

# Mindfulness: A Report on the Benefits of Meditation and Guided Breathing for Subjects with Addiction Disorders, according to the SPIC Protocol

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This article is the result of the internship work carried out by the authors, promoted by the Forensic Science Academy institution and held at the host center of the Emmanuel Community in Ginosa (TA), in collaboration with Dr. Domenico Piccininno and Dr. Serena Paladini, who are currently involved in an experimental study on the use of Mindfulness techniques within the various Emmanuel Community locations, for people with substance-related and addictive disorders (DSM).

**Materials and Methods:** we used the 3 test: Anamnestic questionnaire (QA2CPICB, A new experimental test, created by dr. Piccininno Domenico, to assess whether childhood traumatic events, family economic poverty, critical work in adulthood and lack of stable and lasting affective-emotional support can represent the contributing causes of the risk of recidivism in criminal conduct and drug addiction), criminological questionnaire, DERS (Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale), MAAS (Mindful Attention Awareness Scale) The aim of the internship was to get acquainted with statistical data analysis and the comparison between the various clinical and criminological tests given to users pre- and post-treatment. The aim of this work is also to explore the correlation between the administered tests and the telematic interviews, by highlighting then the key topics that came out during the internship, such as the family role, addiction, bonds with others and the psychophysical well-being.

**Results:** In this study, the sample under examination consists of 9 participants, male (M), with an average age of 32 years, we have noticed that the cycle of 12 Mindfulness sessions with a support of meetings and criminological interviews to accompany them towards the awareness of the wrong committed, has produced average positive effects.

**Conclusions:** the social and urban component is relevant in the maintenance of antisocial conduct that feeds the state of drug addiction and recidivism. The majority of the sample examined, which merged into a subsequent larger one, has expressed the desire and hope to continue the meditative practice even outside the community, because the teachings of this research project were assimilated, and the awareness process was fulfilled. Some of them feel to have gained more self-confidence and the ability to regulate their emotions, marking the achievement of one of this project objectives. Emotional re-education therefore works as a concrete practice of restorative justice, thanks to the protocol SPIC.

**Keywords:** The Positive Effect of Mindfulness, Restorative Justice, Drug Addict Rehab, SPIC Protocol

**Abbreviations:** DERS: Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale; MAAS: Mindful Attention Awareness Scale; ACT: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy; GCP: Good Clinical Practice

## Key Points

The development of emotional awareness is crucial for personal, professional, and social growth.

Mindfulness with 12 sessions of the SPIC protocol is a valid program for the development and management of emotions on drug users in an alternative measure to detention.

Projects like this are the future of restorative justice and a new model that can be followed and applied to various areas of the judicial system, which very often doesn't offer the right possibility of one's life recovery. The 100% of the sample believes that restorative justice is much more effective than punitive justice and consider the crime as a "mistake".

## Introduction

In parallel with an experimental study done by Dr. D Piccininno and Dr. S Paladini, a group of students of the Master in Neurocriminology & Forensic Sciences have been involved in some hours of practice in collaboration with the above-named specialists. The project takes shape from a study on the positive influence produced by Meditation and Mindfulness Practices on crime and deviance. The scientific research has in fact shown that various kinds of meditative practices have somewhat led to a reduction of recurrence, deviance and change in behavior and to a decrease in aggression and impulsivity [1], by encouraging reflective practice among the participants and a better impulse control [2].

The protocol, conceived and proposed by Dr. Domenico Piccininno and Dr. M.R. Spinelli, is aimed to be versatile and applicable to different sectors, from education to penitentiary institutions and ultimately to therapeutic and educational communities. The purpose is also to confirm the validity of meditative practices in reducing violent and aggressive behaviors, but also in inspiring psychophysical well-being of the person through greater self-awareness. Despite the program objectives already widespread have been more oriented to criminal and deviant behaviors, there have also been numerous positive effects in the socio- relational, didactic, interpersonal and emotional sphere. As the present paper intends to show through direct evidence, the participants discovered many positive effects in their personal and relational sphere, witnessing a better recovery of their own individuality.

## What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be defined as a state of awareness free of judgment on what is happening at a present moment or on thoughts, senses and personal emotions [3]. Mindfulness is the ability to observe thoughts that constantly weave their way across our mind as well as physical sensations and feelings that evolve and change. The main objective is to consciously accept this status of the being without getting too involved before you get lost. Achieving acceptance means then not to judge your own thoughts, regardless of their nuances, by simply recognizing them in their nature, positive or negative that may be. Mindfulness practices turned out to be particularly useful in reducing depressive symptoms and rumination, and in improving concentration and Interpersonal relations. After mindfulness practices, it can be observed a better ability to adapt to stressful situations and to manage emotions and mood swings. It is for all these reasons that, based on the scientific research, the application of mindfulness to a population with high-risk in recidivism and with a criminal record related to a complexity of socio-psycho environmental factors can be crucial in improving the participants quality of life. Several studies have found a correlation between mindfulness and deviant behaviors; in particular, we bring our attention to a recent study [4] conducted on a group of prisoners. The study

demonstrates that the Mindfulness practice has a positive effect on impulsivity reduction and on self-compassion enhancement [4].

## Objectives and Structure of the Mindfulness Project

The overall aim of the project is the development of the scientific criminological research in Italy, as it is a growing and expanding sector and we hope that more experimental studies can be developed in the future, that can involve a wider sample of participants so as to further validate the usefulness of meditative practices and their application for rehabilitation purposes. The SPIC protocol is thought to be applied to different social areas: from recovery communities and resocialization to anti-violence centers, penitentiaries and schools as it aims to validate in Italy the importance of the criminological research, specialized in neuroscience applied to crime and deviance, in this sense. The project includes the training of a team of professionals such as social workers, psychologists, mindfulness instructors, expertized criminologists and an office-data entry whose collaboration has a duration between 6 and 12 months, and structured in three steps:

### 1<sup>st</sup> phase:

- i. Collection of the participants written consents on a voluntary basis
- ii. Initial detailed presentation of the project and of the protocol by the FSA Scientific Director

### 2<sup>nd</sup> phase:

- i. Administration of questionnaires:
- ii. (Anamnestic questionnaire (QA2CPICB))
- iii. Criminological questionnaire
- iv. DERS (Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale)
- v. KIMS (Kentucky Inventory Mindfulness Skills)
- vi. MAAS (Mindful Attention Awareness Scale)

### 3<sup>rd</sup> phase:

- i. 12 meetings of practice sessions of Mindfulness techniques associated with the ACT therapy
- ii. 1/2 weekly meetings of variable duration (between 30 and 80 minutes)

### 4<sup>th</sup> phase:

- i. Post-treatment administration of questionnaires.

The MBSR technique (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) provides a central focus on breathing and chest movements during the breathing process that is first guided by the expert to increase awareness in the respiratory activity and then the same awareness can be extended on thoughts, emotions and reality over time. The analysis of the collected data and the comparison

between the pre and post treatment is carried out with statistical inferential analysis, to obtain the research qualitative data and to observe the effectiveness of the protocol application. Specific objectives include the ability to manage intrusive and negative thoughts, by preventing them to come out or by learning to deal with them, trying to control instinctual and aggressive responses, trying to observe the present moment and every situation in a detached manner and by also assuming different points of view to evaluate different possibilities of approach and problem-solving. A further objective is the acquisition of the stress-management ability by practicing breathing exercises in autonomy; in fact, the participants are encouraged to practice daily exercises of meditation and breathing. It is worth to put our attention also to the empathic skills, as a greater awareness of our own emotions and their consequent acceptance, can lead the individual to better cope both resocialization and social fundamental relationships, in line with the restorative justice.

### Materials and Methods

The anamnestic questionnaire (QA2CPICB) includes 40 closed and opened questions to investigate the psychosociocultural factors of the individual, the level of criminogenesis and criminodynamics. In particular, the questions focus on the presence of other eventual cases of addiction within the family, the urban area where the subject under examination lives, the type of education received and his/her interpersonal relationships, with the aim of understanding the correlations between these risk factors and the development of deviant conduct. The criminological questionnaire, consisting of 11 questions administered pre and post activity, is meant to investigate the awareness level on topics like the implementation of restorative justice and in relation to some factors that could be relevant to the criminogenesis and criminodynamics assessment (e.g., the perspective of socio-environmental growth, the offence understanding, the values in which the participant believes, the idea of well-being and friendship etc.).

The DERS (Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale) is a self-report questionnaire with 36 items designed for the evaluation of emotional dysregulation. The stairs of DERS analyze the non-acceptance of emotional answers, the difficulties in engaging in goal-oriented behaviors, difficulties in impulse control, lack of relational awareness, limited access to emotional regulation strategies and lack of emotional clarity. The KIMS (Kentucky Inventory Mindfulness Skills) is a multidimensional questionnaire consisting of 39 items that measure the mindfulness dimensions on four scales such as: observation, description, act with awareness and accepting without judgment [5]. The MAAS (Mindful Attention Awareness Scale) is a test consisting of 15 items evaluated on a likert scale of 6 points, built to evaluate the mindfulness key feature in relation to the ability of "watching out" also thanks to the subject sensitivity and to the awareness of the present moment [6].

### The Internship

The initial educational objective of the internship was to familiarize with the SPIC protocol, conceived by Dr. D. PICCININNO and Dr. M.R. SPINELLI and with experimental questionnaires such as: Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale, Kentucky Inventory Mindfulness Skills (Italian version), Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale, a criminological experimental test and an anamnestic test specifically designed by Dr. D. PICCININNO. MBSR Mindfulness techniques (psychosomatics) associated with the ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) were also administered. Another educational objective of the internship was the familiarization with the scientific and experimental research on one of the research project samples and the theoretical learning of Mindfulness techniques, which are not still particularly widespread and integrated into the various rehabilitation programs active in centers specialized in the treatment of addictions of various kinds.

The work done by the trainees was mainly related to data analysis and completion of questionnaires administered to two groups of participants. The trainees took care of the test data loading and the comparison between pre and post treatment, giving rise to an open dialogue that allowed everyone to take part according to their knowledge and approaches to criminology, also leading to new research insights. The most appealing aspect was the possibility of having a direct dialogue with some of the research participants and community residents. This has favored both the familiarization with the participants and the possibility to virtually observe their non-verbal language and microfacial expressions, which allowed us to evaluate the consistency and honesty of their words and stories, as well as their openness towards us. The experience turned out to be very satisfactory since it encouraged teamwork, the constructive dialogue between professionals from various sectors and it finally guaranteed the learning of both research scientific methods and mindfulness techniques which deserve more attention in future research because (A/N) they could represent a possible and positive manifesto of restorative justice and a different way of conceiving the sanctioning treatment in criminology.

### Setting and Participants: Group Description

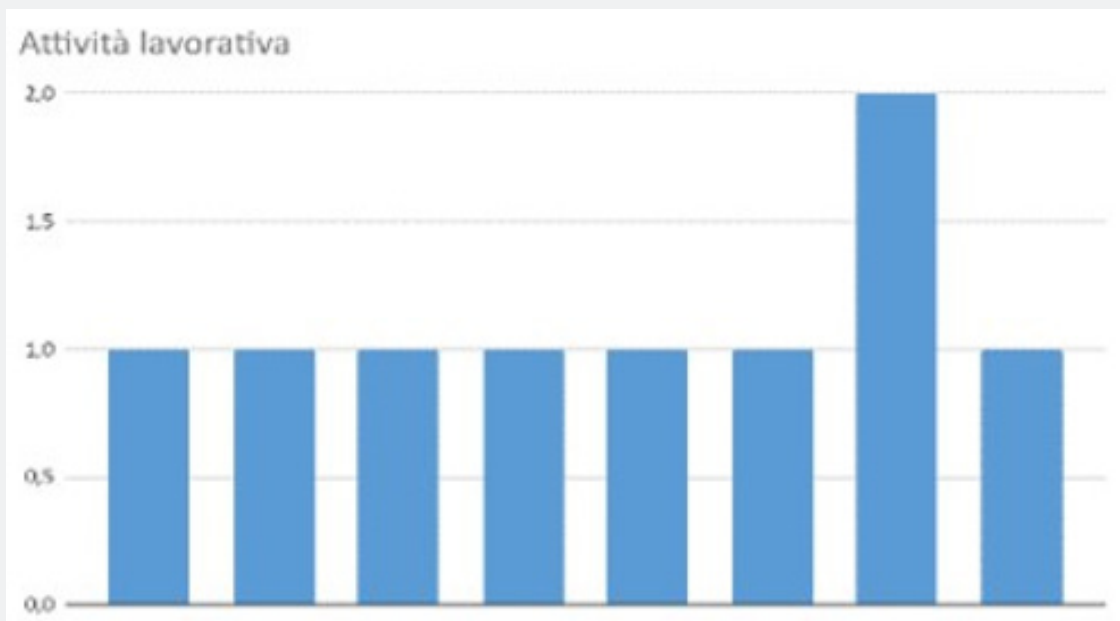
The sample under examination consists of 9 participants, male, with an average age of 32 years. No one is married, three people are engaged and the other 5 are singles; the presence of children occurs only in two cases (Figure 1). All participants have worked in the past, except for a person who reports he has never worked (Figure 2). Compared to the urban area of birth and growth, we can notice that half of the sample comes from an urban area characterized by socio-economic degradation, while the other half comes from a medium area that, as well as the family context of growth, appears moderately stimulating or deficient from school and training perspective (Figures 4 & 5). The type of education received is authoritarian in 3 cases, excessively

permissive in 3 other cases and only 2 participants received an assistive and supportive education (Figure 6). The participants report an addiction of 10 years on average (with a range from 3 to 30 years) (Figure 7). All the sample participants made use of

psychotropic substances at school on a diversified but persistent frequency (Figures 8-10). Most have been part of youth gangs and has displayed deviant conducts, aggressive and destructive behaviors during adolescence.



**Figure 1:** Description of the relationship situation; no one is married. Married/Boyfriend, 1 Divorced/Widowed, 2 Single/Celibe/Nubile.



**Figure 2:** All of the sample worked. Always/Yes Sometimes/Maybe Never/No

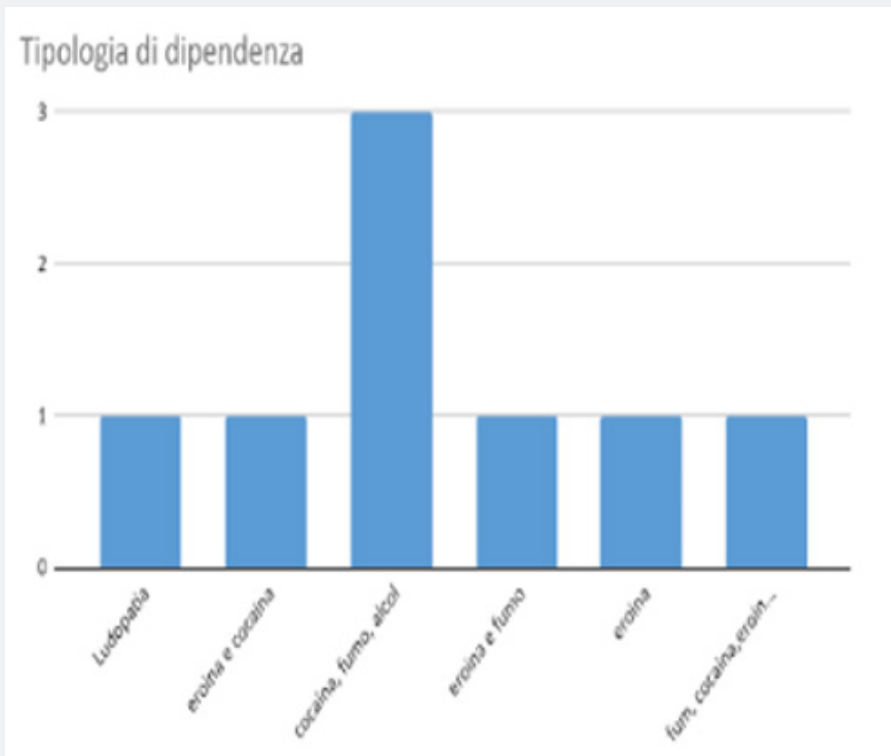
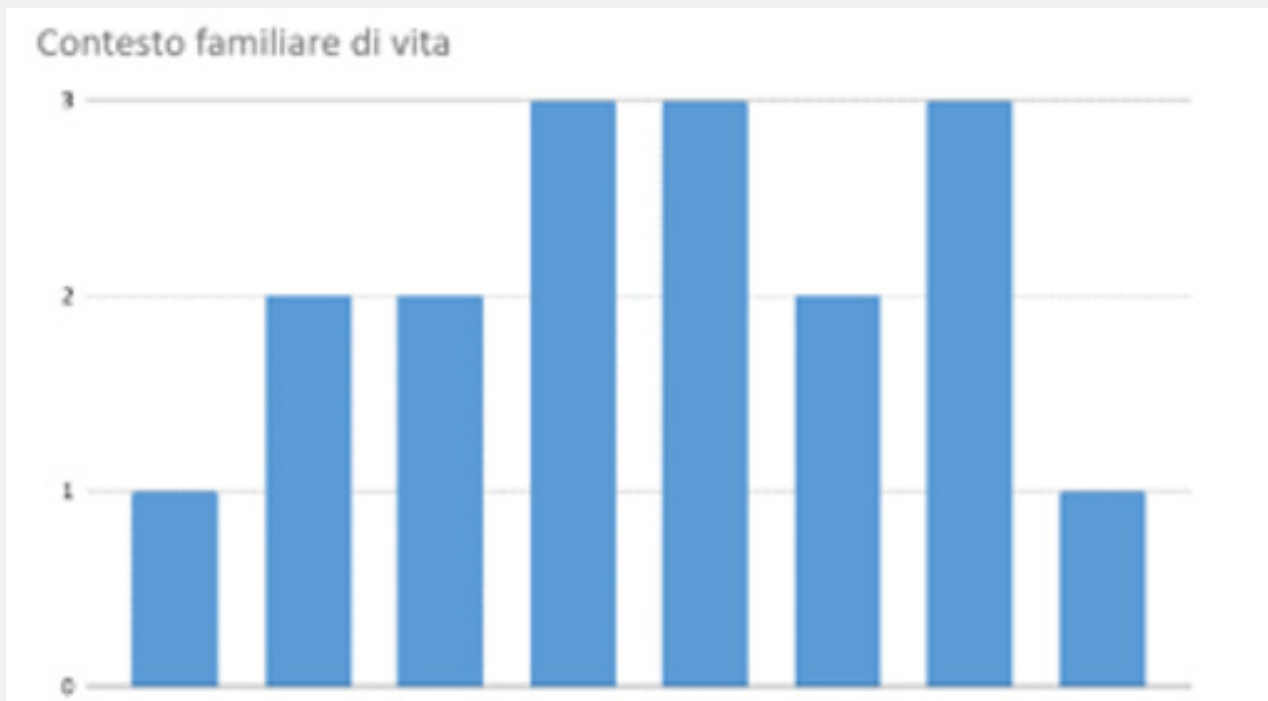


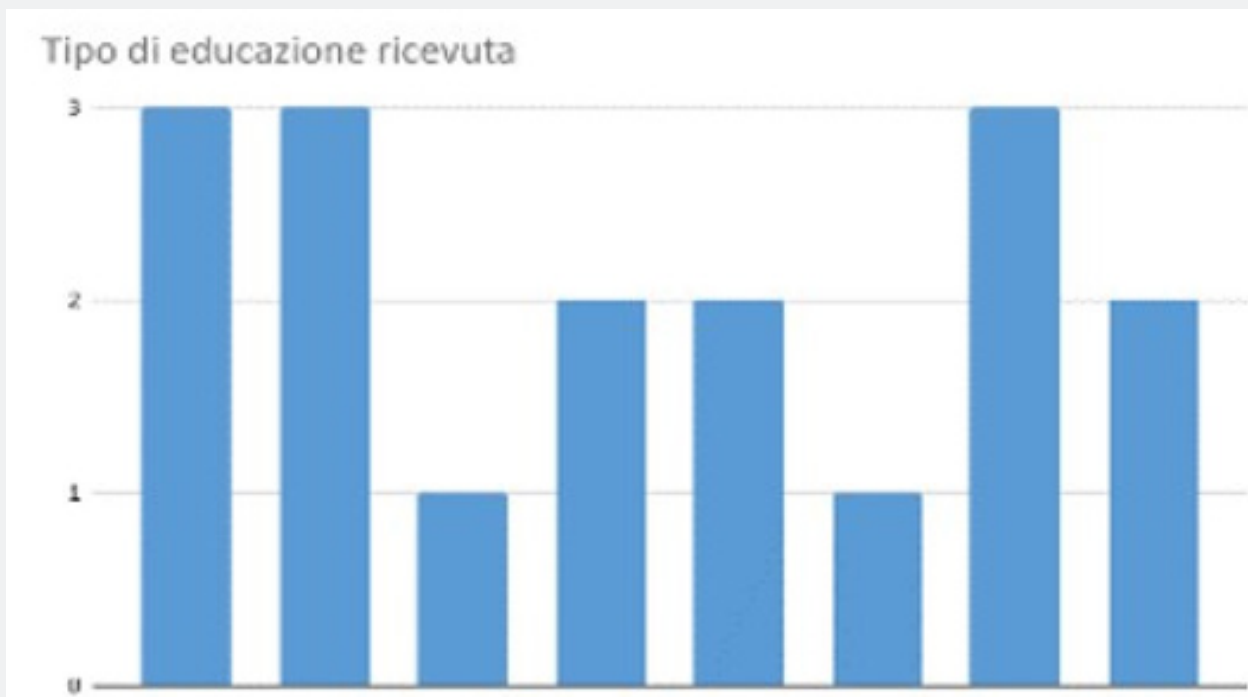
Figure 3: The entirety of the sample is mainly addicted to heroin, cocaine and gambling.



Figure 4: The analysis of the data leads us to reveal that half of the sample comes from a degraded socioeconomic and family context.



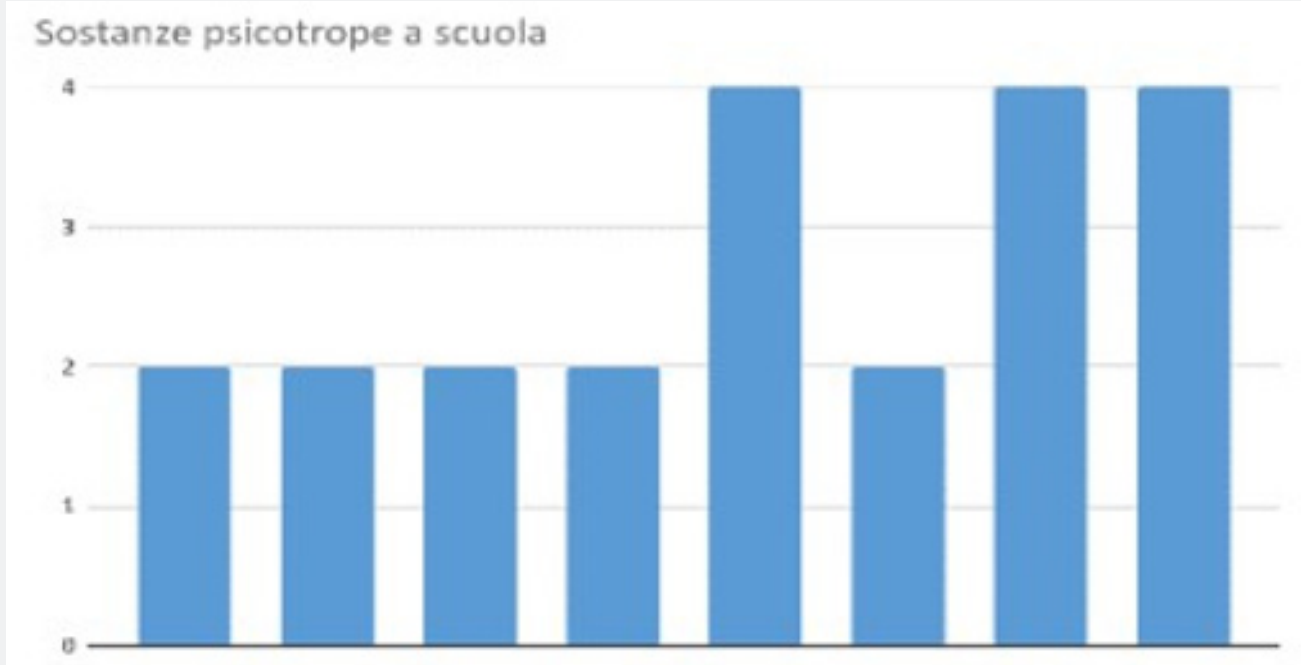
**Figure 5:** The sample's family contest appears moderately stimulating. 3 Low Area, 2 Area media, 1 high area



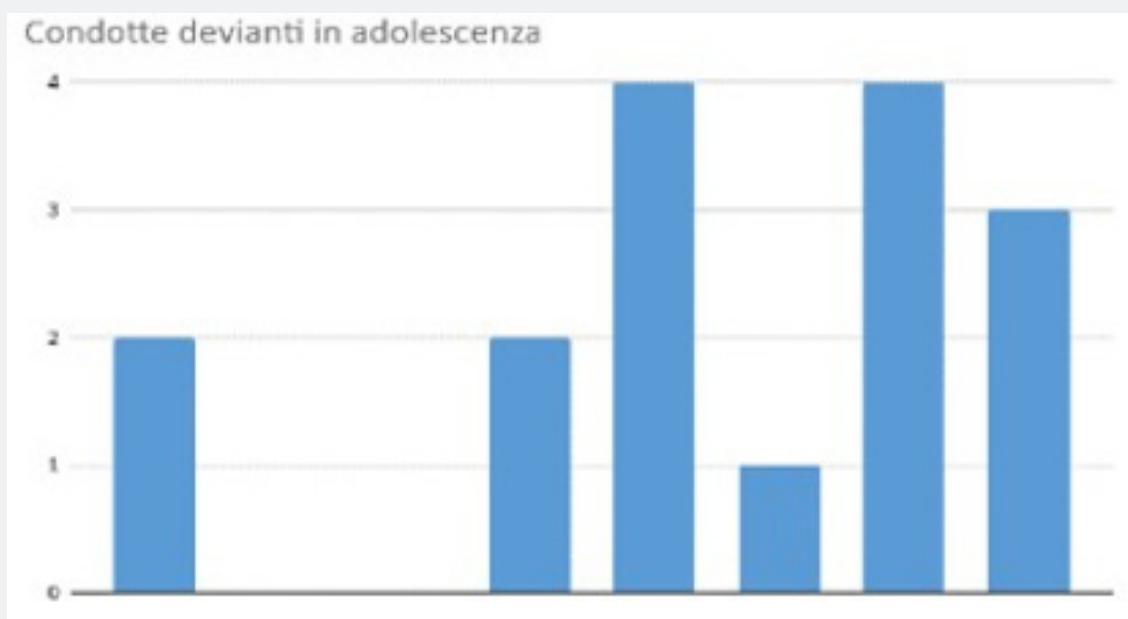
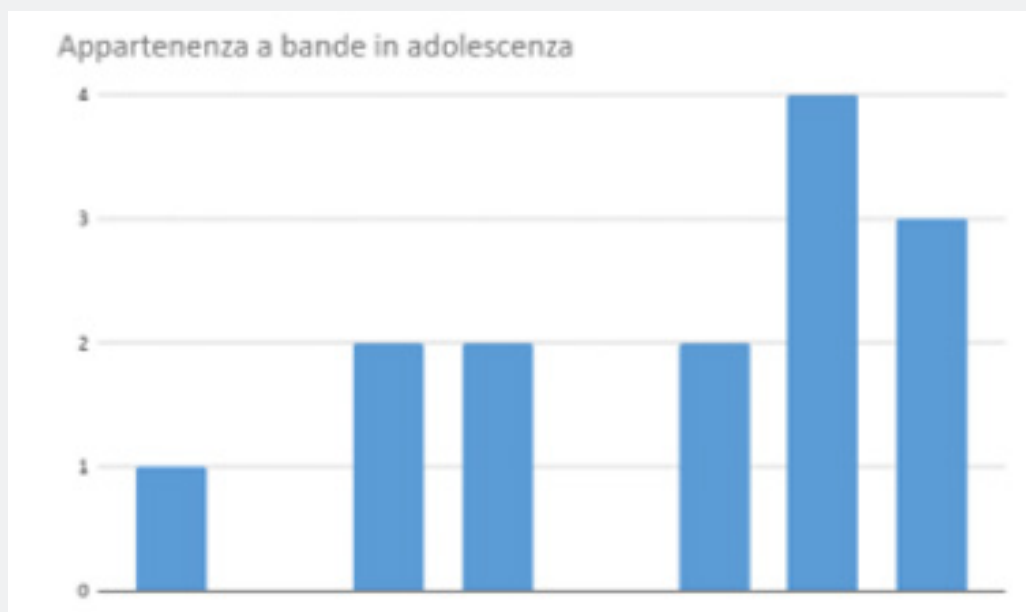
**Figure 6:** We have noted the importance of the parenting style in relation to the development of antisocial and addictive behaviors. The majority of the sample received an authoritarian educational style.



**Figure 7:** The participants report an addiction of 10 years on average (with a range from 3 to 30 years).  
3 Authoritarian upbringing, 2 Excessive permissiveness, 1 Care and support education



**Figure 8:** Most of the sample used drugs during adolescence at school.



**Figures 9 & 10:** A large part of the sample examined was associated with deviance bands at a young age and committed criminal conduct in adolescence.  
 0 Never; 1 Almost never; 2 Sometimes; 3 Often, 4 Always

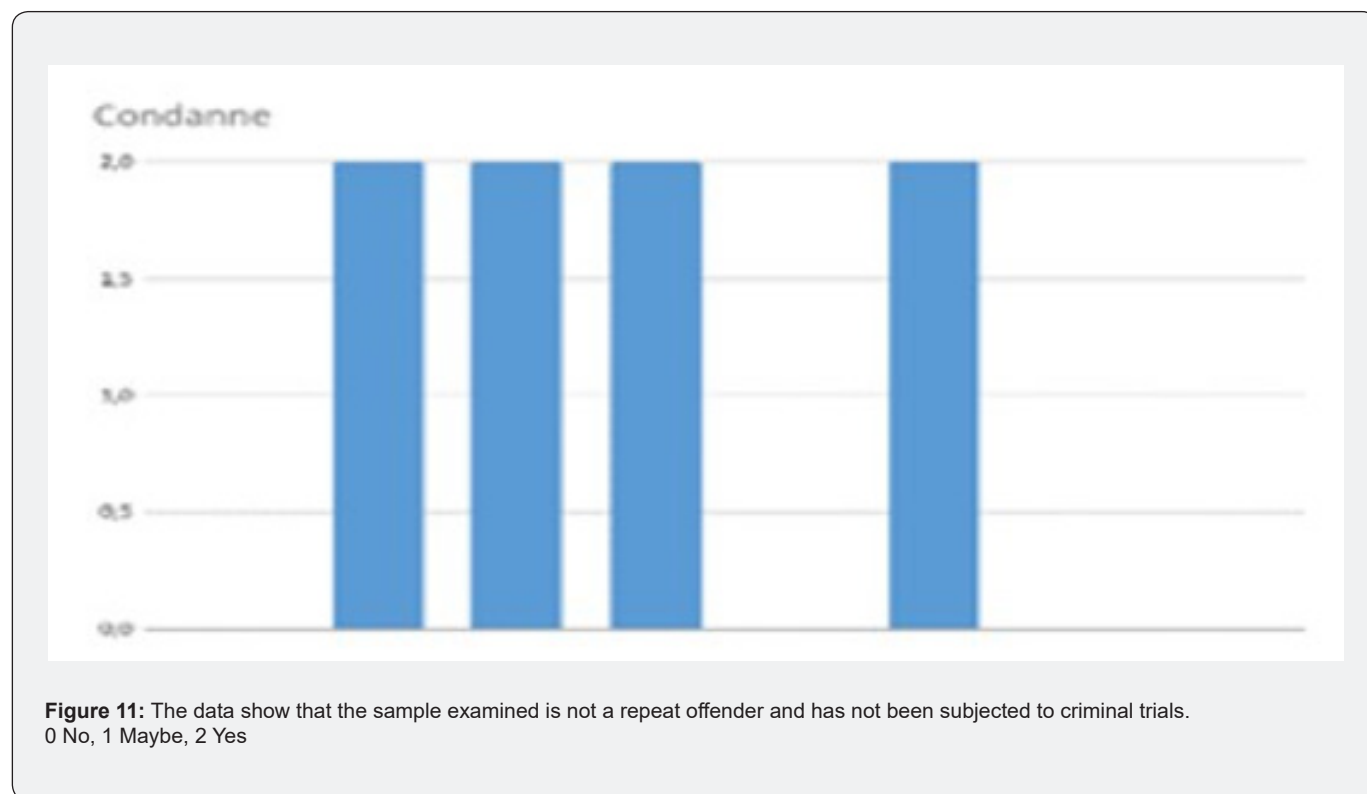
Following an interview, one of the participants stated: "... I've attended school but I didn't do very well, and I've immediately developed addictions, as a child I did make use of hashish at 12 years already. I've always tried everything by my own choice, without anyone's help..." The 55.56 % of the sample hasn't undergone any judgment, nor is currently charged in other criminal proceedings and is not a repeat offender. This data does not exclude that the participants may have displayed a criminal

conduct, but it simply indicates that they have not been identified by the police. It doesn't either exclude the recurrence of the substances' addiction disorder (Figure 11).

About the 78% of the participants declared that one of the main motivational factors, that led them to commit crimes, was the need for money to buy substances and the direct effect of the substance itself. In fact, most of these crimes were committed during the substance craving period in a state of acute

intoxication. In relation to the criminodynamic area, there isn't any engagement in organized crime activities except for 1 case and there's the presence of mental disorders in comorbidity with addiction to substances in only 2 cases. As regards the choice of the community path, for the 50% of the sample the community is an alternative measure to prison, while for the other half is a

personal choice, mainly motivated by the desire to re-establish relations with families, both the original and their current one, and to give themselves a second chance. This was attested by the 90% of the participants for which the family is an essential and steady value in their lives (Figures 12-15).



**Figure 11:** The data show that the sample examined is not a repeat offender and has not been subjected to criminal trials. 0 No, 1 Maybe, 2 Yes

In general, the sample shows homogeneous traits and is characterized by working men who have developed addiction to substances after personal problems during developmental age, such as parental abandonment and the overuse of alcohol and smoking by at least one of the parents- that will be analyzed later. The committed crimes were mainly induced by addiction and not by the real will to break the law. They almost univocally aspire to family reunification.

**The Interviews Construction with Participants: The Addressed Topics, Results and the "Dialogue" After the Anamnestic and Criminological Questionnaire Results**

At a first stage, our main interview goal was to understand the blunt opinion of the participants about the project, the difficulties in coping with life in the community and the introduction of meditative practices that are often greeted with skepticism. The first focus area was the individual sphere relating to personal relations of the individual; soon after we investigated the behavioral, social and interpersonal sphere. Ahead of a second meeting and following on from the greater familiarity gained during the first meeting with the participants, we chose to deepen their life story and in particular childhood, adolescence and the first meeting with substances in addition to their impact on

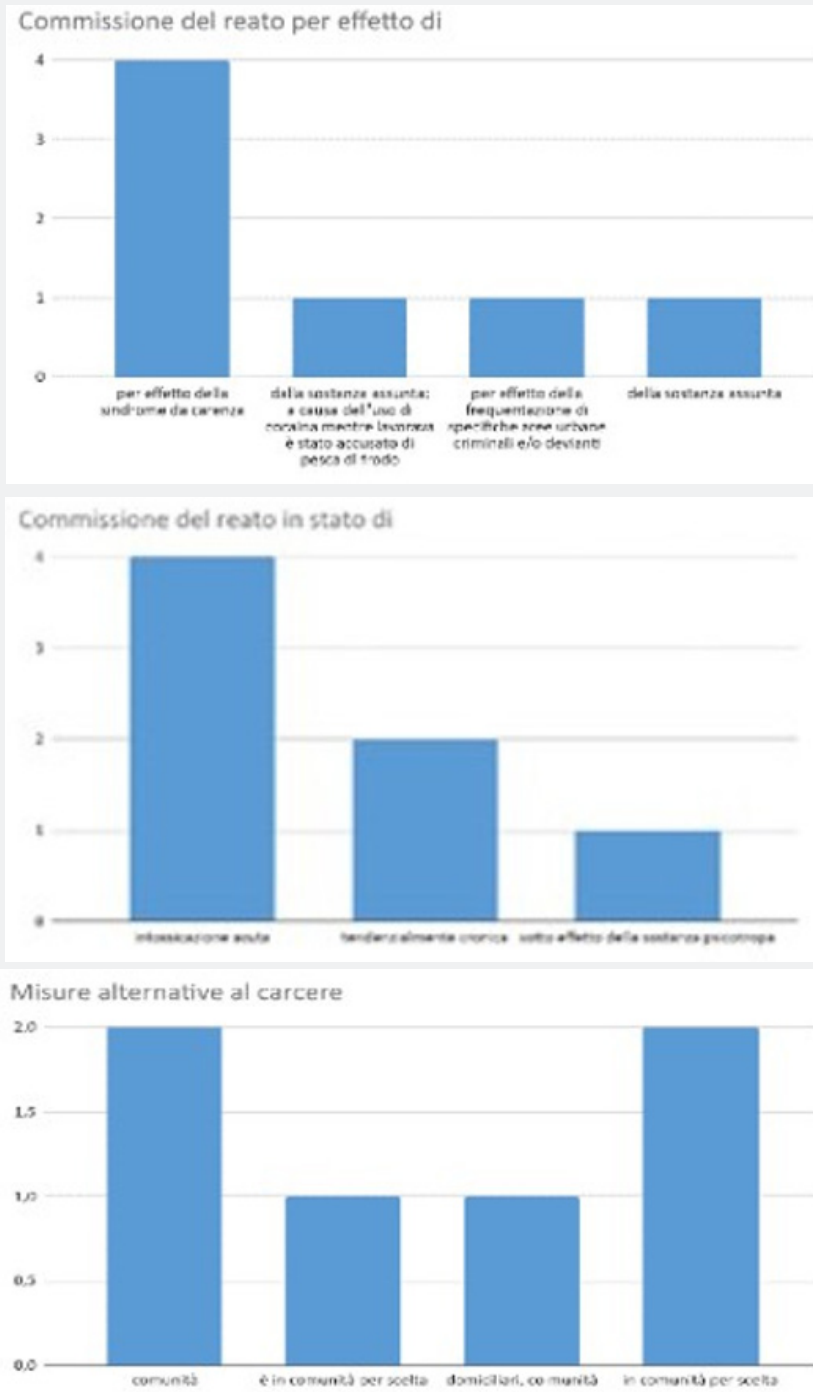
family ties, future projects and the personal choice to enter the community.

We initially investigated the mindfulness experience as an integrative technique to psychological treatment lead by psychotherapists. The introductory question was generic as it was more important to establish a bond with the project participants and allow them to become familiar with the interviewers. The interview was obviously focused on the participants' sensations and emotions felt during the practice, as it is known that the reflection and processing of perceived sensations often happens after the session. What has emerged, in general, is that most of the participants were initially biased in following the therapist's instructions, because they were new to practice and reluctant to introspection. But, once acquired greater confidence with the setting, they started to understand and appreciate its benefits.

Another key issue was the usefulness of the mindfulness technique and the participants' interest in continuing the practice even after the discharge from the community. In this case the results were uneven as 3/9 participants stated that would enjoy the opportunity to continue the mindfulness practice, others stated that the path taken in community is sufficient and are able to cope with rehabilitation and reintegration without additional

support. The psychological and environmental support network is a key component for rehabilitation, also social, to acquire greater autonomy, regardless the original family, the chosen family or friends. In this regard, the participants were asked if they had a

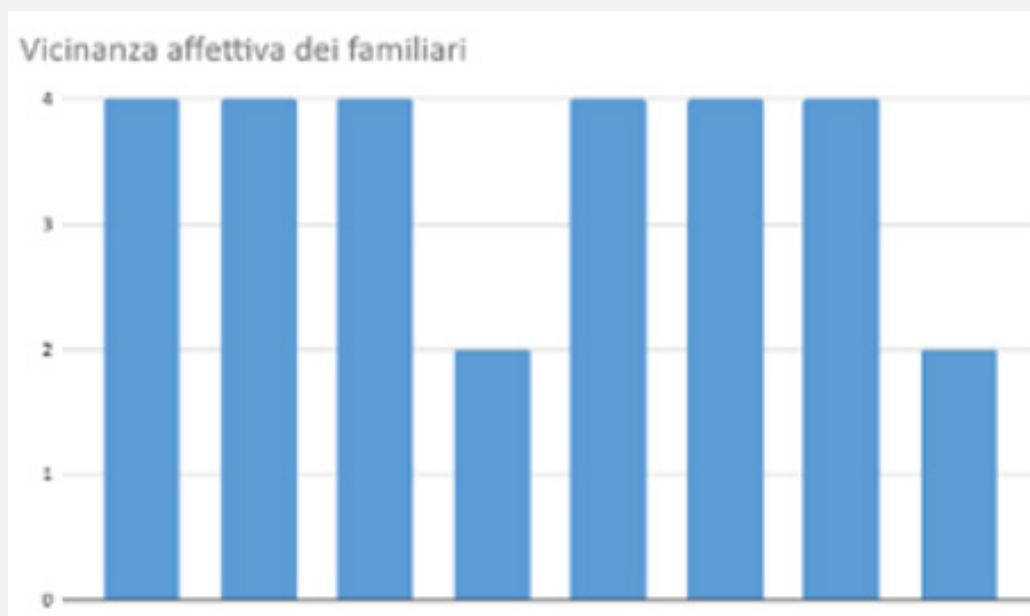
support system in their life outside the community and if they had established potentially enduring relationships within the community.



**Figures 12 to 15: 1.** The cause of the commission of the crime was the drug trafficking, even if they do not belong to criminal associations. **2.** For this reason, for half of the sample, voluntary entry into recovery communities represents an alternative measure to prison; instead for the other half it represents the rebirth of healthy social relationships with friends and family which is the most important element for the sample examined.

The 60% of the group declared to have the family support outside, while some have claimed to be completely alone. The element in common was the importance value given to family and the total lack of trust in friendship relationships (Figure 16). During the second meeting we decided to deepen issues related to adolescence and to the dependency onset by pointing out that the families of origin, despite being an important reference point

for most of the participants, are also among the most potential contributing factors for the development of dependency. In several cases we noted the presence of at least one parent with addiction to substances and/or alcohol. It is also frequent child abandonment and custody to other family members. In most cases, reference models are therefore not effective (Figure 17-18).



**Figure 16:** The majority of the sample said they received support from their family, while the rest did not. 0 Never, 1 Almost never, 2 Sometimes, 3 Often, 4 Always

Finally, we decided to interview the participants on the potential actions that may be carried out with rehabilitation projects, social reintegration and we also asked them whether they agreed with including mindfulness within these projects. The general opinion was in favor of the practice benefit, but they weren't particularly ready to think about it in practical terms, being more oriented to job and family reunification. We attempted to investigate both the positive and negative effects generated by the mindfulness practices, highlighting in the end a positive response in all of them, especially in the ways of thinking and emotions management. The sample positively responded to the integration of meditative practices in their daily life from a quantitative and frequency distribution perspective, from an emotional point of view (showing enthusiasm to participate), as these allow to cultivate introspection and to achieve a personal awareness that was never experienced before.

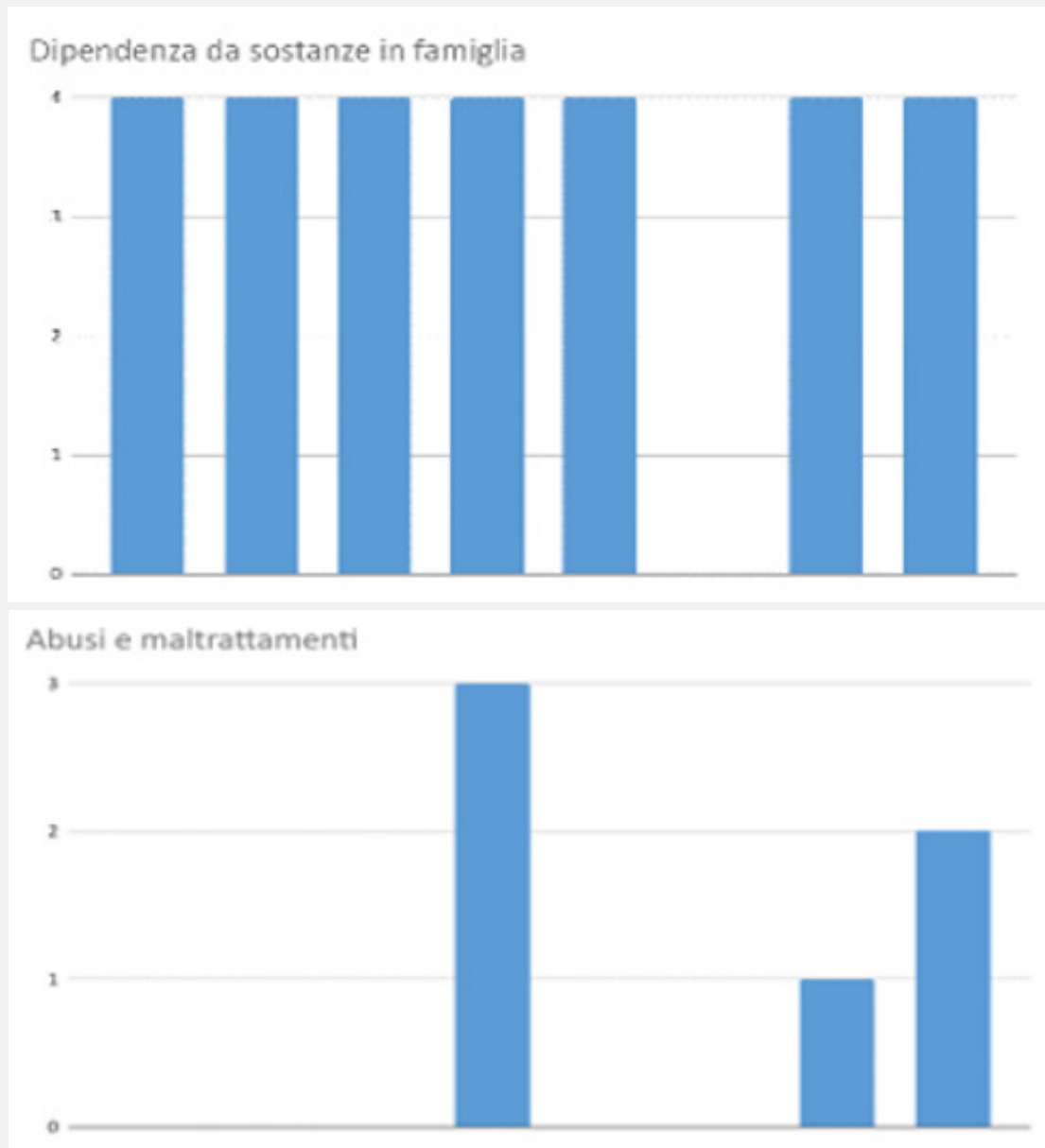
The experience of addiction to substances, as well as ludopathy, remarkably inhibits one's own perception and the ability to manage emotions. For this reason- and according to the psychodynamic approach deepened in the Manual of Psychodynamics Psychiatry- drug use along with a high rate of

comorbidity with psychiatric disorders, can be considered an adaptive behavior that helps the person who is basically unable to manage one's emotional states and to control emotions such as anger, shame and depression [7]. The interviews results show that the introspective experience triggered by mindfulness practices teaches not only to control and manage impulses, but especially to understand its origin, to cope with the underlying reasons behind the development of substance disorder. In this sense, we might think, that Mindfulness is a useful tool in helping the person to communicate with its inner states, both emotional and cognitive, to modify those harmful behaviors or patterns previously established. From a clinical point of view, one of the vulnerability factors identified in substance dependence is closely related to the individual's narcissistic vulnerability and to the inability to modulate affective states and interpersonal relationships [7].

Drug use, as well as the choice of a specific substance, can be highly motivated by attempts of self-healing and by the pharmacological effect of the substance itself. According to the scientific literature, substance use or more generally the development of addiction, reflects feelings of dissatisfaction and emptiness, plus attempts to fill or avoid such daily and pervasive

sensations. This aspect is also confirmed by one of the participants who states: “ ... In my experience, I did it to fill the void I had inside of me.” Mindfulness techniques, thanks to their influence on one’s emotional states, could put the person back in touch with those inner parts that help the self to deal with stronger emotions. The most interesting aspect of the internship was to learn the reliability degree of the tests administered to the participants by

the RPM project, in comparison with oral interviews carried out on the Zoom platform. The questions were in fact addressed to test the participants honesty and the consistency of the adopted measures in relation to their rehabilitation program, also social. The interviews have, in part, confirmed what the international clinical research is proving on the positive effectiveness of mindfulness [8].



**Figures 17 & 18:** We have found that the onset of addiction and deviant behaviors are caused by the family of origin, since at least one parent is addicted to substances and/or alcohol. Family models are not serene and just. 0 Never, 1 Almost never, 2 Sometimes, 3 Often, 4 Always.

## The Family: Rediscovering the Most Primitive Bonds

Recent studies of emotional neuro-criminology have highlighted how emotions, the neurochemical components of a multi-component process in constant evolution, in the adaptive development of the person, are part of higher cognitive processes and have a focal role in the formation of the person's character [9]. The role of emotions begins in the first phase of attachment that, if invalidated, can lead to a deficit in the regulatory systems of emotions and therefore to deviant and criminal behaviors in the future. Some studies highlight the relevance of the quantity and quality of maternal care received during childhood that define:

- a) The social competence of adults
- b) The ability to cope with stress and aggression
- c) The preference for substances that create dependency

In fact, the development of brain neurochemical systems, that regulate motherhood, aggression and other types of social behavior, are strongly conditioned by the parental nourishment received during childhood. Abandonment and abuse during early childhood can cause abnormal development of some bonding systems, the inability to reach a compromise and can pursue commitment to social and cultural values, dissatisfaction with social ties and non- acceptance; at the beginning of life, it may increase emotional appeal towards groups with violent and authoritarian values and leadership [10]. These elements are essential in understanding the sample under examination because, as previously stated, some participants did experience parental abandonment, while others experienced or witnessed domestic violence. These elements strongly contribute to the development of a personality looking for social group membership to make up for the absence of a close family.

Criminology and neuroscientific evidence register the important links existing between parents and children in relation to birth and healthy development of the person [11]. According to the great scholar of the subject John Bowlby, attachment is a motivational system based on motivation to explore and motivation to the bond. When the latter is satisfied children can freely explore, on the contrary when it is not satisfied, the first one is inhibited. The overly permissive approach in parenting style as well as an overly authoritarian education may be a risk factor for the development of impulsivity, antisociality and deviant behaviors. This shows that there is no cause-effect relationship in the combo parent- deviance in offspring, but there's a correlation influenced by other socio-environmental factors [12].

On the contrary, an ambivalent parenting style can lead to emotional deprivation of the child, who finds himself to take care of the parent. In a compromised family coping Nursing diagnosis Compromised family coping (nandadiagnoses. com), the child may play a role that is not suitable for its own development, and is therefore forced to push its growth and maturity, missing out a regular cognitive and emotional development and building

defense mechanisms that often turn out to be primitive and harmful. The importance of attachment, as stated in this article, is confirmed by the family stories told by the participants, that are exemplary of the described mechanisms.

## The Family

Listening to some story's excerpts of the participants, noted below, we could recognize the importance of the family in the possible development of forms of deviance and dependence. It is therefore essential to rediscover the most primitive bonds to restore the psycho-emotional balance lost and/or never reached, during childhood and adolescence. From the interview with a participant, we can in fact read: "I had a somewhat troubled childhood, my mom worked, and my father was never there, I had to play the little man. It led me to a more enhanced state of maturity. I remember difficult episodes such as the hunger, and I slowly tried to protect mom because I'm a sensitive one, I did so many things for others and I got screwed. My father came home undone with alcohol, my mom was too naïve, and depression led her to alcohol, as well. I understand that she woke up in the morning with a husband who didn't give her nothing, he had to wake up and stay there cooking and just sit around like this all the time, and I'm not ashamed to say that I also ate bread and water or baked bread, many times. Toys, I don't know what that means, I played with clothespins. She had to looking after three children because my father was a jerk... When my daughter was born, I made sacrifices, I never went to the disco, but worked and left the salary at home. When we had some fights that led to a point of break, I completely fell apart, I totally lost my pillar, my family, and I did what I didn't have to. All the anger and the negative thoughts, I had nothing left to lose. Even if I did it (drug use) before, I always had a reason (the family) not to overuse it, I wanted to be careful."

The excerpt syntax brings out how all these thoughts overlap one on the other, making the discourse discontinuous. It is evident pain and difficulty in telling such episodes of personal life and it shows how the absence of solid foundations played a central role in the development of deviant behaviors. We can also highlight some themes addressed in this article such as the awareness of an early maturity and sense of responsibility that came with it, a family that is not solid and characterized by episodes of violence. From a relational point of view, this person seems to give extreme importance to the family to which he has always devoted a lot of attention, also giving up to important stages of his psycho-social emotional development. The condition of poverty and economic deprivation have pushed him to find remedies of any kind from childhood to adulthood. It's central to underline that poverty was not the cause of addiction development, but the trigger was the emotional and social distress he was living, that is the loss of a family he was building.

Another participant states: " already from childhood, I had the responsibility to look after myself, I am in prison and so is my father. The economic conditions were not the best, I couldn't go

to school, and I had to work. I helped my mom grow my brother in household. I saw that mom was okay and so I was pleased to work. Then I had a misadventure (physical injuries at work) and there the collapse started: I started smoking cocaine at first for pleasure, then relations started to get ruined...". The absence of a unite family during the developmental stages and the breakup with the family that he was trying to build at the time of the accident at work, has led him to seek pleasure in drugs, eliminating suffering and silencing all negative thoughts that stormed him. The interviewee repeatedly stressed the importance of his family, pointing out that anything he did was to help his mother. This evidence is a perfect example of the family importance in ensuring a healthy development and reference models that are reliable and present throughout the growth period. Compared to the socio-psycho-criminological area, we can track some cases of abuse and mistreatment, both witnessed and experienced firsthand, the presence of deviant behaviors of the family members and their addiction on substances, in particular on smoking.

The exposure to particular risk conditions, both social and biological, during the developmental period, may cause a failure in the normal development of the nervous system; in particular, exposure to smoke use and/or psychotropic substances during pregnancy, trauma during pregnancy and childhood, exposure to direct or assisted violence are just some of the factors that can pave the way for a future behavior marked by aggression and violence. And still: "My childhood was relatively good, I didn't have a dad, he left us when I was one year old. My mom was mom and dad at the same time, in her way she never made us miss anything. I lost my mom at the age of 18 I lived on the street (clochard) for three years and I completely ruined myself.". These statements highlight how the environmental, economic and family factors affect the individual development, also in adolescence when the person is building its own personality and is preparing to adulthood. In this regard, one of the participants stated: "I had lost confidence, their respect towards me. Seeing again the same eyes that looked at me when I was a child, especially my mom and my girlfriend that I've been with for 15 years and put up with me for all this time. My mom, I still live with her, I'm a mummy's boy, but knowing the son she had before and seeing what I had become, she suffered a lot. When I look into her eyes now, it is the most beautiful emotion that exists, seeing the same eyes that looked at me when I was a child, and my girlfriend look is full of love."

What we learn from this is the importance of the parental emotional component in relation to the healthy development of major cognitive faculties. Once again, it can be observed the importance of emotional ties, especially of the family and the partner, as primary attachment figures in relation to the evolution of the life path. It is clear from this extract that the relationship with family has also greatly influenced the person's relationship with itself, also affecting self-esteem. Here is the importance of family support and care, during and after the community period, in trying to reduce the recurrence rate as the family might act as a motivational factor. From an interview extract, we can read: "...

When I'll be out, I have everything ready and I already have a job, I will go to my brother..."; " ...I'm getting very close to my family again."

In the lack of suitable resources, individuals find themselves without a support system, unable to develop adaptive strategies strong enough to cope with the need to delete, albeit temporarily, suffering and negative emotions that often become pervasive. The 87% of the participants lived an emotional closeness to family members, including bonds with their partners, at the beginning of the community period, despite the family ties were worsen due to substances use and the consequent lifestyle which has caused a lack of self-confidence.

### Friendship

Friendship during adolescence is a shared element among all participants, as well as its disappearance after the adolescent period. However, friendship is an important value for everyone, even if this belief is imbued with a basic mistrust and a great prudence. One participant noted: "... I lived on the street for three years; I had many friends before. After a while, I lost faith in friendship, I understood that they are of convenience. If you have something to give, they stay close to you; when I lived on the street, they even no longer said hello to me. We are just passing through ... a guy with whom I have a true friendship, because despite the quarrels we can speak, while others if you don't indulge in requests, they can even speak ill of you, they don't talk to you anymore...". It is clear from these words that the subject probably had bad experiences, where someone took advantage of him, abandoning him when he probably needed it. These repeated experiences of abandonment, from family first and then from friends, did nothing but raise that defensive wall that all the participants share. We can in fact notice the difficulty, but not the impossibility, to believe again in this value: "... friendship inside and out of here are totally different We'll see if the real one is there outside, because it is easy to say we are all friends here. Even as best friends, you can hurt outside. There must be respect without being double- faced Sometimes I realize that it's me that I want to stay away, because they can even destroy your life through the social media". The participants to the project are always clearheaded when talking about human relationships and friendship, motivated by previous experiences as it can be seen from this recorded statement.

### The Experience of Mindfulness Techniques: Correlation Between Substance, Cognitive Processes and Contact with Themselves

Reading the participants' interviews, it can be highlighted one of the positive effects of the practices, detected by the scientific literature, that is an improvement of selective and executive components of attention, concentration of thought and recognition of one's own emotions. As the scientific studies confirm, there is a positive increase of the neurotransmitter levels of psychophysical well-being, that is serotonin, endorphins and dopamine during the

mindfulness practice. From a statement extract of a participant, we can in fact read: “[Mindfulness] gives me the possibility to always know new emotions and hear new ones. In the last session, I felt sadness and disappointment for some recognized things; in others [sessions] I felt anxiety in relation to my parents. Anyway, I’m becoming aware of many things. Initially, I couldn’t understand the reason for this technique, now I slowly recognize the aim of meditation... Each session brings you something positive or negative, but in any case, it always brings something which then makes me think a lot”.

Despite the excursus of substance abuse, when a bond of trust is established between therapist and subject, and the delicate path of introspection is walked, excellent results can be achieved, that are positively welcomed by the participants.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, we could identify three main reasons that may lead to the development of substances dependence, including:

- a) Difficulty in tolerating loved ones.
- b) Problems with maternal attachment, that is deficient and therefore the substance is used as a substitute and source of comfort.
- c) Craving phenomena, triggered by a biological point of view, following changes in neuro-cerebral patterns [13].
- d) In relation to craving, we report a statement from a participant, who agreed with an open debate with us; he says:

“I’ve been a drug addict for 10 years. This technique may seem strange at first, but I took it as an opportunity to understand what we feel in our body, and I started to put my attention to all the things I wasn’t able to see when I used drug (he takes the chain around his neck in one hand). Drug leads you to cross out any kind of thought, either good or bad, it leads you to always think about drug. Now I’m learning to acquire self-awareness. After the sessions I felt cheerful, never sad. Sometimes angry about past things. You come out winner from sessions. It is a kind of meditation that makes you think a lot, both on positive and negative things and when positive thoughts happen is amazing, because you come out of this session cheerful.” It is evident from these words that substances and addiction physically and metaphorically distance people from themselves and their center. Mindfulness seems to be a ray of light in self-knowledge. The questionnaire also focused on the subjective changes observed in thinking modes, in daily life behavior and impulses management. This has also led to a more subtle question on how the participants have faced their own emotions, both mentally and physically, since the psychotropic substances tend to quiet negative emotions, to better understand how the mindfulness benefits are welcomed.

This statement reflects the concept of adaptive craving that is often functional to the removal of problems that the subject daily faces in his life. Drug use, from this point of view, allows the

addicted subject to retreat in a chemically altered state of mind, that is a “safe space”, free of triggers and worries [14-18]. Indeed, another participant, affected by ludopathy, shares his thoughts and his experience that turns out to confirm one of the addiction triggers. He declares: “[...] When there is an addiction, you do it because it’s something you like, but in my experience, it was to fill in the gaps that I had inside of me.” It is worth highlighting the second part of the quotation, where he admits that his attachment to PC games and addiction in general, weren’t motivated by the pleasure he derived from it, but by the need to fill an inner and pervasive void that he carried inside [19-26].

### Discussion

#### How Do They See Their Future?

At the end of the interview, a question that naturally arose was about the future of these men who faced the rehabilitation path because, although their past is well defined and full of events relevant pleasant, their future may appear particularly uncertain. This research surely confirmed that people with addiction disorder have, more than many others, the need for certainty and for someone to rely on. When they are placed before an uncertain future, the risk of recurrence greatly increases, already high for such pathology. In this regard, it is relevant to make sure that reintegration is carried out in the best conditions and that there is both a short-term and long-term project so that the person can feel relieved. Some of the interviewees confirmed the benefit of rules in the management of their daily lives and they also reconsidered the importance of sociability moments, such as daily meals and the moments dedicated to specific activities, including psychotherapy. These rules, besides helping with group management, give a sense of cyclicality and rhythm to the group, coming to be perceived as reassuring.

The whole sample started in the community a personal reflection on the negative consequences of their deviant conduct for themselves, for their loved ones and for their victim. This confirms the importance given to respect and peaceful listening, so as the knowledge of one’s emotions to better recognize that the other has the same importance they give to themselves, for most of these guys.

This result can be related to the mindfulness practice that, in our opinion, gave the participants an early opportunity to reduce anxiety, depression and stress, by increasing cognitive activities related to memory and to emotions and empathy management and regulation, as showed by the data that will be published at the end of the research project. This figure is in line with the words of some interviewed guys: “If I’m nervous, I’m able to relax”, “It is a very positive thing because it helps us to understand what is going on in our brains” and still: “I feel more relaxed and calm”, “This thing is helping me to control breathing, to manage stress and anxiety and to explore a serenity and peace of mind that I didn’t feel for years, things that I couldn’t remember also come up to my

mind, inexplicable emotions”, “I have a more quiet thinking flow”, “There are moments I think a bit more positively”, “I’m more quiet and less impulsive in attitude.”

The mindfulness practice aims at affecting exactly these aspects, the cognitive and emotional processes, by increasing the ability of emotional self-regulation and the consequent psychophysical well-being felt, with an increase of self-esteem and self-confidence.

As this statement shows: “... I would like to make a path where I can find myself, to take care of myself and provide for my family, my daughter, to make up for lost time...”

As for the impact of the mindfulness exercises on emotions management, we notice how much this practice has let them feel, observe and perceive their emotions first-hand. Some participants reported: “I could feel emotions, but I felt them for the hell of it, I wasn’t aware of it, now I can always feel positive emotions, sometimes I think of anger and to other emotions and they don’t scare me, but they intrigue me, and I’ve felt so many emotions, joy, anger”, “It gives me the opportunity to know more emotions and feel new ones, I’m feeling different emotions, sadness, disappointment, anxiety, once an internal explosion of pleasure”, “I started to notice things I couldn’t see before in my body, when I was taking drugs; I’m learning to become aware of myself”.

The results analysis of other administered tests on this sample shows a lack of self-confidence and emotional dysregulation, two factors that are probably filled with substances-taking as an attempt of self-healing.

Projects like this are the future of restorative justice and a new model that can be followed and applied to various areas of the judicial system, which very often doesn’t offer the right possibility of one’s life recovery. The 100% of the sample believes that restorative justice is much more effective than punitive justice and consider the crime as a “mistake”.

This shift in criminological ethics would allow the rehabilitation of many people with deviant behavior; young people, in particular, who are still in the shaping process of their personality. Offering them valid alternatives to the reality they know, it would not only improve their life quality, but it would also decrease the crime rate.

### Conclusion

This experience gave us the opportunity to deepen the research work, both the development and phases of the scientific research and we also had the opportunity to provide important “life tools” to people who, due to different factors and personal experiences, didn’t have the opportunity to live their lives stages to the fullest. Seeing them looking out again from a window of opportunities and helping them to find a way out, experiencing new relational patterns, is the goal of mindfulness practice.

We could generally trace a relation between clinical and criminological tests, administered to the sample in the pre and post treatment. The participants declared to be skeptical at first, but sometimes also curious about mindfulness practices, while in the post-treatment most of them could recognize the usefulness and validity of the applied technique. A majority has expressed the desire and hope to continue the meditative practice even outside the community, because the teachings of this research project were assimilated, and the awareness process was fulfilled. Some of them feel to have gained more self-confidence and the ability to regulate their emotions, marking the achievement of one of this project objectives.

We can therefore draw conclusions in relation to personal awareness, family and parenting style, marital relationships, interpersonal relationships. First, it is necessary to highlight the many positive feedback received from the participants during the online interviews. As the various quotations in this article can show, almost all participants said to have experienced positive changes, from the very first sessions, in the ability of better managing anxiety and trigger situations and a greater awareness of their past and of events they had psychologically removed. Family represents a starting and arrival point for many, a sort of archè as for many of them addiction began with the parental modelling of behavior or because of abandonment events, violence or both that are remarkable risk factors. Despite this, the participants have repeatedly affirmed that their only goal is to reconsolidate their family or to create a new one, proving that a solid support system is important to everyone, but especially for those who have a psychological weakness leading to deviance. Marital relationships are directly linked to family, as they are cornerstones of life for many and one of the main objectives of the participants, once completed the program and social reintegration. We received elusive answers about friendship, considered of fundamental value, but almost all the participants have declared to be hesitant in making friends or in relying on someone. The most likely hypothesis, also in relation to their life stories, is that past experiences of interpersonal relationships have left a deeper mark than what they have affirmed, leading them to have problems of trust towards others.

Although there has been a strong correlation between tests and interviews, it is relevant to stress that the examined sample is made up of people who have voluntarily chosen to enter the community and therefore more motivated to improve their status and life quality and that of their support system. In the future, we may think about applying the SPIC protocol on other samples, such as inmates, listening desks for abusers, participants related to Ser.D services, or to anti-violence centers.

In conclusion, this practical experience has strongly inspired us to continue the forensic studies, letting us develop the necessary skills for carrying out research in the neuro-criminological area, and letting us collaborate with a team of experts, available and

incredibly keen on, who manage to share their enthusiasm and trust in the research.

**Ethics approval and consent to participate:** This study was waived for ethical review and approval because all participants were assured compliance with the ethical requirements of the Charter of Human Rights, the Declaration of Helsinki in its most recent version, the Oviedo Convention, the guidelines of the National Bioethics Committee, the standards of "Good Clinical Practice" (GCP) in the most recent version, the relevant national and international ethical codes, as well as the fundamental principles of state law and international laws according to the updated guidelines on observational studies and clinical trial studies. A data processing and informed consent was administered, managed by Dr. Serena Paladini.

## Consent for publication

Study participants, by signing the informed consent and data processing, consented to the publication of the data in anonymous and aggregate form. Domenico Piccininno was responsible, together with the Emmanuel Community Association and Dr. Serena Paladini for data collection and maintenance, but administration was carried out by facility managers. Subjects were recruited who gave regular informed consent; in addition, these subjects asked and obtained from by the heads of the Centers and Domenico Piccininno, as project manager, not to meet with other study collaborators outside of facility managers, thus remaining completely anonymous. The authors, following current regulations, consent to the publication of the contents of this clinical study.

**Availability of data and material:** The subjects who participated in the study requested and obtained that the facility managers be the sole examiners and that the authors of this pilot study learn about the participants' data in an exclusively anonymous form. The authors make themselves available, with a formal request to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, to disclose the data and materials of the research, in aggregate and anonymous form only, following current regulations and the informed consent and data processing signed by the participants, subject to the authorization of the facility managers involved.

## Authors' Contribution

Domenico Piccininno designed the study, Dr. Serena Paladini contributed to the recruitment and administration of the questionnaires and investigation using a questionnaire survey, Domenico Piccininno and performed the primary analysis of research data and organized 2 criminological interviews. Aurida Pardini, Giulia Puglisi, who have completed the master's degree in Criminology and Forensic Science at the Forensic Science Academy, are the authors of the manuscript, supervised by Domenico Piccininno reviewer and corresponding for the revision and publication phase.

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