



Cultural Competencies: Working with Incarcerated Populations

Thank you for your interest in bringing NAMI Connection Recovery support groups to jails and prisons in your community. To train people who are incarcerated, you need to be aware of cultural elements of the jail or prison environment. This is called being “culturally competent.” By following these practices, or “cultural competencies,” you’ll be better able to work effectively with your audience’s needs and concerns.

Before training

- Edit your manual
 - Consider elements that may be inapplicable to your audience and remove them
 - Examples: Taking It Home sections, possibly Problem Solving
 - The most important parts of this training are the strategies, role plays and structures. Make sure you cover these sections with trainees.
- Learn the rules of the facility
 - Ask your contact at the facility what rules you should be aware of that may impact you and your group
 - Examples: If you are allowed to have a cell phone with you or whether you must have a certain ID
- Learn the facility’s emergency protocols
 - The facility may have specific protocols (steps you should take) for emergencies, especially for mental health emergencies
 - Example: You may need to follow the facility’s rules during a Hot Potato situation in training
- Plan your outfit to be sensitive to the environment
 - An appropriate outfit for this environment would be conservative and modest rather than showy or revealing. Staff probably dress in a conservative way and inmates may not have a choice of what they wear. You’ll show sensitivity to everyone’s situation by dressing in a similarly conservative way.

Working well with facility staff

Because of your personal experience, interest in the subject and training, you have a level of understanding of mental health that other people may not. Staff at the facility may have views of mental health that you disagree with or see as inaccurate or negative.

You may experience some stigma from staff because of your involvement in mental health or because you identify as having a mental health condition. This may be a difficult experience for you, and you can prepare yourself by being aware of this possibility. Adjusting your expectations for how staff may treat you before you go to the facility will help you focus on your goals.

While you may be tempted to try to change staff's beliefs, concentrate your efforts on helping your trainees. You have limited options and time at the facility, and your trainees will benefit from you focusing on them.

Working well with inmates

Building trust with people you don't know can take time and care. You don't have much time with your trainees, and because they're incarcerated, the environment in which you're training is especially sensitive. As you speak with trainees, be aware of what might build trust and what might decrease it. Be especially careful with what information you share about yourself—some types of information may be meaningful to your trainees and others may be distracting and insensitive.

- When people volunteer their time, it shows that they care deeply about what they're doing. Tell your trainees that you're not paid to do this training. Sharing this information can communicate that you value your time with your trainees and are doing this training for good reasons. It can help build trust and acceptance.
- If you identify as a veteran, you may want to tell your trainees. Many people feel respect for veterans' service and experience. Previous trainers have said sharing this information seemed to gain them respect in the group.
- Avoid talking about things you do or will do in your life outside this training (for example, "I love walking my dog and tomorrow I'm going to get pizza with my family"). For people who are incarcerated and don't have similar options, statements like this can be distracting and painful. Focus on the training instead of your personal life.
- Avoid making assumptions about inmates' lives previous to, during or after their period of incarceration. Do not try to encourage or inspire people in ways that focus on their identities as inmates (for example, "If you behave well, I bet you'll get released early").

During training

- Correctional officers may not understand what you're trying to do. They may question why you're there or possibly be reluctant to work with you. When you're in the facility, answer all questions respectfully and obey all orders that are given to you.
- Interruptions and schedule
 - Throughout training, trainees may have to leave for various reasons (for medication, laundry, meals, etc.). If one trainee needs to leave, you must pause the training until the whole group is available again. Create a training schedule

that you can adjust as your situation changes. You should not rely on what you were initially told your schedule would be when you entered the facility.

- If there are any interruptions, like loud noises or staff entering and exiting, remain calm and patient. Politely ask staff for any information they can offer if you don't understand what's happening.
- If there is an emergency of any kind, stop training and follow all orders given to you by staff.

After training

- Presenting certificates and celebration
 - Decorations and food may not be allowed at your ceremony. Find other ways to make this celebration an enjoyable social experience. Before the day of the ceremony, give your trainees the opportunity to create the experience they want by asking for suggestions.
 - Examples: Trainees share their “aha!” moment, share how they’ll practice their favorite principle of support, etc.
 - The celebration at the end of the training is meant to acknowledge the journey trainees have taken as people, not just their abilities as facilitators. Tell your trainees that.
 - For noncertifications, include these trainees in the celebration. Be careful with the language you use when you acknowledge people’s accomplishments, and make sure these trainees feel included.
 - Give staff the names of certified facilitators.
- Further opportunities for trainees
 - Trainees are part of the NAMI family now. Tell them that if/when they are released, they are welcome to become involved with NAMI (for example, volunteering as facilitators in the community, joining NAMIWalks). If someone is not likely to be released, offer to send newsletters or other small NAMI-related correspondences.
 - Be aware that special-interest support groups may now develop in the facility, such as faith-based, diagnosis-based, or sentence-based groups.
- Continuing a partnership with staff
 - Thank staff and find ways to continue your partnership as you now have support groups at the facility. Ask about the best ways to communicate with the NAMI support groups. For example, perhaps you could call a staff member for updates or receive a quarterly report from the medical staff.
- How inmate facilitators report data to NAMI
 - Facilitators cannot report data from a facility using our website. They must instead report their data to a facility staff member. This staff member should communicate the data to the NAMI State Organization to report.

For program coordinators: Debriefing with trainers

- Training in a prison or jail can be a difficult experience. Trainers need to be given the opportunity to debrief and express their feelings with other trained NAMI volunteers or staff. A stressed trainer will not come back and the program will not be sustainable.
- Topics to discuss with trainers
 - Did anything happen that you felt upset by? Offended? Angry? Frightened? How did you manage this experience?
 - Do you feel sad or guilty about anything you experienced?
 - How are you processing the things you saw and heard?
- Celebrate your trainers' accomplishments together. Training can be challenging and working in an environment like a prison or jail is especially so. Take some time to reflect on the meaningful elements of your experiences.