

Noela Yoga Course Impact Report



Presented by
**Justine Best MSc -
Penal Reform
Solutions**



Penal Reform Solutions

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to summarise the findings associated with Noela Yoga, a 10-week mindfulness-based yoga course, delivered by Noela Yoga Wellness and Training to residents at HMP Swaleside. This specialised course integrates desistance and growth theory with mindfulness and yoga, to support identity transformation and personal development. A cohort of two Noela Yoga courses took place at HMP Swaleside and this report highlights the impact of the course on residents after the delivery of both cohorts. The data from questionnaires, feedback forms and a focus group were collated and analysed to assess the impact the course had on residents both physically and mentally.

HMP Swaleside

HMP Swaleside is a high security (Category B) male prison on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. It is part of the Sheppey Cluster, along with HMP Elmley and HMP Stanford Hill. The prison holds around 1100 residents across eight wings, with more than half of residents serving life sentences.

HMP Swaleside was one of the establishments in which Noel served some of his sentence. He was eager to facilitate the course into this prison, to help people who struggle with issues, such as mental health and managing their thoughts and feelings; troubles that Noel himself once faced and led him to develop the programme.



Noela Yoga



Noela Yoga was developed by Noel Moran in 2016 while he was serving a life sentence. Noel has been practicing yoga since 2008 and used the combination of his own Mindfulness Based Yoga, with his custodial experience to develop a 10-week course, Noela Yoga. During his sentence Noel also became a level 4 yoga teacher and level 3 Mindfulness Practitioner

The purpose of the course is to reduce harm and provide opportunities for residents to find themselves, unlock their potential, minimise stress, fears and worries, develop self-rehabilitation, and develop a better version of themselves.

The objectives of Noela Yoga are to promote a rehabilitative climate, improve physical and mental health, develop life skills, increase a sense of belonging and to provide tools to help manage emotions and relieve stress and anxiety.

The aim of the Course is to help residents contribute to a safe environment, where people can express themselves to, 'search inwards, find yourself and reflect.'



Methodology and Sample

Methodology

31 questionnaires were collected in total, 19 pre-course evaluations, and 12 post evaluations. 14 feedback forms were also collected, 13 'takeaways' were shared, and one focus group was held with residents after they had completed the course. It should be noted that due to varying attendance, the score averages were marginally affected, as some residents were unable to attend when the pre and post questionnaires were completed or when the focus group was held. There were several factors that contributed to attendance including; legal visits, appointments, the gym, education, staffing and sickness.

A thematic analysis of the data has been conducted by PRS, to identify key themes around the impact of the Noela Yoga Course on residents at HMP Swaleside, considering the physical and mental impact on residents individually, as a result of the 10-week programme.

Sample

19 participants took part in the Noela Yoga Course over a 10- week period, across two cohorts, however attendance was unfortunately inconsistent due to a number of various factors stated above. The age of the two cohorts ranged from 23 to 53 years old. The ethnicity of the participants can be seen below in Figure 1, which highlights that most of the sample (47%) were White British, with a range of other ethnicities outlined.

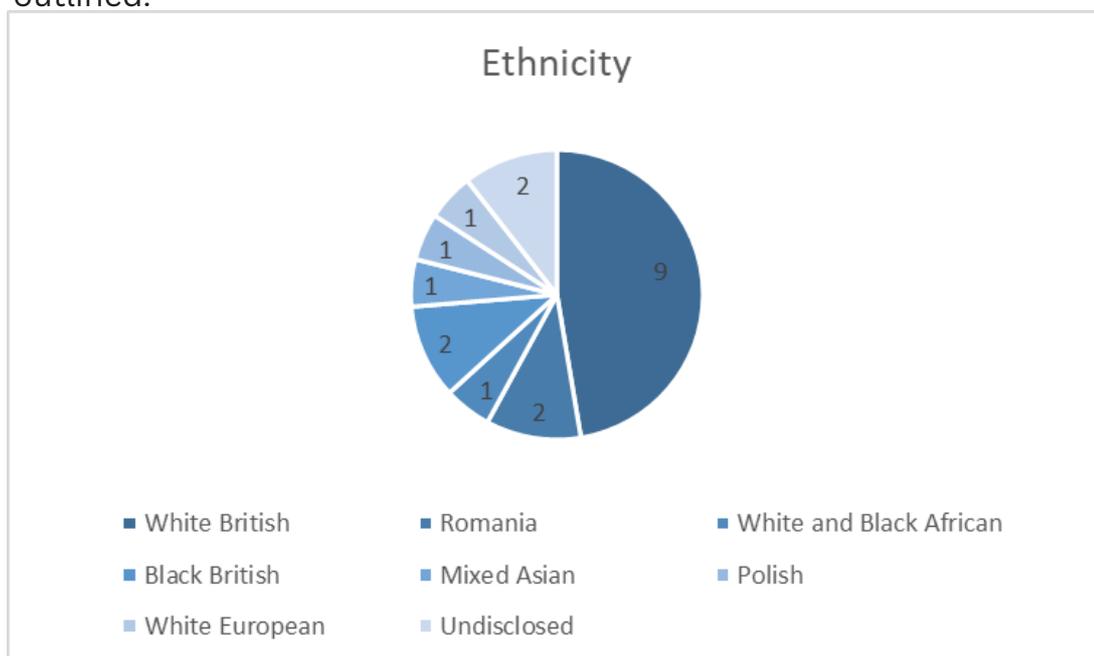


Figure 1: Ethnicity of residents who participated in the course.

Impact

When residents were asked if the course has had an impact on them, 11 out of 12 stated they felt the course had a positive impact (See Fig. 2). One resident shared on their feedback form, “I feel treated as a HUMAN not only a prisoner”, with another sharing “It made me feel better in myself and remembered what goals I have to achieve.”

The impact of participating in the Noela Yoga Course was also evidenced in the averages of participants' scores, seeing an increase in mental and physical health. One participant shared “I am more in control mentally than ever before. The control of emotions is clearly impacting”. This demonstrates a developing awareness and understanding but also highlighted that this participant was applying his learning and gaining greater control over his thoughts and emotions.

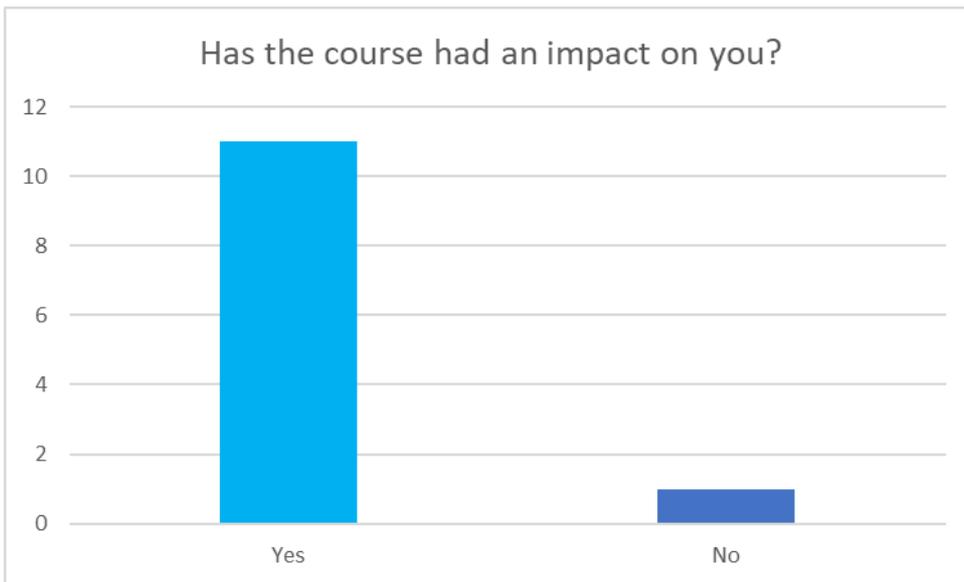


Figure 2: Has the course had an impact on you?

Furthermore, during the focus groups, residents identified that the course had taught them new techniques, and these new skills added to their “toolkit”, empowering residents and arming them with new self-resources. It is evidenced throughout the data that this had improved their overall wellbeing, generating positive impacts.

Relationships

It was firstly evident that residents gained a feeling of unity, through peer learning. For example, one resident stated they felt participating in the course “brought us together.” With another sharing, during the focus group, that he had learnt additional social skills to talk to new people and be more respectful of others and their stories.

One resident shared that, through partaking in the course, they identified that, “[I] didn't realise I went into myself [and it] helped me engage and connect with people.” This demonstrates that participants were able to engage in the course, feel a sense of cohesion, whilst also becoming more aware of the dynamics associated with relationships and self-awareness around their previous coping strategies when connecting with others. Insight developed around feeling closed and then connected highlights a new openness with others which in turn, helped build relationships with other residents, whilst on the course.

In addition to peer relationships, residents discussed that they had shared with their families their progress on the course each session. This gave them the opportunity to talk about ‘something else’ other than daily prison life.

When asked ‘how often are you mindful of other people’s feelings?’ participants stated they felt they were now more mindful of other people’s thoughts and actions since completing the course. From the qualitative data, it can be said this was due to them taking time to reflect and process their feelings, actions, and choices. There was a real sense that self-learning and personal growth was central to the course, as people evaluated their own thinking and behaviour, through the process of mindfulness and reflection.



Mental and physical wellbeing

Participants on the course rated their mental health at the beginning of the 10-week programme in comparison to before beginning the course. The average rate pre course was 5 out of 10, this increased to 8 out of 10 upon completing the course (See Fig. 3).

A large proportion of residents felt their quality and quantity of sleep had increased since starting yoga, with one resident stating, “my bad dreams and lack of sleep” had reduced since completing the course. The improvements to sleep were evident as a consistent narrative within the findings and the qualitative data highlighted that greater peace was also experienced.

An improvement to mental wellbeing was also evident in a majority of participants, who discussed how new techniques led to a greater sense of peace and stillness, promoting mental wellness. To illustrate, one participant claimed that mindfulness-based yoga course gave him the tools to navigate and address anxiety and stress stating, “it gives us an avenue to release our anxiety and stress.” Interestingly, this quote highlights that this participant not only believed this to be true for them personally but used the collective term “us” to communicate that he felt and experienced others addressing their own mental health challenges.

Participants on the course were also asked to rate their physical health at the beginning of the 10-week course. The average rate pre-course was 5 out of 10, this increased to 8 out of 10 upon completing the course (See Fig. 3). Participants stated they had clearly noticed an increase in their physical ability to exercise and for some, particularly those who used the gym, specifically through the stretching and warm-up techniques learnt during the course. Some residents particularly benefited from the physical element of the course, having significant positive impacts with on-going physical injuries and pains. One participant shared, “I wish I discovered this 10 years ago. I don't remember what back pain feels like. I've had back pain for 20 years”, another stating it had “beat chronic back pain” and that it had brought him “back to living without pain”. This strongly highlights the positive improvements to residents' physical wellbeing.

Participants not only discussed the removal of pain and discomfort but also additional benefits they experienced from the course. For example, one resident highlighted a renewed sense of energy, stating he was “buzzed with energy” due to the course. This suggests that whilst the course helped participants to heal physically it also energized them and provided them with a strategy to enhance energy levels.

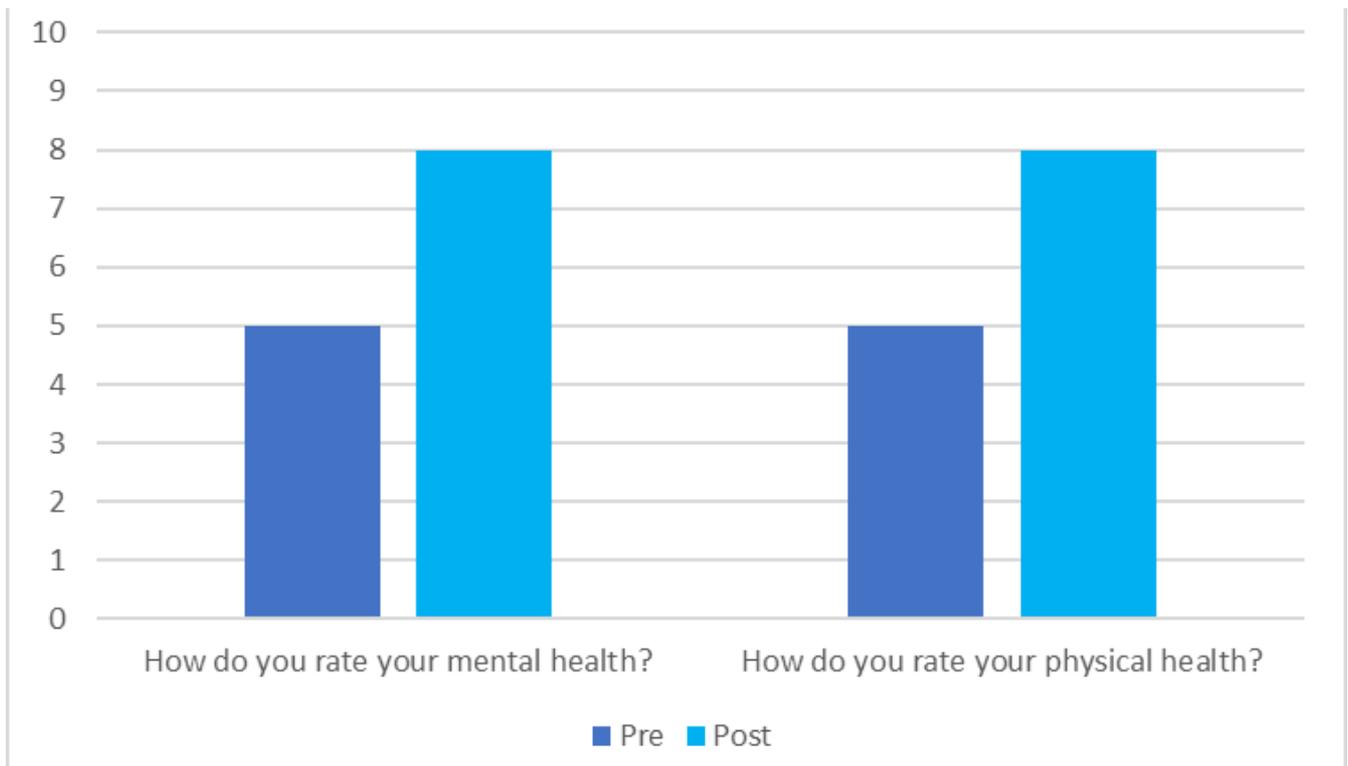


Figure 3: A bar chart showing the average scores of the participants, when they were asked about their mental and physical health, both before and after the course.

All residents stated, at the focus group, that they were still practicing yoga and used the techniques learnt on a daily basis to support them with prison life and the effects of the prison environment.

A Sense of Peace and Calmness

Calmness was a strong theme throughout the data shared by residents. During the focus group, a resident shared that he had become very anxious after COVID, however using the techniques, for example the breathing exercises and meditation, had allowed him to better manage his anxiety. With another sharing they felt he had gone from an “angry mind to a calm mind.” Participants said they felt their minds was more relaxed, less frantic and calmer, reducing their angry outbursts and getting stressed.

Residents felt the course proved them a sense of peace, providing them with a “safe space to let go”, with one participant sharing the “relaxed techniques have helped, [I am] more chilled out and can slow mind down”. This is linked to the previous theme, which highlights greater control but also evidences the adoption of new techniques, to improve a sense of calmness and a clearer understanding around the link between relaxation and racing thoughts.

The majority of residents felt the breathing techniques were the most useful and effective technique learnt from the course. One participant stated these techniques enabled him to “stay calm and able to avoid conflict” with another shared he used it as another coping mechanism tool when managing situations. This quote suggests that this new sense of calmness brought greater clarity around decision making, creating confidence to manage challenging situations and conflict.



Healthy Coping Strategies

During the focus group one resident stated that he had “adopted new healthy habit as a result of Noela Yoga”, with another sharing that one of the facilitators (Chloe) had a real impact on him, not just in terms of yoga but also through encouraging him to eat more healthily and adopt an overall healthier lifestyle.

Meditation was another part of the yoga that stood out to participants. Many said they had used their meditation skills as a way to manage emotions and feelings when they felt stressed, angry or overwhelmed. This suggests that residents were absorbing alternative approaches when managing situations, again highlighting self-growth and personal development. Meditation was extremely helpful for one particular resident, who said that yoga had helped him with his ADHD and had allowed him to focus better, by using techniques such as breathing and meditation.

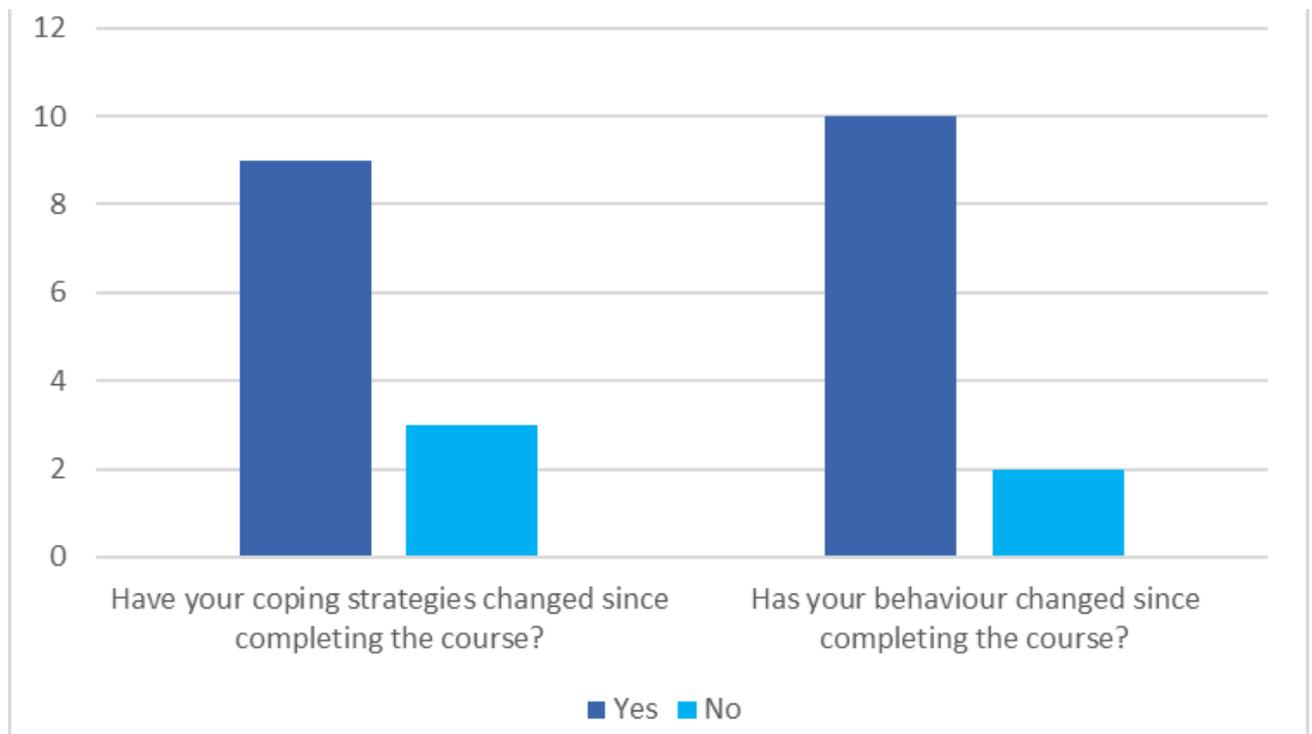


Figure 4: Have your coping strategies changed since completing the course?

There was an increase in the average score in which participants felt they had better control over their own thinking, increasing from an average score of 6 in pre-evaluations, to 8 in post-evaluations (See Fig 4.). This indicates an improved grasp of the participant's own thoughts, as a collective, suggesting they have improved their coping strategies and finding peace, two key principles of growth. Furthermore, this went on to improve how residents cared for themselves. Pre evaluation residents average score was 6, increasing to 8 by the end of the course.

Cognitive Change (Hope and Meaning)

Changes associated with thinking and perspective were also evident in the findings. One resident shared that he got “belief and hope from hearing Noel’s story, [helped me] focus on myself and stay in the zone.” This suggests that the meaningful story underpinning Noela Yoga was felt by this participant, which not only left him inspired but helped him look inwards and consider his own identity. The term “stay in the zone” also infers a sustainability in this change, which was brought about from learning about the author of the course and his lived experience of prison.

One resident openly shared that he initially joined the course to "get out of their cell" but found the course enabled him to “to be more open minded” and calmer. It also supported this resident to feel more motivated about the future, stating, “it keeps me motivated to stay out of jail.” This again suggests a lasting impact, shifting this individual’s mindset and approach to life. It also indicates that, whilst this participant was initially attempting simply to escape from his normal life on the houseblock, he found meaning during the course that was significant and powerful.

Conditions of Success

The following conditions of success emerged from feedback collected from residents and Noel Moran, the lead teacher.

There were a number of factors which contributed to the efficacy of the course. To support consistency and enable residents to get the most out of the course, it was suggested that the allocated time for the course to take place did not overlap with other courses, visit time, education and the gym.

Both residents and Noel Moran felt the location used within HMP Swaleside provided a safe and calming environment for participation. It was reported that staff were incredibly supportive and having a venue with carpet created a more positive learning environment. It was also highlighted that the venue was quiet, with no interruptions and the communication between the Noela Yoga team and the point of contact was excellent. Ensuring the location and environment is suitable, supports residents to feel safe and comfortable, allowing them to be open within a safe space.

Noel shared that he experienced some powerful moments within the sessions, whereby the men felt safe enough to lift their "masks and place egos to one side". He reflected on past cohorts from the course and felt that this group engaged most deeply, stating that it was the "best engagement in any cohort". Further to this he observed the participants teaching one another and demonstrating leadership skills, as they mastered their practice during the Course.

The teachers also observed real growth in the participants, and this meant that they could open up and discuss their pasts as well as their hopes for the future. The residents also demonstrated a real presence within the sessions, and it was believed that this allowed them to experience a sense of acceptance and ground them as individuals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the data highlighted a positive increase in residents' mental and physical wellbeing, stronger relationships, a greater sense of peace and calmness, healthier coping strategies and cognitive change including hope and meaning.

The course supported residents in regulation of their thoughts and feelings and in turn supported their interactions and mindfulness of others. These wellbeing improvements were reported, by participants, to be due to the techniques learnt within the course, which provided additional tools that empowered them to be in control and explore new healthier coping mechanisms. The impact of these new tools to cope were demonstrated through participants' personal changes, how they deal now with situations, as well as their own emotional reactions. These developments undoubtedly improved the residents' relationships with those in and out of prison and improved their everyday lives.

Participants identified longer-term benefits that the course had provided them with, such as the ability and want to focus on their physical and mental health by applying the skills learnt and alternative coping strategies.

All residents were actively still practicing yoga practicing yoga and mindfulness techniques at the end of the course and stated they are all using their new techniques on a daily basis to support coping with prison daily life.

For enquires regarding Noela Yoga Wellness and Training services please contact:

noel@noelayogawellnessandtraining.com



About Penal Reform Solutions

Penal Reform Solutions (PRS) is an organisation that focuses on transforming penal culture, creating spaces that are meaningful, trusting and nurturing. PRS strives to change the conversation around punishment, working with practitioners and service users, making them central to the change process. It is an evidence-based organisation, which draws on our work within academic research, practitioners’ expertise, and the experiences of people who have served a prison sentence.

The **Principles of Growth** were formed alongside practitioners and residents in Norwegian prisons following a three year research project. These principles are supported by the academic literature around human potential, positive criminology and psychology and considering contextual factors around personal growth and how this knowledge can be used to transform culture. The Principles form the theoretical framework by which all Growth Programmes and Project are informed.

Noela Yoga incorporates these Principles of Growth throughout its practice.

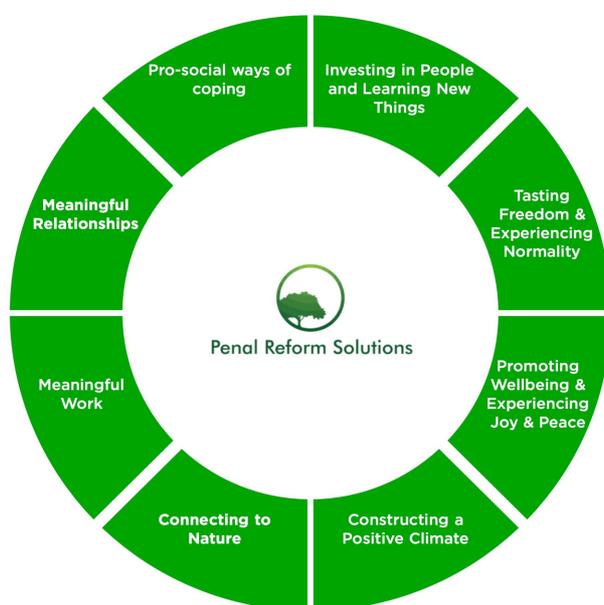


Figure 1: Principles of Growth