



Sycamore Tree Research Overview

Overview and aim

Sycamore Tree (ST) is a volunteer-led victim awareness programme that teaches the principles and application of restorative justice (RJ). The programme's aim is to improve desistance among those in prison by changing attitudes that are known to be conducive to offending.

It is taught in prisons in groups of up to 20 learners, over a six-week period. Learners on the programme explore the effects of crime on victims, offenders, and the wider community, and discuss what it would mean to take responsibility for their personal actions.

Over 35,000 learners have successfully completed *ST* and the programme is currently delivered in 48 secure establishments across England and Wales.

Delivery approach

Who delivers *ST* and how they interact with learners is highly significant to the engagement of the learners and the outcomes achieved. The core beliefs and values of Prison Fellowship (PF) volunteers of empathy, kindness, warmth and adopting a non-judgemental attitude are key aspects for building trust and in turn engaging learners with the programme. Treating learners as equally-valued 'human beings' underpins the work of the PF, which aims to treat all individuals with respect and dignity. In addition, the fact that the individuals delivering the course are volunteers and give up their own time freely and actively interact with learners helps develop trusting relationships, collaboration among the group and a sense of community. A varied pedagogy and flexible approach is used to ensure that learners with different learning needs can access the programme.

Key programme elements

PF is committed to ensuring that *ST* is delivered consistently to universally high standards. As a part of this approach, *ST* is educationally accredited through Gateway and PF is a recognised centre, approved by Gateway Qualifications. Learners successfully completing the course will receive an award of three credits at either Level 1 or Level 2 qualification in Understanding the Restorative Justice Process.

The *ST* programme is based on the principles of RJ. During each of the six weeks, learners engage with different aspects of RJ and how this relates to their experiences. A key aspect of restorative practice is the bringing together of an offender and victim. What is unique about the *ST* programme is the involvement of surrogate victims in week three. This is a powerful aspect of *ST*, as one learner said "... It was hard. ... It makes you think more, it makes you think a little bit more to what you're used to thinking... it's a bit mad."

At the end of *ST*, learners are invited to engage in a symbolic act of restitution for their offending behaviour and in doing so demonstrate positive changes in their life. In many cases, this powerful programme element is performed in front of members of the community.

Impact

Crime Pics II Evaluation 2009

An evaluation of *ST* based on an analysis of Crime Pics II Data by Simon Feasey and Patrick Williams, in conjunction with the Centre for Community Justice at Sheffield Hallam University in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University was conducted in 2009. It showed that across the whole sample of prisoners there were significant positive attitudinal changes with regard to the five psychometric features of Crime Pics II. Statistical analysis indicates that these positive changes are associated with completion of the *ST* programme.

Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) Evaluation 2020

The conclusion of this evaluation states that: ‘Our evidence indicates that the *Sycamore Tree* programme appears to have contributed towards a shift in how learners view their offence and wider impact of their actions, including greater empathy for their victims. At the same time, the findings reveal a number of other outcomes for learners engaged with the Programme. These include improvements in well-being and self-forgiveness, attitudinal and behavioural changes, improved relationships and improved engagement with prison activities. Although not discussed explicitly by learners, these outcomes may be viewed as making a positive contribution towards an individual’s pathway to desistance...’

Face validity

ST has a very positive reputation across the prison estate among learners and staff alike. A typical quote from one learner is below.

“Week Six blew my mind, saying sorry is a massive thing, but to stand up in front of people and actually admit to yourself in front of everyone that you’re sorry, it’s massive, it’s emotional...It’s frightening, but you’ve got to change your behaviour at some time in your life”

Theory of Change (MMU evaluation)

