



FIRST PERSON

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# 'I help white-collar criminals get ready for jail'

Steve Dagworthy as told to Harriet Agnew

Steve Dagworthy served three years in prison for financial crime and then co-founded a company called Prison Consultants



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Steve Dagworthy served three years in prison for financial crime: 'It's sink or swim,' he says

**I**f you went on an expedition to the jungle, you'd want to know what to eat, what's going to kill you and how to survive. It's exactly the same with prison. So I help people who have no knowledge of prison and advise them how to cope and survive. I grew up in Chelmsford and I used to be a finance broker in the City who put together funding packages for businesses. But I ended up in jail for fraud — for what was described in court

as a £3m Ponzi scheme. I served half of a six-year jail sentence.

When I arrived in prison, I couldn't believe what I'd set foot into. It's overpowering. It was a bit like the scene from *Total Recall*, with Arnold Schwarzenegger, when he lands on Mars. The main mistake people make — especially if they've been quite high-powered — is thinking they are customers going into a bad hotel and they'll be looked after. You're not. You're becoming citizens in a whole new world where everyone starts at the bottom. It's sink or swim.

It's important that you present yourself well. Take clothes that will stand a vigorous wash time and time again, so you'll always look smart. Stay away from football team shirts because that could cause a spark. If you let your hair or beard grow, or just generally look like you're not coping, that will go on your file and can halt your progression.

Getting up in the morning, making your bed, going to the gym, taking part: this all shows that you are accepting that you're there and you're going to make the best of it.

There is a high level of violence in prison. In the evenings, when people were allowed out of their cells to roam around, at times it became so tense I would just ask the officers to lock me back into my cell. I've seen people be severely beaten, have their throat slashed, or stabbed with makeshift weapons.

I was once in a prison with a serial killer. He was an extremely ordinary-looking bloke but if he walked through the wing, people just parted and gave him the space. You can spot them. We tell people to be quietly assertive. Don't be aloof but at the same time don't be in a hurry to make friends. Because it's not about making friends — it's about not making enemies.

One day, someone gave me a copy of *The Times*. There was an article by an American called Herbert Hoelter, who set up the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, the

original prison consultancy firm, in the 1970s; he helped Bernard Madoff prepare for prison. It described a whole industry in preparing people, which I thought was a great idea.

So I co-founded a company called Prison Consultants. The minimum I need to spend with someone who is going to prison is two hours. We assist the families as much as the client — it's like sending a young child to boarding school. If you can describe everything that is going to happen, then an element of worry goes. And if you can keep family units together, it should translate into a reduction in reoffending rates.

A guy came to see me who had been in a car accident in which a passenger in the other vehicle had died. He was told he faced a custodial sentence. I spent hours getting him ready but, on the day, he wasn't sent to jail. What was heartwarming was a letter from his solicitor commenting on how calm he was at the prospect.

Going to prison was the best thing that could have happened to me. It gave me a chance to re-evaluate my life and have a second go. I'm proud of the company because it was born out of complete adversity. I have never cried so much as when I went to prison — but I laughed a lot as well. Everyone I've met who has been in financial crime was trying to provide, to give their family everything. When you go to prison and lose all that, you realise the people you were providing for didn't want that anyway. They just wanted you, which is free. So what was the point?

*Photograph: Charlie Bibby*