

What happened in the prison SOTP groups I undertook and how the “Hot Seat” caused stress and fear

I turned to my former Christian faith after my arrest and after conviction moved to a prison where I was told I had to undertake SOTP (at that time referred to as the Sex Offenders Treatment Programme) in order to become eligible for parole.

When informed I had to begin SOTP I was unsure and nervous.

Things heard disturbed me – prisoners who’d already been through the system advised other prisoners undertaking the course not to relate what “actually” happened, but what prison psychologists **wanted** to hear. That would mean talking about my crimes contrary to the truth and saying my statements to the police were lies. I didn’t want to tell lies. I wanted to understand how I’d gone wrong and how I could remain law-abiding in the future. And most of all, how I could give society something back.

Below are feelings and emotions I encountered whilst undergoing SOTP, in actual group sessions and alone in my cell.

I can’t cope	I fear for my sanity
How will other prisoners react when they hear my crimes? ¹	I’m full of self-loathing
Being “judged” by other prisoners	I have feelings of total unworthiness
Being “judged” by psychologists	Occasional self-pity: but I only have me to blame for my situation.
I am ashamed	Shaking with fear
I am frightened	Nightmares ²
I am embarrassed	Flashbacks ³
I want this to stop	Cold sweats
I can’t take any more	Stuttering
God help me!	Bed-wetting
My mouth is dry – can’t speak easily	Tremors
“Butterflies” in my stomach	Feeling sick ... followed by dry retching
Breathlessness	Depersonalisation - feeling like I’m unreal
I live in fear of “the hot seat”	Sleeplessness
I live in constant fear of prison psychologists because of their interrogation techniques	I want to die (and suicidal thoughts)
Dissociation: confusion about sexuality	Panic when knowing I’d be in the hot seat on the next session.

¹ I struggled to talk about the subject of my sexual behaviour when other prisoners were listening to me. Intimate details were demanded by prison psychology on every single second of a sexual abuse act.

² Traumatic events, physical, sexual and emotional abuse suffered in childhood

³ Ditto

WHY PRISONERS SUFFERED UNDER PRISON PSYCHOLOGY

PRISONER “X” HAS A BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER

In a report written by prison psychology during my SOTP course (this was called a “review” of progress), it was suggested I could have a borderline personality disorder.

I cannot describe how this made me feel. In my cell, feeling distressed during an association period, an excellent prisoner officer saw my state and came to talk to me. When I showed him the report, and asked what this would mean, he asked why I was worried. I told him I feared psychology could use this assessment to send me to a secure hospital – and I certainly didn’t feel dangerous or mad.

The prison officer told me I should not be worried. He said he thought most psychologists had a personality disorder for wanting to put prisoners through psychology courses – they were exercising the power of “Control” over prisoners in the same way that offenders had “power” over their victims, in whatever form. The difference was, victims could go to the police and seek help, but prisoners had nowhere to turn. On his advice I spent several hours with a Prison Listener that day.

That prison officer had more humanity in him than any prison psychologist I ever had to deal with and helped me in many other ways in that prison.

I challenged this statement at the next Group Meeting but was told I “was not qualified” and that prison psychology “knew” what was in the minds of offenders.

From memory, nearly every prisoner in the group had the same assessment of having a “borderline personality disorder” in their psychology review reports. We knew the parole board and the Home Office would have sight of these reports, but we had no option that to continue with SOTP groups. Failure to participate meant a downgrading of prison grade and a move to another prison – these were nicknamed “punishment prisons” for prisoners who refused to comply with required psychology courses.

When I asked a lady facilitator (psychiatrist) how much she knew of my childhood, she told me it wasn’t relevant to the crimes I’d committed. I disagreed and told her I’d lived in the 1960s to 1980s when “Queer-bashing” was a national sport, and my sexuality a constant threat to my welfare and that I lived for many years in fear of the law.

I would now respectfully suggest that the traumas I experienced in childhood and the fact I lived through my formative years knowing that (at that time) all homosexual acts were criminal had an enormous bearing and affected my life in a disastrous way.

The following sections explain what happened during two of the SOTP groups I had to undertake. (I took part in four in total, including two after release from prison).

In 2000 at a meeting with prison psychology I was told I'd start SOTP the following week, and after the meeting the wing Senior Officer told me I'd get a cell move next morning.

On a cell move, a prisoner must place his belongings into two "volumetric control boxes"⁴ During the weekend prior to starting my SOTP group I had increased stress.

Monday arrived. After lunch, during bangup I prayed. I went to the SOTP room to begin the group that afternoon. It was a "getting to know each other" day. I coped well and I felt fine as we just made introductions and got to learn which psychologists were running the group.

By Wednesday things were going well but I was still worried about how SOTP would progress and how I would cope when it got tougher.

The next day I was first in the "hot seat" for my passive account of a victim. It was difficult but I got through it, and was told I'd done well by the psychology tutors. The next day I was more relaxed having completed my passive account, but listening to the others giving their accounts was not what I needed to hear. I found some more difficult to hear than others.

The following day I was back on the SOTP group. This was a continuation of passive accounts, some of which left me shocked and horrified. I was preparing myself each morning, but the dreadful things I heard were upsetting and distressing, and it became difficult to sleep.

The next afternoon the SOTP group heard the last passive account before we moved on to SIDS⁵. This was fascinating, but didn't take into account conditioning in childhood, conditioning by society, or moral attitudes. Every night I'd prayed about the following day's group.

On Friday that week we began active accounts. These were difficult, probing every detail of our offences: every thought and every minute detail leading up to it, every move and every thought during the offence itself, emotions, and feelings: it was very painful. I knew it would be hard for me when it was my turn in the hot seat.

Due to prison logistics at the end of the week I was given another cell move, which causes stress and worry and disorientation.

As SOTP continued I saw men broken. What was it doing to us psychologically – I knew I'd go through it, too. It was a terrifying thought. I was afraid to face my crimes again as I kept thinking about how my actions have damaged victims and families, my family and friends, and my partner. Near the month's end at a group session, it was a tough morning. I really felt for the prisoner in the hot seat.

On a morning when quiet descended on our wing due to the death of a prisoner, all prison activities were put on hold except SOTP. At the group I had another stressful morning.

At another tough SOTP session I was told it would be some time before I took my place in the hot seat: there were twelve prisoners the course and each man had three days or more in the hot seat. It could be four weeks before I endured my interrogation.

One another session I was shaking and sweaty by the end and it wasn't me in the hot seat. I was progressively getting tenser as days passed. I knew I wouldn't be believed as psychologists and

⁴ The boxes are suitcase size. All possessions including bedding must fit into the boxes with the exception of clothes being worn. Standard issue prison clothes fill three quarters of one box. Dishes, plates, radios, flasks, books, paperwork, letters, shoes, food, drink, toiletries, etc., ensure prisoners are limited in the possessions they can have. Anything that doesn't fit in is confiscated and put in prisoners' property boxes in Reception. There is one exception: one "outsize" object such as large radio, bird cage, snooker cue, etc. My large item was my budgerigar's cage. I could just get my radio in the boxes.

⁵ Acronym for "Seemingly Irrelevant Decisions"

probation officers had refused to accept that in any offence there had been consensual agreement, or participation by victims.

At the next session my stomach was churning and my head swimming due to the things I was forced to hear. I knew my crimes were awful, but listening to continuing rape and violence was doing my head in. I knew I must be strong.

Again, on a morning witnessing more pain and agony I watched the head of psychology and the probation officer. I couldn't comprehend how they sat there and put us through such pain. I thought they must have warped minds to do what they did.

At another session we were told there had been a "leak" – all discussion in SOTP groups are totally confidential, but details of one prisoner's crimes had been spread around the wing. It was agreed the group members would hold an emergency meeting that night during association. At 19.30 during wing association the group met. All evidence pointed to a particular prisoner as the person spreading information. As he wasn't in the group, someone in the group must have given him the information. I went back to my cell, distressed, and tried to settle. It was much later, alone after bangup, that peace came.

At the next group we discussed the leak. One prisoner had designated himself "Group Spokesman" and directly accused one of our group members of passing details that had come out in the group. We didn't have any hot seat interrogations and I felt stress increasing.

The hot seat interrogations continued with vengeance. It is painful watching men suffer, and I knew my time would soon come.

Another week in, SOTP was a particularly tough for everyone. Tears, anguish, pain and sorrow. I looked on the course as necessary but it was nothing other than cruel and wicked treatment. Some may say we deserved it, but SOTP caused suicides and psychiatric disorders in many of participants. I felt it was torturing us rather than helping us to come to terms with what we'd done.

Hot seat again – I was again in the hot seat and endured a tough session. I found it hard to be questioned over every statement made: it was obvious from the beginning I was going to get a tougher ride than anyone else – or was it paranoia? It was horrible. I felt sick. I sweated. I trembled and shook. My chest felt as if it was about to explode, and on several occasions I was close to tears. When I went back to the wing I felt utterly drained and couldn't eat. I spent the afternoon in a daze.

The following day back in the hot seat I had a rough time. My account was not believed when I described what happened during my offence. But it *was* the truth. What else could I say? It was a hard session – I was totally drained, worsened by psychology saying if I *didn't* tell the truth I would be ejected from the course. The reason psychology said I was lying was because I was telling them exactly the same, word for word, what I admitted to the police in my interviews after arrest, when I'd admitted my crimes and pleaded guilty! Psychology said I was lying but it was the truth! It was totally destructive. I was also challenged over a statement on another victim, which wasn't in the remit and I feel suicidal as a result.

The next day in the hot seat I broke down and wept. I stressed I was telling the truth but I wasn't believed, even after revealing other things not yet covered. Psychology said SOTP wouldn't work for me.

The following day I waited to go to the group. The head psychologist took me into a side office. She said she wasn't prepared to have me on the course. She wouldn't believe me. I swore I was telling the truth, but she would not be persuaded. I asked to be allowed to continue. She said no.

SENT TO “THE BLOCK”⁶

I was immediately removed from the wing and taken to The Block without even being allowed to return to my cell to collect my belongings. Placed alone in a cell with nothing, I asked for my Bible.

The Governor explained as I was in the Block I'd be punished by the removal of my rights as a Standard prisoner. I would be allowed £2.50 a week pay and £2.50 a week from my private cash. I was allowed to go to chapel where I received Holy Communion and fellowship. I saw a prison visitor and told him what had happened. I spoke to prisoners from my wing who were sorry to see what had happened to me. A member of the SOTP GROUP told me confidentiality had been broken again and prisoners on the wing knew about my offences. I was devastated. Back on the segregation unit I was given the wrong medication, I asked for a Listener: the breach of confidentiality placed me under intense stress. A prison Listener sat with me. I talked about the confidentiality breach and how it upset me, and how I felt I was being punished for being on a voluntary course. It seemed unfair and unjust: I couldn't understand how the prison system treated prisoners willingly undergoing offending behaviour programmes in such a way.

Six days later I was “shipped out”.⁷

After another SEVEN (yes, seven) prison moves I returned to the prison where I'd already attempted to finish the SOTP course. It was eight years since I was ejected from the group and I'd had to fight hard to get back on another one. Without the group being completed successfully, prisoners cannot achieve parole.

⁶ Segregation Unit – prisons within prisons: solitary confinement in a separate wing of the prison with no contact with other prisoners. Over half of prisoners interviewed in a Ministry of Justice study reported multiple mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, anger management, concentration issues, insomnia and an increased risk of self-harm.

⁷ Term used when a convicted prisoner is moved from one prison to another. Originates from being taken from the prison to a prison ship for deportation (Maidstone Prison used to have a route from the old dungeons to the river for such action).

MY SECOND SOTP GROUP

I fought hard to begin SOTP again, which prisoners are told will assist in obtaining parole. After getting to a prison that actually ran SOTP, I was back on track.

Tutors gave me psychological, IQ and biometric tests. After I'd completed these they informed me I might not be on the course, but might need to be shipped out to yet another prison to complete "Adapted SOTP". I explained the battle I'd had to complete SOTP. They informed me it wasn't an issue for psychology. They had targets to meet. I was "just a number" to be fed through the system.

It depressed me but I realised I could only place my situation in God's hands.

I was accepted on the course, but not informed until the morning of the day it began. I had not had a chance to prepare myself, and I have no idea why I was left "hanging" for an answer for so long. I was told again, "You are just a number".

When the course began the first step was to form a "live" Group Contract that could be added to as we progressed. The number one item, as before, was total confidentiality within the group. We could speak to each other in private on the prison wing, but not to any other prisoner about what took place in the group. Two prisoners who recently finished SOTP were asked to speak to us, and were clearly chosen by psychology as prisoners to give the best opinions about the course. They told us how they felt about the group. We were allowed to ask them questions and the two prisoners hailed the course as "brilliant". I later learned the men had been given extra privileges by the psychology team.⁸

The next day I went to the second SOTP session. We discussed the best ways to question and challenge each other, and used role-play scenarios with various aspects of age and sexuality.

The next morning went well. I felt reassured I'd complete the course without too much stress.

The group ran every morning on weekdays. Amongst other things we focused on coping strategies using Cost and Benefit analysis, emotion focused strategies, avoidance strategies, and considered problem focused coping (cognitive and behavioural). We were given vast amounts of "homework" for the weekend to be completed in our cells.

Prisoners were opening up, revealing emotions and feelings. I felt many had never done so before. We were told this was the start of a difficult healing process and acceptance of damage we'd done. We discussed family, qualifications, relationships, failed relationships and previous convictions. In the afternoon a prisoner on the group came to my cell to talk. I listened for 1¼ hours. He unburdened many problems. He later became suicidal.

When we gave our first presentations of offences I'd prepared myself. The first prisoner did well. After a break it was my turn in the "hot seat". I was embarrassed, ashamed, and my mouth was dry when I told what I'd done. I felt supported by other prisoners. I felt I'd take a step towards facing my past. The SOTP psychology tutors gave us a "coping diaries" to be utilized throughout the course. I wrote of my feelings about the day, which helped me to recover from the shame felt earlier. Again, I had to be careful what I wrote, as these diaries were going to be read by the prison psychologists.

⁸ Prisoners are placed in one of three regimes Standard, Basic, or Enhanced. The levels in prison were not set by Governors, Principal Officers or Prison Officers, but by psychology, and seemed to be based purely on whether prisoners were prepared to undertake various recommended psychology courses.

All prisoners begin on Standard Regime. If a prisoner does not comply or becomes disruptive they are downgraded to Basic Regime (*reduced spending allowance, removal of association time, restricted visits, no television and removal of all privileges*). When a prisoner agreed to comply with psychology courses, Enhanced Regime would be granted and reviewed six-monthly.) Pay in all grades was low. A prisoner does not qualify for the national minimum wage in respect of any work done in pursuance of prison rules.

During that night, something happened that prisoners who'd completed SOTP warned us about. I had nightmares. Unknown faces appeared, shouting at me, telling me I was lying about my convictions and being aggressive. I kept waking in a sweat and had a bad night. I finally rose early and looked out of my window. My unhappy feelings from nightmares didn't dissipate even when I looked at the sunshine. At the start of SOTP that morning we were asked if we had anything to say. I told them about my nightmares. The group suggested I put this in my coping diary, which I did. Another prisoner presented his offences and another after him: both looked uncomfortable and nervous.

One man was struggling and his presentation took a long time. A prisoner from the SOTP group asked me to explain his OASys.⁹ He had a very high risk factor of 131. I talked, explaining how he seemed in our group setting, his body language and how it affected other group members.

The wing office called me the same night: I was handed my ETS post-programme review, with a date in June, which was amazing as it was still May! When I read this in my cell I was left feeling my efforts had been fruitless and wasted. There was little to indicate how I'd done in the course generally, so anyone reading it would have no idea if I'd progressed or not.

On a difficult morning at SOTP a man struggled to give his life history. I challenged him, and was the first group member to do so. Other group members congratulated me, as did group tutors. The group supported my challenge saying it was required. We discussed Coping Diaries. As only one group member gave his life history, we finished early.

I felt stressed after the session, but as we got back to the wing the alarms went off. There was a kick-off on another Wing: prison officers rushed off to deal with the incident. And on the same afternoon I began an enormous questionnaire that came with my ETS review. I'd just finished it before tea when an ETS mentor called me to the office, gave me my ETS folder and told me "not to overdo it"!

On group we discussed factors that lead to offending. We were told girls under fourteen are classified children, and after 14, "young persons". Boys aren't classified as "young persons" until they reach 16. I challenged this as prejudicial against males and received support within the group. The psychologist said we shouldn't challenge their "facts!"

Reports handed to us by prison psychology gave little encouragement for prisoners on groups. Psychobabble and typical "prison reporting" left the reader baffled. On one night I did ETS work, producing written papers on two objectives as extra work, all this on top of my work preparation for SOTP: it was heavy going! For each objective we had to cover "Consequences and Sequels and Impulsive behaviour".

Another "technique" is to disrupt prisoners during group therapy to put added pressure and stress on them. An example is as follows:

At an SOTP group we discussed situations, thoughts, emotions and actions. "Revelations" about our crimes were due to begin the next day. At coffee break our cells were locked, which increased stress levels: already high due to the Group! After the session I found the prison on lockdown. Before bangup I discovered the lockdown was instigated due to a prisoner allegedly being attacked by a prison officer from another wing. During the afternoon another prisoner on the SOTP group worked with me on the next stage of SOTP. While we were working prison officers interrupted us and came to carry out a cell search. We went to the other man's cell to work. After my cell search was over, I

⁹ The probation and prison services across the country use a system called the Offender Assessment System (OASys) for assessing the risks and needs of an offender.

OASys is an integral part of the work probation officers do in assessing offenders; identifying the risks they pose, deciding how to minimise those risks and how to tackle their offending behaviour effectively. OASys is designed to help practitioners to make sound and defensible decisions. Assessment is a process that continues throughout sentence. OASys can be used to re-assess offenders at various points during their sentence and to measure how they have changed.

returned to find my “room” in disarray: bedding pulled off the bed: articles tossed around the cell and floor. I tidied as best I could before my tea and in the evening did further SOTP work. This caused immense stress, all happening during one day. To add to my problems, when I turned my light off to go to bed, the cell inspection night-light was on. As I didn’t want to disturb the prison staff and be put on report I went to bed with it on.

These are some of the outside factors that prisoners on SOTP groups had to endure.

There is much more I could report, but hopefully the above facts will give understanding of the pressures on prisoners to a) undertake SOTP groups and b) the long-term effects of doing so.

A FEW THOUGHTS ON RECOVERY AND HOW MY CHRISTIAN FAITH HELPED ME

Disaster came in the form of Lucifer, the fallen angel. And as long as Satan “prowls around like a roaring lion” (*1 Peter 5:8 NIV*), he will wreak havoc among God’s people. He will lock preachers, like Paul, in prisons. He will exile pastors, like John, on remote islands. He will afflict the friends of Jesus, like Lazarus, with diseases. But his strategies always backfire.

The imprisoned Paul wrote epistles. The banished John saw heaven. The cemetery of Lazarus became a stage upon which Christ performed one of his greatest miracles.

.... When the door slammed and the key turned in that rusty, iron lock, a feeling of utter loneliness swept over me. I lay down on that cold iron bed in my 8 x 6 prison. The smell of human excrement burned my nostrils. A rat, large as a small cat, scampered across the floor. The walls, floors and ceilings were caked with filth. Bars covered a tiny window high above the ground. I was cold and hungry; my body ached ...

It’s hard to describe what solitary confinement can do to unnerve and defeat a man. You quickly tire of standing up or sitting down, sleeping or being awake. With no books, paper or pencils, magazines or newspapers, the only colours are drab gray and dirty brown. You don’t see sunrise or moon, green grass or flowers. You are locked in, alone and silent in your filthy little cell breathing stale, rotten air and trying to keep your sanity.

Few of us will ever face the austere conditions of the old Victorian prisons. Yet to one degree or another, we all spend time behind bars. And time stands still in a prison.

It took prison and hours of painful reflection to realize how much I needed God and the community of believers.

AND FINALLY – IN CONCLUSION

Many, many years ago I sought help – but there was none. I wanted to know why I led such a promiscuous life in a downwards spiral, but had no one to turn to.

Thirty years later I have a Counsellor who has helped me to realise why my life went the way it did and this has changed my life dramatically. I now actually like myself, which I **never** did in the past.

One-to-one counselling therapy is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. It is the way forward to help offenders. I am relieved at this time of writing SOTP in prisons and the community has been stopped. It was **not** therapy – it was cruel and left a trail of devastation and pain.

Individual therapy is the ONLY way forward if prisons want offenders to avoid reoffending – the cost is not the issue – the results are – and it WILL make a difference.