

# Does the Three Principles approach work in an English prison?

## Introduction

Beyond Recovery CIC is committed to testing and continuously improving the impact of its work. This article is a plain-English summary of a research paper which evaluated Beyond Recovery's work with prisoners at HMP Onley. The study found the programme produced significant positive changes and concluded that Beyond Recovery's approach is effective in a prison setting, resulting in significantly improved mental well-being and behaviour. You can read the full study for yourself [here](#).

## The research

The research paper written by Thomas M Kelley and Jacqueline Hollows (& others) does four main things:

1. Sets out the Three Principles;
2. Explains how they can lead to improved mental health and better behaviour;
3. Describes a research study testing out whether the Three Principles approach works at Onley prison; and
4. Shares the results of that study.

This document provides a short summary of the full research paper in plain (non-academic) English.

## The Three Principles

The principles were first described by a Scottish welder, Sydney Banks, in 1973 as the three key factors which interact to form people's psychological experience. These Three Principles are the **Universal Mind, Thought** and **Consciousness**; which are all described in more detail below.

The **Universal Mind** (or just **Mind**) is described as a life force which Banks believed is the pure essence of everything in the universe including people. He also described it as the creative intelligence which determines how people function on a psychological level. He regarded the **Mind** as an inbuilt source of positive health/resilience which enables people to cope with life's challenges. In the Three Principles model, the **Universal Mind** powers the other two principles.

Banks used the term **Thought** quite simply to describe people's ability to think – rather than the content of any individual thoughts.

Banks' concept of **Consciousness** is slightly trickier to understand. He describes it as the way people use their five physical senses to convert their thoughts into a psychological experience. So, as we use the power of thought to construct mental images, these images appear real to us as they merge with our consciousness and feel like a "real", sensory experience.

Banks saw these Three Principles as interconnected; his view is that people's psychological lives are formed from the inside out: our **thoughts** are made to feel real by our **consciousness** both of which are powered up by the **Universal Mind**.

The critical part of this theory for its practical application is Banks' view that people's behaviour is perfectly aligned with how the Three Principles interact for them as individuals. In other words, whether we are saints or sinners, our everyday behaviour is perfectly synchronised with the way we create our personal reality via the Three Principles. If we can change our psychological state from the inside out, we can change our behaviour at the same time.

## The Three Principles approach

Interventions based on the Three Principles have been developed in a range of different sectors including preventing violence at school, trauma treatment, anger management, and drug & alcohol addiction. Beyond Recovery developed an approach to teach offenders how to use the principles to improve their mental health. Their approach involves the key steps set out below:



## Examples of the Three Principles in action

“Three Principles” is a very different approach from other common counselling methods used with offenders such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). CBT, for example, focuses on helping individuals become more aware of their feelings (whether these are anger, distress from a traumatic event, anxiety et cetera) and then learning new ways of dealing with these feelings using techniques such as conflict resolution, problem-solving, meditation or anger management.

By contrast, Three Principles practitioners are less concerned with an individual’s feelings, teaching that, since we all create our psychological reality from the inside out, we are able to create a new reality which means we are no longer under the control of powerful emotions that we associate with past events. The Three Principles approach does not focus on awareness and ways of coping with feelings, but on understanding. Once an individual understands that painful memories are simply thoughts brought forward from the past, they can be taught to let these thoughts pass through and no longer experience the painful emotions.

Three Principles practitioners believe that they are teaching psychological well-being, rather than helping individuals cope with mental illness.

## The research

The research was designed to test whether a Three Principles programme run by Beyond Recovery in an English prison (HMP Onley) succeeded in improving the mental health and behaviour of the prisoners participating in the programme. The programme comprised of one 3-hour session per week for 10 weeks and Beyond Recovery ran six of these programmes. 75 prisoners started the programmes and 53 completed the full course – the others dropped out, were transferred to other prisons or were released.

The research set out to test whether the programme worked in eight areas. The first two of these relate to the Three Principles model – whether the prisoners on the programme showed a significant increase in Thought Recognition (TR) and Innate health via a clear mind (IHCM). The other six measured the impact of the Three Principles in:

1. Showing a significant increase in mental well-being;
2. Showing a significant increase in purpose in life;
3. Showing a significant decrease in depression;
4. Showing a significant decrease in anxiety;
5. Showing a significant decrease in anger; and

6. Showing greater improvement in behaviour in prison.

The research compared how the 53 prisoners who completed the programme performed against these eight measures compared with a “control group” which consists of 39 individuals who were on the waiting list programme.

The first seven of these factors were measured by a range of standard psychological surveys, all of which have been proven to be reliable in measuring psychological behaviour change, and all of which were administered to the 92 (53 participants and 39 on the waiting list) individuals in the study both before and after the programme.

The results of these tests were that prisoners who participated in the programme improved in six of the seven key factors which were measured by psychological tests:

1. They showed a significant increase in Thought Recognition;
2. They showed a significant increase in Innate health via a clear mind;
3. They showed a significant increase in mental well-being;
4. They showed a significant increase in purpose in life;
5. They showed significant decrease in anxiety; and
6. They also showed significant decrease in anger.

No significant improvement in depression was found.

For the final, eighth measure, improved behaviour was also recorded by prison staff with 16 participants being formally transferred to better living conditions as a result of improved behaviour compared with just three from the control group.

## Conclusion

Interviews with prisoners and staff made it clear that this increased mental well-being was connected to increased self-confidence and a sense of agency. Participants not only became much more engaged in a wide range of positive activities within the prison but began planning actively how to lead constructive and law-abiding lives on release. Prison staff commented that they were able to spend much more time helping participants to plan their resettlement and much less time addressing negative and disruptive behaviour.

The conclusion of this study is that the Three Principles approach is effective in a prison setting, resulting in improved mental well-being and behaviour. Although this is not a perfect research study (very few are, particularly in prison); nevertheless it is a well-designed study using impartial and well-respected

psychological measures and certainly supports the view that the Three Principles approach can be effective in prison settings.

The full title of the study is: Kelley, Hollows, Lambert, Savard & Pransky (2017) Teaching Health Versus Treating Illness: The Efficacy of Three Principles Correctional Counseling with People in an English Prison International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology 1–26.

[You can read it for yourself here.](#)