

IMPROVING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS VIA VIPASSANA MEDITATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN BARODA CENTRAL PRISON

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Abstract

The study measures the effect(s) of Vipassana Meditation on Interpersonal Communication Skills of male prisoners. Communication skills, listening skills and expression of emotions are weakened or damaged in a non-conducive environment such as prison. Resulting catastrophic events- misconducts, misunderstandings etc. Re-establishment requires healing via Vipassana meditation due to its niche in traditional spiritual methods. Interpersonal Communication Skill Inventory was administered on 55 male inmates before 10 days - meditation camp inside Baroda Central Jail. The results indicate significant and positive change in all the four sub-sets interpersonal communication skills after Vipassana. Vipassana should be used as criminal reformation method.

Key words: Vipassana meditation, Male Prison Inmates, Interpersonal Communication Skills

INTRODUCTION

The authors observed in Vadodara city a total population of more than 2.2 million incarcerated adults in the share a disproportionate burden of infectious diseases, psychiatric and substance use disorders, and other major medical problems. Prisons in India are overcrowded, underfunded, and house a rapidly aging population (BJS, 2013). Although treatment for certain conditions have improved in correctional settings, evidence-based medical services are needed not only to improve the care offered in prison, but to support community rehabilitation. Clinical research often gives prisoners an opportunity to receive state-of-the-art treatment or unavailable treatment options in correctional settings, while expanding the evidence base for disseminable interventions.

Prisoners live in conditions that restrict their social, healthcare, and economic freedoms. Thus, research studies that offer the possibility of access to otherwise unavailable resources may seem to exploit inmates' circumstances, particularly if prisoners would choose not to enroll if they were in the community or if resources were more readily available in prison. Yet if prisoners are not coerced to participate, and risks and benefits are balanced, it may seem equally unjust to exclude them from research, especially if studies offer help to individual participants or seek to improve the care of prisoners in general.

The authors observed that prisons in India lack in mental health services. A review of studies on prisons in India by Syed and Raghvan (2018) concluded existence of fewer studies on prisoners in India, high prevalence of mental disorders, lack of studies to identify pre-disposing factors of mental health issues in prisoners and lack of effective and holistic treatment options for mental health. The government of India prescribes various rehabilitation activities such as vocational training for inmates. Baroda central jail is one such example where vocational training like cloth-dyeing, farming, motorbike repair training etc. is executed. But, as a psychologist,

the first author believes that along with vocational skills, the interpersonal skills, effective communication skills, listening skills etc. should be integrated as well.

The authors of the study observed that most of the prisoners (irrespective of their crime nature and duration of punishment) have reported social stigma, family rejection and low socio-economic status as stressors resulting into addiction, misconducts, recidivism, sleep problems and mental health problems. This also conforms to the study on the impact of jail inmates' perceived and anticipated stigma on their functioning, which resulted into poor community adjustment (Moore, Stuewig & Tangney, 2016).

Khurana & Dhar (2000) studied the effect of vipassana meditation on quality of life, subjective well-being, and criminal propensity among inmates of Tihar jail, Delhi. The study reported significantly lower scores on criminal propensity scale and higher scores on subjective well-being scales of the male inmates who practiced vipassana meditation, and further concluded that there is a deeper level of positive change in personality and attitude as an effect of practicing vipassana meditation for a long time. Similarly, Chandiramani, Verma, and Dhar, (2000) highlighted the psychological effects of vipassana meditation by adopting standardized psychological tests on inmates residing in Tihar Jail, Delhi. The study revealed elevation in sense of hope and well-being and lowering of feelings of hopelessness and hostility. These studies conclude practice of Vipassana meditation as a reformatory measure in Indian prisons substantiated through studies conducted on effects of vipassana meditation on prisoners of Tihar Jail, Delhi.

In India, there are very less number of studies that address the mental health issues of incarcerated inmates. Due to that, in this study, we have also referred to studies on Vipassana meditation across other countries as well. Thomas and Cohen (2014) suggested a methodological approach as an appropriate measure for meditation research that includes four aspects: place, person, practice and phenomenology. Hence, the authors adopted a methodological approach to study the four aspects of an individual as a mediational approach. With the reference to these four aspects, the author has provided a detailed explanation below:

THE CULTURAL SETTING (PLACE)

India is one of the oldest countries to introduce the concept of meditation as structured set of practices and techniques (Davanger, 2008). The practice of yoga and meditation is found in the oldest records of Vedantism dated back in 1500 BCE for spiritual enlightenment. Along with Hindu practices we also find meditative practices in Buddhism and Jainism; the former refers to meditation as mental development and mental calmness; whereas the latter refers to a self-discipline, contemplation and non-violence. Other Eastern philosophies such as Taoism emphasize on becoming one with the nature is meditation; Confucianism sees it for personal growth, morality and social justice; Sufism seeks to connect with God through self-reflection and contemplation; and Judaism has its own form of meditation based on deep thought and prayer (Mead, 2019). Therefore, it is evident that eastern philosophies are enriched with the varied concepts and implications of meditation.

LIFE SITUATION OF THE MEDITATOR (PERSON)

In prison setting, the inmates have a difficult time in adjusting to the environment. Research has shown that imprisonment has negative effects on inmates' psychological and physical health like emotional withdrawal (Clements, 1979), depression (Cooper, 1974), suicidal thoughts (Flanagan, 1980) and increased hostility (Bolton, Smith, Heskin & Banister, 1976). They require psychological help to cope better with their length of incarceration, deal with separation from their loved ones and family and being accepted by their peers and society. Cohen and Tylor (1972) reported that long-term imprisonment leads to an obsessive fear of deteriorating among the inmates. These physical and psychological conditions imply that prison environment instills a belief there is no freedom to exercise rights, resulting to several emotional problems. Individuals in

prison with mental health issue have a higher risk of suicide, self-harm, violence and victimization (Fazel, Hayes, Bartellas, Clerici & Trestman, 2016). Thus, there is a significant impact of incarceration on inmates' psychological well-being such as stress, feelings of panic, denial, phobias, substance abuse, criminal activity, delusions, depression and dissatisfaction of life. In such a condition, the inmates require psychological aid just as others do.

VIPASSANA MEDITATION (PRACTICE)

Vipassana meditation is one of the oldest methods for attaining balance and peace of mind. In Pali language, Vipassana means insight or seeing things as they are in reality. It is one of the ancient practices of meditation in India, propagated by Gautama Buddha almost 2500 years ago. Vipassana was taught as a universal remedy for pervasive illnesses (Pradhan, Kumar & Singh, 2016). It is a way of transforming oneself by witnessing one's thoughts, feelings and actions, which ultimately results in complete awareness and mental peace. As individuals practice Vipassana they improve themselves as human beings irrespective of their socio-economic conditions and religious beliefs (Goenka, 1991).

If people in authoritative positions in Indian society can persuade people to practice Vipassana, then in addition to bringing harmony and well-being to Indian society it can help spread the benefits to other countries across the globe as well (Hetherington, 2003). Parihar (2004) documented that practicing Vipassana helped government officials to have a more positive outlook professionally as well as personally. In addition, Vipassana and mindfulness increases managerial effectiveness at personal and professional level (Kumar, 2012). Banerjee (2012) confirms that when employees practice Vipassana, they tend to be more focused, composed and better off than other employees. Bhatnagar (2014) reported that it reduces anxiety in employees and increases productivity. Shiera and Graham (2014) documented that it positively influences Subjective Well-Being (SWB). Marques and Satinder (2009) believe that Vipassana can transform wellbeing at the work place and thereby productivity.

WHY VIPASSANA?

Vipassana Meditation is a technique to enhance the mind-body balance by increased self-awareness. According to Hart (1987), Vipassana is an experience of inner peace within oneself that leads to non-delusion, better self-control and greater clarity of thought. Vipassana is an age-old meditative method for self-development (Hart, 1987), and psychological well-being (Pradhan & Ajitkumar, 2017). The meditation consists of three sub-units:

Anapanasati - Mindfulness of breathing

Vipassana - Insight meditation

Metta Bhavana - Universal love and compassion

In Vipassana, there is a word "anekasahaasa" that means, "this moment will pass." It spreads love and compassion to the outer world and cultivates deeper insight. According to the authors, Vipassana has many benefits that are listed under:

It helps the mind to be able to sacrifice better, worry less about fatigue and work happily.

It helps to understand things as they really are.

It makes us want to learn new things rather than being bored.

It allows one to explain the truth much better and in great precision than before.

It allows recollecting memory easily.

It helps understanding the fundamentals of reality better.

It makes people easy to admonish rather than being arrogant.

It brings people to know themselves and knowing how to maintain themselves on every occasion.
It causes people to reunite and live in harmony and peace.
It purifies one's thoughts, speech, and deeds and makes them calm.
It allows one to escape sorrow, lamentation and despair of all kinds.
It gives one the wisdom to overcome physical and mental suffering.
It enables people to walk on the right path.
It makes them completely mindful in daily activities like eating, drinking, bathing etc.
It makes people well-behaved, virtuous, cultured and civil.
It improves concentration and attention.
According to the authors, Vipassana also has benefits in prison setting:
It gives the mind stronger motivation, effort, patience and contentment.
It cultivates morality, concentration and wisdom.
It makes people love one another, live in harmony, and be comfortable and friendly with each other.
It makes people compassionate toward one another, caring, sympathetic, rejoicing and appreciative of others' work.
It stops people from oppressing each other, competing with each other and not being envious or jealous of each other.
It sets one firmly in gratitude and appreciation, making one grateful and appreciative.
Those who practice Vipassana are easily governed, not making troubles for their peers or society at large.
It causes greed, anger, delusion and conceit to decrease.
It helps people to fix their bad attitude, and makes them more hopeful, optimistic and positive toward life.

STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS/AWARENESS (PHENOMENOLOGY)

Meditation helps one to be aware of themselves. Awareness means consciousness of one's existence, here and now. It includes both, knowing and being (Joyce & Sills, 2010). It simply means that the person "knows" that he is doing something as well as "being" in the moment-to-moment experience of his actions. Vipassana helps one to be aware of his own actions by "paying attention" to a particular aspect of functioning such as breathing, eating etc. Once the individual reflects to his own thoughts and feelings by paying attention to them, they might bring something back to awareness that was missing or ignored by them. This process helps staying in here-and-now, sharpening and expanding awareness of ongoing experience, and directing or focusing awareness to what was avoided before. Because of such practice, individuals gain better understanding of their actions in different situations (Goenka, 1974).

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Interpersonal communication is a two-way process by which people exchange information through verbal and non-verbal means. Interpersonal communication skills are important aspect in healthy social functioning of an individual. There are four main domains under interpersonal communication skills: listening skills, clear communication, receiving feedback and criticisms, and handling emotional interactions. Noted below the studies indicating the benefits of meditative practice on interpersonal communication skills. For instance, Tamwatin (2012) reported that practicing meditation helps to gradually cultivate mindful awareness and concentration, resulting in a direct effect of enhancing emotional intelligence and self-perception of leadership skills. Furthermore, he concluded that insight competence resulting from meditation, if utilized in an appropriate way, can be a potential tool for enhancing the skills of business leaders. Another study by Cayoun,

Shires and Francis (2018) suggests that developing mindful communication skills enables the client to learn that the message must be louder than the messenger, to face interpersonal difficulties calmly, and address them with clear comprehension and assertive communication. According to Bhatnagar (2014) Interpersonal communication skills also help in stress management and coping with the help of Vipassana meditation.

METHODOLOGY

Rationale

The aim is to study the change in Interpersonal Communication Skills of inmates in Baroda Central Jail after practicing Vipassana meditation. The current study measures the effect of Vipassana meditation on male prison inmates. Communications plays a crucial role in formation of relations of the inmates. To investigate the impact of practicing Vipassana meditation i.e. Anapanasati, Vipassana and Metta Bhavanaan inventory was introduced to study differences in sending clear messages, listening, getting and giving feedback and handling emotional interactions as skills of interpersonal communication in a prison setting.

Hypothesis

There will be significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on Sending Clear Messages.

There will be significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on Listening Skills.

There will be significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on Giving and Getting Feedback.

There will be significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on Handling Emotional Interactions.

There will be significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on overall Interpersonal Communication Skills Inventory.

Tools

The Interpersonal Communication Skills Inventory (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1974) consists of 40 items divided equally (i.e. 10 items each) into 4 subsets. The scale has 3-point rating i.e. seldom to usually.

Sample

The populations selected for study were the male inmates from Baroda Central Jail. By purposive sampling method 55 inmates between the ages of 18-65 years were selected as participants. Eighteen inmates could not participate in the post-test due to early release; hence post-test data remains 37 in number.

Research Design

A within group experimental design was used. The participants were given an orientation about the scale and their responses on it were recorded before subjecting them to vipassana meditation. The responses of participants on Interpersonal communication skills were recorded before and after the vipassana meditation camp organized in Baroda Central Jail premises.

Independent Variable

Vipassana Meditation

Dependent Variable

Interpersonal Communication Skills

Controls

The Vipassana meditation was organized in a 'Shibir' or secluded set-up in the Baroda Central Jail. As a part of the meditation, it is required that the participants follow a schedule/ tailored lifestyle. The lifestyle changes are taken as controls for the study. The prisoners only interacted with the teachers if necessary and any other interaction among the prisoners. A separate living area within the Baroda Central Jail was arranged for the duration of the intervention. All the prisoners were served meals thrice a day at fixed time.

Procedure

The authorities of Baroda Central Jail were approached for permissions to access the building unit for recording Interpersonal Communication Skills data, setting up an area of Vipassana meditation and produce a

research paper from the study. The study was divided into two phases to measure the effect of Vipassana meditation. The first phase includes rapport building with the participants orientations about the study and data collection as pre-test data via Interpersonal Communication skills inventory. Each participant was individually attended by Vipassana practioner for orientation and data collection. After pre -administration of Interpersonal Communication Skills Scale the 55 participants started the Vipassana Shibir of 10 days. A professional Vipassana teacher was provided to the 55 participants to whom the participants could convey physical or mental discomfort (if any) experienced during the shibir. During the first three days, the inmates reported minor physical and mental difficulties of adjustment such as body pain, headache and difficulty in concentrating. Between day three and nine, four participants discontinued due to emotional distress. On some days, 12 participants were granted the early release. After the end of shibir, two participants refused to provide their data in brief, and the authors witnessed a drop out of 18 participants. Hence, the post-test data contains 37 data sets. This usable data from 37 participants was subjected to paired t-test using JASP software.

RESULTS

The pre-test and post-test analysis on Interpersonal Communication Skills is indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 Pre-test and Post-test mean difference

ICSI		N	M	MD	t	p
Total Score	Pre-test	37	63.919	-11.000	-4.909	<.001
	Post-test		74.919			
Sending Clear Messages	Pre-test	37	14.757	-2.568	-3.055	0.002
	Post-test		17.324			
Listening Skills	Pre-test	37	16.622	-2.865	-3.199	0.001
	Post-test		19.484			
Handling Emotional Interactions	Pre-test	37	17.081	-3.297	-3.018	0.002
	Post-test		20.378			
Giving & Getting Feedback	Pre-test	37	15.459	-2.270	-2.499	0.009
	Post-test		17.730			

The first hypothesis states a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on Sending Clear Messages. Table 1 Row 2 indicates a significant difference between pre test (M = 14.75, SD = 4.09), and post test data (M = 17.32, SD = 4.40), $t(36) = 3.055, p = .002$

The second hypothesis states a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on Listening skills. Table 1 Row 3 indicate a significant difference between pre test (M = 16.62, SD = 5.58), and post test data (M = 19.48, SD = 4.53), $t(36) = -3.199, p = .001$.

The third hypothesis states a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on giving and getting feedback. Table 1 Row 5 indicates a significant difference between pre test (M = 15.45, SD = 4.94), and post-test data (M = 17.73, SD = 4.06), $t(36) = -2.499, p = .009$.

The fourth hypothesis states a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on handling emotional interactions. Table 1 Row 4 indicates a significant difference between pre test (M = 17.08, SD = 6.03), and post test data (M = 20.37, SD = 4.54), $t(36) = -3.018, p = .002$.

The fifth hypothesis states a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores on overall Interpersonal Communication Skills Inventory. Table 1 Row 1 indicates a significant difference between pre

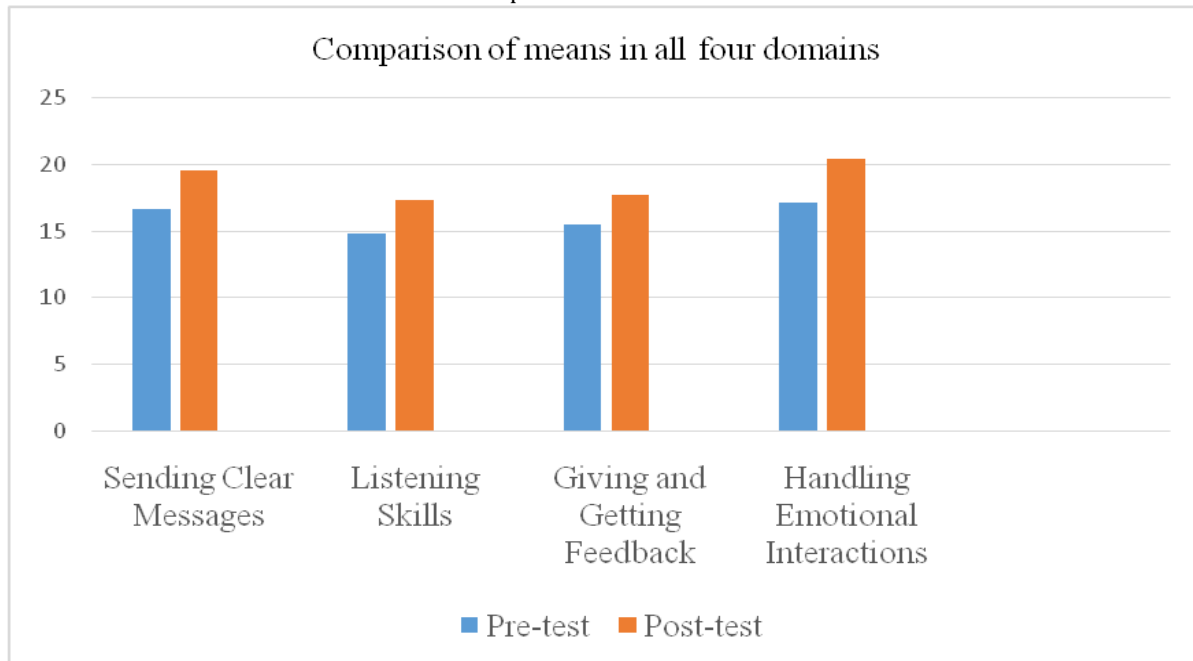
test ($M = 63.91, SD = 14.10$) and post test data ($M = 74.91, SD = 12.68$), $t(36) = -4.909, p = .001$. In Table 2 the assumption check shows that the data is not significant and hence the data is normally distributed.

Table 2 Normality analysis of data

Test of Normality (Shapiro-Wilk)

		W	p
Pre-test	- Post-test	0.983	0.836

Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of comparison between the scores obtained before and after Vipassana meditation.



DISCUSSION

The broad objectives of the study were to assess the effect of vipassana meditation on Interpersonal Communication Skills of male inmates in the Baroda Central Jail. For this purpose, Interpersonal Communication Inventory (ICSI) was used. The four subsets of ICSI are : sending clear messages, listening skills, giving and getting feedback, and handling emotional interactions.

For a prisoner, prison environment plays a significant role in mental health and intense feelings of anger, frustration and anxiety (Woodcock & Ormsby, 2003). Hence, it is important for prisoners to learn about how to manage their mental health. Table 1 Row 1 shows high scores in ICSI indicating that positive environment among the inmates enhances their interpersonal communication skills including assertiveness, emotional interactions, listening skills, handling criticisms and feedbacks and clear communication. These aspects indicate development of an individual on personal and psychological domains of life i.e. development of awareness and understanding of self and growth in social relationships, hence Vipassana was used as an intervention in current study.

The participants were subjected to a 10-day Vipassana meditation program to improve their interpersonal communication. The first hypothesis assumed significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores on Sending Clear Messages. The results of the post-test clearly indicate a significant increase in the scores of sending clear messages. This implies Vipassana meditation helped the inmates to improve their communication via thoughts, feelings and emotions clearly to others. Sending clear messages result into integrated self-concept i.e. perceiving self from other's perspective. Poor self-concept generates feeling of insecurity whereas an appropriate view of self is seen as imperative for healthy and satisfying interaction with

others. To support this objective finding, a set of qualitative questions were asked to the inmates. Prior to Vipassana meditation, inmates reported an unhealthy communication and poor self-concept. Ferullo (1963) found that better speakers tended to have better self-regard whereas poor speakers tended to perceive themselves as more dependent individuals and lack in coping with daily life stress. The Vipassana facilitator communicated drastic change in four of the 37 participants on their self-perception and effective communication after 10 days. Like Ferullo, Tamwatin (2012) found cultivation of mindful awareness and concentration as a result of meditation along with enhanced self-perception. Additionally, the 10-day period provided the participants an opportunity to introspect their thoughts each moment, thereby increasing their patience and developing a positive attitude towards others. Thus, Vipassana meditation improves Sending Clear Messages in effective communication and proves first hypothesis for current study

The second hypothesis assumed that there will be significant difference between pre-test and post-test of the subjects' listening skills. Nichols and Stevens (1957) described fake attention as a common characteristic of poor listeners. Pre-test results from current study indicate poor listening skills of jail inmates. Listening skills means "listening with an inner ear" which is a sign of a good listener who not only listens to words but also hidden meanings behind them. Reik (1964) said that a listener's third ear hears what is said between sentences and without sentences, here what is expressed noiselessly, and it grasps what other people think and feel. The results of the post-test indicate that there is a significant increase in scores of pre-test over post-test on subset Listening Skills. The post-test results indicate an alignment with the findings of Cayoun, Shires and Francis' (2018). Effective listening skills require attention and patience. Through the meditation process inmates' learned to increase their focus by getting rid of negative thoughts and develop a sense of calm, peace through meditation practices such as Anapansti or mindful breathing. Anapansti is the practice of watching one's own breathing. This activity helps the inmates to gain concentration and control of flow of thoughts. Therefore, second hypothesis i.e. Vipassana meditation improves listening skills of the inmates is accepted.

Four items of original scale of Interpersonal Communication measure difficulties in coping with angry feelings as a frequent cause of communication breakdowns (Bienvenu, 1971). Maloney (1964) says that anger is often a repressed emotion which is manifested in various ways during social interaction. Deviant behavior, a manifestation of anger as a repressed emotion was commonly observed in prisoners by current authors. Such as being disrespectful towards jail authorities, initiating brawls often, etc. Vipassana meditation helps surfacing repressed emotions and making individuals aware of their behavior. Also, the practice of Metta Bhavana or universal love and compassion helps the inmates in generating positive emotions towards self and others. This practice further helps inmates' remain calm and aware to the reality, essential for handling emotional interactions in a sensitive environment. The results of current study in Table 4 indicates significantly high scores on post-test compared to pre-test for subset Handling Emotional Interactions. Thus, fourth hypothesis is accepted.

The third subset of ICSI measures Giving and Receiving Feedback. Feedback contributes in developing confidence and professional competency (Hardavella, Aamli-Gagnat, Saad, Rousalova & Sreter, 2017). Feedback helps to achieve desired goals and aspirations of individual with respect to their confidence, performance and competency. Giving and Receiving Feedback helps to develop performance and increases the potential to grow. Seeking growth reflects awareness of self and understanding of possessed strengths and weaknesses. This awareness and understanding is facilitated by insight meditation in vipassana meditation. Furthermore, receiving feedback requires the inmates' to develop a positive approach towards remarks or correctional practices. Meditation helps individual to gain acceptance of reality and focus on the positive aspects. Giving and Receiving Feedback suggests open-mindedness and helps in self-reflection. It also makes an individual a good listener, proactive, and embraces a feedback as a learning opportunity. Therefore, constructive feedback is one of the important aspects of interpersonal communication skill. The results from

Table 5 indicate that the inmates' scores on this subset of ICSI have a significant increase in post-test compares to the pre-test scores. Therefore, third hypothesis is accepted.

The overall scores of post-test shows an increase and significance compared to the pre-test scores;. Thus, fifth hypothesis is accepted i.e. Vipassana meditation is an essential path to discover self, becoming conscious of all the actions and emotions, and helps to improve interpersonal relations.

CONCLUSION

The results indicate a significant positive effect of Vipassana meditation on interpersonal communication skills of male inmates. Use of Interpersonal Communication Inventory (ICSI) for counseling interview is recommended for understanding behaviour in deviant population. Vipassana meditation is an excellent way to explore self and nurture interpersonal communication skills; hence it should be practiced regularly in every prison setup.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest:

Funding: This study was not funded.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval obtained: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Institutional ethics committee of The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent: A written consent was obtained from the participants before data collection.

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