



HARD TIME FITNESS

by Patti Pinkerton, RD, CPT, CSSD, CDE

A Registered Dietitian's Prison Experience

I have been working in a prison for six years, but I remember my first day like it was yesterday. After the gates clinked behind me, the stench of old eggs and dirty hair hit me like a brick wall. Hundreds of men dressed in blue bustled around the hallway like plastic bags in a parking lot. The yellow lines taped on the main hallway floor directed the inmate traffic into the chow halls and staff walked in the center. I followed my escort like a lost lamb following his shepherd to safety. Not the most pleasant thing for a Registered Dietitian's first day at the office.

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My first days were riddled with confusion and disbelief. This was not what I signed up for and it definitely wasn't what I imaged a prison to be like. The first strange thing I noticed was that the majority of the men were obese. The inmates looked nothing like they did in Cool Hand Luke and other movies I had seen- all lean and muscled with tight waists. What I saw was quite the opposite. Rotund bellies hung low beneath their button-down shirts and their faces were plump like basketballs. Why were they so obese? I thought for sure

they'd be avid exercisers who worked out all day. That's what I thought, but I was wrong.

I learned quickly that food was everything to an inmate. It was worth more than money. If you had food, you could get stuff or if you had stuff, you could get food. Because all inmates in California were given the same "Heart Healthy Diet," all the inmates asked for a "special" diet, a special supplement, a special anything. In particular, inmates begged doctors for Boost Plus (a high calorie nutrition supplement for underweight people) I could never figure out why anyone would drink those by choice, but they were "special" because not every inmate could get them and if something was "special" then everyone wanted it - even if they didn't need it. Some inmates think it's a bodybuilding supplement, but it's full of sugar (high fructose corn syrup) and extra calories they don't need, so putting on fat is a common side effect. One man gained 30lb. in a month because he drank 2 Boost/day. The same doctor who wrote the Boost order sent the inmate to me for weight loss counseling.

Another thing I noticed was the lack of physical activity. There was a lot of sleeping, watching "Cops," and playing cards. Everyone doing a little of this, a little of that—adding up to a whole bunch of nothing. Extra calories coupled with little to no activity? It was not hard to figure out what was causing the obesity epidemic inside the prison and increasing our health care costs. Most of the men I counseled suffered from one or all the following: High blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, cancer, sleep apnea, worsening asthma, back problems, etc. You name a disease caused by obesity, prison had it. In retrospect, prison was not unlike that of the outside world.

After years of assessing and counseling more acute patients in the hospital, I decided to focus more on preventative care and became a Certified Diabetes Educator as well as a Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics. One day a social worker called and asked if I'd be a guest speaker in her weekly weight loss class. The first thing I thought of was "why is a social worker teaching weight loss," the second was "sure, that sounds interesting." The group consisted of 8-10 inmates who met weekly. When I arrived, most of the inmates just wanted to whine about the mainline diet and try to con me into a special diet, others were genuinely concerned about their health and wanted to lose weight. Eventually I told the social worker I'd take it over...I must have been a glutton for punishment. What started off as a whim turned into something "Ms. P's Fitness Class."



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By empowering inmates with knowledge about nutrition and fitness, they achieve a greater sense of self-esteem, possibly leading to getting jobs and decreasing recidivism rates.



I continued to meet with the men once per week and taught them about nutrition, the dangers of being obese, and what they could do about it. Each week, we would march into the ACC clinic to get weighed and the biggest “loser” would get a box of vegetables (a prized gift in prison). At the end of 12 weeks, cholesterol decreased, blood sugars were better controlled, and a few pounds were lost. The program needed much improvement however because there was no organized physical activity. I spoke with the gym Coach and with much hoop-jumping, I got permission to use the gym twice per week.

In October 2007, the “Ms. P’s Fitness Class” evolved into “Hard Time Fitness” Fitness Boot Camp. On Monday and Wednesday, the inmates were coached through a rigorous exercise class and the mandatory nutrition class and weigh-in was held on Tuesday. As a Registered Dietitian Board Certified in Sports Nutrition as well as a Certified Personal Trainer, fitness and nutrition was my life. In fact, it saved my life. Having dropped 90lbs. myself, I knew the drastic effect it would have on these men. It became a goal of mine to teach these men not only about nutrition but also about discipline, sacrifice, motivation, and how to “find their inner athlete.” I emphasized “efforts vs. ability.” I witnessed lazy, obese men become disciplined machines – taking whatever “punishment” I dolled out that day. I remember each man’s “first day,” and compare it to my own. There is not much difference in that they all showed up not knowing what to do, where to go, etc.

Two men consistently stick out in my head. One inmate, Mr. S. showed up with a lollipop in his mouth! I yelled “A lollipop to a weight loss class? You’re kidding me, right?” Embarrassed, he tossed it in the trash can. Another inmate, Mr. A, was a tall, with skinny arms and legs and had a belly that made him look pregnant. When I asked him what he ate, he

replied “I eat six donuts a day.” I told him he could have donuts every day but he’d have to cut it down to 3/day. He did what I told him and dropped over 30lb. in 12 weeks. He walks with more confidence, still eats healthy and has maintained his weight loss. I didn’t think these two were going to make it but they showed up every day and ended up being the two biggest “losers” in their class and are now mentors to the new men who come in.

I hope to continue to make improvements and generate a group of disciplined, fit, intelligent men who can share this wisdom to others. Peer education goes a long way and sometimes another inmate is more willing to listen to another than to a free staff. I truly believe that “You can’t keep what you have if you don’t give it away,” and I teach this to the men. 5-7 men are asked to stay for another 12 week session. I choose men who have shown courage, strength, good character as well as discipline. They do not necessarily have to have the biggest weight loss but they have to have been consistent in their efforts.

I have worked hard to lose my own weight and am proof that self-knowledge about good nutrition is useless—unless you develop discipline to apply the principles in their lives on a regular basis. Consistency is key. The men who came back day after day, week after week have made amazing transformations—inside and out. It has been an honor to teach such pupils.

Some people think I’m odd and can’t figure out why I help inmates. They argue that the healthier, the better. I explain to them that by teaching inmates how to get or keep healthy, it not only decreases healthcare costs while they’re in prison, but it also helps when they get out. Who do you think is going to be paying for all the cholesterol-lowering and diabetes medications when they can’t afford it? That’s right—you and me. By empowering these men with knowledge about nutrition and fitness, they achieve a greater sense of self-esteem, too, thus possibly leading to getting jobs and decreasing recidivism rates. That’s great for everyone.

It has been an honor to work with the staff here at the California Medical Facility. I hope that we can all achieve optimal health—inside AND outside of these prison walls.