

# Value of Befriending to Inmate and Ex-Offender Clients

**An Exploratory Study on the Befriending Programme**

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## **Introduction**

The Befriending Programme which is under the umbrella of the Singapore Prison Services (SPS), is an initiative undertaken by trained volunteers to give offenders the necessary support and guidance prior to and after their release. This service is meant to give additional emotional support to participating inmates and is open to those who lack positive peer and emotional support from family and friends. This programme is also designed to encourage greater involvement from members of the community, specifically the various ethnic groups. As the community realises the importance of their involvement in the reintegration of ex-offenders, programmes such as this can be an important platform to inspire, empower, educate and equip both the ex-offender and society at large.

An offender needs a network of positive peers (who are not currently engaged in any illegal activities) to support his reintegration efforts (Singapore Prisons Services, 2015). These peers may include family members, friends, mentors, or a befriender. These peers will also likely involve the offender in pro-social community activities. Pro-social peers are also important as the majority of inmates are single. They may not have strong family support upon release. Peers can serve as “surrogate families” to the released ex-offenders. The offender also needs an alternative pro-social support network, without which he is likely to return to the company of negative peers or a gang, increasing the chances of re-offending. Just as negative peer influence could have led the offender into criminal behaviour, positive peer influence has the potential to prevent re-offending by allowing him to meet his social and other needs in lawful ways.

Literature that examined the approaches taken in the criminal justice landscape and the correctional environment since the 1960s until recent years in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, indicate that peer-support and volunteer groups have an important role to play in contributing towards meeting offender rehabilitation and re-entry needs and helping ex-offenders break away from their criminal lifestyle (Hornby, 2012). However, there is a paucity of local research looking deeper into how offenders experience and interpret the value of befriending in the context of their re-integration journey and whether what befriender volunteers are currently providing meet the needs of these recipients.

Little is known about the specifics of what works and what does not work so well for the benefit of the recipient in befriending and mentoring services. This is the same likewise in the context of Singapore. Also there has not been any consistently clear delineation in current literature between mentoring and befriending. It is thus pertinent for future research to be highly specific and the scope of the research to be focused on particular aspects of befriending and/or mentoring, so that findings of the services could be better

understood. Thus, this research seeks to understand the benefits of the befriending programme to the clients. The paper will explore the experiences of 15 ex-offenders who had undergone the befriending programme and whether they feel the befriender volunteer has met their required reintegration needs.

### **Literature Review**

In most literature on the topic of befriending and mentoring, the terms ‘befriending’ and ‘mentoring’ are usually used interchangeably. The reason being that both involve developing a one-to-one relationship whereby an individual, who is neither a friend or family member, volunteers to give his/her time to support and encourage the recipient, usually through face-to-face meetings (Mentoring & Befriending Foundation, 2011). However, the main difference between the two is that there is an emphasis on goals in mentoring. Indeed, mentoring is a time-limited and goal-oriented process, focused on providing support for the mentee’s learning and development, although it has social elements to the relationship. In contrast, befriending involves the development of a more informal and supportive social relationship over a longer duration and the achievement of goals are not the main focus, unlike in mentoring. In the current Singapore context, the befriending programme that is catered for offenders is a time-specific programme and focuses on the development of an informal and supportive social relationship. For instance, each run of the befriending programme is conducted over 16 months; 10 months during in-care and 6 months of aftercare. During the in-care phase, befrienders will regularly engage the offenders through letter writing, visits or phone calls. This monthly engagement during the in-care phase is important as it will assist in the rapport building between the befriender and client. Upon the offender’s release, the befrienders are expected to follow up with them for at least 6 months in the aftercare phase, guiding them through the reintegration phase (Singapore Prisons Services, 2015). As part of the programme, inmates will receive visitations from their befrienders during the in-care phase. Furthermore, as the main objectives of the befriending programme is to prepare ex-offenders to reintegrate into their own community and to provide the ex-offenders with positive peer support from the community, this section will look into the impact of visitations during incarceration, and the Social Capital theory and examine how relevant the theory is in analysing the findings of this study pertaining to befriending.

#### *Regular visitations may reduce the adverse effects of social isolation*

Scholars have argued that visitation is salient because of the isolation inherent in a prison stay. Separation from social networks is a critical challenge for inmates. As emphasized by Adams (1992), it contributes to prisoner maladjustment in the short and long term. According to Adam’s review of scholarship on inmate adjustment, social isolation during imprisonment is the most frequently reported concern that inmates report. Scholarship on inmate visitation consistently argues that the effects of isolation may carry

over not only to life in prison but also to life after prison (Mears et. al., 2012). This idea not only pervades the literature on inmate visitation but it is also reflected in prisoner accounts. For example, a recent study of soon-to-be-released inmates in Illinois, Ohio and Texas found that inmates who reported less family support and who stayed in prison for longer periods of time had less optimism about their life following prison (Visher & O'Connell, 2012). According to previous studies, visitations serve to maintain or strengthen existing ties. This idea is aptly illustrated in the work of Datesman and Cales (1983) in which inmates highlighted the main advantage of the visits were to tighten their relationships. For example, a study of long-term inmates by Richards (1978) found that individuals who felt more isolated were those reported to have greater psychological stress and having less visits during their incarcerations. Separation from potentially prosocial ties may lead inmates to adopt more deviant norms while incarcerated. From this perspective, maintaining contact with outside social ties may help to offset the internalization of criminal roles while in prison and help inmates to adopt more conventional, socially approved roles after release (LeBel, 2012). Furthermore, many theoretical accounts suggest that visitation can improve inmate behaviour and re-entry outcomes, not only by reducing social isolation but also through a range of other mechanisms. Visitations provide the only opportunity for prisoners to access social ties to conventional society. For example, scholars have argued that regular visitations may help individuals manage the strains related to incarceration and access to social networks via prison visits can provide individuals access to social capital and resources that can increase their chances of successful reintegration (Wolff & Draine, 2004).

### *Social Capital and Socialization theory*

Social capital is a valuable resource not only providing individuals with the supportive relationships that they need but also as a source of feedback. Social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In this case, social networks are not only important in terms of emotional support but also crucial in giving people more opportunities, choice and power. However, there can be significant differences between the types of networks people have, not only in quantity but also in quality. It is important to question how the positive consequences of social capital which include mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness can be maximized and the negative manifestations such as sectarianism, ethnocentrism, and corruption can be minimized.

Putnam (2000) highlighted that there are different types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking. *Bonding* social capital resides in family and friendship relationships and peer groups that provide a sense of belonging. It is good for under-girding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. *Bridging* social capital creates links with people outside immediate circles of relationships. It is good for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion. These networks can be very important for broadening our opportunities and horizons. Bridging social capital is important in getting ahead in life.

*Linking* social capital relates to relationships with varying levels of power. It is good for accessing support from formal institutions. Putnam (2000) considers the distinction between bridging and bonding to be of crucial importance, referring to bridging as 'exclusive networks' and bonding as 'inclusive networks'. Exclusive networks may be more inward looking and have a tendency to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups. Inclusive networks may be more outward-looking and encompass people across different social divides (ibid.). The notion of social capital includes individuals' social connectedness and social ties, their embeddedness in a set of relations of trust, their participation in civil society and so on.

Lin (2001) has stated that social capital can be defined operationally as resources embedded in social networks and accessed and used by actors for actions. Thus, the concept has two important components: (1) it represents resources embedded in social relations rather than individuals, and (2) access and use of such resources resides with actors. Lin also argued that there are two types of resources an individual can gain access to and use: personal resources and social resources. Personal resources are resources possessed by an individual and may include ownership of material as well as symbolic goods such as diplomas and degrees. Social resources are resources accessed through an individual's social connections. Depending on the extensity and diversity of their social connections, individuals have differential social resources.

In order to understand social capital better, the concepts will be divided into social trust in people, social trust in institutions, social tolerance and social connectedness. A subjective type of tie indicates trust, reciprocity and positive emotions between individuals.

#### *Social trust in other people*

Social trust in other people is the most widely used dimension of social capital (Rosenberg 1956). Social trust is frequently called interpersonal trust or generalized trust. Interpersonal trust is an attitudinal predisposition of enabling a person to enter trust relations with those who she does not initially know. It is a driving force in our lives and is important for the harmonious functioning of society. Without such generalized trust, individuals become alienated and suspicious of other people, and society does not function properly. Fukuyama (1995) argues that trust is a key by-product of the cooperative social norms that constitute social capital. According to Brehm and Rahn (1997), interpersonal trust enables individuals to interact and to cooperate with strangers even in the absence of actual, tangible profits.

#### *Social trust in institutions*

Silverblatt (2004) defines a social institution as an organization that is critical to the socialization process and it provides a support system for individuals as they struggle to become members of a larger social network. Social institutions are one of the key

mechanisms for producing trust. According to Weil (1987), institutions play an important role in forming an artificial structure of trust in order to secure and maintain social order. Thus, it is crucial whether or not individuals place trust in institutions. According to Giddens (1990) trustworthiness in institutions is a bridge connecting an individual to the outside world.

### *Social tolerance*

The idea of viewing social tolerance as a source of social capital has been relatively overlooked compared to other dimensions of social capital. According to Brehm and Rahn (1997), social capital refers to an aggregate notion that has its basis in individual behaviour, attitudes and predispositions. This clearly shows that social tolerance is a key component of social capital. Tolerance indicates the intention for accepting or recognizing individuals and groups perceived as different from us in terms of who they are, what they believe or what they do. According to Sullivan et. al. (1982), tolerance is the willingness to extend civic liberties and protection to unpopular or even hated groups. This suggests that high levels of social tolerance could generate or reinforce amicable attitudes between people which are the essence of positive emotion.

### *Social connectedness*

The last dimension of social capital refers to how well individuals are connected with each other. It stresses the fact that each individual has ties to other individuals. Associations between individuals can be rendered through mainly two features of ties: formal or informal social relationships. Putnam (2000) emphasizes the formal ties between individuals through formal membership in voluntary associations. At the same time, numerous studies continue to illustrate the importance of connection via informal associations. Informal associations consist of diverse social relationships such as friendship, kinship and neighbour. Each of these types of association has an explicit link to the total stock of social capital.

## **Aims and Research Questions**

In this exploratory study, we seek to examine how ex-offenders who are presently undergoing the befriending programme perceive the benefits of the programme based on their current experiences. We would like to understand the meaning and value of befriending for ex-offenders and how it affects their experience of the process. Additionally we hope that the ex-offenders' perceptions of this programme may inform us on some of the areas that may need to be improved upon.

## **Methodology**

Data was collected from 15 male ex-offenders who have been released from prison and were currently in or, as in one case, had recently completed the befriending programme. As there is a higher incidence of male offenders than female offenders in

prison, this study focuses solely on male respondents. Respondents were obtained from a list provided by the Singapore Prison Services (SPS) and Singapore After-Care Association (SACA). The sample of this study is a purposive sample as the respondents selected were male, and must be/have been in the befriending programme. In this sample, eight of the respondents are Chinese; six are Malay and one an Indian. Please refer to table 1 below for a detailed breakdown of the respondents' profile.

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Highest Education	Offence Committed	Repeat Offender or First-timer
R1	60	Chinese	Secondary 2	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R2	38	Chinese	GCE 'O' Level	Drug Trafficking	Repeat Offender
R3	48	Malay	Secondary 2	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R4	44	Malay	NTC 3	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R5	49	Malay	Primary 4	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R6	62	Chinese	Secondary 4	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R7	51	Malay	GCE 'N' Level	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R8	33	Indian	GCE 'O' Level (pursuing Diploma)	Criminal Law Detainee	First-timer
R9	56	Chinese	Secondary 2	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R10	56	Chinese	Primary School	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R11	45	Chinese	Primary 6	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R12	35	Chinese	GCE 'O' Level	Cheating	First-timer
R13	67	Chinese	Secondary 1	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender
R14	50	Malay	Primary 6	Drug Trafficking	First-timer
R15	62	Malay	Primary 6	Drug Consumption	Repeat Offender

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

In this study, the researcher employed the use of in-depth interviews to collect the data. A sample of the interview questions is attached at the end of this report in Appendix A. The variable and personal nature of the social constructions was elicited and refined through interaction between the respondents and the researcher. In order to have a better understanding of the social phenomenon, the researcher triangulated the findings with available Prison literature on the purpose and scope of the befriending programme.

The researcher was given a list of befrienders with active cases in the aftercare phase. All respondents for this study were contacted through their befriender. Initially it was difficult to secure the required number of respondents as some clients were uncontactable by their befriender while others had reoffended and returned to prison. In fact 13 out of the 28 befrienders whom the researcher had contacted reported this to be the case. Below is the breakdown of the reasons that the befrienders had given to explain the premature termination of their befriending case.

<b>Reasons Given</b>	<b>Number</b>
Befrienders who were no longer in contact with their clients	5
Befrienders who had clients who returned to prison	6
Befrienders who mentioned their clients did not want to be associated with things related to their past lives	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>

Table 2: Reasons why befrienders were unable to elicit participation from clients

### **Limitations of study**

As this study examines the experiences of only fifteen clients on the befriending programme, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire befriending client population. Also, as is generally the case with such studies, none of the respondents prematurely terminated their befriending relationship and so the findings only reflect that of people who were still in the programme at the time of the interview or who had recently completed it.

### **Findings & Analysis**

**Main finding 1:** Inmates keep verbalizing wanting more of tangible and material forms of help from their befrienders.

According to the Singapore Prison Services (2015) and input from SACA, the main role of a befriender is to provide a supportive relationship which would cater more to emotional support and provide a listening ear and give encouragement to the clients to change to be better men. While the SPS is looking at prioritizing emotional support for inmates without family support, these respondents are more concerned with securing tangible help from their befrienders. From the interviews, 10 out of the 15 respondents expect a more tangible form of support from their befrienders.

The standard thing for a befriender to do is to get the person a job. And then of course there is no way a befriender can be with the ex-offender the whole time. In fact, he found a job for me at the American club which needs to go thru some interviews. I decline because people around my age usually already retire. And the crew will be half of my age. (R6, Chinese, 62)

My PS introduced social workers to help me what kind of house I want, ¼ etc. There are a lot of ¼ houses. I don't know if befrienders can have the authority to find social workers for you to interview us. Four months about 3 times my befriender comes to visit. The most important thing is to find a place to stay. First time I told him about my problems, he never find a place for me or get me a social worker. Second time he reassured me of my problems. The third time he came, I ask him to find out whether I am able to use my security pass when I'm in the outside world. Because I'm worried I won't be able to find a job. (R9, Chinese, 56)

From the excerpts above, both R6 and R9 expect their befrienders to secure them job opportunities once they are released from prison. R9 also expects his befriender to assist him in securing accommodation after his release. More importantly, in the case of R9, it can be inferred that his primary concerns centre on employment and accommodation upon release and he feels that his befriender has been unhelpful in these aspects. These examples highlight that the ex-offender client may have expectations that differ significantly from the stated aims of what befrienders are supposed to do.

However, from the excerpts below, it is evident that the befrienders themselves have actually been doing more than providing the clients with the expected emotional support. The befrienders have gone beyond expectations to willingly assist the respondents by providing them with tangible forms of assistance. For example, R13's befriender displayed a fair bit of initiative and seemed to respond to client's main material needs immediately after release. Another very interesting display of initiative and willingness to go the extra mile is illustrated by R4's befriender who contacted client's sister in Malaysia without the client knowing so that they could reunite as a family – the willingness to go beyond merely providing emotional support is clearly evident even if the appropriateness of the action is questionable. In the case of R6, his befriender gathered information he required to secure a rental flat to live in while R10's befriender met up with him a few times at the National Library to help him print some of the forms required to secure a job.

Yes. My befriender bought spectacles for me and found me a place at a halfway house in Sembawang. He recommended me a job. (R13, Chinese, 67)

We cannot ask for more as the befrienders help us more than our family. My befriender went to JB to find my sister without me knowing. I feel indebted to him; he has done so much for me without me asking him.  
(R4, Malay, 44)

He is a very nice guy and dedicated. When I wanted to find out on HDB rental flat he went to PropertyGuru and check out all the HDB rental guidelines for me without me asking him. The criteria is quite tight as it requires 2 people to rent a flat. Other than that, just last Friday he gave me 2 tickets to the F1 walkabout. Then the next day he gave me 2 tickets for the Sunday show. F1 tickets not cheap you know very expensive. Walkabout tickets around 200 or 300 plus. He gets complimentary tickets from his company, so he gave some to me. (R6, Chinese, 62)

I have met him 3 to 4 times ever since I was released. I just met him yesterday as he had helped me. If I need help he always comes down to the library to help me. For example, he helped me print out my WSQ form the other day. I asked my NR officer to help and they told me to use the computer to print. If I know how to use the computer, I will not be asking them for help. My befriender helped me with the printing as I do not know how to use the computer. (R10, Chinese, 56)

Significantly the SPS befriending factsheet states that the primary purpose of befriending is the provision of emotional support to the inmate/ex-offender client. This point was reiterated by both SPS and SACA who informed the researcher that both the befriender and the client are reminded of this fact at the onset of the befriending relationship. Yet the evidence seems to point to the fact that a majority of clients are looking for or are expecting tangible assistance from their benders. There are also several examples to indicate that benders themselves are responding to this by actually going beyond providing emotional support to meeting the material needs of their clients.

Given that there seems to be some difference between that stated aims of befriending as compared to what actually transpires between befriender and client, the organisers of the programme may want to consider the following;

1. If the intended purpose of the befriending programme is to mainly provide emotional support to the client
  - how can this message be better communicated to both client and befriender
  - what can be done to ensure that this is actually the case during the course of the befriending relationship
  - what additional support systems need to be put in place to provide the tangible help needed by clients (to complement the role of the befriender)
2. If the primary purpose of the programme is to be modified to include tangible forms of assistance at the outset
  - what can be done to ensure that benders are equipped and supported to effectively carry out this part of their role

**Main Finding 2:** All 15 respondents have benders who are available to them when needed.

While the first finding focuses on the fact that a majority of clients expect tangible assistance from their befriender, it must be noted that this was not the case for a third of the respondents. However, something that the researcher noted was evident in all 15 cases was the fact that respondents gave the distinct impression that their befriender was frequently available to them. As illustrated below all respondents kept alluding to the fact that they either approached their befriender for specific help, advice, or simply to catch up and chat. For example, R14, R5 and R4 spoke to their benders whenever they felt the need to talk to someone who will just listen to them expressing their problems and when they needed reassurances in their life. In the case of R12 the importance of having someone to talk to meant that the physical distance between himself and his befriender was no barrier to the latter's ability to continue to play a supportive role in his life.

He is the first person I talked to every time I want to speak to someone. I am looking forward to have someone who is able to listen to me and talk to me. (R4, Malay, 44)

Usually I will give him a call. Usually I will tell him what are the issues that I am facing especially when I am adapting now ever since my release. He gave me advice not to return back to drugs. (R14, Malay, 50)

We talked about family and let him know of what I feel. Now I need a person to guide me so if I have problems in my life, there is someone I can share with whom I know who will be able to listen to me and console me. He will always give me advice on life and reminded me that not everyone will accept me and I should ignore the negative comments that people say if I want to change for the better. (R5, Malay, 49)

I called my befriender, every 2 weeks, whenever I feel stressed. This was especially so when my son was born as I didn't know how to sort citizenship, passport for my son and Long Term Visit Pass for my wife. I managed to build up my life over at Vietnam as my career was progressing well and managed to get recognition for it. (R12, Chinese, 35)

For the befriender I know he does it from his heart. For example if I encounter any problems he will help me. He will tell me everything very clearly. (R10, Chinese, 56)

Even though only 4 out of the 10 respondents actually received tangible help from their bendifenders, it is interesting to note that none of the 15 respondents dropped out of the programme. This suggests that the respondents value their relationship with their befriender even though some of them feel that they should be receiving more tangible forms of support. Importantly it should be noted that the respondents view their relationship with their befriender as a friendship – tellingly fourteen respondents referred to their befriender as their friend and in one case as part of his family.

The most important thing is I have another friend and I am proud that I have someone who is there for me. (R6, Chinese, 62)

A befriender should be someone not so strict, someone who will be there for you, someone who does not impose his authority, someone who is like a friend. It should be a two way flow and not just one person talking. So far yes, not only he listens to me but also share his views on life. (R8, Indian, 33)

My befriender is like family to me, he always went the extra mile to help me when I need help. (R10, Chinese, 56)

All the examples provided for the second main finding clearly point to a close relationship between the befriender and client, one that is based on trust. The fact that the respondents see their befriender as someone who is always there for them ready to support and encourage them or even simply to provide a listening ear seems to be a significant reason as to why the respondents continue to keep in touch and even cultivate the relationship.

**Main Finding 3a:** The befriending programme improves the respondents' self-esteem and confidence.

This befriending programme has taught me how to communicate with other people. Last time I do not really like to communicate with other people and I rarely make eye contact when talking. At least now the befriending programme helps me to be more confident when communicating with other people. (R5, Malay, 49)

After I was recently released, my friend came over to 'visit' me and offered me drugs again. He always offered me drugs whenever I was released. Usually I had the problem to say no to drugs. But for this recent release, I am very determined to be a changed person as my befriender kept encouraging me to change, and I managed to tell him, "Sorry I have decided to stop taking drugs completely." I told him politely. I was proud of myself when I told him that. From that incident I learnt that it is possible for me to say no to drugs and be firm with my decision. (R11, Chinese, 45)

All 15 respondents believe that the befriending programme improves their self-esteem, communication skills and allows them to be more confident of themselves. From the interview excerpts above, the respondents feel that through the help of the befrienders, they are able to be more confident and build up their self-esteem. One client, R11 provided an instance in which he is able to reject drugs given to him after his release as he has been receiving motivation from his befriender to distance himself from his previous lifestyle.

This befriending programme allows former offenders to develop their soft skills. Soft skills encompass a wide variety of workplace skills (Taylor, 2008). They are the kind of skills which are often taken for granted but are extremely important and one of the key things that employers look for. These skills include the ability to communicate and interact effectively with others, work well in a team, possess self-confidence and take responsibility. Thus, the befriending programme is useful for the respondents to develop these skills which enable them to be more employable in the job market.

**Main Finding 3b:** With an increase in self-esteem and confidence, respondents feel motivated to have a more positive outlook on life after imprisonment.

Imprisonment can affect the prisoners' abilities to think for themselves, a factor that may influence re-offending (New Bridge, 2011). Despite efforts to take part in programmes to improve attitudes, other prisoners and old friends may reinforce negative attitudes towards crime. Thus, the presence of a befriender in the respondents' life helps in his reintegration efforts upon release and provides him with the emotional support he requires. This is illustrated in the examples below. R5 and R7 emphasize the importance of having a befriender in their lives as the befriender encourages them to view life in a more positive light and to leave their previous lifestyles behind. The befriending programme provides the respondents with a positive role model and encourages them to be better people.

He will always give me advice on life and reminded me that not everyone will accept me and I should ignore the negative comments that people say if I want to change for the better. So now I am doing just that. For example there was one day when I had been recently released, I was telling him that I wanted to end my life, he reminded me of my life and my religion. The next thing I knew he came down to meet me immediately. I really felt touched for what he had done as it showed that I am important to him. He really helped me out a lot. From there I am determined to be a better person. (R5, Malay, 49)

We usually talk in English and Malay. Usually he will share his experiences with me. He gives me moral support and tells me not to go back to my old ways. He usually gives me motivation quotes so that I can be motivated to be a changed man. I wanted to do some volunteering but because of work commitments I do not really have the time to do such things. Usually when come back from work I will be very tired and cannot do anything else except to rest and sleep. (R7, Malay, 51)

Apart from that, the respondents highlighted the importance of having their befrienders as a form of emotional support especially when they needed someone to motivate them not to return to their old lifestyle.

I called my befriender, every 2 weeks, whenever I feel stressed when I was in Vietnam. This was especially so when my son was born as I didn't know how to sort citizenship, passport for my son and Long Term Visit Pass for my wife. I managed to build up my life over at Vietnam as my career was progressing well and managed to get recognition for it. (R12, Chinese, 35)

He gave me a lot of advice more on religious advice and advice on life and to be more patient. For being there as a friend it is something I am grateful for. A befriender should be someone not so strict, someone who will be there for you, someone who does not impose his authority, someone who is like a friend. It should be a two way flow and not just one person talking. So far yes, not only he listens to me but also share his views on life etc. Yes, I am planning to stay away from my gang friends. (R8, Indian, 33)

The befriender is there to give moral support and not to ask money from the befriender. There are some inmates who ask their befriender for money and that is not appropriate. (R6, Chinese, 62)

In the interview excerpts above, R8, R11 and R6 reiterate the importance of having a befriender as a form of emotional support and just having someone to talk to whenever they are facing difficulties with their reintegration. By talking to the befrienders, it helps the respondents to reaffirm their intentions to change to be a better person and have a more positive outlook on life. R6 and most of the other respondents did point out that their fellow ex-inmates who are in the befriending programme should not ask for money from their befrienders as a befriender is not supposed to provide them with any form of financial assistance.

Labelling theory may also offer another possibility for how befriending schemes might reduce re-offending. Individuals may internalise certain labels (offender) and in turn act according to the label. The befriending programme acts as an important counter to such

labels and instead promotes a more positive sense of personal identity (Bales & Mears, 2008). Through their responses, prisoners appear to really value the support from community members who view them in a non-judgemental way.

**Main finding 4:** The Befriending Programme creates opportunities for the respondent to build a new set of social capital and improve his relationship with family members.

The Befriending Programme is not just about making a new friend and having someone to talk to but also allows the clients to tap on the befrienders' extensive networks and resources to help them. Thirteen out of the 15 respondents received some form of assistance from their befriender's social networks. Additionally, the befriending programme acts as a stepping stone for the ex-offenders to build up a new social network for themselves. This is an example of activating social capital and occurs when the clients become sufficiently embedded in the relationship with their befriender so that the relationship itself could provide capital, both practical and emotional, in their lives. As illustrated below, R15 and R7 were able to meet with Malay Ministers in the community through their befrienders' extensive social network as they required specific forms of assistance.

When I lost my IC or when I have problem in securing housing, my befriender suggested to bring me to one of the Malay ministers whom he knows personally to help me get a subsidized rate. (R15, Malay, 62)

My befriender invited me for carnivals and a few Grassroots activities and meet a lot of people that are different from my previous life. And I even met an MP from the Grassroots activity. When I was about to be released, he was worried I do not have a place to stay so he started to look for housing alternatives for me like halfway houses etc. (R7, Malay, 51)

He invited me to Hari Raya gathering which is an RC event. He introduced his family to me, his wife, his brother. That's why I feel people like me who don't have any role model because there's no family members to support us, I feel that this befriender really helps me a lot and be a great role model to me. (R4, Malay, 44)

Since I haven't work now I attend church 1 week 3 times. Go different churches with the prison fellowship. Only some churches would be receptive of ex-offenders. You can see from their body language. (R10, Chinese, 56)

My befriender is a very dedicated man. Just last Friday he gave me 2 tickets to the F1 walkabout. Then the next day he gave me 2 tickets for the Sunday show. F1 tickets not cheap you know very expensive. Walkabout tickets around 200 or 300 plus. He gets complimentary tickets from his company, so he gave some to me. (R6, Chinese, 62)

Based on Putnam's theory of social capital, the befrienders serve as bridging capital which creates links with people outside the ex-offenders' immediate social circle. In this case, the befriender acts as a link to external networks and sources of information. Through the befrienders the ex-offenders get to know people who are outside their social circle and help them pick up new pro-social hobbies and activities. As mentioned by R10 and R4 above, the befriending programme creates opportunities for them to meet new people

which in turn help them keep away from anti-social associates. It creates opportunities for the clients to build social trust in other people who do not mind accepting them back into the community.

From the interviews, the respondents highlighted that it is rather difficult to break away from their old circle of friends as they have been threading the same path for a long time and inmates in prison generally know each other.

First I try to avoid the places where I used to hang out I try not to pass by there because if I pass by these places I will meet them and from there things will escalate. I believe they know I am out now. If they don't know it's much better. (R3, Malay, 48)

The challenge is usually you will just accidentally meet someone then they start talking. For me that is very dangerous. Sometimes if you have the temptation to try drug once then you are finished. This is what I worry for myself. But I have friends who have stayed away for 10 to 15 years already, so if they can do it why can't I? (R7, Malay, 51)

In Singapore wherever you go, you will meet people you know because Singapore is very small. So it is hard to totally cut off your ties from these people as you might bump into them at MRT and bus. There is this drug anonymous, there's one guy from Britain who came here just to do his rehabilitation. This is because the only way to move out of his circle of friends so that he can stay away from drugs. No. I plan to go to Malaysia once I finish serving all the requirements. My aim is to run away from my circle from friends where nobody knows me so that I am able to start a new life without going back to drugs. (R4, Malay, 44)

R8 even suggests that, in desperation, some ex-offenders prefer the familiarity of life in prison compared to living in an unfamiliar and unsupportive external environment.

Some people come out then got overwhelmed with the real world so they will do something to get caught so that they can go back in. For these people they find it more comforting and safe to go back to prison as they have no family and friends to turn to for support n help to reintegrate. Quite a number of people do that actually. Sometimes their friends are their old drug friends so they went back to drugs. Because it is difficult to break out from their old circle of friends if they are not determined to do so. (R8, Indian, 33)

Equally important then it would seem is the respondent's need to find viable alternatives to their former anti-social associates. The maxim 'nature abhors a vacuum' comes immediately to mind and to this end one effective countermeasure would seem to be the attempt by a majority of the respondents to rebuild their social network around their newfound work colleagues. R3, for one, did his best to not contact his old friends by avoiding the places that he knows they frequent. Currently, R3 is creating a new social network by making friends with his colleagues whom he is sure will encourage him to be a better person. This is further supported by R5 who believes that it is safer to just mix around with his work friends.

My friends now are all friends from my new workplace and from downtown. They are good guys they don't do drugs or other bad things that will end up in jail. They always talk about work and upgrading themselves and this is something new for me. (R3, Malay 48)

So far my current friends at the workplace are okay. They don't take drugs and only talk about the job and improving themselves. (R5, Malay, 49)

All 15 respondents emphasised the importance of having a befriender in their lives as the befriender was not from their circle of friends and would be able to guide them in their struggle to be a better person. Importantly then all respondents displayed a keen awareness of the dangers associated with reconnecting with anti-social peers and how that usually led to a return to the criminal justice system.

Right now I feel there's a lot of temptation and the urge to return to my old lifestyle. So to remind myself from going back to my old life I will talk to my befriender and ask for advice. Because my old friends are like old outfits. I feel like the outfit does not fit me anymore. If I wear the old outfit it will suffocate me. So it's better to have a befriender and new friends from my workplace. (R3, Malay, 48)

Staying away from friends is very important for me. The challenge is usually you will just accidentally meet someone since Singapore is a very small country, then they start talking and offer you drugs etc. For me that is very dangerous. It is very important to me to just stay away from my old friends and be closer to my befriender. (R4, Malay, 44)

Significantly, prior to release, 12 out of the 15 respondents indicated that they had come to realise that their past actions affected not only their own lives but that of the people closest to them. As illustrated in the interview excerpts below, both R7 and R8 mentioned that their interactions with their bendifenders helped them realise how their previous lifestyle had affected the people who love them. This encouraged them to improve their relationship with their family members after release.

When I was in prison, it makes me reflect that what I did previously actually affected my family and friends and at that time I did not notice the effects. I only noticed it after my befriender talked to me about it. Now I know it is called the ripple effects, I thought it was only me and others will not be affected by my actions. It affects your family, your relationship with family and friends. I felt happy my sister was able to accept me even though I have done bad things to them. (R7, Malay, 51)

Last time before I was detained, my relationship with my parent and siblings were very distant. I rarely talked to them and I felt that whatever I do will not affect them. Staying in prison and being part of this befriending programme makes me reflect my past actions. It makes me realize that what I have done affected my family but at that time I was still very young to weigh all the consequences of my actions. My befriender encourages me to mend my relationship with my family even though I have changed my religion secretly. (R8, Indian, 33)

The ability of the bendifenders in the examples above to facilitate reflection on the part of their clients leading them to empathise with the difficulties faced by their loved ones is significant. In both cases it led to a determination on the part of the respondents to work at improving their relationship with their loved ones. The family both as a first line of support for the returning offender as well as being a key lever in the individuals' rehabilitation and eventual reintegration is a key plank of the nation's aftercare strategy. On the face of it bendifenders are not expected to be able to able to elicit such significant therapeutic impact on clients. However, the fact that 12 of the 15 respondents credited

their befrienders with helping them make progress on this key aspect of their rehabilitation and reintegration is evidence of the fact that befrienders and befriending has the potential to play a significant role in aftercare.

**Main finding 5:** Nine out of 15 respondents have suggested that they would like to be assigned to a befriender 1 or 2 years before release and there should be no time constraint imposed on the befriending relationship.

Having been in prison for a long time with irregular visits from family members, the respondents preferred to be assigned befrienders 1 or 2 years before release as they wanted regular monthly visits from someone. As most of the respondents do not have regular visits from their family members, they felt socially isolated. Thus, these respondents felt that the befriending programme is useful for them as they would have regular visits and have someone just to talk to. However, these respondents indicated that it would be good if they had been assigned a befriender one or two years prior to release.

When inmates are in prison, they feel socially disconnected from society as they have a lack of social contact with family members and friends. Feelings of loneliness and not belonging, for example, indicate a perceived inadequacy of the companionship of one's interpersonal relationships compared to the relationships that one would like to have (van Baarsen et al. 2001). Thus, it is important for inmates to receive regular visits from someone every month so that they would have someone to talk to.

I have friends who for 10 to 15 years of sentence they have no visits. Totally no visits. Then the prison department told them to sign up for the befriending program if they want a friend. Then this friend of mine told me about this and asked me to apply. They will send a person here. You will have to fill up a form and based on the criteria they will match you up with a person who will be able to click with you. You can write a letter to him and he will come over to you one or two times, 1 to 2 hours and talk just like a friend. Then after that I can prolong this relationship as a friend. So I get to know from there. At first I did not want to think about the outside world. But when I am about to release I start to think about this and applied. (R3, Malay, 48)

I usually treat my befriender as a friend. Befriending service should not have a time limit but instead it should be built up of trust over time. Also things could happen beyond the 16 months that would trigger the person to return to his old ways so I would suggest that the befriending service should be more of a long term process. I call my befriender once every 2 weeks or once a month. (R12, Chinese, 35)

A befriender is like a friend, so I do not understand why there is a time limit to it. I prefer if I can extend this befriending programme and that it could be a lifetime thing as it has been very useful to me a lot. So what would happen to me after this befriending programme is over? Am I allowed to continue my friendship with my befriender or totally cut my friendship off? (R2, Chinese, 38)

As illustrated by R2, he is worried whether he would be able to maintain his new pro-social lifestyle without having his befriender around. As the relationship between the ex-offender and the befriender evolves from being strangers to becoming friends, it may be

difficult to terminate a relationship that has been built based on rapport and trust. Both R2 and R12 have suggested that it would be good if the befriending programme has no time constraint as they felt that they needed their befriender even after the sixteen month period was over. According to both SACA and SPS, the befrienders have been informed that they are allowed to continue the relationship with their clients in their own personal capacity even after the official befriending relationship is over. However, the fact that 9 out of the 15 respondents indicated that they would like to have the befriending programme extended beyond the sixteen month period suggests that their befriender had informed them that they would not be continuing the relationship beyond the stipulated time period. This brings up the question of whether the befriender is equipped and prepared to wind down the befriending relationship and facilitate its closure. While it is beyond the scope of this study the researcher is left wondering if referring to the duration of the befriending programme is a convenient way for befrienders to bring the relationship to closure in the face of a lack of suitable alternatives.

Whatever the case may be the winding down and eventual termination of a befriending relationship warrants greater attention. Based on the respondents in this study there seems to be a fair amount of demand for a continuation of the relationship at least for those who have benefitted from it. The implications of such an arrangement not least the demand it places on befrienders bears looking into – all respondents consider the befrienders their friends; on the face of it friendship has no expiry date.

### **Discussion & Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the befriending programme has had a positive effect on the respondents' lives. Their interaction with their befrienders helps to improve their self-esteem and confidence which encourages them to view life after release more positively. As several respondents had indicated their preference for the befriending programme to commence 1 or 2 years prior to their release so as to receive regular visitations, SPS could consider having a befriending initiative solely focused on the incarceration period especially for inmates who have few or no visitations at all. Under such an initiative volunteers could visit eligible inmates who opt in on a monthly basis with an aftercare component not incorporated into the relationship at the onset. At a suitable juncture closer to the inmate's release the decision could then be made as to whether this relationship will be extended into the aftercare. The provision of pro-social support via in-care visitations is in line with previous research studies discussed earlier which suggested regular visitations throughout incarceration will reduce the feeling of being socially isolated and improves the inmates' well-being which in turn will improve their chances of successfully reintegrating upon release.

It is evident that the befriending programme provides ample opportunity for the ex-offender to create new social capital through their befriender. As mentioned earlier, the befriending programme acts as bridging social capital by creating links with people outside

immediate circles of relationships. It is good for linkages to external assets and for information diffusion whenever the clients require any form of help which has been illustrated in the findings in which the ex-offenders were able to get assistance from their befrienders' extended social networks.

In a study conducted by Pyror and Thompkins (2013), the authors highlighted the relationship between ethnicity and social capital. There were differences among white and black ex-offenders with regard to securing employment. The white respondents indicated being referred by friends and family to their current employment which highlights the importance of social capital in securing employment. This is in contrast to the black respondents the majority of whom were unemployed or under-employed at the point of the study, and those who were employed attributed the obtainment of a job to referrals from agencies or to their human skills. The study highlighted that ex-offenders from the minority group did not have enough of their own social capital to tap on. This current research study reinforces the importance of social capital for ex-offenders to reintegrate into society. Through the befrienders' help, ex-offenders from the minority groups have been able to tap on their befrienders' social capital when they encounter problems with their reintegration.

As mentioned in the findings, the respondents in the befriending programme expect their befrienders to provide them with more tangible forms of assistance rather than just emotional support. SPS should consider providing greater clarity to both the inmate-client and befriender regarding their respective roles. A small booklet outlining the roles of the befriender can be distributed to the inmates under the programme. Additionally, the roles and expectations with clear guidelines for the befrienders can be documented in a befriending manual for easy reference. With strong social supports in place, even someone who is experiencing problems in their life does not suffer to the same extent as a socially isolated person.

## **Conclusion**

According to SPS, the main role of a befriender is to provide inmates with the necessary emotional support and a listening ear before and after their release. However, the findings from this study suggest that the inmates require more tangible material forms of assistance from their befrienders after release. A review of the focus of befriending may be timely and a relook at the roles of the befriender and well as better communication of the responsibilities of all parties involved could be considered. To a man the respondents communicated the belief that their befriender was readily available to them and that he or she was sincere in wanting to help them in any way they could. This shows that the relationship between the respondent and the befriender is genuine and is based on trust as none of the respondents in this sample dropped out of the programme.

On the issue of closure, given that there is a stipulated time period for the befriending relationship, special attention needs to be paid in terms of preparing both client

and befriender for the next phase; be that a complete termination to the relationship or one that continues informally outside the boundaries of the befriending relationship. A review of the termination process is necessary as most of the benders in this study rely on the stipulated time period to end the relationship even though they are given the option to continue the relationship in their own personal capacity if the client finds the relationship beneficial.

It is evident from this study that the Befriending Programme improves the respondents' self-esteem and confidence, which in turn, spurs the respondents to have a more positive outlook on life. The respondents view their benders as a positive role model in their lives and without them they indicate that they would find it even harder to leave their previous anti-social lifestyles behind. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of the Befriending Programme in creating opportunities for clients to build a new support network. A new pro-social network is important to ensure the reintegration of the clients into mainstream society.

It would be useful to elicit the feedback of benders as to how they view their role and the overall value they place on the Befriending Programme as a resource for ex-offender clients in their efforts to get back on their feet. Together with the inputs provided by the clients it will paint a more holistic picture of what the befriending initiative looks like to the practitioners on the ground providing valuable insights to those responsible for administering this impactful initiative.

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## **Appendix A – Interview Questions**

### **Personal Demographics**

1. How old are you?
2. What is your highest level of education?
3. What are your plans for accommodation? / Where are you currently staying now?
4. Are you employed? / What are your plans for employment?

#### Sub-questions

##### (Concrete plans)

- i. What would you like to work as?
- ii. Where do you intend to work at?
- iii. Have you had prior experience in this area?

##### (No concrete employment plans)

- i. What do you intend to do next?
- ii. What is holding you back?
- iii. What are the steps you plan to take to achieve your plans?

### **Criminal history and Life in prison**

1. How many times have you been arrested? For what reasons?
2. Prior to arrest, how was life like? (Any issues with family, friends. Work/school)
3. How many times have you been imprisoned?
4. What are the memories that you remember the most about prison?
5. Have you adjusted to life outside prison?
6. How different is life outside prison?

### **Befriending programme**

1. How do you know of this befriending programme when you were in prison?
2. How do you find this befriending programme so far?
3. Do you feel that this befriending programme is useful for you in your re-integration into the society?
4. How is your relationship with your befriender?
5. Do you feel you are able to relate well with your befriender?
  1. Is your befriender a good match for you?
  2. How has your befriender help you so far?

6. What do you think is lacking in the befriending programme?
7. What do you think can be improved in this programme?
8. Is there anything that you think should be included in the befriending program?
9. What are some of the things that your befriender has helped you with?
10. What other programs/activities have you been selected to attend?
11. What are some of your learning points from the befriending programme?
12. How often do you meet up with your befriender?
13. What is the mode of interaction that you usually communicate with your befriender when you are in prison? (i.e. Through letters, meet-ups etc)
14. What is the mode of interaction that you usually communicate with your befriender after your release? (i.e. through letters, meet-ups, through phone calls, WhatsApp/messages)
15. What are the topics that you usually talk about with your befriender?
16. In what language do you usually converse with your befriender in?
17. How has the befriender supported you through your time in prison?
18. How has the befriender supported you after you have been released from prison?
19. When you decided to join the befriending programme, what were your expectations of a befriender? Has these expectations changed?
20. Is the befriender able to meet your expectations when you enter the real world?
21. What do you think the befriender is lacking in helping you to adjust to the real world?
22. How difficult was it to find an accommodation after your release?
23. Did your befriender assist you in finding accommodation after your release?
24. How has your life improved ever since you are on the befriender programme?
25. Have you been in contact with your old friends?
26. Are you planning to be in contact with these friends?
27. What were your most immediate concerns when you are about to be released?
28. What are some of the obstacles that you have faced in your release?
  - a. Finding accommodation/shelter
  - b. Employment
  - c. Financial
  - d. Social/emotional support
  - e. Healthcare
  - f. Staying away from criminal activity
29. How is your relationship with your family members now?