



Above: Du Peng, a police officer and psychological consultant at Shanghai Wujiawa Prison, analyzes the inner world of a prisoner through sandplay.

Left: An inmate draws psychological cartoons with different themes. — Photos by Jiang Xiaowei

# Keeping mindsets healthy behind bars

Tian Shengjie

Du Peng, a police officer and psychology consultant at Shanghai Wujiawa Prison, looks compassionately at the prisoner sitting across from him.

“Why did you try to scald your arm with boiling water?” Du asks.

The prisoner, surnamed Zhang, doesn’t answer, only shakes his head. Silence ensues.

“You picked a fight with other inmates two days ago because of the placement of wash basins, right?” Du asks, trying to get a reaction.

Again, Zhang shakes his head and avoids eye contact. So, the psychologist adopts a different tack.

“I understand your daughter is sick and took a turn for the worse recently,” he says.

Tears well up in Zhang’s eyes as he finally looks at Du and speaks. He explains that he has been at the end of his tether since learning of his daughter’s condition on the monthly phone call home.

Du arranges for the prisoner to have more frequent home

calls during this trying time.

Du is part of a group of psychologists who work behind bars, providing counseling for inmates. The job requires patience, compassion, personal interaction and that human touch if the therapy is to work as part of rehabilitation.

The Shanghai Prison Administrative Bureau last year issued regulations requiring new prisoners to undergo psychological testing, with updates every two years. Those who show abnormalities are of greatest concern.

“Some prisoners have psychological problems before they are even arrested, and the strict regime of prison can aggravate the condition,” said Gu Aijun, deputy director of the Wujiawa prison, which houses hundreds of male prisoners with terms of three to 10 years.

“During a long term of incarceration,” Gu added, “inmates are likely to experience misfortunes, such as divorce and deaths in families. That can lead to psychological distress.”

The concept of psychology

behind bars is to maintain stability in prisons and try to prevent prisoners with mental problems from harming society again upon their release. That task falls to a dedicated group of trained psychologists.

In 2000, Shanghai prisons started to attach importance to the psychological needs of inmates, expanding recruitment of psychology graduates and providing training to prison officers interested in entering the field.

“At present, there are more than 700 prison officers with national psychology counselor certificates,” said Wang

Weiming, an official at the reform and education department of the local prison administrative bureau.

Du, 29, is one of them. He passed the national exam for psychology consultants while at university. After a psychology facility was established in Wujiawa’s Cell Block I in 2017, he went to work there.

“Some prisoners are not aware they have psychological problems,” Du said. “And even if they are aware, it’s not something they are willing to share with others.”

What psychologists may learn in classrooms and what

they find in the prison setting are often worlds apart.

Xu Dong, director of the Psychology Health Guidance Room at Yangpu District’s Wujiachang prison, graduated in 2004 with a bachelor’s degree in psychology and became a prison officer.

He had to cope with the gap between theory and reality, learning some bitter lessons along the way.

Xu told Shanghai Daily of an incident that happened soon after he went to work at the prison. An inmate surnamed Wang was reported to be crying at night. Xu immediately offered psychological counseling to him. But after talking to him for 40 minutes, he found Wang wearing a persistent smile and showing no signs of abnormal behavior, so he was allowed to go back to his cell.

However, the next day, Wang hit the prison iron door with his head in a fit of anger. Xu eventually learned that Wang had conflicts with his cellmate. After Wang was moved to another cell, his psychological condition gradually returned to normal.



A prisoner settles his nerves through music therapy under the guidance of a police officer at the Wujiawa prison.