. It's a lot harder that way but I still think
27 we're strong, stronger than ever definitely/ if I'd come in and thought it was going to
28 break down, I would never have stayed with her this long anyway even if she wanted
29 to, I wouldn't (pause) put her through all this you know/obviously we love each other
30 anyway and you know, she all the good times we've had together she remembers them
31 and that's why she wants to be with me.
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43 **Coping with Challenges and Threats**

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46 Although participants believe their relationship is solid, it is threatened by
47 imprisonment. This theme is concerned with the difficulties of the sentence and the offending
48 that could harm the maintenance of the relationship. The super-ordinate theme of coping with
49 challenges and threats reflects the feelings of *isolation, loneliness, restriction, guilt, shame,*
50 *responsibility, powerlessness, insecurity, and loss* that participants experienced.
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3 For the male participants, *insecurity* may be part of their character, but they describe
4 this as having become worse during the prison sentence.
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8 Karl: I know how close we are together, but this place just makes me think she's going
9 to leave me and stuff like. I'm always asking her, but I know she won't, but I know
10 she's going to be there, it's just scary that I think she won't, like.
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16 For Ellen, Neil's *insecurity* leads to her feeling *powerless* to cope with his emotions.
17 This creates *restrictions* in her life even though she is not in prison, adding to her anger and
18 frustration through the experience.
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23 Ellen: But now he'll ring me the next day. Who did you see? Did any boys look at
24 you? Did any boys touch you? Did any boys do whatever? Just over the top and I'd say
25 I probably get more attention walking down the street by a white van man beeping the
26 horn. /He talks about the impact on him, but obviously you know, it's horrible being
27 stuck in there whatever. We mainly talk about when I want to go out or I go out or
28 something then he would say how hard it is, you know for him to be like that and I'm
29 like it is hard on me when I am actually out, because I'm still restricted in what I do
30 and everything and everything I do, I got to think about you when you're not here and
31 everything else.
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45 This *restriction* is also practical. Laura is alone with her children and the sentence
46 means that she cannot work. For her, there is a sense of *isolation* attached to *loss*. Laura
47 illustrated this through her explanation of having to do everything alone:
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53 Laura: 'I miss him and he's not here um, for the fact that were not together and that
54 we're not doing things like we used to, for the fact that I not only have to do everything
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3 on my own and do everything for the children and keep the house going and everything,
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5 whereas we've always done things together.'

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8 All of these subthemes are important in the experience but what underlies them is a
9
10 sense of *loss*. Jenny best illustrated how this plays out during a week:

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14 Jenny: 'We see each other on a Monday and we'll be buzzing all day, really happy, and
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16 then Tuesday we would be a little bit happy, Wednesday would be alright, but Thursday
17
18 would be quite down and Friday quite depressed; by Sunday I'm crying and ripping my
19
20 hair out because I'm so depressed. Then on Sunday night then I get butterflies and feel
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22 sick and shaky I can't sleep.'

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26 The men expressed their experience of *powerlessness*. Craig experiences being unable
27
28 to help his partner and to influence the upbringing of his child.

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32 Craig: Yes, you worry about a lot of things there's nothing you can control I can't
33
34 control anything I'm a controller, not that I control anything anyway because Julie was
35
36 the boss, but it's a lot harder now because you want to be out there you want to help,
37
38 you want the baby to be raised the way you want him to be raised and at the moment
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40 now he's being raised the way her parents raised her, so by the time I get out there's
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42 nothing that I can do.

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46 While Adam worries about how Laura copes without him:

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49 Adam: She's decided now to get them a bike, a bike each for Christmas, and I said to
50
51 her, what you've got to realise is they are going to want to go on these bikes at the same
52
53 time/and there's no way she's going to be able to control two kids at the same time, one
54
55 of them is going to want to go that way and the other one going to want to go that way.

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3 When interviewing the male partners there is a sense of underlying *guilt and shame*
4 related to having put their partner in this situation.
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8 Neil: I'm very lucky to have someone like Ellen, and you hear all the time on movies
9 and this and that, but I'm really lucky because obviously I've been in jail twice. I've
10 put her through things she shouldn't have gone through shouldn't have had to go
11 through.
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18 Craig's partner Julie understands and tries not to make this worse.
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21 Julie: Oh, he was devastated, he knew he'd let me down and the baby and he was just
22 beside himself really at the time/he felt he'd let me down and the baby everyone really,
23 you know his friends, his family.
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29 This understanding and the way they manage the difficulties links into the next theme.
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32 **Developing Reciprocal Behaviours**

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35 This theme has many subthemes and is complex within the interviews but seems to
36 represent the behaviours, that have developed throughout the relationship. These behaviours
37 have been strengthened during the prison sentence and have enabled the maintenance of the
38 relationship. The sub-themes relate to *commitment, feeling valued and valuing each other,*
39 *reassurance, managing conflict, influence, and coping.*
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48 Sometimes *commitment* was formalised *before* the prison sentence, with mutual
49 *commitment* helping to maintain the relationship. For example:
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53 Jenny: we went on holiday with all my family and a lot of friends in a big big bus to a
54 caravan park and it was heaving in there. We went in the clubhouse and he got on the
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3 karaoke and he sang our song, Aerosmith I don't want to miss a thing, and he proposed
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5 to me and he had the ring and I didn't know, so that was lovely.
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8 Ellen explains the *commitment* she made and the way in which she changes her
9
10 behaviour to *reassure* her partner of her *commitment* to him while he is prison by ensuring that
11
12 he knows everything about her life. Later comments from Ellen make it clear that she will only
13
14 alter her behaviour while he is in prison suggesting some temporary willingness to do things
15
16 that she would otherwise view as unreasonable.
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21 Ellen: Sometimes I don't want to go out, anyway sometimes it would be because he
22
23 didn't want me, well most of the time it was because he didn't want me to, but I would
24
25 think to myself and I would say to them I have made the decision to be with him while
26
27 he's in prison, so I have to deal with what he does/I'd prefer him to be happy in there
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29 than be constantly paranoid. Yes, just things like that really, just talk to him every day
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31 and whatever and see him when you can and everything really, you obviously can't be,
32
33 um, vague about things either you have to, you know, they make sure they know
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35 everything like what you doing or like. If I said now what you been doing today and I
36
37 said nothing he'd have to know what nothing means, you know, I think it is
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39 understandable, what other people think that's a bit possessive, but I think yes its
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41 possessive if he was here and he was like that, but when he's in prison/because I think,
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43 well I've stayed with him so if I am going to stay with I him, then I'm going to have to
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45 deal whatever's happening really.
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51 The couples continually found ways to *value each other*. *Feeling valued* through their
52
53 partner's words and behaviour helps them to maintain their connection. For all the participants
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55 contact was *reassuring*. For Adam, the *reassurance* comes from Laura's response to his fears
56
57 and for Laura it comes from visiting him.
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3 Adam: 'Robert's just been sentenced for 7 years, been married to his wife for 10 years,
4 she's just basically sent him a Dear John, and every time a thought comes into my head
5 like that I go on the phone and talk to Laura... every time she writes a letter to me.
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10 'Adam my darling, me and you are forever' ... that just makes me feel all warm inside
11
12 I suppose, safe, secure, and happy.'

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15 Laura: It's seeing that he's OK its seeing him that he's fit and well more than anything/
16
17 because we miss him just as much as he misses us and I think visits are very important.
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21 The participants are realistic about how they manage the relationship. They do not only
22
23 *reassure*, they also take time to *re-evaluate*, put the offending in the past and *influence* change.
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25 Julie was pragmatic; she described accepting what had happened and wanting to move on. This
26
27 appeared to help her to *cope*. She re-evaluated how she and Craig used to communicate and
28
29 began to *influence* him to become more open with her about his feelings. For some participants,
30
31 this *influencing* extended to setting an ultimatum to change. Ellen described how she and Neil
32
33 had learned important lessons about *managing conflict*, but also noted that she had 'reached a
34
35 limit' and would leave if he did not stop gambling. They are not the only couple who have
36
37 reached this point in their relationship. Laura and Adam reached this point before and Adam
38
39 has worked hard to manage his substance use.
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45 Complex communication arrangements help participants to *cope* through the sentence.
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47 Craig explained a series of phone calls he made to remain connected to Julie's day, but also to
48
49 help her manage their child alone, and show her he was opening up about his feelings.
50
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52 Craig: ... well she hates me keeping it all inside, you know, she'd rather me tell her
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54 what I think and I have told her that I'm going to be more you know, I told what I
55
56 thought when I came in and I've been more open than I was when I was out there.
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3 This routine was *reassuring* for them both. Jenny provides a clear example of how being
4 there for each other helped her and Karl *cope* throughout the sentence:
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8 Jenny: ‘When he’s on the phone telling me I’m doing well and he’s proud of me, he
9 makes me feel like I’m doing well and I do it, so he’s keeping me strong even though
10 he’s inside.’
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16 This theme best illustrates the complexity of adaptation in long-term adult relationships.
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19 **Maintaining a Belief in the Future**

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22 In this theme, the experience of *hope and fear* for the future was bolstered by
23 *explanations for the offending behaviour* that helped partners believe it would not recur, and
24 the *involvement of others* and the way they support the couple or not. The participants sought
25 evidence that supported their desire to have faith in the future.
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32 The female participants found ways of explaining their partners’ behaviour that made
33 sense to them. For Ellen there is sense that if her partner made excuses, she would find it
34 difficult to respect him in the same way. She is clear that his past has led to his offending and
35 this helps her to be the compassionate person in his life that he needs.
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42 Ellen: ‘When I say to him, ‘You do this because this has happened in the past,’ it makes
43 sense to me, some people make excuses for everything, he doesn’t make excuses for
44 anything.’
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50 Julie explained her partner’s behaviour as his need to support her and their child:
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53 ‘We were just desperate for money and that’s the only way he could see you know of
54 getting it really so it was totally out of character, it’s not who he is at all.’
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59 Jenny suggests a *higher purpose* for the offending and *shares responsibility* herself:
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3 'I don't think bad of him or blame him for being there because he hit the person sticking
4 up for my younger brother. '
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8 For Laura, it is important to believe that her partner is maintaining change to his drug
9 using behaviour, which begun two years previously.
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14 'I knew it wasn't him, as in if he hadn't been spiked none of this would have happened.'
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17 The carefully constructed beliefs around offending and hopes for the future were
18 affected by their families' views. For Julie her family are supportive, but for Ellen things are
19 more difficult and she has had to remain loyal to her partner while understanding her family's
20 position.
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27 Ellen: ...my dad and step mother, they could not stand him from the first time/they
28 don't understand why am I with him, but there's nothing I can say to explain they've
29 never really seen us together, they don't know anything, so they just see what he's done
30 and that's it really you can't really blame them for, yes but we don't really say anything
31 about that really
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39 There was a sense that if she talked to them about him, she might have to recognise
40 their views, and the careful balance would be difficult to maintain.
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45 The *explanations of the behaviour* and the careful management of the *involvement of*
46 *others* helped the participants to have *hope*. The female participants looked for evidence that
47 *hope* was not in vain. Ellen's view is that Neil now sees the need to change, although, in her
48 tone there is *fear* that this will not happen.
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55 Ellen: I think he realises, because when we went to his probation and he said to him,
56 his probation worker, that he wanted to get help for his gambling, which he has never ever done
57 before.
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3 For Laura, it is the faith that Adam has changed; she could not allow herself to *fear* the
4 alternatives. For Julie and Jenny, *hope* rests on this being their first experience of a prison
5 sentence, their realisation that it has been difficult for their partners and the belief that they now
6 know what they have to lose.
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13 The male participants do not often find *explanations for their behaviour*, perhaps
14 because they do not need to as their partners do this for them. Their expressions of *hope* varied.
15 Adam, who was older than the others were, viewed this as his last chance:
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21 ‘I don’t want to be doing this no more ... I’m no spring chicken. This is my last and
22 only chance of becoming the age of 60, 70 and looking at my grandchildren and
23 thinking, ‘Thank god, you got it right in the end.’
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29 Karl’s *hope* rests on the effort he has put into changing.
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32 Karl: ... we are not going down town drinking anymore and just stuff like that, just
33 stuff that’s going to prevent me coming back and doing offences I won’t be doing
34 anything like that, I’m doing a anger management course now, so I won’t be coming
35 back here, she knows that.
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42 For Craig, visualising a shared family life in the future helps him to focus his belief.
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45 This theme brings together all of the other themes in a complex and careful balance of
46 beliefs that the participants continually reinforce and maintain. The female participants need
47 hope that their partner’s will not re-offend and that the future will be different. The male
48 participants are aware things need to change and that they cannot let their partner’s down.
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55 Discussion

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3 This study explores prisoners' and their partners' experiences of their relationships throughout
4 the prison sentence. This is a small idiographic study, where the researchers have tried to learn
5 from a very specific hard-to-reach group of individuals about their experiences. The participant
6 sample is limited in that the couples are heterosexual, the prisoners are male, and the prison
7 sentences are relatively short. Whilst this limits the scope of understanding intimate
8 relationships for a wider range of prisoners, including those serving longer periods of
9 incarceration, IPA studies are not intended to be generalizable to the wider population. Instead,
10 this study provides an opportunity to hear the participants' voices, learn from them, discover
11 what is important about their experiences, and potentially frame future, larger studies that can
12 inform practice. These studies should include non-heterosexual relationships, experiences of
13 female prisoners, and consideration of a wide range of participants experiencing different
14 sentence lengths. Without this area of study there is a risk that we lose the participant's voice,
15 fail to empower them, and make assumptions about their experiences, including what is
16 important to them. The participants engaged fully in the process and provided rich accounts of
17 their relationships. This was particularly evident in the emergence of the first two themes;
18 *having a special connection* and *challenges and threats*. The final themes *developing*
19 *reciprocal behaviours* and *maintaining a belief in the future* provide insight into the
20 relationship processes that may influence behaviour.
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45 **How do the participants maintain their relationships?**

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48 Due to the circumstances of the sentence, the opportunity to practice the key elements
49 shown to contribute to relationship satisfaction (interaction, emotion, expression, clarity and
50 contact; Lessin et al., 2005) is limited. However, the themes of *having a special connection*
51 and *developing reciprocal behaviours* support established indicators of relationship
52 satisfaction (Lessin et al., 2005). Participants describe the 'emotion' component through their
53 instant physical attraction, continued affection, apprehension about seeing each other, and
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3 anguish when they cannot. The ‘expression’ of how they feel for each other is overt and
4 reciprocated and they have ‘clarity’ in that they understand what happens between them and
5 the behaviour patterns that motivate them. With regard to ‘contact’, the participants describe
6 high levels of support. It is reasonable to assume that satisfaction with each other is high within
7 this group. This satisfaction is not necessarily current as the context they find themselves in
8 has negative effects on their relationship experience. However shared past experience and
9 future expectations help them to maintain a level of relationship satisfaction.

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12 The first theme of *‘having a special connection’* mirrors the important elements of
13 intimacy and passion, which maintain relationships (Sternberg, 1986). The participants feel
14 linked to their partners through an initially intense emotional and physical connection. Intimacy
15 builds through their special and exclusive knowledge of each other. This develops into an
16 experience of shared identity. They attain a positive self-identity from the relationship, view
17 the relationship as having its own positive identity, or describe a positive identity for their
18 partner. What they are describing is a good relationship and being able to enhance this positive
19 identity is likely to be beneficial in terms of their future behaviour.

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22 The *‘challenges and threats’* are underplayed by the participants, in order to maintain
23 a positive outlook to ensure coping throughout the sentence. They have developed adaptive
24 behaviours and they live up to them consistently. However, the challenges are over and above
25 those experienced by most couples. This is evident in the loss, loneliness, and isolation they
26 experience. The participants’ occasional insecurities link into the theme of restriction. The
27 female partners engage in ‘safety behaviours’ to prevent conflict within the relationship. This
28 was more than psychological restriction. Participants are restricted to their homes and from
29 work by the pressures of coping alone. These pressures lead to powerlessness, guilt, and shame.
30 Understanding these threats and challenges is useful for considering the manner in which
31 prisoners and their partners can maintain their relationship through the sentence.

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3 The participants in this study demonstrate real skill in how they adapt to maintain their
4 relationships over time. Adapting their behaviour to maintain relationship satisfaction provides
5 hope for the male participants in terms of behaviour change. As each partner adjusts, the
6 patterns within the relationship become reciprocal. Some of the couples in this study have
7 developed “if-then” contingencies related to offending that may influence change. Perceptions
8 of daily relationship events strongly colour how partner’s motives and intentions are viewed,
9 and this can have consequences for the future (Fincham, 2001). Those who view arguments as
10 leading to the eventual end of the relationship are less happy within it. The participants in this
11 research did report conflict, but not as a major concern, suggesting that they did not view the
12 relationship as being endangered by conflict.
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27 The couples in this study are motivated to support each other as responsive caregiver’s
28 (Feeney & Collins, 2003). The way in which they value each other and their memories of how
29 they have valued each other in the past, helps them perceive the relationship as healthy. It is
30 interesting that research has shown that partners of more anxious individuals disclose less to
31 them (Bradford, Feeney, & Campbell, 2002). While in this research, participants viewed
32 disclosure as important in order to provide reassurance to each other. Maybe this is because
33 they understand the source of the anxiety and have realised that a high level of disclosure is an
34 effective and acceptable strategy.
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46 Some of the participants’ coping strategies involve a positive focus on the future, a
47 sense of wanting to move on. This was evident both in their comments within the interview
48 and their minimising of ‘challenges and threats’. The participants have developed strategies
49 that help them to maintain their belief in the future. They have invested time and effort into the
50 relationship and have built commitment through shared experience. The female partners are
51 making sacrifices to remain in the relationship. To remain compassionate and supportive they
52 need to maintain their belief in themselves as good people and their partners as non-typical
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3 offenders. The evidence they seek exists within the theme of ‘developing reciprocal
4 behaviours’ such as commitment, support, reassurance, and feeling valued, but they need to go
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6 one step further to believe not only in the now but in the future. The mechanisms they use are
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8 complex.
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13 Believing in positive relationship outcomes results in positive events. When individuals are
14
15 motivated towards a goal, they draw closer to others who are instrumental in achieving that
16
17 goal (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2009). This is difficult to do when experiencing the effects of
18
19 the prison sentence and this is especially true if there is evidence of repeated shared goal
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21 violation through offending. In order to manage their hope, the female partners have developed
22
23 explanations of the offending that allow them to believe this is the last time it will happen.
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25 When the evidence is more weighted towards it happening again (e.g., where their partners
26
27 have offended before or have substance misuse issues), they seem to expend more effort on
28
29 developing the explanations. They provide explanations for behaviour that allows
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31 understanding and continued support. The male participants understand that to retain this
32
33 compassion they cannot excuse their behaviour directly themselves. Both individuals within
34
35 the couple realise the balance is precarious and this willingness to provide explanations may
36
37 reach a limit. It would be easy to judge this balancing act as naive and maladaptive, but when
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39 considering the relationship satisfaction experienced over the whole course of the relationship
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41 and the benefits experienced by the couple, it seems adaptive.
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48 **How can practitioners use the couples’ skills to help others?**

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52 Although relationships are complex, participants show natural qualities that enable
53
54 them to cope. These qualities could be encouraged through intervention as protective factors
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56 for other couples. Practitioners may find it useful to consider how to avoid negative judgements
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58 of prisoners’ descriptions of their relationships. Prisoners who have not committed offences
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3 within their relationships do not have to account for their relationship behaviours. It is
4 important therefore to explore the strengths in the relationship with the couple and build on
5 this. A non-judgemental and compassionate approach (Gilbert, 2010) and a sense that we are
6 building on an already positive base may prove successful. Encouraging the exploration of the
7 positive emotions that prisoners experience is also useful in that positive emotions encourage
8 psychological growth and improve wellbeing over time (Fredrickson, 2001).
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18 Within this study, components of relationship satisfaction were accompanied by many
19 idiosyncratic techniques of maintaining satisfaction in difficult circumstances. Teaching
20 partners the components of relationship satisfaction, exploring their “if-then” contingencies,
21 and discussing individualised ways of maintaining this could be useful for improving
22 relationship quality. Teaching partners to be realistic about conflict; the normality of arguing
23 and not setting expectations that seek to reduce it, but rather changing the threat that it holds,
24 is a more realistic and achievable strategy for many couples under extreme stress who need to
25 express this to each other.
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37 Supporting couples’ patterns of communication is crucial in maintaining this
38 connection. Increasing the opportunities for prisoners and their partners to spend time together
39 is a key factor that would reduce the challenges they face (Carcedo et al. 2011). The prisoner
40 is not the only support-seeker. He may be the only form of emotional support his partner has,
41 making regular phone contact critical. Where possible more relaxed extended visits would be
42 of benefit as physical contact with time for communicating is reassuring and supportive to both
43 partners, countering some of the challenges they face. The participants compensate for the lack
44 of physical contact through increased communication. It may be useful to acknowledge this
45 and support them to build increased communication into future behaviour. Finally, it is
46 important to allow for compassionate strategies that provide explanations for the offending;
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3 this serves an important function in the maintenance of optimism and ultimately the
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5 relationship.
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9 Sampson, et al. (2006) suggest that the identity of men who get married may shift
10 toward being a more 'responsible' person. However, this research suggests a more complex
11 shift is evident, that is to a more positive self-identity *and* a shared identity, over and above an
12 increase in feeling protective and responsible for the other person. The prisoners' partners
13 believe in them and present an optimistic view of the future. This hope derives from a
14 compassionate view of the offending, a willingness to look for and give weight to evidence of
15 change, and a willingness to be on their partners' side. Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, and Naples
16 (2004) suggest that individuals start to believe that they can successfully change when those
17 around them believe that they can.
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For Peer Review

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3 Appendix 1
45 **Questions posed to participants**

6 How long have you been together? How did you meet? When did you first make a
7 commitment to each other?
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10 How would other people close to you describe your relationship? What do you like to do
11 together? What do you enjoy about the relationship?
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14 Can you tell me about a really positive time in your relationship? Can you tell me about how
15 you have dealt with difficulties in your relationship? Can you tell me about how your
16 relationship has changed over time?
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19 When you talk about your/their offending with your partner what kinds of things does s/he
20 say? What kind of things do you say? When you talk about this sentence with your partner
21 what kinds of things does s/he say? What kind of things do you say?
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24 How have you kept the relationship going throughout this sentence? How often do you have
25 visits/talk to each other? What do you talk about? How do you talk to each other?
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28 What do you think is going to happen to your relationship in the future? How do you think
29 your relationship will help you in the future?
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