

Offenders learn stress relief through smart breathing By Molatelo Mokumo

More than 5 700 offenders in over ten of the department's correctional centres are learning to manage their stress and anger levels using age old techniques.

Or at least, when they are stressed or angry, they can deal with it promptly and appropriately by applying the breathing techniques learned from the Prison SMART (Stress Management and Rehabilitation Training) programme.

Prison SMART is an eight day programme that utilises breathing techniques derived from predominantly Asian philosophy and principles of meditation to seek peace and balance in the person's mind.

According to Chintz Bhana, National Director of Prison SMART South Africa, "The programme helps prisoners in rehabilitation to reduce violence and drug dependencies. It teaches life skills that enable individuals to accept responsibility for their past actions and to handle future conflict and stressful situations successfully. Innovative breathing techniques are a cornerstone of the programme."

Some of the correctional centres where offenders are participating in the programme are Johannesburg, Vereeniging, Leeuwkop, Baviaanspoort, Boksburg, Durban-Westville and Groenpunt, with the latter registering 241 offenders in August last year (the highest number).

Another 200 offenders enrolled for the programme in January this year. Continued Mr Bhana, "This 'first of its kind' internationally acclaimed programme is progressive, practical and results oriented, providing innovative and effective solutions to break cycles of violence and escalating crime rates. Over



No, nothing's wrong; just having therapeutic thoughts.

100 000 people in prisons all over the world, including India, Russia and the US have benefited from the programme."

The SMART programme was first taught in South Africa at Leeuwkop Medium Section in February 2002. Since then courses have continued in all sections of the prison.

Mr Bhana pointed the lack of teachers as the

major stumbling block that causes the programme to run at a snail's pace. As a solution they now want to incorporate some offenders who have done well in the programme and who are due for release. He also said that they are planning to provide the programme to officials who experience high levels of stress and anger.

Correctional officials have reported that inmates who have participated in the programme exhibit less acting out in confrontational situations and show better cooperation with staff.

Area Coordinator Communications at Groenpunt, Mr Godfrey Geantsane had this to share, "This programme will add value to the inmates' lives inside the prison and even when they are reintegrated back into the society. It will empower them with self respect, self control among other inmates and also contribute to fewer gang-related violent incidents."

True to Mr Bhana and Geantane's sentiments, here is what Prison SMART recipients attested to: "I used to look forward to fights. But now, since doing this course, I'm a totally different person. I am able to contain my anger and act as a mediator when fights ensue," said an inmate at Pollmoor.

Another inmate at Leeuwkop said: "Since doing this programme, my mind doesn't snap like it used to. I know now that I can live a positive life with no anger whatsoever. I'm not really a person of crime, the only problem was that I was shaking when people irritated me and my anger controlled me. But now that's a thing of my past." ■