



## **THE POSITIVE ROLE OF OXYTOCIN** in Treating and Aiding Incarcerated Women



By  
**Susan Madden Lankford**

**Photography**

Susan Madden Lankford

**Graphic Artist**

Polly Lankford Smtih

**Prison conditions are harsh,** so what woman would be open to returning to the penitentiary? But, behind the steel bars and barbed wire lurks a camaraderie that many female inmates never experienced during their days freedom. Oxytocin is a hormone released by the brain that makes people bond. It is called the “love hormone.” Oxytocin is what helps female inmates bond over their shared difficulties: missing their children, family dysfunctions, and terrible jail food.

**A**s a photojournalist, I made over 80 visits to a local women’s detention facility in Santee, California to interview and photograph the inmates. I became well educated as to the many reasons why women participate in criminal behavior, abandon their children, and land in jail.

Many of the days were spent on the minimum-security yard where women were able to spend the day on fenced-in patios connected to their units. I could see the close ties the women developed with one another. They were anxious to share like views on what happens inside a women’s jail. Comments about staff, the food provided at the jail, the courthouse, medical experiences, labor and delivery while incarcerated, as well as their own family dysfunctions brought commonality to the inmates.

On this yard, the sleeping conditions were dormitory style with 40 women per unit. This setting was much different from the maximum-security units where two women were assigned to individual cells that were positioned around a daytime open space, which was

---

*Above: Minimum Security Inmates*



**Oxytocin is such a strong hormone that it is one reason that many women actually do not fear returning to jail, thereby aggravating our recidivism rates in local and state penitentiaries. Oxytocin may actually aid in increasing women's health while they are incarcerated..**

*Above: Inmate Lorinda;  
Below: Inmate Stokes*

monitored by the control room for each unit. Still, although a different layout, I discovered a not-too-dissimilar voice from the inmates. Thrown into this highly controlled environment, women from various walks of life were forced to live together and even sleep in the same spaces. Something happens when women start to bond together. It was apparent that they didn't like the conditions of jail, yet there was something they were experiencing in prison that they may not have had on the outside—closeness.

Oxytocin, sometimes called “the love hormone,” has been shown to facilitate maternal bonding<sup>1</sup>, increase social recognition<sup>2, 3</sup>, raise trust<sup>4</sup> and empathy within groups<sup>5</sup> affect generosity<sup>6</sup> and inhibit the development of tolerance to opiates, cocaine, alcohol and other addictive drugs, while reducing withdrawal symptoms<sup>7</sup>. It may also be an effective treatment for autism, by reducing repetitive behavior<sup>8</sup>.

Oxytocin can benefit incarcerated women by reducing the stress one experiences in uncomfortable circumstances<sup>9</sup>. I contend that this is a normal “clutching together” of the women who end up in an open dayroom or the patio.

Women truly bond together in prison and jail units. They bond over their disdain regarding guards and other facility staff, over their physical conditions, over being mothers deprived of their



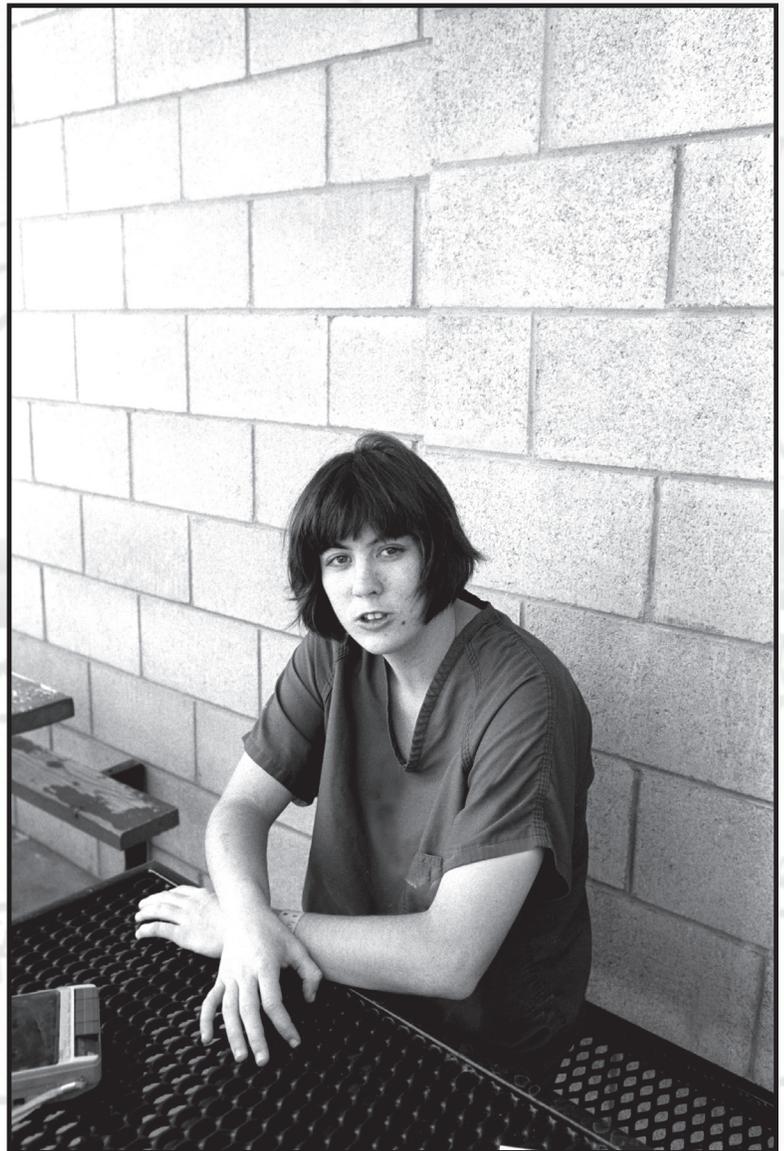
**S**omething happens when women start to bond together. It was apparent that they didn't like the conditions of jail, yet there was something they were experiencing in prison that they may not have had on the outside—closeness.

children, and so on. Oxytocin is such a strong hormone that it is one reason that many women actually do not fear returning to jail, thereby aggravating our recidivism rates in local and state penitentiaries. Oxytocin may actually aid in increasing women's health while they are incarcerated.

Dr. Shelley E. Taylor, a research professor at the UCLA Psychology Department, has written: "Socio-emotional resources, including optimism, mastery, self-esteem and social support have biological and psychological benefits, especially in times of stress. Our research program of the last 25 years has explored these resources and documented their many benefits, and, as such, attests to the powerful ability of the human mind to construe threatening events in ways that are protective of health<sup>10</sup>."

"Our current research assesses whether oxytocin acts roughly as a social thermostat that is responsive to the adequacy of social resources and prompts affiliative behavior<sup>10</sup>." It also reduces biological and psychological stress responses, once positive social contacts are reestablished<sup>10</sup>.

Female rats given oxytocin antagonist after giving birth do not exhibit typical maternal behavior<sup>11</sup>. In contrast, virgin female sheep show maternal behavior toward foreign lambs upon cerebrospinal fluid infusion of oxytocin, which they would not do otherwise<sup>12</sup>.



*Above: Inmate Teena*

**Oxytocin can benefit incarcerated women by reducing the stress one experiences in uncomfortable circumstances. I contend that this is a normal “clutching together” of the women who end up in an open dayroom or the patio.**

There is some evidence that oxytocin promotes ethnocentric behavior, incorporating the trust and empathy of in-groups, with their suspicion and rejection of outsiders<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, genetic differences in the oxytocin receptor gene have been associated with maladaptive social traits such as aggressive behavior<sup>11</sup>.

Because oxytocin is destroyed in the stomach, it is generally administered by nasal spray or intravenous injection. I have heard that several female prison medical staff have been experimenting with oxytocin, and the results are favorable so far.

**Susan Madden Lankford** is a photojournalist, author and documentary film producer. She serves on the editorial board of *Cancer InCytes Magazine*. Photographs in this article are from Lankford's book *Maggots in My Sweet Potatoes: Women Doing Time*.

## References

1. van Leengoed E, Kerker E, Swanson HH (1987). "Inhibition of post-partum maternal behaviour in the rat by injecting an oxytocin antagonist into the cerebral ventricles". *J. Endocrinol.* **112** (2): 275–82.
2. Unkelbach C, Guastella AJ, Forgas JP (2008). "Oxytocin selectively facilitates recognition of positive sex and relationship words". *Psychological Science* **19** (11): 1092–4.
3. Marsh AA, Yu HH, Pine DS, Blair RJ (2010). "Oxytocin improves specific recognition of positive facial expressions". *Psychopharmacology* **209** (3): 225–32.
4. Kosfeld M, Heinrichs M, Zak PJ, Fischbacher U, Fehr E (2005). "Oxytocin increases trust in humans". *Nature* **435** (7042): 673–6.
5. Thompson MR, Callaghan PD, Hunt GE, Cornish JL, McGregor IS (2007). "A role for oxytocin and 5-HT(1A) receptors in the prosocial effects of 3,4 methylenedioxymethamphetamine ("ecstasy")". *Neuroscience* **146** (2): 509–14.
6. Zak PJ, Stanton AA, Ahmadi S (2007). "Oxytocin Increases Generosity in Humans". *PLOS One* **2**(11): e1128.
7. Kovács GL, Sarnyai Z, Szabó G (1998). "Oxytocin and addiction: a review". *Psychoneuroendocrinology* **23** (8): 945–62.
8. Bartz JA, Hollander E (2008). "Oxytocin and experimental therapeutics in autism spectrum disorders". *Progress in Brain Research* **170**: 451–62.
9. Marazziti D, Dell'Osso B, Baroni S, Mungai F, Catena M, Rucci P, Albanese F, Giannaccini G, Betti L, Fabbri L, Italiani P, Del Debbio A, Lucacchini A, Dell'Osso L (2006). "A relationship between oxytocin and anxiety of romantic attachment". *Clin Pract Epidemiol Ment Health* **2**: 28.
10. Shelley E. Taylor Faculty Page, Dept. of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles. [http://www.psych.ucla.edu/faculty/faculty\\_page?id=89&area=11](http://www.psych.ucla.edu/faculty/faculty_page?id=89&area=11). Retrieved in October, 2013.
11. alik AI, Zai CC, Abu Z, Nowrouzi B, Beitchman JH (2012). "The role of oxytocin and oxytocin receptor gene variants in childhood-onset aggression". *Genes Brain Behav* **11** (5): 545–51
12. Kendrick KM (2004). "The Neurobiology of Social Bonds". *British Society for Neuroendocrinology*. Retrieved April 13, 2009.