

- Billa: Hey, my name's Billa and you're listening to Safe on NPR. This is a mini-series we are making with the folks at IAP or Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody. It's all about helping you make the most of your transition outta lockdown. Something I experienced myself having just got outta prison in, in October last year. So far in the series we've heard from Saul who said exercise, structure and support were his salvation and Cleo who worked hard on the outside to help her dad on the inside. *(Cleo: I think we know about all the problems that are happening within prisons, but for me, I kind of want to focus more on kind what other solutions. So the reason that I share my story, and obviously I'm sharing it with you now, and I've shared it with lots of other people is to be part of that change.)* This week, we are meeting Lewis who had one of the most important jobs in prison. He was a Samaritans Listener. So Lewis, thank you for chatting us today, mate. When did you get outta prison?
- Lewis: Um, so I was released a year ago, so it was, uh, 24th of June last year.
- Billa: Oh, well, uh, congratulations. So thank you for coming today and speaking to us, I just want to let the Listeners know a little bit of about what the actual the Listeners actually do. So, yeah,
- Lewis: I, um, I was a, a Listener in HMP Winchester. I'll be honest with you. I, I, I initially applied because I didn't wanna get shipped outta jail. And so it, it was purely for selfish reasons why, why I applied in the first place. I, I, I kind of wasn't prepared for, um, how much I'd learned from becoming a Listener. It, it ended up being a, a really rewarding experience, you know, um, helping other people. And what I found is, you know, when I was actually listening to other people and, and hearing their problems, it kind of, you know, stopped me from worrying about my problem so much.
- Billa: No, that's so great to hear Lewis. I mean, as I can imagine, uh, the Listeners would be more important than ever over the last 15 months or so with the COVID situation. Uh, I mean, I know you've talked a little bit about how you signed up, but what was the actual experiences? Was it a, a, a quick thing to get into and obviously sound like you enjoyed it?
- Lewis: Yeah so basically you have to complete an eight week, a six to eight week courses. Um, so it's about an it's about a morning or an afternoon a week, um, for your training and really they just teach you how to it listening to skill. You know, I didn't realise, I thought it was just something, you know, you just shut your mouth on that, but, you know, they teach you to listen to key things, what people are saying and from that, you can kind of understand where they're at and maybe what help they might need, or, you know, it is very delicate situation. Cause a lot of people that call the Listeners out when that are, you know, are suffering from depressed and things like that, you know, and it's, it's a delicate subject really and you, you are taught that. You've got to be careful, you know, what, what type of things you say in response to the things, uh, prisoners might say, and then obviously once you start listening, it's quite, it's quite, uh, nerve-racking at first when you first start talking to people, but then after a few times you start feeling a bit more confident, you know, but yeah, with the COVID thing I found, I was getting called out a lot more because people were stuck in their cells

like 23 hours a day 'cause the COVID and that, and you know, people were really making use of the service, you know?

Lewis: Yeah, no that's uh, great Tia. So was that like a 24 hour thing? So you could be called out at any time?

Lewis: Yeah, so like some nights we'd, we'd be on call on nights and then we'd be caught on call on days. So like I literally get woken up in the middle of the night. One of the officers would come to the door, wake me up. But like I say, yeah, it's really rewarding. And you know, like a lot of the time just listen. Yeah, exactly. Like they say, you know, like the name Listener. Yeah. People just want to be able to get whatever's on their chest, get off, get it off their chest, you know? And like nine times out of 10, you know, after I spent like maybe half an hour or 45 minutes with them, they just say, I feel so much better now I'm happy. Yeah. I wanna go back to my cell. Do you know what I mean?

Billa: Yeah, no, no. Cause I, I knew a couple of Listeners myself and I could see the work that they were doing was, were invaluable, you know, to the people that really needed just to get some things off their chest or, you know, uh, thank you for, you know, you helping out the prisoners as well. So I just wanted to go back to when the actual COVID hit. Yeah. Like you, I was in prison and everything, everything, the whole regime shut down, chaplaincy, gym, everything. Uh, so I'm checking, like there was no Listener movement and the volunteers couldn't come in and could you still get out your cell then or cause of the COVID could you not go?

Lewis: Yeah, no I, so we were just doing, we were still working is Listeners, but what we were doing is we were just, we were talking to people through the door. Do you know what I mean? So we were still allowed to speak to people. And then after that, they kind of just made an exception for the Listeners and we had to wear a mask and things like that. You know, people find it hard in prison. Anyway, when the COVID thing hit, people are finding it extra hard. Like you say, where they're not getting any outlet or whatsoever or for their emotions or, you know what I mean, or their frustrations and that, and they're just spending a, like a lot of time in their cell isolated really.

Billa: I can imagine you're being super busy Lewis and just always talking to the, the prisoners and you know, giving back, uh, I mean, is there, I know everything's confidential and stuff. Uh, is there any specific situ is that listening to someone has helped someone immensely during the pandemic? You know, 'cause there's all sorts of things going on as you know.

Lewis: Yea a lot of it was just, people became frustrated with the situation and that, and um, it is easy to look at the system and think that is them they're doing and the officers and they're doing it on purpose and things like that. Do you know what I mean? But you know, so a lot of the time I just listen to people and what they've got to say, kind of let them know that everyone else is in the same situation. You know what I mean? They're not being singled out for treatment and that, you know that and they're not being treated unfairly, you know?

Billa: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, uh, um, I can see that totally Lewis. I mean, uh, what I'd be curious to know is like, uh, because you're being such a big help to others as a Listener, what sort of things helped you stay positive and focused during the lockdown?

Lewis: So I was quite lucky, really. I was in a position where I, I was a red band or like had a free movement throughout, at the prison. And um, and that was part of my, part of my job with the substance misuse team and that, so I was quite lucky in the fact and I used to work in reception as well. So I didn't feel the lockdown as, as much as other people were, I'd say, but I I'd say people are still in lockdown now. And I, you know, I, I used to do a lot of reading. (Yeah). Try and stay in contact with people on the phone, like the prison I was in, they was providing like five pound free credit a week here instead of visits.

Billa: Yeah. We got that as well.

Lewis: And I'll just say to anyone listening yeah. That, you know, there's no shame in calling a Listener out, you know, sometimes there's a bit of stigma about it and people think that you weak and things like that, you know, but at the end of the day, if you've got something in on your chest and you feel like you, you need to talk to someone about it, they're not, I I'd recommend it. It's the best thing to do. And also, you know, if, if you'd like to think about becoming a Listener, I think it taught me so much like as a person and it taught me, you know, listening to other people. I came to realise that a lot of the problems that I feel think I've got all a lot of the worries I've got, yeah. All the difficulties that I've got in dealing with daily life are nothing compared to what some other people go through and that, you know, and it kind of helped me put things in perspective and that, and think, well, you know what, actually, things aren't as bad as I thought they were, you know? And also it's really nice just helping other people. And that I've always come from a selfish place here where it's always me, me, me, me, me, and I'll get what I want and I'll do what I want and I want it now, do you know what I mean? And then like becoming a Listener, like kind of taught me a bit of patience and just taught me, I learned a lot about myself.

Billa: Yeah. Yeah. I can see that it's it is a whole process. I mean like yourself, I had like the, the red band and jobs and stuff like that. I think it's just routine keeping busy. And when you're giving back, especially to, you know, the prisoners who you're living with, then, you know, it's got a little bit of substance to it and you know, it does help you, you know, grow from strength to strength each day. Uh, I just, uh, want you to ask Lewis the stuff that you've learned, have you took that out into the community with you over the last year? Because I, I kind of see that you've learned some very important skills, uh, as a Listener. Uh, are you using any of them things now?

Lewis: Well, if you ask my girlfriend, I dunno ever she'd agree with you. Yeah. <laugh>

Lewis: But I dunno. Do you know what? Yeah, it's just taught me a little bit of patience and um, it's definitely like it's listening is, is a skill. You it's an art. Like how many times does somebody tell you they name you and you forget it a couple of minutes later or even a second later? Do you know what I mean? And if, um, and

that stayed with me now, like if someone says their name, because when I first started going into listen and that I'd ask people their name and I'd do what I'd always done, like I'd ask the name, but then for some reason I wouldn't remember it. Yeah. You know, and that's something I've like now that I can actually, if, if someone tells me their name yet, and I'm pretty good at remembering people's names now, which is really nice thing as well, you know?

Billa: Yeah, no, totally. Lewis. I get you, uh, so to become a Listener, then do you have to have certain, do you have to have like your English, Maths before you can apply to put an app in a, as opposed to be a Listener? Is there any requirements?

Lewis: I'm pretty sure. But they do like a screening day. Yeah. So the Samaritans come in and they spend like a morning with you and, um, you know, and they ask you some questions and things like that to see whether you are suitable. So if you want to be a Listener, you want to give it go like the sound of it, then just put an application in, put it on a general app and just say, I'd like to become a Listener, please. Can you put me down for the next course? I know that because of the pandemic. Yeah. 'cause of COVID that they're been really struggling with having Listeners, because it's been hard to train them 'cause they're coming into the prisons and everything. Yeah. So I know that there's a lot of vacancies in all prisons across the country and that, so if you're thinking about, you'd like to be a Listener, then just put an app in, put a general app in and that and say, can you put me on the waiting list? You know? And someone will get back in, in contact with you. And uh, let you know when the next course is, I think they run 'em like, or three times a year.

Billa: If there's anything that you could say to like, and the prisoners, any sort of advice, uh, 'cause you've come from a Listener background, uh, what would it be?

Lewis: Well, the biggest thing is not just to do with listening and that yeah. Is like, I've always all my life yeah, thought that I could do it on my own and that yeah. And I wouldn't ask for help. I've done whether that was a bit of pride, a bit ego or a bit of fear about, you know, looking silly or whatever, all looking stupid. But like the best thing advice I could give is, you know, just ask for help, yeah. It doesn't matter whether you ask the staff for help or if you're suffering from like a mental health problem or you've got anxiety go and speak to the mental health team. Or if you've got something you need to get off your chest, you have called a Listener out. There's, you know, there's no shame in asking for help in that. Like I was the type of person I would not ask for help all my life. And then what I found is, is when I did ask for help that funny enough everyone wanted to help me. Do you know what I mean? So <laugh> yeah, yeah, yeah. And it, and it was, and it's really good. And you end up getting the support you need to get you through prisons. You know what I mean? And that's what it comes down to at the end of the day. Yeah.

Billa: Yeah you've got that, that rapport there. And uh, I think it sounds like those that, you know, you've been doing some, making a real difference in the prisons when,

'Safe' – audio transcription

when you were there and rest of the Listeners as well. (Thank you mate). And I know it really does make a difference. (Thank you buddy).

Billa: Okay.