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Some prisoners have psychological problems before they are even arrested, and the strict regime of prison can aggravate the condition.

Gu Aijun

Deputy director of Shanghai Wujiaowa Prison



A prisoner releases his negative feeling through virtual reality treatment at the Wujiaochang prison. — Ti Gong

The incident, according to Xu, made him realize how important it is to build trust with prisoners and persuade them to open up and talk.

“If an inmate refuses to open his heart to you, the psychology session will be hollow, even false,” Xu said.

Part of that trust means getting inmates to distinguish between prison guards who enforce discipline and psychologists who try to establish a more “equal footing” with prisoners.

To that end, psychology consulting rooms in prisons have been decorated in warm tones. The chairs are all the same, giving the inmate more of a feeling of equality and respect.

Sometimes, psychologists are rotated in the hope that a “new face” might help inmates lower their guard and open up.

Xu said he always changes from his police uniform for psychology sessions.

The professional therapy rooms in Shanghai prisons are designed for different functions such as music, sandplay and anger management. Group

sessions are held regularly.

When the Wujiaowa prison opened in 2015, it was the first to introduce psychological cartoons for diagnosis and treatment.

“In psychology, there is a test called House-Tree-Person,” said Huang Tengda, director of its psychological health guidance room. “It involves people drawing the three elements on paper. Then psychologists interpret the drawings and base treatment on that analysis. It’s a good way to delve into a prisoner’s inner thoughts.”

Huang cited the example of an inmate who drew a windowless house and a bare tree. His renderings were interpreted to show that he was locked in a world of his own, suffering from a feeling of hopelessness.

In the picture, the inmate also drew a man standing under the tree with a knife. During the psychology sessions, the convict said his parents divorced when he was very young and his grandfather who raised him had recently died.

Huang said the sessions helped the inmate come to

terms with his negative emotions and control them.

A prisoner surnamed Wu told Shanghai Daily: “I like drawing psychological cartoons with different themes, like greed, the desire for a future life and introspection on the crimes I committed. It’s a form of catharsis.”

The inmates’ drawings have been published in books for sharing around the prison.

Indeed, sometimes the best therapy occurs when prisoners help one another with psychological problems. Each cell block has two “psychological helpers” — inmates with an upbeat disposition and excellent communication skills — who watch for abnormal behavior.

If they spot a problem, they first try to talk to the inmate, then pass on the information to a prison psychologist if necessary. Sometimes, psychiatrists are brought in to prescribe drugs for serious cases.

In 2021, virtual reality therapy was introduced into the Wujiaochang prison as a pilot project, starting in a cell block where inmates were about to be released. The technology



A prisoner releases his negative emotion in the psychological venting room at Shanghai Wujiaowa Prison.

allows prisoners to experience calming environments, like walking by the seaside.

As release from prison looms, many inmates feel uncertainly about moving back into society and worry about their futures. That anxiety was showcased in the character of Brooks Hatlen in the movie “The Shawshank Redemption.” Hatlen has been imprisoned for so long that the jail becomes his real home. After his release, he commits suicide because he can’t adjust to life on the outside.

The film reflects reality, Xu

said. “Believe it or not, some prisoners don’t even know what mobile phones are,” he said.

To ease their release anxiety, VR devices simulate job interviews and the opportunities of occupations such as delivery-man and shop assistant.

“I hope that various schools of psychological treatment, such as psychoanalytic therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy, will be like a hundred flowers blooming behind these high walls,” said Wang of the prison administrative bureau.