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# “Soft Skills for Hard Work”

**The importance of emotional literacy in  
building relationships with offenders**

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# The Use of Emotional Literacy in Work with Offenders

- ‘Enlisting offenders as agents of change’ requires the context of a productive working relationship
  - Emotional literacy (EL) in probation staff is a key means of achieving this
  - The ‘managerial’ context of current probation practice, the focus on risk assessment and management and the punitive media-driven agenda in relation to sex offenders all mitigate against this
  - Research for a PhD thesis offers some illumination on what EL means and how it might be supported and sustained
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# Building a case

1. What is the evidence that building a strong relationship matters in enabling change?
  2. What does emotional literacy mean and what is its significance in relationship building?
  3. What is the impact of current organisational policy and culture on this skill?
  4. What do probation workers think and feel about it?
  5. What might best practice look like?
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# The evidence for the importance of relationships

- History of probation practice (Monger 1972, Mayer 1970, Biestek 1961)
  - Research on Effective Practice, Desistance and Drug Treatment (Dowden & Andrews 2004, McNeill 2004, 2006, McCullough 2005, Mills et al 2007, Roy et al 2007)
  - Working as a consultant with a Midlands based sex offender team
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# What is ‘Emotional Literacy’?

## Definition

“The ability to recognise, understand, handle and appropriately express emotions....using your emotions to help yourself and others succeed” (Sharp 2001)

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# What is 'Emotional Literacy'?

Developed through the concepts of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner 1983), and Emotional Intelligence (Salovey & Mayer 1990, Goleman 1996), and used increasingly in business, the service industries and education

Evolving within social work practice (Morrison 2007 and Howe 2009)

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# The power of emotions – they are:

- Elusive
- Messy
- Difficult to write about (writing is about cognition)
- Potentially dangerous
- ‘Irrational’

And yet:

- ‘The social work profession, particularly during its early development, has always understood that emotions lie at the heart of its concern’ (Howe 2009:9)
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# Emotions as 'tools' for good or bad?

- *They also recognise that fear, blame, shame are the **emotional tools** politicians use to temporarily circumvent tricky political, economic and social problems' (Orbach 2001: 81).*

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# Emotions as 'tools' for good or bad?

- Bachman et al (2000) identified the improved results amongst debt collectors who had been trained in the skills of emotional intelligence. The connection here is that these debt collectors deal with 'difficult' 'aggressive' 'manipulative' customers. However, the use of such skills to increase profit, whilst no doubt advantageous to the companies concerned, lacks a value base essential to work with offenders. The use of such skills in a manipulative or exploitative manner to engage offenders could be seen as highly unethical.
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# The Significance of EL in a probation context

- Is there a risk that probation staff might sometimes use the same emotional tools?
  - What is the evidence that probation staff use other, more positive, 'emotional tools' in their work with offenders?
  - How do probation staff understand and articulate the role of emotion in their work?
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# The impact of current organisational policy and culture?

- Punish rather than help
  - Garland (2002) – ‘crisis of penal modernism’
  - Focus on public protection; assessment and management of ‘risk’
  - Rise of ‘managerialism’ - targets and outputs rather than processes
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# What do probation workers think and feel about it?

- How do probation workers understand and articulate the role of emotion in their work?
  - What is the evidence that probation staff use 'emotional literacy' in their work with offenders?
  - How is it supported or sustained within the workplace?
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# Research Methodology

- Pilot Study involving seven staff working within a Midlands Sex Offender Team in 2007 - Semi-structured interviews
  - Further 21 interviews with probation staff working with high risk offenders in five other Midlands probation areas. Majority were offender managers with some responsibility for high risk offenders including sex offenders. Some also undertook group work with sex offenders and domestic violence offenders
  - One focus group
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# Selected Research findings

## A) Definitions of 'emotion'

Proved quite a challenge for many of the workers despite its apparent 'simplicity'. Some acknowledged that they routinely expected offenders to be able to articulate their feelings, without realising how difficult it can be until confronted with the question themselves.

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# Quote

- *'I ask these questions to offenders, it is quite different being on the other end .....* '

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# Selected Research Findings

## B) Range of feelings expressed

The range and intensity of *negative* feelings described by the workers for both themselves and, particularly, for offenders, far outweighed the *positive* feelings

Nevertheless workers were keen to stress the enjoyment, intellectual stimulation and satisfaction they gained from their work

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# Selected Research Findings

## C) Gender Bias

A number identified 'being emotional' as a negative female stereotype, and as having sexist connotations. This negative labeling had the effect of making one female worker feel that she had been 'over-reacting' and 'put down' in (male) groups.

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# Selected Research Findings

## D) Gender Differences

Linked to this was the view expressed by a number of respondents, both male and female that in general men had more difficulty in understanding or expressing their emotions.

*'he can't let you know that he is at breaking point' .*

*'Most men have very limited emotional vocabularies'.*

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# Selected Research Findings

## E) How emotions are expressed

- ❑ Some workers talked about occasions when their emotions had been close to the surface and sometimes very overtly expressed. For example they had been in tears or obviously angry. Others indicated that they had been nearly in tears, such that the offender would have noticed, but how nevertheless they kept some control on their distress. One described going 'red in the face' but otherwise controlling their responses. Some admitted to showing other non verbal signs such as 'sighing' and one admitted to 'hauling him out of the group' when cross with a particular offender for being 'disingenuous' .
  - ❑ All felt that they should control, mask and to a large extent conceal their emotions in order to remain 'professional'
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# Selected Research Findings

## F) Differences in 'perspective'

The largest category of comment here was that 'management' or the 'organisation' had little understanding of the significance of the emotional world of the job and saw the task of the probation officer to 'feed the computer' and 'meet the targets'.

*'...there is no comprehension of whether I am a good facilitator, whether I am emotionally able to manage what comes round, I don't think they care as long as they've ticked all the boxes'*

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# Selected Research Findings

## G) A 'bullying' culture?

Two went as far as to describe the organisational culture as one of 'bullying' in order to achieve targets and felt themselves to be bullied, if not directly, certainly indirectly in terms of what was expected of them to deliver.

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# Quote

- *'I have to concede that really its not the work we do and its not the guys we work with - they do have an impact on us, and we club together and share that with each other, and its where we get our sustenance - but gnawing away at those highs and lows all the time is a distrust of management or a feeling that management don't trust us - we're not valued. That's all we want rather than just 'we've met the targets'— oh and by the way you just need to work a bit harder next year – oh great.....'*

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# Selected Research Findings

## H) Training

None of the respondents considered that they had had any specific training on the subject of emotional literacy; of what they needed to learn or do in relation to the emotional content of their work. A few talked about previous training generally from undertaking counselling courses, that they considered had helped them a great deal in their face to face work with offenders

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# De-briefing

## 1) Debriefing

A significant proportion looked for 'debriefing' particularly after group sessions – which was seen as an accepted part of their routine, and a sign of good practice. However, a number articulated the time pressures, constraints and lack of safety in the working environment that inhibited this.

Some looked to their seniors, some to colleagues that they trusted, and some only at home

*'Debriefing – letting off steam – I do it in the office and I do it at home as well'*

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# Selected Research Findings

## J) Emotional Impact

Many respondents talked in a variety of ways about the 'impact' the work had on them. In this context I take 'impact' to mean predominantly the emotional and/or psychological effect that working with high risk offenders had on them. Some described impact in terms of feelings and some in terms of their own or others' mental health.

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# Selected Research Findings

## K) Emotional expression and mental health

Some identified the constraints they felt associated with the fear that overt emotional expression could be linked to the stigma of mental ill-health. A number felt there was a lack of recognition within the organisation of the importance of emotional expression in maintaining good mental health

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# Quote

- *'...sometimes I'm lying in bed at night and I'll be.. worrying about a particular person, or thinking about what I've got to do with that person the next day because last time I saw them they were so upset, or you know I'm dreading seeing this guy because last week he was really angry and you know..'*
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# Quote

- *'...so I had masked all that stress, and all the self doubt that was going along side that and not being able to keep on top of things'*
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# Quote

- *'...and it is quite scary because you think you are invincible and you think it is never going to happen to you, but I look around at some people and you can see even the strongest people can crack with the pressure of the job, you know, and working with the people that we work with...'*
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# From negative to positive

- How do we support and sustain workers to use their emotions in a positive way to enable offenders to develop and enhance their agency?
  - How do we minimise or ameliorate the negative emotional impact of the work on the mental health of workers?
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## Examples of Emotional Literacy: Quote

- *‘One of the things I do try and do is I try and reflect back emotionally what I’m getting from people. So I’m quite keen on reflecting back - ‘it seems as if’ or ‘I’ve noticed you are doing this I was wondering how aware you are of that’ and – ‘why do you think that might be’ - and then discussing that with that person.’*
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## Examples of Emotional Literacy: Quote

- *'Walking in someone else's shoes - how I interpreted it. Very important we do spend a lot of time on that we - have to model it with each other and everyone else'*
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# Examples of emotional literacy: Quote

- *“And really it is very difficult for them to distinguish between thoughts and feelings so ... .. a lot of underlying work is designed to make them a little bit more articulate in those respects...”*

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## Examples of Emotional Literacy: Quote

- ..... *I then gave him my feedback and ..... And when he was giving me his feedback, he actually winked at me, and nobody was aware except him and I, ...every one was just listening.. so in my feedback.....I just said that ‘you’ve done very well, ..... and thank you for the work we’ve now got two flip charts...and thank you for the wink’*
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# Emotional Literacy: Masking, Suppressing or Managing?

- Concealing, hiding, making invisible
  - 'Suppression'
  - Appropriate expression and 'management' of feelings
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# Emotional Literacy as an evolving process

- Self-awareness
  - Ability to understand own emotions
  - Ability to 'mirror' back to offenders the emotions you see in them
  - The ability to 'read' non verbal cues
  - 'Modelling' emotional maturity and appropriate emotional expression
  - Validation of feelings
  - 'Moral courage' - being 'transparent' and having the courage to say 'difficult' things
  - Balancing 'liking' with a 'non-collusive approach'
  - Using 'challenge' constructively
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# A Blueprint for best practice

- EL as an evolving life process
  - The significance of emotional expression in work with all offenders
  - The significance of relationships in the change process
  - The reflective practitioner
  - Organisational and training implications
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# Organisational implications

- An emotionally literate workplace?
  - Building safe emotional spaces for debriefing and support
  - Training
  - Validation by the organisation of the significance of 'emotion'
  - Placing a value on 'process' as well as 'output'
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# Literature

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  - Howe, D. (2008) The Emotionally Intelligent Social Worker
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