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## How Compassion Toward Prisoners Set Me Free

I would define compassion as feelings of empathy, love, and caring for all living creatures, irrespective of race, identity, cultures, and social groups. Even though science and technology have improved people's standard of living, they have also increased suffering in various ways, all of which would benefit from greater levels of compassion:

- Industries have become capital-intensive and replaced manual workers with machines.
- The Internet has fueled pornography and other forms of sexual exploitation.
- Mobile and electronic networks have facilitated drug trafficking and black markets.
- High-tech prisons have enabled the mass incarceration of disadvantaged populations.

Against this backdrop, my Day of Compassion was very interesting and filled with positive experiences. I work with prisoners at the Educational Centre of Eastern High Security Prison in Mauritius, where I've been an officer for 14 years, and I decided to spend the day bringing love, trust, peace, compassion, and harmony to a group of 50 prisoners.

This approach is very different than what the prisoners normally experience. On a typical day, inmates often avoid socializing with others due to impaired social skills, the stigma attached to their criminal status, the risk of fights, and stereotypes that they have of other prisoners or that others have of them. In addition, the prison has strict rules, regulations, and disciplinary procedures to maintain its security, and these policies and practices prevent many inmates from socializing, building friendships, or feeling safe expressing feelings of warmth toward others. The inmates under my care have committed serious offenses such as murder, assaults, drug dealing, larceny with violence, and more.

On the Day of Compassion, my first goal was to help the prisoners embrace human values and cope with their difficulties through teamwork, positivity, and a sense of camaraderie. To promote this orientation, I organized a day of activities that included volleyball, dominoes, carrom, and street football in the prison yard where inmates are detained during the day, and I'm pleased to report that nearly all the prisoners participated in these activities.



While interacting with the prisoners, I also made it a point to learn about their family backgrounds, level of education, hobbies, and likes and dislikes. During these conversations, I kept social psychology research findings in mind. For instance, I thought about behavioral confirmation and research showing that positive social expectations could lead to self-fulfilling prophecies in which other people confirm optimistic social expectations. The end result was that many prisoners rose to the occasion, and I was able to recognize and admire their capacities and abilities.

Another social psychology application I used was to avoid the fundamental attribution error. Specifically, I refrained from over-relying on dispositional attributions, stereotypes, and dehumanizing labels such as deviant, culprit, or monster. Instead, I tried to see each person as a unique individual who had both positive and negative attributes, and I focused on our common humanity and shared interests. I could see, for example, the joy prisoners had when playing sports, which is the same joy that I myself have experienced.



From time to time, other prison officers came to watch the inmates doing activities in the yard, and several officers made negative comments. Here, too, I was able to draw upon social psychology. For instance, I told my coworkers about the consequences of certain attribution errors and biases, and I reminded them that prisoners are human beings who have rights we should respect.

During lunch, I sat among the inmates and talked about their motivations and feelings. Most of inmates responded positively because it was the first time that they had participated in games with one another and developed team spirit.

Remarkably, treating the prisoners with compassion not only made all of us happier than we usually were—there was not a single conflict or quarrel all day among the inmates.

### Insights from the Day of Compassion

No one is born a criminal. Rather, the circumstances of life lead people to become anti-social and break the law. All of us have our own story that begins in childhood. Hence, society should treat prisoners compassionately and teach them prosocial values and non-violence instead of simply rejecting them.

When I broke out of ordinary ways of thinking and began helping inmates feel better about themselves and each other, I felt a surprising degree of inner peace and satisfaction. I never thought that a single "Day of Compassion" could generate so much happiness or that a shift in my interactions with prisoners would change their behavior and my relationship with them so dramatically in the span of only one day. Most surprising of all, I didn't realize how imprisoned I myself had become as an officer, and how treating inmates with compassion could set me free.