



Living with separation when a partner goes to prison

"It's almost like he's died. Except when someone dies people visit, you can grieve and move on. When someone goes to prison it's like life is on hold and yet you're grieving for them all the time. It feels like a living death"

- Woman with partner in prison

Feeling alone

The isolation experienced when a partner goes to prison is unique. Although you are still in a relationship, the decisions made about your partner's day to day life and your access to them are now under the control of a government department.

This feeling of loneliness can be made worse if you have not told anyone where your partner is. It is not unusual to worry that people will find you 'guilty by association'. Some people will say that their partner is working away from home for an extended period. This can create the illusion that things are going smoothly in your life.

It can be difficult to explain to people where your partner has gone but it's very important that you have support. It can help to remember that there are nearly 10,000 people in prison in New Zealand and that although your situation is unique there are many people facing similar issues. To talk to someone who understands you can call Pillars on the number in the *Who can help?* section below.

Coping at home

If you have children you will now find yourself living as a one parent family. There will be times when you have to make important decisions on your own. It can be helpful to try to include your partner as much as possible in these decisions. This can give them a realistic idea of what is happening at home and can help them resettle when they are released.

If there are things your partner did before that you don't know how to do, seek help. These could be things like paying the bills, registering the car or dealing with the landlord. Try not to let things get on top of you. There are many services that can assist you and many will do so for free. You won't always have to tell them where your partner is and if you do, you probably won't have to tell them why. Getting on and doing the practical things can also help by giving you some tasks to focus on.

Maintaining your relationship

It can be very difficult to maintain a relationship with someone in prison. Your calls and mail may be monitored and you will be sharing a visiting room with strangers. The amount of physical contact you can have will be regulated too.

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Try to keep your partner up to date with things that are happening at home. If you find phone calls are focused on the person in prison it may be that you write letters about what's happening outside. It might be difficult for your partner to read these at first but it can really help if they are in touch with home life when it comes time to be released.

There may be things you need to say that you fear will lead to arguments on the phone or at visits. You may find it useful to talk to someone about how to raise tricky topics before you talk to your partner.

Some people find it helpful to keep a journal to vent how they are feeling. Writing a letter to your partner that you don't send can also help you sort out how you are feeling. It can help you feel as though you have got things out of your system even if they don't read it. See *Looking After Yourself When a Family Member Goes to Prison* for more ideas on how to reduce stress.

Who can help?

You may find you feel different before, during and after prison. It's important for you to have support at each different stage. You may find after a while that you begin to get over the initial shock only to feel upset again as release day nears. See the other brochures in this series for ideas on how to cope or phone Pillars to speak to someone who understands. Making sure you have support is a brave and very important step.

Pillars - Pillars has a range of services including a free and confidential helpline for anyone who is affected by the imprisonment of a family member or friend. Phone 0508 PILLARS (0508 7 45 527) or visit www.pillars.org.nz

Lifeline - Free confidential non-judgmental counselling 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Phone 0800 543 354

Citizens Advice Bureau - Provides free information on debts, loans, repossession and other financial matters. Specialist Welfare / Beneficiary clinics ensure that people are receiving their full entitlements. Phone 0800 367 222 or go to www.cab.org.nz

Department of Corrections - Information for friends and families of people in prison. www.corrections.govt.nz

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