

RESOURCE SECTION - 33 TIPS FOR SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF PRISONERS

WHAT IS CASP?

Clondalkin Addiction Support Programme (CASP) is a community based addiction treatment service which was founded in 1995. It takes a Community Development approach to its work and was set up by members of the local community in response to the high usage of illegal drugs in the area. From its initial home in Quarryvale Co-operative and Quarryvale Community Centre, CASP developed a range of programmes focussing on the broad range of individuals affected by addiction. The project also supports the families of prisoners.

CASP provides a holistic community based service focusing on the physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs of drug users and their families in North Clondalkin. The service is open from 9.30am to 9pm five days a week, and on Saturday and Sunday mornings for medication. It has its offices on the Fonthill Road.

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By Sharon Harty



Some partners can be living in dread of their loved ones or partners being sent to prison. For others it comes as a complete shock. For some it isn't a new experience.

But if it happens to you, or you know someone going through it for the first time, these are a few things to take onboard. This advice-sheet was written by Sharon Harty of CASP with the aim of informing our readers - particularly people in local community and family support groups - who find themselves face-to-face with someone whose partner, or in rare cases a child, has been sent to prison.

Doing what's best for the children:

1. Many arrests take place in the home. This can be very traumatic, especially if children are present.
2. Older children may be just as traumatized, especially when their friends get to hear about it.
3. Children may worry about where their parent(s) are. Will s/he be coming back, etc? They may also feel they are in some way responsible. If some of these fears can be dispelled, then the child(ren) will be happier and more content.
4. Make time to listen to children, allow them to ask questions and make time for tears and anger.
5. Their opinions should not be ignored.
6. Be honest and open.
7. Share your own feelings. Don't exclude them by saying nothing.
8. Seek advice - contact local family support / youth services.
9. It is usually better to tell them the truth.
10. Some effects children may encounter include the children becoming babyish, fretful, clingy, isolated, anxious, attention seeking or aggressive.

11. Some children however may be perfectly comfortable with the facts of imprisonment.
12. Mothers with partners in prison can be tempted to compensate their children for the loss of their father by spending more than they can afford on birthdays and Christmas.
13. However, some women may feel they are better at managing money without their partner, especially if their partner had an alcohol or drug problem.

Children Visiting the Prison:

14. If you do decide to take children, it is a good idea to prepare them for being searched by practicing 'standing like a tree'.
15. Pre-visit behavior can include sickness, irritability, excessive quietness or over excitement.
16. Go to the toilet or get a drink so that a teenage visitor gets time alone with their parent.
17. Don't force the young person to come on the visit.
18. They can write letters. There's no email.

Maintaining Family Life:

19. When a partner enters prison, the family becomes a one parent family and must adapt to a new way of life. It can be felt that the prisoner is powerless to solve these problems from inside the prison.
20. The first visit or two may feel overwhelming because you will have so many practical things to talk through.
21. However, there can be comfort in looking forward to the visits. They can be the high point of the week for prisoners. Good visits can sustain both partners.
22. Undoubtedly, some couples will run into difficulties. Maybe the partner did not know about their partner's activities before being convicted.

Shame and Guilt:

23. For some families, the nature of the offence is a source of shame.
24. Some women partners feel a great sense of guilt, as if the offence was somehow their fault.
25. Other families report being harassed by neighbours. Keep a record of dates and events - useful if you need to call in the Gardai or the local authority.
26. It is normal for family members of people in prison to feel angry, let down, disappointed and ashamed. These feelings are normal and family members are not guilty - no matter what other people think.

Practical Issues:

27. After the shock of the guilty verdict, family members may be faced with other issues such as money problems and transport to the prison.
28. In most cases, the prisoner's solicitor will be able to pass on information to families regarding which prison s/he is being sent to.
29. The first visit to the prison can be worrying and frightening. All visitors including children and babies will be searched.
30. The presence of the drug detection dog can be used as a reason for a visitor to refuse to carry in drugs for a prisoner.
31. If you are feeling lost and need to talk to someone, it can be tempting to discuss your worries with the partner of another prisoner, but it may get back to your partner, perhaps being misinterpreted along the way.
32. It can be helpful to speak to someone outside the family.
33. You could ask to speak to the welfare services attached to the specific prison you are visiting. In the Dublin region, there are a number of prison links workers whose contact details are available through the Local Drug Task Forces. Local community development initiatives or family support services may also be able to offer support.