

# Reframing Trauma: The Transformative Power of Meaning in Life, Work, and Community

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## Abstract

Each year more than 700,000 people leave prison having undergone a traumatic experience. While research about the prevalence of post-traumatic stress is emerging, many returning citizens will exit the institution undiagnosed and untreated. Many inmates learn to mask their emotions and internalize their symptoms to navigate prison. Once released, they will return to society and struggle to find work, a sense of worth, pro-social identity, and place in their community. Work plays a crucial role in our sense of self, identity, and the role we play in society. In this constant comparative study, 20 formerly incarcerated staff and volunteers at faith-based or community re-entry agencies shared their lived experience of how they were able to reframe their traumatic experience by transforming into helpers and wounded-healers assisting other returning citizens. Through their agency community and work, participants found meaningful work and meaning in life. Participants felt the culture of these agencies offered a humanizing experience, empathy, and sense of belonging enabling them to create a new narrative as good and different people, and shedding labels. As staff and volunteers undergo self-change, the ex-offender label is shed, and a wounded-healer emerges. Understanding the perceptions of returning citizens who work in helping roles provides insight into addressing the psychological challenges for this population and implications for reentry.

**Keywords:** Trauma; Post-traumatic stress disorder; Society; Work

## 1. Introduction

Incarceration is a traumatic experience that leaves few unscathed from some form of psychological harm [1]. In addition to loss of liberty, living in fear, social ostracization, and leaving behind friends and family, incarceration erodes an individual's sense of self, identity, and self-esteem [2]. Society likewise plays a role, seeing formerly

incarcerated persons as lepers and a drain on society [3], 'damaged goods' [4], and members of a sub-class of society [5]. The totality of a person's life is defined by a crime, attaching a stigma of criminal. Prison destroys self-esteem, self-worth, and the human spirit, instilling deep shame [6]. These negative cognitions and emotions are symptoms of a traumatic stress severe enough to develop into post-traumatic stress reactions once individuals are released [7]. The incarcerated and formerly incarcerated have a greater likelihood to experience post-traumatic stress disorder [8]. When examining an Italian inmate population, Gremigni et al. [9], found post-traumatic stress disorder the most prevalent illness. Yet, many formerly incarcerated leave with the 'pains of prison,' undiagnosed for post-traumatic stress disorder having learned to mask a range of maladaptive emotions such as internal chaos, fear, stress, and disorganization during their institutional stay [7].

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that develops in individuals who have experienced shocking or traumatic event like physical abuse, disaster, sexual assault, accidents, or victimization, with symptoms starting within three months of the occurrence and lasting more than a month. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), diagnosis requires the presence of four indicators for at least one month: re-experiencing the event, one avoidance symptom, two arousal and reactivity symptoms, and at least two cognition and mood symptoms such as negative thoughts about oneself or the world.

While the trauma of incarceration places individuals at greater risk to develop some variation of PTSD, research about the prevalence within the post-incarcerated population is only now emerging [8]. Moreover, less is known about the constellation of psychosocial problems displayed by the formerly incarcerated. "A major problem with the description of detention-related psychological problems in terms of PTSD is that its characteristic diagnostic features do not fully grasp the complex nature of trauma resulting from incarceration" [10]. Researchers have posited that most people who have been incarcerated will suffer from PTSD that is either exacerbated by or developed as a result of their prison experience [8, 10]. Jaggil et al. [11], found a high prevalence of PTSD amongst Black Americans who had been incarcerated. According to Liem et al. [10], a discrete sub-type of post-traumatic stress disorder, known as post-incarceration syndrome has been identified in longer-term prisoners. This sub-type shares the symptoms of PTSD but is specific to incarcerated and released prisoners. However, little research on sub-types of PTSD has been conducted.

The perpetual status as a former inmate, ex-offender, or ex-con weigh heavily on the returning citizen who is attempting to create a new identity within society [5]. Prison dehumanizes, reducing the person to a number and branding him or her as undesirable by society. Such forces can crush self-esteem, especially for a person who may be vulnerable. According to Kashdan et al. [12], fragile self-esteem has been linked to life events rather than random physiological processes. When self-esteem and affect are unstable, it diminishes coping abilities, creates an inability to establish a stable identity, and increases risk of psychopathological outcomes. Unable to self-regulate, there is greater self-loathing, anxiety, guilt, and shame. The totality of these symptoms combined with others are interwoven into the pathogenesis of this disorder. Those afflicted by PTSD have a greater likelihood of unstable self-esteem and affect. When PTSD is undiagnosed and left untreated during incarceration, though the person may outwardly appear

well adjusted, symptoms become internalized creating rage, anxiety, and helplessness. These individuals will be less successful in navigating their post-incarceration experience [13]. Although penal institutions attempt to address the mental health issues of inmates, once released, without adequate support and access to mental health care many are left undiagnosed and/or untreated [13, 14].

For many who are unable to withstand the irreparable damage to public image, embarrassment, shame, loss of standing in the community and/or guilt, suicide becomes the solution [15]. Given the loss of identity, self-worth and value, the person's state of mind is more fragile and a much higher risk for suicide [16, 17]. Understanding how some post-incarcerated individuals have been able to successfully reframe the trauma of their prison experience through meaningful work becomes imperative when considering the rate of recidivism and the potential for suicide.

In America work plays a greater role in our lives than merely an economic benefit. While some might view work as a necessary chore, tedious, or undesirable, many find work as their sense of purpose. What people do for a living and believing it makes a difference matter. Work can offer a mission, sense of purpose, and define the value we bring to society. All of which, build our self-esteem [18]. According to Zulke et al. [19], unemployed persons may experience mental health issues such as depression, and the longer they are unemployed the greater the challenges. Who we are as individuals is often related to what we do for a living. For many, work emphasizes our identity. Without it, many will experience a sense of worthlessness [18].

When a formerly incarcerated person leaves prison, employment is typically a condition of parole or probation requiring them to take any job available [20]. For inmate or post-incarcerated, living without meaningful work and relationships is an "acutely destructive experience" [21]. While research speaks to the positive effect employment has on reducing recidivism [22-24] there is a paucity of research on how meaningful work can aid to reframe the trauma of prison. Previously incarcerated persons are often relegated to jobs few people desire and lack a deeper purpose [4]. For the formerly incarcerated, unemployment may exacerbate an already fragile state of mind. Especially if the individual is affected by PTSD, but untreated. Though returning citizens may be qualified, many are turned away because of their incarceration history. This denial continues the stigma of incarceration affixed by society and internalized by the individual [25]. Menial dead-end jobs continue to reinforce the message of worthlessness, increasing depression, anxiety, and destroys self-esteem. When one is repeatedly turned away from work because of a criminal record or relegated to dead end jobs, optimism for the future diminishes. According to Pluck and Brooker [26], hopelessness is a primary contributor to suicide.

Returning citizens consider career development vital for reentry success [20] and work serves a prominent turning point in their lives [4]. When assigned meaningful work, the individual experiences self-change and transformation [27]. When employees believe they are contributing and playing an important role within their organization, self-perception changes and recidivism declines [23]. The lens through which the formerly incarcerated see their work may reframe of the trauma of their experience, shape their journey, and contribute to better mental health and desistance [4].

## **2. Supporting Theories for Reframing Trauma**

### **2.1 Meaning in life and meaning making**

Meaning in life is a complex, multidimensional construct that weaves the individual's experiences, beliefs, interpretations, aspirations, and values [28]. As an ostracized population, formerly incarcerated struggle not only to find work but to find meaning in life post-incarceration [29]. The presence of meaning in life is synonymous with a person's well-being and with positive attributes of optimism, hope, happiness, and positive social interaction. According to Steger et al. [30] "These positive findings extend to people's positive attitudes and satisfaction, perceived meaningfulness of work, career decidedness, and viewing one's work as a meaningful and socially important calling". Meaning in life has been posited as vital to rehabilitation success [31] and post-incarceration success [32]. It can signal that a person has been able to reframe trauma, demonstrating strength and resiliency [33].

According to Laub and Sampson, exogenous factors such as stable relationships, satisfying work, or being in service roles influence desistance. Cognitive change such as redefining personal narratives does not precede the desistance process. Instead, the advent of prosocial roles launches the desistance process and cognitive transformation occurs as a bi-product later. Previously incarcerated persons who had become helpers and wounded healers by serving other returning citizens had found meaning in life through their work [34].

Finding meaning in life and subsequent traumatic events is more than an existential crisis. For some, it may represent the difference between life and death. In examining returning veterans, [35], found that those who were able to reconcile their traumatic combat experience into an overarching view and ascribe a purpose, albeit subjectively, were less likely to commit suicide or engage in dangerous behavior. The method by which those who have navigated a traumatic experience is not homogenous. In the meaning-making model, there are two aspects to meaning: global and situational. We possess a global view of the greater world around us, our role, and our values. Trauma may shatter this global view or become incorporated into it by assigning meaning to the event. Meaning-making is particularly important when it comes to trauma. "Meaning-making refers to the interaction of global meaning with a specific occurrence" [33].

### **2.2 Helper and wounded healer roles**

The archetype of the wounded healer is present in diverse cultures and has universal value in Christian, Moslem, Judaic, and African healing practices. This archetype is rooted in Greek mythology with Chiron, an immortal character who was wounded and became a revered teacher and healer. This legend was shared throughout various cultures and ultimately translated as a healer who knows the cure because he or she possesses the same affliction [36].

An emerging body of literature specifically examines the phenomenon of formerly incarcerated serving as wounded healers [34, 37-39]. Having benefited from mentorship and/or reentry support, formerly incarcerated may wish to give back by helping others [37], which can enhance the helpers' own self-esteem [40, 41], and fosters purpose [41].

In line with Riessman's [42] helper-therapy principle, helpers themselves might benefit by feeling satisfied in helping and finding meaning and prestige in the role, or in experiencing better treatment from others. Quantitative studies of [34, 38] have found that formerly incarcerated staff or volunteers who work in helper roles have found job satisfaction and meaning in life. Working to help others make positive changes may encourage more law-abiding attitudes [43].

When the post-incarcerated can reconcile their criminal past by redefining their personal narratives through a lens of helper, a self-transformation occurs enabling them to reframe their trauma experience as having an underlying purpose [38]. Through the process of helping others, the helper becomes the greater beneficiary. A positive and socially accepted identity is formed, a sense of purpose develops, and a new personal narrative is created [38]. The research on post-incarcerated wounded healers and helpers is emerging and holds promise that such work heals [38].

Understanding individual context and meaning in life and/or an ability to reframe one's personal narrative as helper reimagines one's place in the world [38]. When formerly incarcerated serve as helpers/wounded healers, aiding those likewise situated, self-esteem improves and there is greater satisfaction with work and life, and less perceived stigma [38, 44].

Reentry agencies such as faith-based and community organizations not only offer vital services for formerly incarcerated [45] but also serve as a place for employment and/or volunteer opportunities to serve as wounded healers [37, 38]. Within these environments, a transformation occurs by conveying hope, acceptance and welcome [32, 46], offering religious guidance on living a pro-social and law-abiding life [32, 46-47] and endorsing atonement for crime by offering recompense and restoring oneself as a productive community member [48]. Recognition of one's having something to offer fulfills the human need for relevance. All of which, enables individuals to come to terms with their incarceration, accepting responsibility, finding a greater meaning in the experience, and reframe the trauma as providing the ability to help other formerly incarcerated persons.

LeBel [41] found positive correlations among clients' reports of helping others by sharing stories, being role models, being mentors or being future helpers. A wounded-healer scale built from these items correlated positively with self-esteem and life satisfaction and correlated negatively with criminal attitudes and forecast of future re-arrest. Perceiving less personal stigma also correlated positively with self-esteem and life-satisfaction. LeBel et al. [38] also found that formerly incarcerated staff at prison-reentry agencies were more likely than clients to report a wounded-healer orientation and life satisfaction and were less likely to report personal stigma and a forecast of re-arrest in 3 years.

### **2.3. Study objective**

The research questions central to this study were designed to understand the lived experience of formerly incarcerated people who had undergone personal transformation. Participants shared how they became helper/wounded healers enabling them to reframe the trauma of prison, rebuild lives, and create a new personal

narrative. Individuals were asked to share their post-incarceration challenges, views about their work, and how they see themselves presently.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

Qualitative research elicits meanings and perspectives in participants' own words, allowing rich description of a phenomenon [49]. In the present study, through interviews and surveys, a purposive sample of formerly incarcerated volunteers and staff at prison-reentry agencies described their post-incarceration experience, views about their work, and role in society. Themes were then coded, quantified, and categorized to provide context for participants' views. By utilizing the constant comparative method, raw data is coded and analyzed enabling theory to emerge [50]. As a qualitative research, this method enables a portrait of the studied phenomenon to emerge, not quantitatively, but by understanding the perceptions, experiences, impact, and meaning participants assign to his or her experience [51]. Codes are generated from the data rather than to prove a preconceived theory [52].

#### **3.2 Procedure**

Nine organizations (seven faith-based, two community-based) participated in the study recruiting 20 participants who had been incarcerated and worked as either employees or volunteers. Of the 20 participants, 11 were paid staff (55%) and 9 were volunteers (45%). All participants returned a completed survey. Follow-up phone interviews of about 1 hour were conducted with 17 individuals to clarify or elaborate responses on the survey. Summaries of interviewer notes for each question were sent to participants who were instructed to make any necessary changes and confirm the summary accurately reflected the interview. After their review and modifications, all 17 interviewees confirmed accuracy. Three individuals did not participate in the interview; their data were coded based on written survey responses and one participant's additional email to elaborate.

#### **3.3 Instrumentation**

Participants completed a written survey that included demographic questions, a question about meaning in life derived from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire [53] and open-ended questions. A semi-structured interview asked the same open-ended questions. Demographic questions asked about age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and type of living arrangement (with family, alone, with someone else, or residential setting). Participants were also asked how long ago they had been released, how long they had worked for their current agency, and what role they played at the agency.

#### **3.4 Meaning in life**

A survey item about meaning in life also asked participants if they had "found meaning and not searching for it," "found meaning and still searching," "have not found meaning and am still searching for meaning," or "have not found meaning and not searching for it." This question was derived from research using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) [53], which has strong internal consistency and measures (a) search for and (b) presence of

meaning in life. The MLQ “is valid to the extent that it positively relates to a variety of measures of well-being, including life satisfaction and positive affect, and negatively relates to depression” [28]. According to Steger et al. [33], presence of meaning signals well-being, an intrinsic religiosity, altruism, and personal growth; the person has been able to reframe trauma, demonstrating strength and resiliency. When search for meaning is associated with presence, there is a deeper search of self, relationship with God or a Higher Power, and moving toward one’s greatest self in service to others [30]. Search for meaning without presence of meaning suggests rumination over past or present challenges, and reporting no presence and no search for meaning may signify distress [53].

### 3.5 Data Coding and Analysis

Each survey and subsequent transcript were read line by line, attributing a code to a word, sentence, or phrase, with codes representing a concept or idea as prescribed by the constant comparative method [52]. New codes were added as necessary until all were completed and no further codes were forthcoming. All survey/interview codes with similar characteristics were grouped into broader categories. These categories were continuously compared for similarities and differences, eventually being grouped into overarching themes.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Descriptive characteristics of participants

Demographic characteristics of the 20 previously incarcerated participants are shown in Table 1. The majority were African American (60%), male (60%), in their 30s or 40s (60%), and had been released for more than 5 years (50%). Participants held a variety of positions including: director/coordinator, counselor, mentor, pastor, instructor, paralegal, office worker, and public speaker.

Variables		Total	
		N	%
Gender	Male	12	60.00
	Female	8	40.00
Ethnicity	Black/African American	12	60.00
	White/Caucasian	6	30.00
	Multi-ethnic	2	10.00
Age	20-29	1	5.00
	30-39	5	25.00
	40-49	7	35.00
	50-59	5	25.00
	60+	2	10.00
	Married	7	35.00
	Separated	2	10.00
	Divorced	3	15.00

<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>Widow</b>	1	5.00
	<b>Live with partner</b>	1	5.00
	<b>Don't live with partner</b>	2	10.00
	<b>Single</b>	4	20.00
<b>Residential Status</b>	<b>Lives with family</b>	12	60.00
	<b>Lives with roommate</b>	1	5.00
	<b>Lives with friend</b>	1	5.00
	<b>Lives alone</b>	5	25.00
	<b>Residential program</b>	1	5.00
<b>Work Status</b>	<b>Employee</b>	11	55.00
	<b>Volunteer</b>	9	45.00
<b>Years since release</b>	<b>&lt; 1 year</b>	2	10.00
	<b>1-3 years</b>	6	30.00
	<b>4-5 years</b>	2	10.00
	<b>&gt;5 years</b>	10	50.00
<b>Length of service</b>	<b>&lt;1 year</b>	6	30.00
	<b>1-3 years</b>	7	35.00
	<b>4-5 years</b>	2	10.00
	<b>&gt;5 years</b>	5	25.00
<b>Meaning in life</b>	<b>Found meaning – not searching</b>	9	45.00
	<b>Found meaning – still searching</b>	9	45.00
	<b>No meaning – still searching</b>	1	5.00
	<b>No meaning – not searching</b>	1	5.00
<b>Role at Facility</b>	<b>Director/Coordinator</b>	6	30.00
	<b>Counselor/Mentor/Pastor</b>	6	30.00
	<b>Instructors</b>	2	10.00
	<b>Paralegals</b>	2	10.00
	<b>Office/Facilitator/Speaker</b>	4	20.00

**Table 1:** Demographic Characteristics Total Sample.

#### 4.2 Themes from surveys and interviews

Utilizing data from surveys and interviews, categories were formed. These categories were continuously compared for similarities and differences, eventually being grouped into overarching themes. From this analysis, three overarching themes emerged: recognition of trauma, the reframing process, and creating new personal narrative.

**4.2.1 Recognition of trauma:** Participants acknowledged the traumatic nature of their experience. They felt stigmatized and distressed as part of their prison and post-incarceration experience as well as witnessing the distress of others similarly situated. Stigma was internalized as part of the prison experience where people were treated as, “worthless, despicable, not trustworthy,” and that stigma and isolation continued after leaving prison. One female (African American, age 50-59) stated, “When you’re in prison, you understand society wants nothing to do with you. When you get out, that feeling continues.” Another female (White, 30-39) stated, “Society views incarceration as a stigma, a personal defect and wants to continue to separate you even after you’ve done your time.” Several specifically used words such as: “trauma,” “traumatized,” and “traumatic” to describe their experience.

Finding work was a difficult experience creating greater anxiety, depression, and self-doubt. “It’s sad, because it contributes to low self-esteem and being told you are worthless,” said a male participant (African-American, 30-39). Jobs might also be menial, low-paid, “dead-end and meaningless,” seven (35%) people said. “I realize that my conviction will be a constant barrier to job opportunities,” shared a male participant (African American, 30-39). Similarly, another male (White, 40-49) stated, “A prison record creates a wall that separates willing candidates from jobs.” Several discussed that while jobs were vital to support oneself and family, work was also important to one’s identity and role in society. “Jobs are a crucial part of our identity.” When society repeatedly turns a previously incarcerated person away, it is difficult to establish this new identity. “This is never over,” said a female (White, 30-39).

Specifically, 30% mentioned the box on job applications that asks if one has been convicted of a crime. “Once you check the box, you know the odds of getting the job are diminished no matter how much talent or experience you have. I actually saw someone toss my application into the trash,” said a female participant (African American, 40-49). From this experience, she found herself anxious, depressed, and fearful to continue her job search. Such rejection perpetuates the message of undesirability, exacerbating fragile self-esteem and affect. When the message of worthlessness is continually reinforced, it is difficult for its recipients to not internalize it. When individuals internalize negative labels, it alters their self-concept and social identity. Many expressed they lost their sense of identity and internalized being bad people. “An outcast, with nothing to offer,” “flawed,” and “broken” were used to describe themselves.

Most participants said they felt distressed after prison (80%), feeling ashamed (50%), worthless (45%), guilty (30%), sad, isolated, afraid, and angry. A female (African American, 40-49) stated “I didn’t see the talents in myself and needed for my self-esteem to heal.” “You are told and feel as though you have no value. You are less than human,” was a recurrent statement. Participants expressed the dehumanization of their experience, losing their identity, community, and sense of belonging. “You are less than human and are not a member of society.” Some noted the distress or mental illness witnessed in others (75%) and the need to address addiction (40%). “Many post-incarcerated people are too afraid, ashamed, mentally ill,” shared several participants. Likewise, a female (White, 30-39) stated, “I could easily be like my clients, emotionally and mentally flawed through addiction.”

Recognizing and acknowledging the traumatic experiences associated with their incarceration and subsequent release served as an antecedent to healing for participants. By examining their experiences and the emotional pain tied to them, participants gained a perspective that enabled them to differentiate a bad situation from being a bad person. According to participants, such acknowledgement helped ameliorate anxiety and depression while providing a basis upon which a new sense of self or identity could be formed.

**4.2.2 Reframing process:** There were distinct aspects to the reframing process: the reentry agencies where participants worked, played a significant role in their ability to reframe their experiences and build self-esteem. These agencies are established to assist returning citizens with support groups, life skills, and a variety of services aimed to enable successful transition into society. Some participants were court ordered to the agency and later became employed. Others found their agency through religious organizations. Religious change and undergoing a healing process also paved the way for a new personal narrative.

**4.2.2.1 Reentry agency community:** Most participants viewed the agency as a humane bridge between leaving jail or prison and re-entering society. Specific items mentioned about the agency included: providing humanizing experiences (90%), receiving empathy and understanding (85%), having time to acclimate to society (80%); feeling community/belonging (75%) and filling a gap in services (30%). “They need a space: a bridge between prison and getting a job. People coming from prison and making a transition may not be ready for a job.” (African American male, 30-39).

Most (80%) participants said agencies served as an interim space letting former prisoners acclimate to society as they prepared to find work. “This time allows the newly released person to be exposed to an environment of hope and support that reestablishes their dignity and builds a bond to God.” (White male, 40-49) said. Most (90%) participants said the agencies were humanizing, something lost during incarceration. “These sessions may be the first time someone has reached out to them, recognizing their humanity,” shared a female (African American 30-39). “I was accepted as a human again.” Some mentioned a religious focus. “When the person returns from prison, they need to be heard, to feel like they matter, they’re human, someone cares: they’re not nobodies, they’re a child of God,” explained a female (African American, 50-59). Likewise, a male (White, 30-39) said, “We tell them they are forgiven and make them feel human—you can’t imagine how these people feel.” Others did not note religious principles but spoke of treating people as human. “At our agency, we have taken an oath to use words that reinstate people who are released from prison to a human. We do not use *ex-inmate*, *ex-con*, *ex-offender*, and the like,” said a female (Black, 50-59). A male (African American, 30-39) said:

We recognize that it is not easy making the transition from incarceration to returning, contributing citizen. It is not. People will fail, more than once. They need a place where they know they can return to try again and will not be judged but supported and given the assistance and encouragement they need. Without this type of support, recidivism is almost a foregone conclusion.

Most (85%) participants said that agency helpers who had been incarcerated themselves better understood client issues and were credible messengers. “People here understand you, your experience, and are more supportive because many of them have had the same experience.” Most (75%) also liked the sense of community in prison-reentry agencies. “Someone is there to welcome them home, to accept them and let them know there is a community for them. They are part of a larger family and community,” said a male (African American, 40-49). Several stated, “You feel like you belong.” Similarly, another male (African American, 50-59) stated, “I like being part of a larger community that accepts those who would otherwise be shunned or turned away.” Another person valued “being part of a community of believers who witness the change, the grace and compassion.”

Participants also said agencies teach life skills (55%) or teach job skills and job development (45%). Some said they tutored clients for the G.E.D. and computer skills; helped clients write resumes, explore job openings, learn to respond to employer needs, and answer questions about incarceration; taught life skills (e.g., how to save money or buy a car) or job skills, and recruited potential employers. One person said, “At (agency), the emphasis is to learn marketable skills to find not only gainful employment but also a career.” (African American male, 30-39).

**4.2.2.2 Religion:** For some, religion brought a transformation enabling the person to reframe his or her experience as having a higher purpose. Most (75%) noted being religious or spiritual, but some also reported a religious change, especially from those who were in prison programs. Some reported a divine mission (55%), restored faith (45%) and wanting to give back and share faith (40%), restore others' faith (30%) or help (35%).

Over half (55%) of respondents felt a Higher Power has a bigger plan for them, and agency work could be part of that plan. “This work is what God has called me to do.” A female (White, 40-49) shared, “You heal when you understand that God has put each of us here for a purpose.” Nine (45%) also reported restored faith, in some cases with the help of ministry in prison or at the agency. “Coming to the Lord was the turning point. I was saved. I learned there was more to my life than prison. I could do something good when I got out,” said a male (African American 40-49). “I became involved in religious programming that helped me discover hope and create a closer relationship with God,” said another. To give back and share the message of God’s plan and love or put faith in action, eight (40%) people sought to share their faith (e.g., in Bible study), six (30%) to restore others’ faith, and seven (35%) to help: “I wanted to give back the same feelings of hope and love I received while I was incarcerated to others like me.” A female participant (African American, 60+) said:

When you are told by the people you work with that you can do anything and become the person God meant me to be, it restores my sense of humanity, purpose, and belonging to a community of good people, and I am one of them. I believe that God has a very special plan for me: my past is past, forgiven, and I am on my path in life. I can make a difference in these lives, contributing to their growth.... I’m in a perfect place to be an example that all things are possible and to share that God has a special plan for all of us.

**4.2.2.3 Healing:** Most (95%) respondents also reported healing by coming to terms with the past and moving beyond it, by learning from mistakes, taking responsibility for actions, acknowledging past trauma, looking outside

oneself, repenting harm done, or atoning. Some also reported forgiving self and others. “This experience has helped me heal. It made me confront my past.... If you’re going to heal, self-forgiveness is essential: you can’t keep punishing yourself for your past,” said a male (African American, 30-39). He added, “When your work matters, you begin to see yourself as a different person. Your self-esteem heals.” Another male (African American, 50-59) said: I have accepted responsibility for my past, but I cannot live there. I have also forgiven myself and see myself as a different person than I was 20 years ago. I have things I can contribute, I have hope, and I have compassion for others...

Seven people (35%) also said sharing stories was a “pathway to healing” bringing release of feelings, discovery, confrontation with one’s past, perspective, acceptance, and motivation. A female (White, 30-39) said: During our first week [at the agency], hearing the ladies tell their stories, I realized we all had a story, and telling the story brought healing. I had never shared my abuse or feelings with anyone. I was in an emotional prison, and telling my story brought me much needed healing to my soul.

Another learned that others had had worse experiences, which helped in getting outside himself. Some participants also said they held themselves accountable with the guidance and support of a mentor: “At the agency, we serve as mentors, where people are held accountable but guided. We become teachers, showing them how to succeed.” One agency administrator remembered having spoken openly about his crime to his mentor and being accepted unconditionally. He added:

Fifteen years after release, I still meet with mentors to keep my life in perspective. It is far more than a friendship. This person helps you with your faith, speaks candidly about what you are doing and what you are not, and is there for you when you need them most.

“If you’ve never had a healthy role model, it’s hard to live a healthy life. Without a mentor, I’m not sure I would have made it,” another person said.

**4.2.3 Creating a new personal narrative** By serving as wound-healers, discovering meaning in work, creating a new self-view, and possessing meaning in life, participants created a new personal narrative. This narrative is not limited to how participants see themselves, but rather how they believe society views them.

**4.2.3.1 Wounded-healer roles:** Feeling they had healed and “knew the way,” nine people (45%) wanted to help others heal. “Who better to help heal the wounds of these people than someone like me who understands their wounds?” “I do the work on myself, so I can be more effective to the people I serve.” Another mentioned using a “valley experience” (a period of time when one feels alone, suffering, or go through a trial) to help others see their situations differently. With healing, they experience compassion or joy, peace, love, and faith to share.

Participants also mentioned serving in four wounded-healer roles [41] mentoring others (80%), wanting a future helping career (75%), sharing stories (65%), and being a role model to others (60%); all reflecting a wounded-healer orientation. One person (White female, 30-39) who carried out several of these roles said:

I am able to share my personal experience of transformation with these women—I am living proof it can be done—and share my own story and experience of hope and strength. I am trusted with a very important job in the residency program. I know that my work is appreciated and valued. I am in a role where I can help others heal from their past, because I have healed as well. If I can make the change, anyone can.

**4.2.3.2 Meaning in work:** Most participants (90%) agreed that work had meaning. “There is meaning in work and purpose in my life” (African American male, 30-39). “I have a purpose for the first time in my life. I could have tended bar, but I wanted to make more out of my life” (White female, 30-39). Most also felt satisfied with their work (95%) and that they were helping others (95%). Common phrases included: “There are too many joys to list.” “I love my job.” “I love helping people.” As helpers, some also found meaning (n = 5), dignity (n = 5), self-esteem (n = 4), a sense of capability (n = 3) or healing (n = 2). “When you know you’re helping others, you feel good about yourself,” said one man in management (White, 40-49). “Helping others accomplish something makes me feel like I accomplished something too.” Still another added, “I can do something good and I want to.”

**4.2.3.3 New self view:** Additionally, most participants (95%) said they now viewed themselves as good people who differed from the self who served time. “Coming here has helped me to see myself as God sees me: beautiful, trustworthy, and possessing something to offer others.” “Even me, a felon, a drug addict can become an amazing person that has changed her life for the better,” said a woman (White, 40-49). “There is no better feeling than being accepted for who you are-not were,” said another. In their current role, most (95%) felt they were making a useful contribution and felt proud. “We can be trustworthy, have something of value to offer, and be recognized for our contribution.” A similar response was articulated, “I am doing good. I know that I have something to contribute, that it is making a difference, and it is appreciated.” One participant (female, White, 50-59) said:

It is so gratifying to see these women take back their lives-to take control-to regain their families, their children. It is so powerful to see them become productive members of society, to know that I am helping, serving as a mentor, and making a contribution.

Most (90%) also valued sharing hope, faith, and encouragement. “I know what that person is going through and am proof that he or she can make it to the other side.” Another said, “Hope provides that encouragement that might be the difference between the person making it or going back.” “I assist clients in developing life-enriching goals that they will not just stay out of prison or jail, but in essence, increase the quality of their lives,” shared one participant (African American male, 40-49). Most (80%) also felt hopeful about their own promotion or careers: they had been promoted one or more times (n=5), knew agency staff who were promoted (n=13) or had more job skills (n=1). One person (female, multi-ethnic, 40-49) said:

I started here as a volunteer, then on a per-diem-basis case manager and worked my way up to director. The women here know my story, they’ve seen me make it through hard work and commitment. If I can advance, they believe

they can too. As workers move up in positions, we become role models to those who are just arriving. A future is possible if you desire it and are willing to work for it.

“Knowing others like me have made it, I have no excuses,” one person said. “When you know you can move on to your career, there is advancement, it is a signal of trustworthiness,” another person (male, African American, 30-39) said. However, one volunteer found paid employment elsewhere noting low agency salaries.

A majority of participants (65%) also mentioned shedding labels. “I am seen as simply me, without a qualifier such as “ex, this or that,”” said one woman (African American, 40-49). Others shared similar sentiments: “I am not an ex, but in many respects a peer trying the best that I can with God's grace.” Another person said, “It is a recognition of the person without any qualifying labels.” A woman (Black, 50-59) who told her story publicly also said her advocacy work helped change how people saw her and other previously incarcerated people:

When people see my face and hear me speak, the stigma dissolves. It is like looking into a mirror, my face is familiar. I am no longer demonized and pushed aside as refuse. I have a better view of myself: my courage, my strength and my worth.... My children see a mother who has dealt with adversity with grace, resilience, calm, and forgiveness.

Positions and the meaning of work all play a part in shaping identity; how we see ourselves and how others see us. “Working in this agency says something about who you are, what you are about, and what you are doing” (African American male, 40-49). “I can say my community sees beyond my record and I know they have respect” (White female, 40-49). Comments such as: “I transitioned from inmate to an esteemed member of society,” “I wear professional attire-a shirt and tie and I can see I am viewed differently by society in general,” and “My position transcends the stigma of being a formerly incarcerated person. If I view myself differently, then the person I project in my community is viewed differently too” suggests the transformative power of meaningful work.

**4.2.3.4 Meaning in life:** Most (90%) participants also felt life has meaning, with nine (45%) concurrently stating they still search for meaning, suggesting a desire for stronger relationship with a Higher Power. Of two people reporting no meaning in life, one spoke of searching beyond meaning in work, and another said he valued helping but felt sad about the work, seeing the number of returning citizens. Asked how their work affected life's meaning, seven (39%) said the job helped them find a purpose in life; five (28%) that it let them help people; and six (33%) that it clarified meaning. Most participants (75%) also reported restored connections with family and/or community.

## 5. Discussion

The present qualitative study sought to understand how 20 formerly incarcerated employees or volunteers were able to reframe their prison experience to create new personal narratives by helping others re-enter society after incarceration. Most participants reported high levels of meaning and satisfaction in their work, including helping, being useful, giving hope, feeling one had become a different and good person, hope for promotion, and shedding

labels. Moreover, though once stigmatized by society, many are now perceived with status within their community. They have been transformed from an “ex” being affixed to a title, to simply being a title without a qualifier.

Overcoming post-incarceration challenges, emotional distress, and other barriers, heightened meaning in their work, faith, and hope. Participants viewed their agency as a humane bridge to society, accepting and humanizing, serving as a non-judgmental community, and allowing time for self-discovery and change. By recognizing their own wounds, they have filled wounded-healer roles, providing them with a sense of meaning and purpose. Cognitive and spiritual transformation occurred as they learned to delineate past transgressions from their current identity. For some who serve as wounded healers helping others, work is meaningful and the basis for meaningful life. Such meaning suggests psychological well-being, healthy coping strategies, and the ability to reframe negative events as lessons to assist others [33, 38].

### **5.1 Understanding trauma**

While questions about post-traumatic stress and treatment were not specifically asked, it is clear from participant narratives that serving time and its corollary post-release impact were perceived as traumatic. Moreover, since these participants work in reentry agencies they see and/or work with other returning citizens who suffer from mental illness, addiction, and other struggles that remained unaddressed. Transitioning from prison life to the outside world can present a host of challenges beyond securing necessities. Most have had to learn to navigate in a dehumanizing environment where emotions had to be masked and internalized [7, 13]. It is highly likely that many released persons leave prison with some form of trauma that has been undiagnosed and untreated [8, 13, 14].

Prison adversely impacts self-esteem, sense of identity, cognition, emotions, and human spirit [6]. Banishment serves as a strong reinforcement that one is undesirable, worthless to society, and no longer a member of their community. Moreover, once released returning citizens are viewed as second class [5], forever branded with a criminal history [3], and seen through the lens of a felony stigma [54]. Taken together, all these challenges can be psychologically imposing making it difficult to reframe trauma when one is constantly reminded of it and experiencing it on a regular basis. Reentry agencies provide the time and space for post-incarceration adjustment, allowing individuals to reacclimate in an environment where their journey is understood and not judged [34, 38]. Prison-reentry agencies that provide multiple services may function much like intensive-outpatient support programs for post-incarcerated people, which have been shown to help restore clients’ sense of humanity, dignity, self-worth, and contribution [55]. This culture combined with needed assistance and recruitment to work present an environment conducive to reframe trauma [56].

### **5.2 Reframing trauma**

When traumatic experiences occur, there is a desire to understand why it occurred within the context of the person’s global meaning of life. If individuals are unable to fit this event into their larger meaning, “...people typically attempt to change or distort their views of their world and life events to incorporate them into their global meaning” [33]. For participants in this study, the distortion was internalized by seeing themselves as bad people who were

flawed, broken and despicable. Such self-understanding was reinforced not only during their incarceration, but after their subsequent release when rejected for employment [57], feeling stigmatized [4], and feeling a lack of well-being and low self-esteem, with shame, guilt, and worthlessness [58]. The ability to make meaning from one's traumatic experience, creates greater resiliency in the person [35].

In the instant study, coming to these reentry agencies offered participants acceptance without judgement of their history, provided them a sense of community and belonging juxtaposed against a society that does not, and enabled them to discuss their experience to recognize the trauma. Heidemann [59] similarly reported that reentry agency peers and staff welcomed, encouraged, and assisted, serving as a significant predictor of life satisfaction for women in her study. Such acceptance may begin the process of rebuilding one's humanity, being seen as a person, and recognizing there is more to the individual than his/her criminal history. When returning citizens witness others like them have found work, were promoted and placed in positions of leadership, a sense for possibility builds [44].

According to Aresti et al. [27], one of the stages of building a new identity for formerly incarcerated is experiencing a defining moment. Most participants described their defining moment as healing and coming to terms with the past and moving forward and less as an act of integrating it. Other participants felt transformation began with a spiritual/religious epiphany where they viewed themselves as children of God, being part of a greater plan, and/or serving God's purpose. Reframing trauma in terms of a life purpose or God's plan can also increase faith, inner strength, and demonstrate resiliency [33]. Similarly, Kerley et al. [32] described faith-based reentry-agency clients who came to see themselves as women of God and felt greater self-worth, sense of purpose, and ability to change. Still others, felt their defining moment arrived when they experienced recognition, respect, and validation for their work with other returning persons. Promotion signaled the turning point of one's career trajectory and a statement of relevance.

For the wounded who have themselves undergone suffering, participants had become healers recognizing the wounds of others [60]. As former drug-users, reformed alcoholics, and former inmates, those they provide counseling speak from the voice of experience, empathy, and an inner understanding of their client's struggle [61]. Reporting they had healed, participants wanted to heal others by fulfilling wounded-healer roles. LeBel [41] noted that agency wounded-healers were especially likely to feel contrition about committing past harm and to identify with other prisoners. Those who find rewarding and meaningful work that helps others develop pro-social identities and self-image [44].

By acknowledging their past and subsequent experience, participants were able to separate events from their identity. Whether viewing the meaning of their experience as providence by a Higher Power or simply accepting it as part of their narrative, participants were able to reframe their experience and move forward. In either scenario, the experience of prison became a source of credibility to help others returning from prison. Helping was meaningful or work clarified life's meaning or helped them find meaning: for some, as part of God's plan [62]. The persistent theme was to accept one's past, but not allow it to define the future and in doing so, it was easier to shed labels, or

reduce personal experiences of stigma [38]. This meaning-making process enabled them to make sense of the experience, their world, and their place within it as meaningful [33].

### **5.3 Creating new personal narratives**

By serving as wounded healers, helpers, and credible messengers, participants reported finding meaning in their work and life. They believe their work was recognized by others as contributing. Without a sense of belonging to a community, believing one's work has purpose and is valued, and being perceived as good people, meaning in life is lost [30]. Riessman's [42] helper-therapy principle also suggested that helpers might find satisfaction in helping, find meaning, feel prestige in the role, and receive better treatment from others.

For those in the present study, meaning in work also encompassed reports of becoming different and good people, shedding labels, and envisioning a future. Helping and engaging in respectable work [63-64] seemed to let people see themselves as good, valued, and accepted for themselves, instead of bad, worthless, or stigmatized. Other research has also described the redemptive value of deriving lessons from the past self to become a positive self who can help others [27, 39, 62].

Beyond creating a new and better sense of self, participants expressed that others also saw them through a lens unmarred by the label 'criminal'. Holding key positions within their organizations, serving as pastors, and speaking publicly about their prison experience enabled participants to transcend the labels associated with incarceration. By becoming workers whose jobs contribute by helping others, participants earned "one's place back into the moral community" being placed in visible, leadership roles [44].

## **6. Implications for Programs**

Few would argue that most people leaving the prison system have experienced some form of trauma. Every year, about 700,000 inmates are released from prison [65], many most likely without being diagnosed and/or treated for a traumatic experience and who may have internalized symptoms to survive the experience [13]. The majority of persons leaving incarceration will either pass through halfway houses and/or probation or parole. Each of these points on the transition spectrum offer an opportunity to evaluate the individual for stress/trauma.

Reentry agencies can help individuals transition from prison and later by offering an accepting community, space to adjust, job training, treatment, support groups, mentors, and resources [45, 66]. In this study, 40% of participants heard about agencies in prison. This suggests that more reentry agencies be invited to help in prisons, become part of the pre-release process, and/or meet with probation/parole officers to recommend their supervisees to such programs. Judges could also assign supervisees to these agencies for community-service programs to enhance chances for growth and work. Without time to adjust, adequate support, and experiencing a healthy environment that fosters self-efficacy, the transition from incarceration is fraught with many challenges and recidivism more likely [56].

This study also showed that agency clients became volunteers and/or staff who had learned skills and felt hope about promotion and careers. Work as helper/wounded healer enabled participants to reframe trauma. Agencies that encourage professional development can help formerly incarcerated individuals contribute, improve their self-view, find meaning in work, and plan a path to success.

## **7. Limitations of the Study**

The study's small sample size (N=20) limits the ability to generalize from findings. Also, most participating agencies were Christian, so results may not generalize to other faith traditions or secular agencies. Further, 69% of respondents were 40 or older, which is older than most in the penal system, even if the inmate population is aging. Older individuals or those who have been out of prison longer may have more mature views, which could account for reports of having found meaning in life and the ability to reframe trauma.

Views about agencies, helping, or healing could also have been especially positive due to self-report bias or if highly motivated people were asked to participate in the study. Compared to reentry agency clients, formerly incarcerated agency staff also tend to report greater participation in helping roles, less personal stigma, and less expectation of re-arrest [38]. Given that demographic characteristics of volunteers and staff in the present study were similar to those of staff in the [38] study, the present study may generalize to reentry workers.

## **8. Directions For Future Research**

Future research should ask how former inmates are evaluated for trauma pre-release from prison, how more of them can be directed toward reentry agencies, and how time at these organizations might improve the longer-term restoration process; including career development [20], and find new meaning in life [34]. The present study also suggests constructs for use in a quantitative study (ideally longitudinal) about reframing trauma, finding meaning in work, and the way agencies can facilitate clients' regaining self-worth and finding meaning in work.

To conclude, this study showed that formerly incarcerated volunteers and staff at reentry agencies found meaningful work, positive shifts in identity, and hope for careers at these agencies. The idea of being needed, making a contribution, and being part of the community are building blocks to reframing the trauma of prison. Every year, nearly three quarters of a million people are released from prison [65], a number that informs us of a large population that may be suffering and underserved. Our American culture is less forgiving and perpetuates the stigma associated with incarceration by shunning this population. While reentry agencies offer the opportunity to work and volunteerism, this number may far exceed their capacity. Other charitable and service organizations may increase the opportunity for returning citizens to serve and rebuild. Reframing the traumatic experience of prison requires a welcoming response to returning citizens, validating they can make a difference, and help them script new narratives.

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