

Understanding impulsive behaviour

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Helping offenders to control their impulses can reduce the risk of re-offending and help with anger control, according to research from Victoria University of Wellington.

Rebecca Bell, who will be awarded her PhD in Psychology this week, looked at [impulse control](#)—or the ability to think before acting—in men serving sentences in New Zealand prisons.

"There is a tendency to think about impulse control in terms of general personality and behaviour, but we have to work backwards from that and essentially guess what is going wrong in the cognitive sense," she says.

"Are people failing to think of the consequences? Do they find it hard to stop a habitual response? In order to help in the best way that we can, we need to know what is causing impulsive behaviour."

Rebecca carried out a series of simple impulse control tests with a group of criminal [offenders](#) before and after an eight-month intensive rehabilitation programme. She tested decision-making, cognitive control, or the ability to direct thought processes to achieve goals, and motor impulse control, all of which need to function well to control impulses.

"The crux of decision-making is being able to attach emotions to previous experience, so we can draw on that emotion to help us make similar decisions in the future," explains Rebecca.

"Cognitive control is the ability to block out unhelpful thoughts and

focus on the helpful ones and motor-impulse control is about physically stopping yourself doing something habitual."

She visited prisons in Wellington, Christchurch and Hamilton, chosen because they have Special Treatment Unit Rehabilitation Programmes, and worked with high-risk offenders with extensive criminal histories.

"Theories of antisocial behaviour tell us that high-risk offenders with extensive criminal histories should perform poorly on impulse control tests. But the majority of participants performed similarly to non-offenders, with the exception of cognitive control performance."

A quarter of the sample found it much harder than non-offenders to block out distraction from unhelpful thoughts and focus on the helpful ones.

"It is important that we identify who is struggling most with cognitive control before treatment even begins as this skill is crucial for learning in treatment and for implementing new skills," she says.

Following the treatment, decision-making and [cognitive control](#) improved, with participants being more focused, attentive and less easily distracted.

Rebecca says the most promising thing about her research is that it challenges the view that offenders cannot control their impulses.

"Overall, the impulse skills are there so perhaps it's more about practice and motivation.

"Offenders need people to help show them how to call on their impulse control skills in the moment and why controlling problematic impulses is important for themselves, their families and their communities."

Provided by Victoria University

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