



# INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

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## **BUILDING ON STRENGTH**

by Joseph Sabella, Director Inner Strength Training®  
Franklin House of Correction, Greenfield, MA

*Fifteen inmates shuffle into the room that serves as my classroom during the week, and a chapel during the weekend. As they walk in on the first day of class, I don't know who is the sex offender, murderer, domestic abuser, petty thief, drug addict or alcoholic. I don't know who's doing twenty years, five years, six months or ninety days. I make it a point of not knowing.*

It's not a matter of denial. Soon enough, I will know why each man is in my jail and how much time he has to serve. In time knowing why, how, and what brought a man to this jail, and for how long, becomes important — but not at the beginning. In the beginning, and perhaps for as long as an inmate is my student, I'm trying for something deeper than "crime and punishment."

In order to stay out of jail each inmate needs to be able to face some pretty tough questions: Who am I? What have I done wrong? Why have I done it? And most importantly, how can I keep myself from doing it again? Since many inmates return to jail, helping successfully solve these mysteries is an essential part of helping them develop crime-free behavior — and creating a more safe society.

Some might argue, "Are you nuts, Joe? There is nothing deeper about this. The facts are clear. These people manipulate, lie, cheat, steal, can't control their behavior, and prey on the weak. They're illiterate, immoral misfits. They violated the law and now they're paying the price. You're just wasting your time and the taxpayers' money."

Though I may be hard pressed to disagree with most of the above, especially questions relating to my sanity, I would argue extensively and passionately about the idea I'm wasting my time or the taxpayers' money.

When I first started working with groups of inmates, I tried counseling them and teaching them new skills. After some time, I realized I was having a disappointing experience—and so were they.

In any group of inmates I found ten to twenty percent were openly resistant; the same percentage were positively involved, and the rest fell somewhere in between; meaning that in any given class I could have fifty to sixty percent of the group going against what I was trying to do. It was exhausting to me and not helpful to them.

It occurred to me after a time that all inmates had had life-experience on the street before they came to jail. That through this experience they had each developed various ways of coping. Likewise each inmate had developed their own ways of coping with life behind bars. I had been assuming that **all** of those ways were destructive, ineffective or socially unacceptable. What if I was wrong and, in fact, inmates had some constructive, effective and socially acceptable activities that they were already doing while in jail? Wouldn't it be more efficient and useful to help them build on those activities rather than attempt to induce them to try something new and unfamiliar? Instead of focusing on their problems and trying to fix them, we could focus on building on their already present strengths, increasing the odds that they could and would call on these strengths at critical moments.

*(continued on page 2)*

*OPEN is striving to collect insights from ex-offenders who are currently serving as treatment providers in adult corrections.*

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e-mail: nrollo@home.com*

From this perspective, we designated any activity a person uses constructively and effectively to cope with life in a socially acceptable manner, an *Inner Strength Activity*. In this designation there are three major categories:

**Individual; One to One; and Group.**

- **Individual Inner Strength Activities** are activities inmates do *by themselves* to constructively and effectively cope with life in jail, in a socially acceptable manner.
- **One to One Inner Strength Activities** an inmate does *with one other person*, to constructively and effectively cope with life in jail.
- **Group Inner Strength Activities** an inmate does *with more than one other person* to effectively cope with life in jail.

The combination of all these activities make-up an inmate's **Inner Strength Program**.

To develop an inmate's awareness and skill in accessing their abilities, a three-level *Inner Strength Training*<sup>®</sup> course was designed for groups of eight to twelve inmates who meet once a week for ninety minutes.

Level 1 - Inmates are introduced to Inner Strength Theory and define their goals. (3-week length).

Level 2 - Inmates identify their Inner Strength Program (5-week length).

Level 3 - Inmates practice their Inner Strength Program, learn to expand and make it more effective (ongoing participation determined by inmate).

During Level 2 inmates are given lists of Individual, One to One, and Group activities that can be done to constructively and effectively cope with life in jail in a socially acceptable manner. *The inmates select the activities they are currently doing in jail from this list, and this becomes their initial attempt at identifying their own personal Inner Strength Program.*

When inmates have initially identified their Inner Strength Program for life in jail (Level 2), I share with them my personal program for life on the street! It is often a revelation for them that many of the same activities they need to effectively cope with life in jail, are the same ones I need to effectively cope with life on the street. We discuss which exercises work, and how to make them more effective. Each inmate is required to keep a log of Inner Strength Experiences and this log becomes the basis for individual sharing and group discussion.

Sharing my life and program with the inmates has been very important on several levels. The experience enables me to remain sensitive to the difficulty of sharing in a group. Communicating

my life first helps lessen the resistance of inmates to expressing personal details of their life. I am continually reminded of the power and effectiveness of this program. And, they can see through my example the results of applying this program.

As Level 2 of Inner Strength Training<sup>®</sup> comes to a conclusion, the inmates have a much clearer idea of their own program. They are able to organize and schedule their Inner Strength Activities in jail. We emphasize in discussion that the more they practice Inner Strength in jail, the better the chance they'll practice it when they get out. During this discussion, most inmates come to the following conclusion: it takes more Inner Strength to be on the outside than it does to be on the inside. The real test will come when the inmate leaves the institution.

Do inmates maintain and further develop their Inner Strength Training<sup>®</sup> once they leave the institution? I can't answer that question with any certainty. Follow up research has not been done. What I can say is, inmates who practice their Inner Strength Program within the institution consistently reported less conflict, more calmness, increased self-confidence, and improved relationships with loved ones. These are the same results I get on the outside.

*Joseph Sabella is the creator and Director of Inner Strength Training<sup>®</sup>. He has been a counselor and personal growth educator in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts since 1976. Sabella has been developing and teaching Inner Strength Training<sup>®</sup> in the community since 1990 and in correctional facilities since 1992. He can be reached at - [innerstrengthtraining.com](http://innerstrengthtraining.com) or visit his website at - [www.innerstrengthtraining.com](http://www.innerstrengthtraining.com)*

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Following are six examples from the list of Individual Inner Strength Activities:

- **Sobriety** - Not abusing alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, food, etc.
- **Praying** - Mentally sharing your thoughts and feelings with God, Higher Power, Jesus, etc. and asking for help.
- **Study** - Reading books, magazines, or letters from others so you can learn about your inner self, your body, relationships or your circumstances.
- **Writing** - Expressing thoughts and feelings in letters, journals, poems, stories. Writing wise and caring advice to yourself on how to handle difficult situations.
- **Introspection** - Consciously observing, listening to, or feeling your mental and emotional states.
- **Planning** - Identifying goals, breaking goals into doable steps, knowing your next step, seeing opportunities, avoiding problems, and preparing for obstacles are all part of planning.



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