

Tolerance

I've spent close to twenty years in prison, all together. While incarcerated, I've learned a number of important things. One of those is tolerance.

No matter what you do, or where you go in a prison setting, you will run into people you normally would have nothing to do with. Maybe you don't like their crime. Perhaps you hang out with a different group - or "click". It could be because the person is sort of a "truck"... always getting into trouble or causing problems. But, unless you stay on your bunk all the time, you are going to be around those people. That is where tolerance comes in.

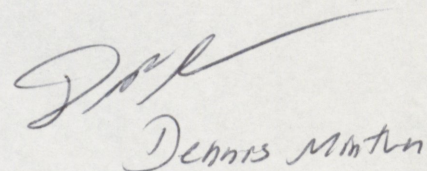
Tolerance is not necessarily condoning a person's behavior; past; or even way of life. Tolerance is simply accepting a person, and learning to put up with them, in spite of personal feelings. One of the biggest issues in prison is a person's crime - or their past reputation, in general. What we need to remember is that the past is exactly that... the past. People can, and do, change. We've all made mistakes in our past. If we are honest, most of us have done things we would never want anyone else to know about. In fact, a lot of our friends might not want to hang out with us if they knew all the details of our past.

So, we bury our pasts. That doesn't mean we forget them. It just means we put them away. That's how we should deal with the pasts of other people... put them away. After all, they've already been convicted and sentenced for their crime. It's not up to us to punish anyone. We're not paid to be a judge or prosecutor. The very best way to deal with a person is to deal with them *in the now*. That is: we take them at face value. If they are trying to improve themselves in any area... help them. But, even if they are not, we can still learn to be tolerant. People are always evolving. Some take longer than others. That's where tolerance comes in. Encourage people to improve themselves, without being pushy or demanding.

Another area that many of us find hard to deal with is age. Some of us are older, and "set in our ways". This makes it difficult to deal with younger inmates who feel they have to "make a name for themselves". The younger feel the older are *stubborn*, or *grouchy*; the older think the younger are *impulsive* or *flighty*. Again, we pretty much have to learn to work with each other. Here, the younger inmates can give different perspectives or original ideas; while the older can share their experience and (hopefully) wisdom. Either way, being tolerant of someone who is in a different age group can turn out to benefit everyone.

Then, there is the issue of different *clicks*. You have a certain set of people you usually hang out with. In a prison setting, it is sometimes easy to forget that we aren't in high school. Rather, we are in a closed community where it is much easier to live together if we are getting along. That's not to say you should hang out with people who make you feel uncomfortable. But, you may have to work with them; attend classes with them; or play on a sports team with them. In short, learning to tolerate those who are different than you will make even a stay in prison a bit more pleasant. We may be forced to live together. However, that doesn't mean we need to make things harder on others - or ourselves - by being intolerant.

People who learn true tolerance are people who will make this world a better place.



Dennis Martin