

CASE STUDY



The Decider Skills in Prisons

The Decider Skills use Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) to teach children, young people and adults how to recognise their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours, allowing them to monitor and manage their own emotions and mental health. The skills were designed to enable participants to make effective changes to help manage distress, regulate emotion, increase mindfulness, promote effective communication and help to live a more skilful, less impulsive life. In our case study Prison they use a peer mentorship scheme whereby prisoners are trained, encouraged and supported to pass on The Decider Skills to others.

Background to The Decider

In 2010 Michelle Ayres and Carol Vivyan, who are Guernsey-based Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapists, developed The Decider Skills out of their own clinical practice.

Both Michelle and Carol had worked as professional mental health nurses and Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapists, and after the initial Skills Group session they went on to develop The Decider Skills.

After the first Skills Group session they asked service users for their feedback; what helped and what didn't, what they wanted and what they didn't want. Then, using this information, they put each memorable and effective skill down on paper and produced The Decider: A Skills Manual.

The main ethos behind The Decider Skills is that bad habits are not hard-wired into our brains. Neuroplasticity means that people can change or strengthen neural pathways and synapses. Essentially through the repeated practice of new skills and thinking people can develop new positive habits.

The Decider Skills Manual

The Decider Skills Manual summarises 32 cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT) informed skills under four core skill sets; the acceptance skills of distress tolerance and mindfulness and the change skills of emotion regulation and interpersonal effectiveness.

The manual provides a client hand-out and a detailed explanation from the clinician for each skill. One of the key attributes of the skills programme is that it is extremely flexible and has the potential to be adapted for a range of service settings, including mental health centres, hospitals, schools and prisons.

The training's core aim is to provide people with the skills required to recognise and better manage their own thoughts, feelings, behaviours and mental health.

One of the most effective and unique properties is that The Decider Skills can be taught and in-turn enable non-experts to teach the skills to others.

Teaching The Decider Skills in Prison

The Prison introduced The Decider Skills in 2011 and so far it has seen positive results. Prisons are places where a significant proportion of the population has difficulties with emotional management and distress tolerance, high incidents of mental health disorders and impulse control issues so the skills taught in The Decider Skills sessions are essential to the good mental health and well-being of our population.

“Implementing The Decider Skills has been instrumental in the development and improvement of behaviour within the prison. We’ve seen an uptick in positive conduct, and we hope to see a decline in reoffending rates as a result. I think it’s essential for prisons to encourage and deliver these skills as many of them are essential for managing impulse control which is a common problem within the prison system.” - Deputy Prison Governor

The Prison deliver the Skills in two-week intensive workshops to prisoners who need support with emotional management. Courses are held two or three times a year and are attended by up to eight clients per session. Individual and small group delivery is also made available to those who cannot access larger groups as that environment does not meet every one's needs.

Each session is run by two prisoners who have undertaken the sessions before and have since been trained to deliver the sessions. Sessions are attended by the Prison Psychotherapist in case additional support is needed.

The Psychotherapist has been keen to embed The Decider Skills programme into the daily life of the Prison and because of its flexible nature she has adapted it to suit a forensic environment.

She is a qualified and experienced family, couple and individual psychotherapist. She sees people with a very wide range of personal, emotional and relationship problems. More intensive trauma focused therapies such as EMDR, systemic psychotherapy and offence focused programmes are offered alongside The Decider for those who are assessed as needing them.

She is a big advocate of The Decider Skills: "The aim of the programme is to reduce the impact of emotional distress by teaching evidence-based and effective skills," she says. "But the thing that differentiates The Decider Skills from other forms of therapy is that it can be delivered by inmates to their peers, which is crucial if the skills are to be relatable to our clients."

S and T are both prisoners at the Prison and they have been teaching The Decider Skills Workshops for two years. They are also both very positive ambassadors of The Decider Skills and highly recommend its use in the Prison.

T, who is halfway through a six-year sentence, says: "It's very rewarding to be able to not only reflect on your own impulses and behaviour but to be able to help others. After the sessions you really see participants becoming more cognisant of their own behaviour. It can really help to alleviate a lot of concerns and pressure.

“What was particularly interesting is one group member who is on the autistic spectrum really saw things from different angles and was really keen to improve himself - but I don’t think he would have responded so well if this hadn’t been happening in a peer-taught space. The peer-to-peer teaching environment is essential to the programme’s success.”

The Psychotherapist is very deliberate when picking clients to deliver the courses. The Prison is split into two separate populations the Main Population (M Pop), where offences include violence, domestic abuse, substance misuse and importation and the Vulnerable Population (V Pop) which is largely comprised of sex offenders.

T, who is part of the M Pop, only mentors people who are in V Pop and women. S is in V Pop.

S describes M Pop as being comprised mainly of people from more ‘turbulent’ backgrounds. He says: “M Pop perhaps have more erratic lifestyles, whereas V Pop seem to be from more conventional backgrounds - we have more stable families, hold down jobs - it’s calmer in V Pop, with a community feel.”

T concurs with S’s assessment of the two groups, he claims that “M Pop is a more macho environment, housing testosterone-filled and aggressive personalities, but that’s why programmes like The Decider Skills are important - a lot of the training is about impulse control and managing emotions.”

Knowing the character dynamics within the prison, the Psychotherapist purposely picks a diversity of personality types as mentors including some who would self- identify as broadly ‘alpha’ in outlook to lead The Decider Skills workshops for the M Pop participants because as S who is more reflective in style and a member of the VP population notes: “If a macho type is one of the mentors and there’s an interactive element where you have to pick a card that represents your feelings, or use toys as a visual aid, if someone like me starts doing that, then M Pop will just start name calling, but if a ‘macho’ more alpha guy leads the group then suddenly it becomes something that is ok to do – people think that it’s ok, if ‘they’re’ doing it then it must be fine.”

When the Psychotherapist started working at the prison access to psycho-education was very limited. The Decider Skills have been a successful enterprise and it works predominantly because of its natural flexibility and the peer-to-peer aspect. This means that the sessions are immediately more relaxed and that each session can adapt and evolve to suit any group dynamic.

S recently went on a Coaching Course, which he found really beneficial so he integrated this into the Skills workshop he was running because he knew others could benefit from this teaching. But it's not just inmates who benefit from the training. The Psychotherapist says that Prison Officers have also undertaken training with a particular emphasis on the interpersonal skills such as 'Respect' and 'Listening' as part of Pro-Social Modelling Training.

She explains: "The Prison actually has an extremely low level of violence and serious self-harm. While there's no way of accurately correlating the link between The Decider Skills course and the low incidents of violence, it's interesting to observe that 'respect' is focussed on as a key skill. Prison Officers should always talk to inmates respectfully and vice versa - violence can occur when mutual respect and good interpersonal skills are not part of the organisational culture."

One of the main desired outcomes of the skills programme is the hope that inmates won't re-offend. The idea is for inmates to arm themselves with this new set of skills and hopefully better manage themselves emotionally in the future and make decisions.

Reoffending rates in the UK are currently at 60% while the local incidence of reoffending currently sits at an all-time low of 27%.

The Psychotherapist notes that statistically the risk of reoffending is significantly reduced if an offender has the skills required to build positive social, emotional and intimate relationships, which is something The Decider Skills enables. The workshops focus heavily on finding connections and creating better relationships. T notes that by the end of some sessions people were actually sad to leave because they really felt like they'd made friends and become a little community. The Decider Skills definitely have a place in prison. It works

because it is peer-to-peer. It is rewarding to see others becoming more cognisant of their behaviour.” - T

How the sessions work

The Decider Skills works by distilling complex psychological theory and making it fun and engaging. Each skill is simplified and sessions incorporate visual aids, demonstrations, music and discussion. This means it's accessible to all types of personalities and all styles of learning.

Currently, the sessions are delivered on a rolling programme as intensive two-week workshops. The first session starts off by writing down on a flipchart The Decider Rules and Directions these can include anything from confidentiality to not talking over each other. The next part of the session invites participants to select a 'mood card', which is a way of visually representing what mood you're in. They then take it in turns to go around the room and explain why they chose that picture and what mood they are currently experiencing. S notes that this exercise is an effective ice-breaker because the interactive nature helps to set a tone of inclusivity and fosters a social environment. The session moves on with the teaching of 3 skills a day through the modes of role play, discussion, music, art or written pieces such as poetry or rap.

The flexible structure of the session means there is no one set way to deliver the programme, teachers can use their insights and intuition. S, who is a keen Dungeons and Dragons player, says that he utilises his role-playing skills in the sessions and often runs his workshops like he would a D & D campaign. He comments “I like The Decider Skills because I can include elements that I think others will benefit from. It also really helps to establish a sense of community.”

Sessions typically involve role-play and interactive games, and focus a lot on discussion. The exercises in the manual have names such as Breathe, Drift, Observe and Focus, so the intentions are clear, it is about composure, reflection and having a measured approach to challenges.

The value of teaching The Decider Skills in prisons

The Prison Psychotherapist says “For The Decider Skills to work properly in other prisons it would need to adapt to each prison, taking in to account the various personalities. I don’t know if it would work everywhere but it certainly works here and it is proven that group work is not only cost effective, overall it is more effective generally in enhancing the life of prisoners.”

Head of the Probation Service comments “Prisoners seem much more comfortable engaging in sessions and discussing the skills they’ve learned when it is run by their peers. Learning the Decider Skills is actually the start of a very personal journey for all those taking part and it’s important for them to feel supported and part of a group. The skills and knowledge imparted in the workshops are essential life skills that everyone can benefit from and I can already see it having a positive effect on prison culture. The ultimate aim is to equip people with the tools they need to manage life back on the outside and I think the Decider Skills are a highly effective way of delivering these tools.”

The Forensic Clinical Psychologist, who is based in the UK, has been mentoring probation officers since 2006 on the techniques to rehabilitate both convicted sexual/violent offenders as well as those who may not have committed a crime but contact the service in a desperate plea for help.

His observations are significant.

“One striking thing about The Decider Skills is that many prisoners remember the detail of sessions. The sessions offer a psychological education that is straightforward to engage with and offers something for people with various learning styles. As a learning tool it is one that prisoners find credible and are comfortable using.

“I specialise with high risk offenders – clients who have difficulties with emotional regulation and problem solving - all of which is tackled in The Decider Skills sessions. The skills taught are effectively a way of prisoners ‘arming’ themselves with the skills needed to intervene

and interrupt negative behaviour – they are a gateway to impulse control and can offer an early intervention. Importantly, once people feel in control of their own impulses and emotions they are then often more confident to move on to look at other issues – like sexuality or violence.

“Lower risk offenders need low intensity intervention, and can even be in danger of being over treated. With high risk offenders you need high intensity intervention - The Decider Skills could be a key component of their intervention.

“I would say that The Decider Skills are a highly effective and essential set of core skills that could be of value to many prisoners.”

About The Prison

The Prison is a mixed category prison. Unlike most establishments, it holds both male and female inmates and caters for a wide range of ages; from juveniles aged 14 upwards to adults. The prison has a capacity of 130 and has 11 wings in total. There is a focus on lowering rates of reoffending and resettling prisoners after they have served their sentence. The current population of the prison is 83.

About The Decider Skills

The Decider Skills are used widely in the UK and ROI and extensively by the following organisations: NHS Highland, NHS Fife, NHS Cumbria, NHS Forth Valley, NHS Lothian, Barnardo's, Youth Connection, Mind.



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