Using distraction items in custody

Published on 1 December 2021 Written by Becky Davies, Custody Sergeant, Devon and Cornwall Police

Items such as stretch balls and foam footballs could reduce anxiety and stress in custody

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Over several years, I have undertaken work relating to mental health. During 2019, I noticed that our mental health practitioners had a stretch ball. Occasionally, they would ask if they could give this to a detainee. I noticed how effective these balls could be in helping to reduce panic attacks and self-harm, as well as improving communication.

The custody environment

In custody, personal items are historically removed from detainees, who are then placed in a cell with very little other than a mattress, pillow and four plain walls to look at. Research shows that these practices may re-traumatise detainees who have experienced trauma in their past (Beyond Youth Custody, 2016). There are a number of professionals based in the custody unit. However, if the detainees are unfit to engage, then they are not able to benefit from the support that these professionals can provide.

The purpose of this initiative was therefore to provide the detainees with items to help to reduce the anxiety and stress they experience, so that they are more able to engage. A significant proportion of detainees have communication difficulties, with youth offending teams reporting that this figure is between 60% and 90% for young people (Bryan and others, 2015).

From idea to implementation

I had a conversation with my line manager, who is keen on innovation and empowers staff to try out new ideas. We carried out robust risk assessments on the distraction items and, due to the low costs involved, we were able to source them without bureaucracy. The foam footballs, stretch balls and mindful colouring that we introduced cost a couple of pounds each, while the jigsaws were donated at no cost by staff and a local community charity called Roots.

We carried out learning events with our staff before the launch. One of our objectives was to initiate discussions about emotional dysregulation, which describes an emotional response that is poorly regulated and does not fall within the accepted range of emotional reactions. We aimed to get some buy-in from staff who would be expected to give out the distraction items. The distraction items were initially trialled in Exeter custody centre. As this was successful, they were then rolled out across the force area. The distraction item that staff selected varied depending on the detainee's preference and the risk that they presented. For example, certain items may not be provided if the detainee was known to be at risk of self-harm or had a propensity towards violence.

Early findings

Feedback was sought from staff and detainees via surveys that were left in the custody office and could be updated by hand, to make the process as straightforward as possible. Surveys included questions requiring a simple 'yes/no' answer, such as whether staff thought the use of distraction items was effective and whether they presented any issues or problems. Detainees had an opportunity to provide qualitative feedback as to what they thought of the availability and use of the items.

My interim evaluation indicated that the distraction items were effective and were well received by staff and detainees. Detainees reported reduced anxiety levels, which helped them to distract and engage better with the custody process. Other benefits include reductions in self-harm, use of force and other high-demand behaviours. We have now introduced items to support neurodiverse detainees, such as earplugs to block out noise. We intend to carry out a full-scale evaluation of the initiative.

References

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