

HOW TO FEED AND CARE FOR YOUR PRISONER

A Manual in Two Parts

comprising

An Essay of the Same Name

and

A Shorter Piece, Its Compliment

presented by

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for the Edification and Diversion of the Public.

## How To Feed And Care For Your Prisoner

Commiserations and condolences on your loved one's recent imprisonment. As a proud and/or ashamed participant in an existing relationship with a New York State prisoner, you may feel a little bit lost as you contemplate your change of social status vis-a-vis your loved one: what are your responsibilities? What can you do to help him? What are his responsibilities to you? Most importantly, how do you keep the State's decision to lock your loved one in a cage from destroying your relationship with him?

The following guide is designed to answer some of the most basic ramifications of this essential question.

The guide is divided into four sections for ease of use, but each of these categories is interrelated with every other. The best chance you have of maintaining your relationship with your prisoner lies in defending that relationship holistically -- at every level, on every front. As with any long-term strategy, this effort requires a practical understanding of the game. Read on.

### Part One: "I miss my baby."

Prison is lonely. There are (for practical purposes) no women -- conversely, in women's prison, there are no men. There are no children, no spouses, no relatives. There are no friends. (Hopefully.) The system is designed so that neither guards nor fellow inmates can ever be relied upon. Anyone a prisoner might safely trust is on the other side of the wall, full stop.

This is the primary function of imprisonment: the convict is ripped from the social fabric that sustains him. To extend the metaphor, some threads snap under the strain, others lengthen. Elasticity -- flexibility -- is key, and the way to maintain flexibility is through stretching.

In practical terms, this means adapting your relationship to the circumstances of your loved one's imprisonment:

1. Make time to visit him. Even if it's only once per year, this is the best way to show that you care. We can wait. It's what we do. Just remember that it is easy to become paranoid in here: if you aren't coming, say so. Small breaches of trust can quickly add up to torpedo a relationship.
2. If you have a phone account set up to accept his calls, be available when you say you will be available. We understand that life happens, and sometimes you can't answer. But please know that it is better for us, psychologically, to be told that you just don't want to talk than to be told that you do when you don't. Prison phone systems are set up so that prisoners can't tell the difference between ringing through to voice mail, an out of service phone or number, or being sent to voice mail manually. Not knowing which it is makes us

paranoid, anxious, angry, depressed. Communication -- even about not wanting to communicate -- is important.

3. Which brings us to the mail. Write your prisoner. It really will make his day to get a card, letter, email, or videogram from you, even if it's just about the weather or Mrs. Hinkeldreck's stuffed cat collection. And if it's bad news, see #2 above and Part Four below; it's better to know than not to know. Knowing the bad news will let your loved one move on with his life, do what he has to do, and will ensure that he does not act on false assumptions. He may not like what you have to tell him, but he will be grateful (eventually) to be respected enough to be told.

### Part Two: "It sucks to be poor."

It is bad enough to be poor in the real world. Being poor in prison is that much worse. The State does pay inmates for the work they do, but it is generally, in New York State, between 7¢ and 25¢/hour. Only a few hundred inmates Statewide make up to 45¢/hour working in prison industry, no matter what any number of righteously-indignant politicians on the nightly news may say. Most prisoners make less than the poorest citizens of third-world countries. \$2/day is about the best your prisoner can hope to make in State pay, no matter how well or how hard he works.

The State, vexingly, allows him to purchase up to several hundred dollars in food, tobacco, stamps, and other basics every two weeks at the prison commissary, and allows many other items to be purchased from catalog retailers out of his prison account.

With the recent issue of JPay tablets to each prisoner in the New York State system, millions of songs, videos, games, and various messaging options are now available to your loved one, too --for a fee.

But on State pay, only the most wretched existence is affordable, and recent legislative efforts to raise prison wages have proven to be about as popular as the plague.

Your prisoner, unless he is independently wealthy and has arranged a stipend for himself, needs money. The good news is that literally anything will help. A few pointers:

1. Your prisoner always needs money. The only question is what you can afford to send. The best thing you can do is to send money on a regular schedule. Everything in prison is cyclical and scheduled far in advance, day-to-day disruptions notwithstanding: being able to plan for the near future with confidence will relieve a great deal of your loved one's stress and will enhance his social standing, which will improve both his health and his safety. This is particularly important if he smokes or chews: borrowing against the next commissary day means paying at least 50% interest (borrow 2 items, buy 3 on the next commissary date), if not 100% (borrow one, buy two). "Juggling," as it is called, is a sucker's

game: the equivalent of a payday loan, or the services of your friendly local loan shark.

2. Send food and/or tobacco regularly. New York State prisoners are allowed 35 pounds of food and 12 ounces of tobacco per month. Having a stash of food and tobacco puts your prisoner in a superior bargaining position to get the best out of a resource-poor environment. This is a great option for those with bills to pay -- alimony, child support, court costs, fines, restitution -- which are subtracted from money sent in.
3. Remember that food, money, and tobacco can be brought in when you visit your loved one. Kill two birds! Nothing prolongs the warmth of a nice visit like tromping back to your cell with a big sack of goodies from home.
4. Ask your prisoner what he needs -- he will know best what is allowed and what will serve his purposes. He may be too polite or too proud to ask you, but be certain, he needs your support.
5. If you say you're going to send something, send it. If you can't, say so. Your prisoner would rather know than be jerked around, however inadvertently: the State does enough of that.

### Part Three: "It's cold in here."

Unsurprisingly, the State does not provide much in the way of clothing, bedding, shoes, appliances, etc. The biggest purchase your prisoner will make will probably be a television, which runs \$147 and must be bought through the commissary. Other things that will enhance his quality of life, make him feel less like an animal, are bed linens, blankets, rugs, a typewriter (upon which this essay was composed, by the way), radio, cups and bowls, good headphones (see my essay "On Quiet"), socks, shirts, hats, shoes and boots, towels and washcloths, religious items, art supplies, books and magazine subscriptions, sports equipment, musical instruments.

DOCCS Directive 4911, which sets forth inmate package procedures, has a list of what is allowed. Your prisoner can get a copy of this in the law library, or you may be able to find it on the DOCCS website.

A few important points:

1. It really does get cold in here. Many prisons have old factory-style windows, single-glazed, often missing panels, and Soviet-bloc-style heating that turns on in October and turns off in April, regardless of weather. Prisons are very drafty places. It keeps the fog of cigarette smoke to a minimum, but it can get cold in winter, and the State does not care if you freeze. State issue clothes, bed linens, and blankets are very

thin. It is not uncommon to see new prisoners sleeping in boots, pants, and State-issue jacket under a threadbare secondhand State-issue blanket during winter. It is one of life's small mercies that fans are sold on prison commissaries; summers can be as stuffy and hot as winters are cold. There is no such thing as air conditioning. Mattresses are thin and lumpy and covered with hard vinyl. Pillows are also thin, lumpy, and covered in hard vinyl. Both are issued used, often in poor condition. It sometimes takes months to be issued a pillow. You can't send your prisoner a pillow or a mattress, but you can send him some decent sheets, pillowcases, and a proper fleece blanket. A pair of long johns helps, too. It can be the difference between a good night's sleep and chronic fatigue.

2. While the other sundry items and entertainments aren't exactly essential, they do soften the blow of a long sentence, and your prisoner will remember you each time he turns on his TV, or puts on shoes that don't hurt his feet. Remember that each of these things will serve your prisoner for a significant period of time -- decades, even -- so the return on investment is pretty good. Nothing is wasted in prison: like the peoples of the far North, we use the whole whale, meat, bones, blubber, baleen, and ivory; nothing is thrown away before its usefulness is completely exhausted.
3. At the end of the day, people are pretty resilient creatures: when the rudimentary standards of civilization are met -- we have some food that doesn't look and taste like silage, a warm place to sleep, maybe a book to read, a nice photo on the desk, or the warm afterglow of a friendly phone conversation to contemplate -- we can soldier on through pretty much anything that doesn't outright kill us. Little things help.

Part Four: "I am still a man." (Or woman, as the case may be.)

Visits, phone calls, letters; Christmas cards and photos of the kids; food packages and clean underwear; the physical manifestations of care, of fondness, of love or devotion or duty: these things lose a lot of their power to help maintain a relationship without a foundation of mutual respect, mutual trust, between your prisoner and yourself.

The State of New York is a messy, clumsy, antiquated system that wears the weight of its years in weakness and corruption. It is perfectly possible to go to prison for decades in this state for no other reason than that somebody had to. It is also true that most prisoners are guilty of the crimes of which they have been convicted.

The first thing you learn in prison is that no matter what you've done or not done, you always have your word. It is the

one resource to which all people have equal access, regardless of the law or circumstances. At some times, it is all that you have. It is the foundation of every human interaction: whether someone will do as he says he will do, is who he says he is. Once broken, your word cannot be restored, only repaired, and the cracks will show.

It is the nature of imprisonment to stretch the ties that give our lives meaning, and it is the responsibility of you and your prisoner both to see that they do not break unnecessarily: those bonds are the only things that the wall cannot contain. Trust and respect. Telling the truth, even if it hurts. Letting yourself be hurt when necessary. This is the easiest and the hardest part of feeding and caring for your prisoner, and the most important. A relationship built on trust and respect can endure, can become stronger over time, can be a source of comfort in times of sorrow, of purpose in the midst of despair.

Without trust and respect, a relationship becomes toxic to both parties, or falls apart, and is not easily mended.

Whatever your relationship with your prisoner, remember that he or she is a person before anything else, and "there but for the grace of God go I."

Prison is hard. Your loved one may fail you, or you may fail him. Your relationship may become so burdensome that you have to end it, or vice versa, even -- especially -- if you are honest with one another; even if -- sometimes because -- you truly have one another's best interests at heart.

But time passes; people grow and change; doors open. A relationship founded on trust and respect, even one left for dead, may live again.

Thank you for reading How To Feed And Care For Your Prisoner. I hope it has been helpful to you.

However, there is more to be discussed. You may have noticed that there was very little said in How To Feed And Care For Your Prisoner about your prisoner's responsibilities to you. You may, in point of fact, be speculating as to whether the essayist is a clinical-level narcissist (not uncommon in prison, to be fair) or merely a class-A jerk. Therefore:

### The Other Side Of The Coin: What You Should Expect From Your Prisoner

Never fear, dear reader: while your prisoner's options are extremely limited by confinement and the constant aggravation and depression that come with it, this essay is not apology for bad manners or sociopathic behavior. Your prisoner's situation does not constitute a moral high ground from which he may demand your participation in his ordeal.

Rather, your prisoner's limited ability to engage in normal human reciprocity is a largely immutable fact through which your expectations of him must be filtered.

Think of it as a disability, a challenge to which he must rise.

Having read the first of these twin essays, you have some understanding of your prisoner's basic quotidian problems, and of how you can help to alleviate them. While those problems are considerable, they do not relieve your loved one of his social obligations; they only complicate his fulfillment thereof.

Consider Part One of the previous essay. Visiting, picking up the phone, writing letters or emails -- these are all activities in which you have primary agency: you choose whether to come to the prison to visit; you choose whether to set up a phone account; you choose to send money so that your loved one can afford stamps; you choose to share your new telephone number or address with him.

Very few prisoners have the power to make these things happen from in here, and even then that power is predicated upon the relations that they maintain with people outside the walls -- lawyers, family, friends, business associates, whomever.

Your prisoner's obligation to you can only begin when you have taken the first step. But once you have done so, his responsibility to you clears up, and begins to resolve into something suspiciously resembling simple politeness. He should not refuse a visit. He should make the effort to call when he can. He should write back. He should never be rude to you. And over all, he should remember that those contacts that you initiate are as much for you as they are for him, and he should respect that.

Prison is not just hard on prisoners; feel free to remind him of that. If he is honest with you and with himself, he must admit it to be true.

Parts Two and Three of the previous essay relate to physical support: money, food, and stuff. Again, you must make the first move, usually, as most prisoners lack outside resources independent of their social relationships (i.e. trusts or pensions; resources bound to their disposal by law). Again, your

prisoner's responsibility to you begins only when you choose to initiate contact by sending him something. But unlike with simple communication, your loved one probably won't be able to return the favor in kind. This is the meaning of "disability" as previously mentioned: your prisoner probably cannot provide for you as you can provide for him.

However, (as with most disabilities) there are ways to compensate for this inequality of opportunity inherent to your relationship with your prisoner, and in this compensation, the initiative belongs to him: this is the challenge to which he must rise.

Gratitude is the first response you should expect. A simple "thank you" goes a long way. In a nice letter or card, perhaps. Bear in mind, however, that in some cultures it can be read as backhanded to thank someone for something understood to be a matter of course. Communication, as previously and repeatedly mentioned, is key.

Another way your prisoner can respect your support is by taking care of himself and of the resources you provide him. This means using his money responsibly and maintaining the things you buy him, or disposing of them when he no longer wants them in a way that benefits his well-being and thereby respects your intention.

Everyone in prison knows someone who behaves abominably toward his family or friends, demanding loudly over the phone that they send him money, food, a new pair of shoes, and then selling the stuff as soon as it arrives for a pittance in drugs or tobacco. You do not have to allow yourself to be used in that way, and rest assured, most of us think it's pretty rotten, too. Moreover, enabling or validating bad behavior does your prisoner no favors: it serves him as badly as it serves you.

(On a side note, I should mention that people with surcharges, judgements against them, restitution, etc., all of which are taken out of cash receipts, commonly have their families send in things to sell for commissary items, but obviously this should be done with the full knowledge and cooperation of one's family.)

Most prisoners make the best of what they are given -- they try to eat well, stay at least somewhat active, live respectably, and try to take good care of their stuff. It is not an unreasonable expectation that your prisoner should wring every penny of value from your hard-earned dollar, nor is it unreasonable to expect that he should respect the limits of your generosity.

In all such interactions, to be humble by choice, rather than to chafe always at the State's boot on his neck, is your prisoner's best response both to his situation and to your generosity of spirit and of means. This lesson can take decades to sink in, but most prisoners eventually come to understand that it is true, and a good way to live, generally. It is not something that you can teach, except by example.

Which brings us back around to mutual trust and respect, the indispensable foundations of any healthy relationship, in which two people may grow and learn from one another, and about which

nothing more shall be said, in order that action may take the place of words.

Thank you for reading The Other Side Of The Coin: What You Should Expect From Your Prisoner, and good luck.