Do Prison Inmates Cope with Psychological Distress Well: A Qualitative Study Among Prison Inmates in Sri Lanka

M. Amila Suranga [a,*], Janaki Vidanapathirana [a]

[a] Directorate of Policy Analysis and Development, Ministry of Health, Colombo, Sri Lanka
*Corresponding author Email: amilamalawige@gmail.com

Abstract: Psychological distress is more common among the prison population than in the general population. This is due to overcrowding, various forms of violence, lack of privacy, lack of meaningful activity, isolation from social networks, insecurity about future prospects and inadequate health services, especially mental health services, in prisons. A qualitative study was carried out in 2019 among sixteen prison inmates representing all types of prison institutions in Sri Lanka with the aim of identifying coping strategies of psychological distress. Among them, eight prison inmates were having psychological distress. Majority were between 27-56 years of age and were male. The main strategies adopted by the prison inmates were engaging in different activities, positive thinking about the future, discussing matters with others, avoiding the situations leading to distress and engaging in religious activities. Mainly, the prison inmates who are not psychologically distressed had used these strategies compared to the prison inmates with psychological distress. None of the prison inmates had identified the importance of counselling in coping the psychological distress. Prison inmates have not been given training or awareness regarding the concept of psychological distress or regarding the coping strategies of psychological distress within the prison institutions. Therefore, it is important to include awareness sessions and practical sessions on psychological distress and coping strategies to the introductory awareness sessions conducted for the prison inmates at the time of entry to a prison institution.

Keywords: Prison Inmates, Psychological Distress, Coping, Mental Health

1. Introduction

Psychological distress is being defined differently in different categories of work fields. The widely used definition in the literature for psychological distress is "a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of depression (lost interest, sadness, hopelessness) and anxiety (restlessness, feeling tense)" (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002). Psychological distress refers to "nonspecific symptoms of anxiety and depression". Further to this high level of psychological distress is directly combined with impaired mental health and may well reflect as common metal health disorders like depression and anxiety (Viertiö et al., 2021). Psychological distress works as a diagnostic criterion for some psychiatric disorders (Obsessive Compulsive Disorders, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) as well as a measure of deciding the severity of symptoms of some disorders (Major Depression, Generalized Anxiety Disorder) (Phillips, 2009; Watson, 2009).

Psychological distress could be caused by several factors. These causes are broadly categorized in to three parts. Those are sociodemographic factors, stress related factors and personnel resources. Sociodemographic factors include personnel factors of an individual such as gender, age, ethnicity and cultural norms & background. In stress related factors some groups differ each other in handling the stressful events in their lives. This causes changes to their status of mental health at varying degrees. Personnel resources are of two types, inner and external. Inner resources are the self-esteem and personality and the external resources are the social support, networks, income, education which could make a person stable or unstable leading to psychological distress (Drapeau et al., 2012).

Although mental health problems affect society as a whole, studies have shown that mental illness is more common among the prison population than the general population (Bland et al., 1998; Brinded et al., 2001). Several

studies conducted around the globe among prison inmates have found that majority of the prison inmates were having psychological distress at an alarming level (Brooke, Taylor & Maden, 1996; Ibrahim *et al.,* 2015; Nseluke & Siziya, 2011; Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Health, 2011; Armiya'u *et al.,* 2013). Within the prison personnel factors of the prison inmates and stress related factors due to the prison system causes prison inmates to be distressed. Studies has shown that personnel factors like female sex, poor health status and stress related factors due to prison system such as long duration of imprisonment, dissatisfaction about the prison services, type of prison, physical assault within prison, having no prison visits and unable to engage in work within the prison has caused psychological distress among prison inmates (Dachew *et al.,* 2015; Schneider *et al.,* 2011).

The Sri Lankan prison inmates in the prison system experience the above causes leading in to psychological distress. According to the findings of the prison study by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka 2020, the majority of prisoners are from a lower socio-economic background and they became involved in criminal activities due to lack of financial stability and poverty. Poverty was intersected across all age, ethnic and religious groups of prisoners. Male prisoners were anguish as they were the primary income earners in their family and they were unable to provide for their families during incarceration. The detention conditions in the prison institutions are well far below the threshold of basic living standards. Service provision to prison inmates such as access to healthcare and rehabilitation is grossly inadequate due to overcrowding of the prison institutions. Providing quality food, sanitary facilities and consistent water supply has also been a challenge due to the overcrowding. It has also shown that the current system to facilitate prison inmates to contact with their family members does not accommodate familial bonding or serve it purpose.

Above personnel factors as well as stressful conditions created by the gaps in the prison systems had made prison inmates more vulnerable for getting psychological distress.

As a vulnerable group, coping is a very important strategy for a prison inmate's survival. They enter into a new stressful environment completely different to the outside community. Prison inmates enter this environment with prior constrains like abuse, poverty, little education and minimal social support. Those constraints make it very difficult for inmates to cope in the prison systems. Typical coping strategies used by prison inmates are avoidance, momentary relief of problems with little thought of consequences and aggressive behavior. If unsuccessful coping strategies continued within the prison inmates, the problems will become worse, with the same pattern continuing throughout. It is very important to have emotion focused coping to improve the psychological health of the inmates (Chahal, Rana and Singh, 2016).

The aim of this study was to identify the coping strategies adopted by the prison inmates to overcome psychological distress in prison institutions in Sri Lanka.

2. Methods

An institutional based qualitative study was carried out in selected six prison institutions covering all types of prison institutions (Closed, Remand, Work camps, youthful offenders and Drug rehabilitation) in Sri Lanka. Purposive sampling was done to identify the prison inmates from each selected prison institution. Prison inmates with psychological distress and without psychological distress were selected for this study, psychological status of prison inmates was decided by using the Kessler's Psychological Distress scale (K10) during a previous component of the study. Prison inmates in the selected prison institutions were approached and got their consent after describing the objective of the study. Sixteen prison inmates were selected for this study.

Eligible prison inmates provided informed consent and participated in a 30–45-minute semi-structured in-depth interview conducted by the principal investigator. All the interviews were carried out in a separate room maintaining the privacy and the confidentiality of the prison inmates. The interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed. A validated semi-structured interview guide was used for the in-depth interview. The guide began with the introduction to the topic and then about how the confidentiality of the given information would be secured. This guide was used to generate discussion and direct the participants to reveal their thoughts. It inquired in to the daily activities of the prison inmates and then would inquire about the distress and the methods of overcoming the distress. Basic socio-demographic data of the study participants were collected during the interviews. Prison inmates were interviewed until theoretical saturation was achieved. This was pre-defined as the point at which new data become

redundant with existing thematic categories and the properties of categories were sufficiently understood. Therefore, sixteen prison inmates were interviewed during the study.

Interview transcripts were analyzed qualitatively through thematic content analysis, a well-established approach that involves a rigorous review and interpretation of textual data. The goal was to derive meaning from stories told by participants and to identify and describe recurring conceptual patterns or commonalities of experience across the sample.

This process included several steps. An inductive thematic analysis was carried out. The first step was transcribing the audio recordings and reading the transcriptions several times to get familiarized with the content. After reading the interviews several times, the codes were generated that captured the underlying meaning of each selected interview segment. The generated codes were reviewed to identify the patterns and combined several codes to develop themes. Then the themes were reviewed thoroughly by comparing them with the data and fine tunings were done to the themes identified. The finalized themes were defined and named accordingly.

The ethical clearance to carry out this study was obtained from the ethical committee of the Medical Faculty of the University of Colombo. The administrative authorization was obtained from the Commissioner General of Prisons in the prison department.

3. Results and Discussion

A total of sixteen interviews were conducted among prison inmates. Among them, eight prison inmates were having psychological distress. The majority were between 27-56 years of age and were male prison inmates. Among the study participants had an educational level of having learned in GCE O/L class or less than that.

Engaging in different activities, positive thinking about the future, discussing matters with others, avoiding the situations leading to distress and engaging in religious activities were identified as the main themes following the analysis.

3.1 Engaging in different activities

Both the distressed and non-distressed prison inmates practiced this method in coping psychological distress. They engage in different activities during the day time. These activities ranged from organizing programmes, engaging in indoor activities, engaging in outdoor activities and engaging in recreational activities which were arranged and authorized by the Prison Department.

One prison inmate indicated the importance of engaging in activities as:

"Back at home I rarely read books, but after I was imprisoned, I used to read books daily and sometimes I read the same books two or three times, it makes me relaxed"

3.2 Positive thinking about the future

This was mainly practiced by the non-distressed prison inmates. They try to see the positive side of their future and try to work out problems by seeking the positive side of the problem. They try to see life beyond the imprisonment, getting rehabilitated and going back to the society to have a normal life to achieve the targets of their lives.

A prison inmate stated his experience as follows:

"Some of the times I have problems with other prison inmates while sharing and working with them as my way of working is different, so I feel distressed but I try to think that others are having more problems than me and try to forget the experience"

3.3 Discussing matters with others

Discussing issues, distressed situations and the experience of facing those situations with people they were associating with, was the method used by them. This was mainly adopted by the prison inmates who were categorized as the non-distressed, compared to distressed prison inmates.

Importance of discussing matters was highlighted by one of the prison inmates as:

"My wife always outthinks me. She has solutions for any matter. So, when she comes to see me, I discuss some of the problems that I face within the prison. She gives me some brilliant ideas to overcome those problems"

3.4 Avoiding the situations leading to distress

Both the distressed and non-distressed prison inmates used avoiding the situations leading to distress as the method of coping to relive their distress. They have identified the situations which make them distressed mostly and tried their best to avoid those situations or try to minimally engage actively during those situations. As being prison inmates, they didn't have the possibility of avoiding some of the situations entirely, but they had made negotiations and had used different strategies to minimize the exposure to such situations. Waking up early morning and using the toilets as early as they could to avoid the rush, trying to minimize the contact with fellow prison inmates, trying to finish their allocated work as early as possible and trying to be healthy without fall ill were some of the strategies they have adopted under this theme.

Following were stated by the prison inmates in regard to avoiding the situations leading to distress:

"In the morning I need some time to be spent in the washroom, I can't rush my activities in the washroom as I get distressed if so, therefore here I try to get up early before others and use the washroom before the rush"

"Sometimes talking to fellow inmates ends up in arguments, I feel distressed if someone gets angry at me, so I try to minimize interactions with other prison inmates and try to be alone as far as possible".

3.5 Engaging in religious activities

This method was practiced as one of the major methods among convicted prison inmates to cope psychological distress. They read religious books, daily engage in religious activities and participate in the special religious programmes conducted by the prison institutions.

A couple of inmates expressed their views regarding the religious activities in the following way:

"I have read bundles of religious books after I became imprisoned. Now I try to use them practically every day. This makes my mind relax and forget all the problems. I could also help the other fellow inmates who are distressed, as well"

"I have been involved in many religious activities since I came here, now a lot of inmates identify me and respect me. Now it is my duty and I'm in-charge of "Buddha Poojawa" (Offerings to Lord Buddha) in this prison institution, I guide the other prison inmates in doing this activity. This makes me feel like in heaven"

Engaging in different activities is a part of cognitive coping and rational coping where you identify the problem and make a solution by passing it away. In a study conducted among 677 older inmates, one third had used cognitive coping (Maschi *et al.,* 2015), which supports the finding of the current study. In another study done among 254 adolescent prison inmates, one fifth had used rational coping (Ireland *et al.,* 2005), further strengthening the finding of the current study.

Study conducted among prison inmates in Victoria, Australia has found out that supporting, and acceptance types of coping methods are been successfully adopted by both the young adults and adults to deal with the psychological distress (Luke *et al.,* 2021). This has supported the findings of the current study that prison inmates use the same styles of coping namely discussing matters with others (supporting), and positive thinking about future (acceptance) as well.

Another study conducted among prison inmates in Victoria, Australia further strengthened the findings of the current study that it shows use of positive thinking as a coping strategy predicted a decrease in psychological distress level (Rose *et al.,* 2020). Few other research as also indicated that positive thinking has helped the individuals to deal with stressful situations to improve the psychological status (Shulman & Cauffman, 2011; Van Harreveld, *et al.,* 2007). Current study "positive thinking about future" was a main method of coping with psychological distress.

Positive thinking is a part of emotional coping. Even though the prison inmates used this method to relieve their distress, during the interviews, the following points came up that they have not been given a proper training or provided a conducive environment on positive thinking. To support this finding, a study found that one tenth of adolescent prison inmates were practicing emotional coping for psychological distress (Ireland *et al.,* 2005).

None of the study participants identified use of counselling as method of discussing matters and getting relived of the distress. Discussing matters with others is a part of social coping. In this study inmates had discussed their matters with peers and they were not trained counselors. To the positive side of the finding of the current study a study conducted among 677 older prison inmates showed that majority had used social coping for distress (Maschi *et al.,* 2015), while older prison inmates in a study used affiliation as a coping method (Quota *et al.,* 1997). A study conducted in India among convicted prison inmates found out that both male and female inmates had used emotional coping, where they discussed their grievance with others to get relieved from distress (Chahal, Rana and Singh, 2016).

In the current study, prison inmates have tried to avoid conflict situations with prison officers and with prison inmates and have tried to avoid illegal activities happening within the prison institutions. In a study, prison inmates had used avoidant coping to combat the distress, and in another study, prison inmates who experienced torture had used avoidance as the coping for distress (Ireland *et al.,* 2005; Quota *et al.,* 1997). These findings support the finding of the current study.

In an interventional study done to assess the usefulness of mindfulness for stress reduction has shown a highly significant pre to post course improvements in the fields of hostility, self-esteem and mood disturbance, supporting the findings of the current study (Samuelson *et al.,* 2007). Mediation is also a part of the emotional coping where, a study found that adolescent prison inmates were practicing emotional coping for psychological distress (Ireland *et al.,* 2005), to support the findings of the current study.

In the current study, most of the coping strategies were used by the participants who are not psychologically distressed compared to the psychologically distressed study participants. However, in the study conducted in India among convicted prison inmates found out that participants with psychiatric morbidities used significantly higher number of coping strategies compared to healthy participants (Chahal, Rana and Singh, 2016). This could be due to the fact that they have been trained regarding using of these strategies.

4. Conclusion

Prison inmates have identified and used five main types of strategies to cope with psychological distress. Mainly, the prison inmates who are not psychologically distressed had used these strategies compared to the prison inmates with psychological distress. None of the prison inmates had identified the importance of counselling in coping the psychological distress. Prison inmates have not been given training or awareness regarding mental wellbeing or regarding the coping strategies of psychological distress within the prison institutions.

Therefore, it is important to include awareness sessions on mental health promotion including psychological distress to the introductory awareness sessions conducted for the prison inmates at the time of entry to a prison institution and to start a compulsory mental health module for all the prison inmates during their first few months following entry to a prison institution.

References

Armiya'u, A.Y., Obembe, A., Audu, M.D., & Afolaranmi, T.O. (2013). Prevalence of psychiatric morbidity among inmates in Jos maximum security prison. Open Journal of Psychiatry, 3(1), 12–17. https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpsych.2013.31003

Bland, R.C., Newman, S.C., Thompson, A.H., & Dyck, R.J. (1998). Psychiatric Disorders in the Population and in Prisoners. International Journal of Law and Psychiatry, 21(3), 273–279. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-2527(98)00005-3

Brinded, P.M.J., Simpson, A.I.F., Laidlaw, T.M., Fairley, N., & Malcolm, F. (2001). Prevalence of Psychiatric Disorders in New Zealand Prisons: A National Study. Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 35(2), 166–173. https://doi.org/10.1046%2Fj.1440-1614.2001.00885.x

Brooke, D., Taylor, C., & Maden, J.G. (1996). Point prevalence of mental disorder in unconvicted male prisoners in England and Wales. British Medical Journal, 313,1524–1527. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.313.7071.1524

Chahal, S., Rana, S., & Singh, P. (2016). Impact of coping on mental health of convicted prisoners. The International Journal of Indian Psychology, 3(2), 66-80. https://books.google.lk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=e4JoCwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA66&dq=factors+associated+with+psychological+distress+among+prisoners+in+india&ots=UGVlQduQBS&sig=5_6SKen8vOoqBRtxRNn0cVFNNsc&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

Dachew, B.A., Fekadu, A., Kisi, T., Yigzawa, N., & Bisetegn, T.A. (2015). Psychological distress and associated factors among prisoners in North West Ethiopia: cross sectional study. International journal of mental health systems, 9 (39). https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-015-0033-7

Drapeau, A., Marchand, A., & Beaulieu-Prévost, D. (2012). Epidemiology of psychological distress. Mental illnesses-understanding, prediction and control, 69 (2), 105-106. https://doi.org/10.5772/30872

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Misnistry of Health., (2011). National Mental Health Strategy 2012/13-2015/2016. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Ibrahim, A., Esena, R. K., Aikins, M., O'keefe, A. M. & McKay, M. M. (2015). Assessment of mental distress among prison inmates in Ghana's correctional system: a cross sectional study using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale. International Journal of Mental Health Systems, 9(17). https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-015-0011-0

Ireland, J. L., Boustead, R., & Ireland, C. A. (2005). Coping style and psychological health among adolescent prisoners: a study of young and juvenile offenders. Journal of Adolescence, 28(3), 411–423. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2004.11.002

Luke, R. J., Daffern, M., Skues, J. L., Trounson, J. S., Pfeifer, J. E., & Ogloff, J. R. P. (2021). The Effect of Time Spent in Prison and Coping Styles on Psychological Distress in Inmates. The Prison Journal, 101(1), 60–79. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0032885520978475

Maschi, T., Viola, D., & Koskinen, L. (2015). Trauma, stress, and coping among older adults in prison: Towards a human rights and intergenerational family justice action agenda. Traumatology, 21(3), 188-200. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/trm0000021

Mirowsky, J., & Ross, C.E. (2002). Measurement for a human science. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 43 (2), 152-170. https://doi.org/10.2307/3090194

Nseluke, M.T., & Siziya, S. (2011). Prevalence and Socio-Demographic Correlates for Mental Illness Among Inmates at Lusaka Central Prison, Zambia. Medical Journal of Zambia, 38(2), 3-7.

Phillips, M.R. (2009). Is distress a symptom of mental disorders, a marker of impairment, both or neither?. World Psychiatry, 8(2), 91-92.

Qouta, S., Punamäki, R.L., & El Sarraj, E. (1997). Prison experiences and coping styles among Palestinian men. Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 3(1), 19–36. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1207/s15327949pac0301_2

Rose, A., Trounson, J., Louise, S., Shepherd, S & Ogloff, J. (2020). Mental Health, Psychological Distress, and Coping in Australian Cross-Cultural Prison Populations. Journal of Traumatic Stress, 33(5), 794-803. https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22515

Samuelson, M., Carmody, J., Kabat-Zinn, J., & Bratt, M.A. (2007). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Massachusetts Correctional Facilities. The Prison Journal, 87 (2), 254-268. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0032885507303753

Schneider, K., Richters, J., Butler, T., Yap, L., Richards, A., Grant, L., Smith, A. & Donovan, B. (2011). Psychological distress and experience of sexual and physical assault among Australian prisoners. Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health, 21(5), 333–349. https://doi.org/10.1002/cbm.816

Shulman, E. P., & Cauffman, E. (2011). Coping While Incarcerated: A Study of Male Juvenile Offenders. Journal of Research on Adolescence, 21(4), 818–826. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2011.00740.x

Van Harreveld, F., Van der Pligt, J., Claassen, L., & Van Dijk, W. W. (2007). Inmate Emotion Coping and Psychological and Physical Well-Being: The Use of Crying Over Spilled Milk. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 34(5), 697–708. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0093854806298468

Viertiö, S., Kiviruusu, O., Piirtola, M., Kaprio, J., Korhonen, T., Marttunen, M & Suvisaari, J. (2021). Factors contributing to psychological distress in the working population, with a special reference to gender difference. BMC Public Health, 21, 611. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10560-y

Watson, D. (2009). Differentiating the mood and anxiety disorders: A quadripartite model. Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 5, 221-247. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.032408.153510

Does this article screen for similarity? Yes

Conflict of Interest: The Authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

Author's contribution: Amila Suranga: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing -Review & Editing; Janaki Vidanapathirana: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing -Review & Editing

About The License

Cite this Article

M. Amila Suranga & Janaki Vidanapathirana, Do prison inmates cope with psychological distress well: A qualitative study among prison inmates in Sri Lanka, Asian Journal of Interdisciplinary Research, 5(2) (2022) 23-29. https://doi.org/10.54392/ajir2223