

# **Criminon: A Program Making Criminal Rehabilitation Possible**

Actual rehabilitation of criminals is often regarded as the unreal wish of the “do-gooder” or as a good idea in theory but one which falls far short in practice – when one is faced with the reality of hard core, repeat offenders and with individuals whose lives present a picture of repeated anti-social acts and whose pattern of conduct throughout their lives raise the question of whether there exists a positive state to which the person could be rehabilitated.

Yet the rapid and continuing increase in prison population, the return to society of prisoners who, if anything, are confirmed in their negative life-styles through their prison experiences, the high national rates of recidivism, and the huge financial burden which a large correctional budgets place on State governments – all these factors tell us that something must be done to put an end to the revolving door of recidivism. In order to achieve a reduction in recidivism, effective rehabilitation programs are necessary.

This paper describes one such program: the Criminon criminal rehabilitation program, its history, what it does, and why it is effective. The paper is intended to serve as an introduction to the Criminon program and to explain where and how the program fits in today’s concerns with achieving the actual rehabilitation of offenders.

## **Criminon Mission Statement**

- To address those factors which produce and precipitate criminal behavior
- To restore common-sense values
- To provide educational tools and life skills, including effective literacy, to those in need so they may rejoin society as responsible and contributing members.
- To provide effective drug rehabilitation to offenders and those on probation and parole
- To assist the criminal justice system to bring about reforms that will accomplish these aims.

## **The History of the Criminon Program**

The Criminon (meaning “no crime”) program was established in 1972 in New Zealand. From that point until well into the 1980s, the Criminon program was delivered as an on-site rehabilitation program. Centers were implemented in prisons, in juvenile halls and in court related community facilities.

A major change in Criminon’s activities occurred in 1989 when a Los Angeles area volunteer, hearing an ex-offender tell his successes through the program, developed a new approach which enabled Criminon to rapidly reach into prisons, including into super maximum security (supermax) and secure (or closed) housing facilities, which were previously inaccessible to virtually all rehabilitation programs.

While not replacing on-site programs, in the United States, the correspondence course model became the dominant thrust of the Criminon program. The correspondence modules

consisted of a series of cognitive-behavioral courses designed to help the prisoner to adopt a new approach in his or her thinking about goals, interpersonal conduct, the impact of anti-social behavior (his own and those of his associates), and decision making skills. These courses are all based on materials developed by L. Ron Hubbard.

“Already a devout Muslim, The Way to Happiness course understood and practically applied – remarkably enhanced my ethics, virtues and self-realization. The course helped me to understand the pros and cons of social behavior and techniques, to subtly and overtly move segments of my peers to wanting to display benevolent acts as well as comprehend the profound long term social benefits thereof. Hence, consciously utilizing this course as a supplemental compass over a seven month period of time has brought more happiness to this student and infected the psyche of even hostile peers to the point that they single me out for preferential treatment.”

Al B.  
Pleasant Valley State Prison  
California

Whether delivered on-site or by correspondence, the keystone of the Criminon courses is The Way to Happiness Course. Centered around a secular, common-sense moral code written by Mr. Hubbard, the course leads prisoners into a new way of thinking about themselves, their relations with others and about how they conduct themselves in life. As described in greater detail below, the course helps even inveterate offenders develop a new way of thinking about their conduct and the choices they make in life.

The full range of courses took some years to develop as there was an evolution involved in learning what prisoners needed and in codifying the course materials to satisfy those needs. Additionally, since many prisoners have low literacy levels, it was necessary to recompile materials for easier comprehension.

Currently the Criminon program reaches into more than 2,500 prisons in the United States and throughout the rest of the world. More than 10,000 prisoners have completed one or more Criminon courses and 7,000 are currently enrolled in a Criminon course. There are active Criminon programs in the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Indonesia, Hungary, Canada, Colombia, Venezuela, Holland, Spain, Puerto Rico, Czech Republic and Russia.

## **The Philosophy of the Criminon Program**

It is commonly understood that numerous societal factors contribute to the endemic levels of crime in our society: poverty, illiteracy, discrimination and racism, the lack of economic opportunity, gangs and drugs are only a few of the most widely recognized factors. It is also increasingly understood that prisons, themselves, have become a crime-generation factor. Harsh conditions, the presence of gangs and other pressures lead to socialization into life style patterns which afford immediate survival but are inimical to a crime-free life upon release – all these and a host of additional factors have combined to create what is popularly known as the revolving door of recidivism:

Offenders are being released from prison confirmed in criminal modes of thought and action. Moreover, as ex-cons or parolees, these people face severe difficulties in obtaining adequately remunerative employment and decent housing. Routinely they find little to no support for a crime-free life style. Indeed, they frequently return to poisonous environments little changed by their prison experience except confirmed in anti-social life styles and thinking.

This can be seen as an intractable dilemma, wherein societal problems have created a criminal class and the necessary incarceration of offenders hardens inmates into criminal life styles which both reinforce the underlying social ills and create political pressures for harsher anti-crime policies. Essentially it is a closed feedback loop where the problems generate further problems, which generate even more problems until we have societies such as the United States, today, where more than 2,000,000 people are behind bars, over 700 for every 100,000 population.

While recognizing the reality of the broad social context, the Criminon program takes the approach of dealing with the individual offender – changing his or her orientation and behavior from that of a criminal to a more pro-social orientation; and bringing social and learning skill levels up to a level where the offender stands a reasonable chance to integrate successfully back into the general society and to be able to succeed through positive actions. It is recognized by Criminon that broad societal conditions as well as adverse life situations and experiences play definite roles in shaping the mental outlook of the criminal. However, when it comes to rehabilitating the individual, ultimately rehabilitation is an individual matter, a personal decision to change the direction of one's life to a more positive orientation.

Criminon's approach holds that central to this individual rehabilitation process is the idea that it is necessary for the criminal to regain a sense of self-respect, a feeling of self-worth. "Self-respect," as Criminon uses the term, must be distinguished from a false pride or assertion of self-importance. The overblown sense of self-importance that causes one to be "dissed" by a glance into the eye or by a causal remark or the overblown assertion of one's importance is not what is meant. Rather it is a genuine realization by the individual that he or she is truly a decent, well-intentioned person. The individual then finds himself facing life choices from a new perspective. Will one continue on the path of action that has led to a life behind bars, that has led to a broken family life, and to associates who support the

"I've learned that it is essential for one to handle suppression by controlling the mind because if one can not control the mind, he or she can become susceptible to lashing out violently, therefore [*sic*] endangering their life and freedom.

"By handling my suppression I have been more at ease with myself. I do not get stressed out as much, in fact, I rarely do.

"Either being the suppression that I am afflicted with by the daily bases and functions of being incarcerated and the negligence by my caretakers or the suppression that other inmates try to afflict on one, I've learned that control of the mind is a number one factor if I am to survive."

-- Javier M.

Tallahatchie  
Correctional Facility  
Mississippi

downward drift of the person and encourage more of the behavior which led him behind bar? Such negative choices are contrary to the person's new view of himself or herself.

The Criminon program, then, seeks to bring the person to a new understanding of himself or herself and, building upon that foundation, help the person develop and experience skills and reasoning which will guide his or her actions in social and constructive directions.

### **Criminon Courses:**

As explained above, the Criminon program is delivered in both on-site and a correspondence course modes. In each approach the full program consists of a series of courses which address key factors in the achievement of rehabilitation. However the sequence of course modules differs depending upon whether the program is done on-site with direct supervision of the participants or on a long-distance, correspondence basis.

"My name is Frederick B, and I am a five time loser serving 19 years and 4 months for armed robbery. Since become a student with Criminon, I have come to feel better about myself. I have more confidence about myself and I now have the self-determination to learn more, to straighten my life out for the better and to achieve success.

Criminon has helped me to recognize my faults, thus allowing me to approach my weaknesses one at a time, so that I may be able to "master these situations without becoming angry, without waking away and without giving up.

Today I am better at understanding my purpose in life. I am now a High School graduate, a cabinet maker, and undergraduate in Theology, and a self-improvement coordinator with the Nation of Islam, where I also hold the position of third lieutenant.

I feel more positive about the future, myself, learning more and being there for others. Thank you Criminon."

Frederick B  
Folsom State Prison, CA

When the program is delivered on-site, the sequence of core courses is as follows:

1, **COMMUNICATION TOOLS:** Consisting primarily of a series of drills and exercises, this component significantly increases the participant's ability and skill in the use of communication. It has been found that when an individual's communication skills are raised sufficiently and when the individual has confidence in his ability to deal with even contentious and upsetting matters through verbal communication, that individual tends to use those skills to handle life situations and to verbally resolve interpersonal problems, with a greatly diminished reliance on force, negation or avoidance.

2. **LEARNING IMPROVEMENT COURSE:** The impact of literacy and adequate reading skills on criminal or delinquent behavior does not need to be belabored here. This course is designed to increase the reading and learning skills of the individual.<sup>1</sup> The Learning Improvement Course addresses the ability of the individual to extract, comprehend and

<sup>1</sup> This is not a phonics or basic reading course. If the participant's reading abilities are such that his or her skill level needs to be addressed at that bottom echelon, the Criminon program utilizes a basic phonics and reading program to address such needs.

utilize information, primarily through reading. The course provides the participant not only with increased ease in understanding and ability to utilize the information in subsequent Criminon modules, it also enables the individual to more easily learn other information whether in school or educational programs, on the job or for vocational advancement.

3. **THE WAY TO HAPPINESS:** It has been found that a broad common factor among offenders is the existence of a personal moral code which inclines them to make incorrect life choices. There are a vast number of reasons why such personal outlooks develop – poverty, illiteracy, racism, childhood abuse, broken homes, gang socialization patterns, etc. Whatever the reason, it has been found that unless an individual understands how to act in a social manner, unless he or she deems doing so to be personally important and unless they feel themselves to be an individual capable and worthy of living a decent life, person will incline toward the maintenance of a “criminal moral code”. Through The Way to Happiness

Course, the participants are helped to regain their own sense of self-respect and worth and are brought to an understanding of how to conduct their lives in a manner that is responsible, contributive and in harmony with others. The Way to Happiness Course helps the participants to understand, adopt and put into use a set of common sense values and guidelines.

“The success I received from “The Way to Happiness” has allowed me to be in control of my emotions and have a better understanding of my inner-turmoils and how if not kept in order or dealt with properly, they can affect me and all those I come into contact with. I’ve learned to weigh and judge decisions before taking action and most of all I learned who I am which is something I wish I could have had an understanding of prior to coming into the prison system. I had no parents to teach me morals and values as a teen so I learned the hard way, but now thanks to this course I know a better way. Thank you.”

N.S.

4. **RECOGNIZING & OVERCOMING ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOR:** Offenders chronically manifest anti-social behavior. As well, upon release, they often associate with those who are anti-social. Such behavior patterns hamper positive integration into society and actively contribute to further criminal activity. The Recognizing & Overcoming Anti-Social Behavior course enables the individual to spot within himself and to set aside these negative modes of social interaction. Following The Way To Happiness Course, this course helps the individual become aware of such ingrained behavior patterns and helps to train in more pro-social patterns. Also, importantly, it sensitizes the individual to such behavior in others thereby enabling the individual to avoid falling back for support upon negative associates who often encourage new criminal activities.

5. **UNDERSTANDING AND OVERCOMING ADDICTION COURSE:** Given the substantial negative impact of drug and alcohol use and abuse, the Criminon program includes a course serving to inform the participants about how the use of such substances effects their mind, body and life. The course covers how and why a person becomes dependent on drugs and how to become free of addiction and maintain a drug-free life<sup>2</sup>. This course is often taught lecture style to the students.

<sup>2</sup> Criminon has program components which directly address key physical aspects of drug addiction – bringing a person through a drug-free, relatively pain-free withdrawal and a

“By me being a victim and a product of a high crime risk, and an extremely violent environment on the west-side of south-central Los Angeles, I was inflicted with a strong sense of distrust, rage and other criminal characteristics beyond my control. Resulting from the poverty, lack of education, social disorders, and gang-related activities that I was strongly subject to. Drugs – PCP, marijuana, and alcohol along with past experiences of witnessed homicides and attempts being made on my life, played a major part in my lack of trust (Paranoia), by destructive tendencies and resentment that I would bury behind rigid controls.

However, by me taking The Way to Happiness Extension Course through Criminon, this course has actually suppressed the flames that were ignited inside of me, and it has shown me a more productive constructive side of me, as well as how this world should be. It has given me a brief description of how to obtain success in a positive manner along with its survival tools of virtues and moral excellence. Slowly but surely I’m learning to ‘trust’ and socialize with others again as well as respect and love all of humanity. If L. Ron Hubbard’s method of Criminon can rehabilitate me and open my eyes to reality, Criminon can help and reinstate anyone in special impact areas and other parts of the globe also. Criminon is truly The Way to Happiness.

D.C.

When the program is delivered by correspondence, the first course delivered is The Way to Happiness. It has been found that this is the most effective approach when the program is delivered through the mails. That is because the course directly engages the interest of the participant and gives them information and a perspective which they can immediately put to use.

As on-site delivery is done in a more intensive and more closely supervised manner, the participants can be taken fairly rapidly through the communication and learning skills courses, which increase their ability to understand and use The Way to Happiness course materials.

In addition to the core curriculum, the Criminon program can deliver further courses which assist participants to understand and deal

with other factors which may be need by the participants, such as a course in parenting or a course to help the individual improve his or her decision making skills.

### **The Criminon Program: Building on the Basis of What Works**

The techniques and procedures used in the Criminon program are based on secular technologies for personal improvement developed by L. Ron Hubbard. The application of these tools and approaches have been refined by Criminon over more than three decades of work with inmates and at-risk youth around the world.

With its origins and development rooted in this manner, the current Criminon program was not developed by reference to the social science literature in the fields of sociology, criminology or psychology. However, as a practical and effective approach, it is not surprising that the Criminon program in philosophy and practice reflects what has been found in social science to be workable approaches to rehabilitation.

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detoxification program. This is most often delivered in community based programs rather than in prisons in the United States.

Although there are voices in the literature today which still echo the “nothing works” mantra of the 1980s, closer inspection reveals that this is not, in fact, the case, although there are few scientifically exacting studies existing to prove program effectiveness.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the relatively few approaches which has been consistently found to lead to effective rehabilitation. Cognitive-behavioral treatment or therapy addresses the mode of thinking (cognitive) of the individual and by bringing about change at that level, brings about change in the person’s behavior. It is generally a rational or analytical approach to thought processes. That is, CBT encourages the individual to examine his behavior and the consequences of that behavior. Then the individual is encouraged to choose among the alternative behavioral choices with which he or she is faced. Different CBT methodologies utilize different means to reinforce and support pro-social choices. But, in the final analysis, they all address and seek to help the person change their own decision making process and then examine the consequences of their decisions and behavior. This is precisely the approach of the Criminon program.

Such a “rational” approach can be distinguished from approaches which modify behavior through the use of psychoanalytic therapy, drugs or, at the extreme, psycho-surgical modalities. Further, behavioral change in CBT approaches is accomplished primarily through getting the individual to see the advantages which reside in pro-social actions. Thus, as an approach, it should be distinguished by a punishment-based approach which has been tried intensively and unsuccessfully from the mid-1980s to 2000. This punishment based approach holds that by increasing the certainty and level of punishment, the criminal will rationally decide not to engage in the illegal behavior. While such an approach may or may not “get the criminal off the street”, it is certain that it does not accomplish rehabilitation. The futility of tough-on-crime, three-strikes laws, mandatory sentencing and runaway prison facility expansion as a rehabilitative tool is too obvious to warrant discussion. It is mentioned here only to distinguish it from CBT.

There is a growing body of literature supporting the cognitive-behavioral approach as an effective tool to the achievement of rehabilitation/recidivism reduction:

- “Risk and Protective Factors Among Youth Offenders,” Mary B. Carr; Trish A. Vandiver. *Adolescence*, Fall 2001 v36 i143 p409
- “Rehabilitation, recidivism, and realism: evaluating violence reduction programs in prison,” Roger Matthew; John Pitts. *Prison Journal*, Dec 1998 v78 i4 p390
- “The Phoenix Project: reducing recidivism using a cognitive-behavioral program,” Susan Tucker; David Cosio; Lotus Meshreki. *Corrections Compendium*, March 2003 v28 i3 p6
- “Juvenile recidivism: criminal propensity, social control and social learning theories,” Bruce Watt; Kevin Howells; Paul Delfabbro. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, April 2004 v11 i1 p141
- “What Works in Corrections? An Examination of the Effectiveness of the Type of Rehabilitation Programs Offered by Washington State Department of Correction,”

- Doris Layton MacKenzie; Laura J. Hickman. *Submitted to The State of Washington Legislature Joint Audit and Review Committee*, June 1998
- “Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Offenders: A Comprehensive Review of MRT Outcome Research,” Gregory L. Little. *Addictive Behaviors Treatment Review*, 2000 v2(1) p12-21
  - “Meta-Analysis of MRT Recidivism Research on Post-Incarceration Adult Felony Offenders,” Gergory L. Little. *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment Review*. v10(3/4), p.4-6 [note: self-published]
  - “Inmate Education,” John Howard Society of Alberta., 2002

The other major factor which has consistently been found to correlate with recidivism reduction is education. The person must have the literacy skills to effectively function in the society, to get and hold a job, and to be able to make rational decisions for his life based on an understanding of the factors which are pertinent. Our society is too complex, too inter-related for most individuals to successfully operate based only on information they can glean from conversations, while hiding their inabilities to read adequately. It is for this reason that the Criminon program includes a component to develop the individual’s study skills.

More than just being able to read (although that is addressed, too, if needed), the person must be able to study well enough to learn new subjects or to expand his knowledge base. Without such skills, an individual is trapped in established patterns and limited to those skills and abilities which he already has. This makes innovation and adaptation to change difficult and may, for example, lead the person, out of despair, to resume criminal – but well known -- ways of making money.

“This course made me sorry for every wrong thing I have ever done to anyone. It made me cry. I will always hold this course, and the principles therein, with high regard. After completing this course, the great thing that could happen to me would be the opportunity to apply the course’s teachings amongst the free, that before I died – someone in society would say, ‘David Turner was a good man’.”

D.T.

Again, the impact of education on recidivism has been well recognized in the literature. And, it should be noted, it is more than simply giving a person a college education so that he comes out of prison with a “better meal ticket”. The lack of basic educational skills is recognized to correlate highly with poverty, with an inability to get off of welfare and public assistance, and with crime and drug use. There is extensive literature on these latter points. The impact of education on recidivism is less extensive but more directly to the point. A representative sample is cited here:

- “The Impact of Career and Technical Education programs on Adult Offenders: Learning Behind Bars,” Howard R. D. Gordon, Bracie Weldon. *Journal of Correctional Education*, Dec. 2003, 54, 4 p.100
- “Effects of a Short-Tem Auxiliary Reading Program on the Reading Skills of Incarcerated Youth,” Kimber W. Malmgren, Peter E. Leone. *Education & Treatment of Children*, August 2000, v23 i3 p.239

- “Effective correctional treatment and violent reoffending: a meta-analysis,” Craig Dowden, Donald A. Andres. *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, Oct 200, v42 i4 p449
- “Using One-to-One Tutoring and Proven Reading Strategies to Improve Reading Performance with Adjudicated Youth,” Gail Coulter. *Journal of Correctional Education*, Dec 2004, v55 i4, p321
- “Educated Prisoners Are Less Likely to Return to Prison,” James S. Vacca. *Journal of Correctional Education*, Dec 2004, v55 i4 p297
- “Prison Education Program Participation and Recidivism: A Test of the Normalization Hypothesis,” Miles D. Harer. Federal Bureau of Prisons, Office of Research and Evaluation, May 1995
- “Education Reduces Crime Three-State Recidivism Study,” Correctional Education Association (CEA) and Management & Training Corporation Institute (MTCI), February 2003
- “Three State Recidivism Study,” Stephen J. Steurer; Linda Smith; Alice Tracy. Submitted to the Office of Correctional Education, United States Department of Education, Sept. 2001

## **Conclusion**

Criminon is a non-profit, non-sectarian, community based program which offers a wide variety of modalities so that it can be utilized in contexts as different as maximum secure housing and community programs for at-risk youth.

After more than thirty years of development and experience, the Criminon program embodies a strong and proven approach to the rehabilitation of criminal offenders. It contains a series of courses which have been refined and developed to help offenders achieve new views of themselves and of what constitutes useful and appropriate conduct. In its approach, the Criminon program is strongly endorsed by what has been found to be essential, workable elements leading to rehabilitation of offenders.

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