

Freedom Philosophy – Role of Assistant Tutor

The assistant tutor role is a wee bit like being a teaching assistant. The tutor leads the session, and the assistant helps things run smoothly. We do a lot of brain storming activities with the prisoners. This includes writing up ideas on the whiteboard, helping facilitate small group discussions, mindfulness exercises, and anything that helps keep the prison students on track and engaged. Even though each session is structured, sometimes you just go with the flow, so an adaptive frame of mind is ideal!

It's also helpful for the tutor to have a second pair of eyes to observe the dynamics in the group. The mood and energy levels can change week to week and even during the session, so it's good to just have someone keep an eye out to help everything run smoothly and make sure everyone gets an opportunity to contribute. Generally, we do not have a guard in the room with us. It is just the tutor, assistant(s), and the attendees from the prison (groups about 5-12 depending on the unit). However, we have radios and alarms, and the guards watch us on CCTV from the guard room. I have been in the prison many times and to date, and never felt unsafe.

I started as an assistant myself in Term 1 2021 and thoroughly enjoy it. I go into the Drug Treatment Units, youth wing, and some of the lower security units. Each group is different and has its own dynamics, but my overall experience is the attendees are receptive, interested, and willing to learn. Young women assistants typically do receive more attention in the men's prisons. It's important to be professional and have clear boundaries to nip any unwanted attention in the bud. Usually, a gentle deflection does the trick, and they get the message, but I think it's only fair to warn people.

I really enjoy assisting - I've learned a lot from the men in prison. They say things that are heart-breaking, deeply profound, and at times hilarious. They will certainly take you on an emotional journey but it's really satisfying, and the men often say they are deeply humbled by members of the community making time to come in and see them.

There is no formal training for assistants as such but Rob (who started the program in 2018) will meet with any new volunteers to give them a good overview of the program, the content, what to do, and what to expect. You will also need to complete background checks and Corrections Induction (2hr session at the prison).

The first couple of times you go into the prison is really an opportunity to observe and engage as much as you feel comfortable doing. The tutors are supportive and appreciative of anyone willing to help. They will do their best to make your time enjoyable and worthwhile. We meet about an hour before the morning/afternoon sessions at the cafe (Doing Thyme) to run through what the day's session involves, how the session will be run and which bits you might like to lead (if any).

If you're still interested any have more questions, email Rob – Chairman, or Jane – Secretary, at freedomphilosophynz@gmail.com and they will get the ball rolling.