

HOW TO FEED AND CARE FOR YOUR PRISONER

A Relationship Maintenance Manual
For Prisoners And Their Loved Ones

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Commiserations and condolences on your loved one's imprisonment. As a participant in a 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 your loved one's imprisonment from destroying your relationship with him?

The following guide is designed to answer some of the most basic ramifications of this essential question in a brief and practical manner. It is addressed to persons on the outside whose loved ones are in prison, but is designed to be useful reading for prisoners, especially first-timers, as well.

The first part of 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 is no dating pool, though women and men both work in men's and women's prisons. There are no children, no spouses, no relatives. (Hopefully.) There are no friends, only associates. Socially, prison is a carefully-calibrated system of incentivized self-interest, designed so that no individual inmate can rely on anyone but himself. This is meant to prevent breaches of security, good order, etc., and should not be taken personally, neither by prisoners nor by their loved ones. It is a feature, not a bug. A prisoner must remember at all times that anyone he might safely trust is on the other side of the wall, full stop.

The primary effect of imprisonment is to remove the convict from society. At a level personal both to him and to his loved ones, this means that he is removed from the social fabric to which he contributes (positively and negatively), and which sustains him. To extend the metaphor, some threads of this social fabric snap under the strain, others lengthen. Elasticity -- flexibility -- is key, and the way to maintain flexibility is through regular 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. He can wait. It's what prisoners do. Just remember that it is easy to become paranoid in prison: if you aren't coming, say so. Small breaches of trust can quickly add up to torpedo a relationship. If you're married, or a blood relative, consider participating in the Family

Reunion Program, which grants three-day, two-night visits in small apartments on the prison grounds to qualified prisoners and their relatives. It is not available in every facility, but is worth looking into.

2. If you have a phone account set up to accept his calls, be available when you say you will be available. Keep your ringer on. Prisoners understand that life happens, and sometimes you won't be able to answer. But please know that it is better for your prisoner, 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, and being sent to voice mail manually. Not knowing which it is can make your prisoner paranoid, anxious, angry, depressed. Communication -- even about not wanting to talk -- 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 cats. 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 between 7¢ and 25¢/hour. Only a small proportion of inmates statewide make up to 38¢/hour preparing food, or 65¢/hour in Corcraft prison industry. \$2/day is about the best your prisoner can hope to make in "State pay."

The State 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 tablet computers to each prisoner, millions of songs, videos, games, and various messaging options are now available to your loved one, for a fee.

But on State pay, only the most basic existence is affordable.

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 tobacco: borrowing against the next commissary buy means paying at least 50% interest (borrow two items, pay back three), if not 100% (borrow one, pay back two). "Juggling," as it is called, is a sucker's game: the equivalent of a payday loan, or the services of a loan shark. It is dangerous, and to be avoided.

2. Send food and/or tobacco regularly. New York State prisoners are allowed up to 40 pounds of food (in up to three separate boxes) and 12 ounces of tobacco per month. Be aware that online retailers like Amazon and Walmart.com will sometimes ship orders in several boxes. Each box will count against the monthly limit of three. Food can no longer be sent from home, and nonfood packages can only be sent twice a year. (See Part Three.) Rules aside, having a stash of food and tobacco will put your prisoner in a superior bargaining position, enabling him to get the best out of a resource-poor environment. Regular food and tobacco packages are a great option for those prisoners with bills to pay -- alimony, child support, court costs, fines, restitution -- all of which are subtracted from money sent in.
3. Remember that money can be brought in when you visit your loved one. Nothing prolongs the warmth of a nice visit like tromping back to one's cell with a topped-off commissary account.
4. Ask your prisoner what he needs. Each facility is different; 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. And never send anything unannounced -- remember the three-box monthly limit for food packages. Someone else may already have sent him something, and it costs money he may not have to return packages to sender. Facilities will not allow your prisoner to use return shipping labels -- he must pay all such costs himself.
5. If you say that you're going to send something, send it. If you can't, say so. Your prisoner would rather know than spend his time waiting for a package that never comes. It is impossible for him to tell what is happening outside his immediate line of sight, much less outside the wall. Much as with visits or phone calls,

it is better to be disappointed than to be left in the dark.

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

The State provides only basic clothing, bedding, shoes, appliances, etc. The biggest purchase your prisoner will make will probably be a television, which runs \$158 and must be bought through the commissary. Other things that will enhance his quality of life are bed linens, blankets, rugs, a typewriter, a radio, cups and bowls, good headphones, 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 governs inmate packages, contains a list of what is allowed. Your prisoner can get a copy of this in the facility law library, or you may be able to find it on the DOCCS website. The regulations are extremely detailed, and must be adhered to with precision. Remember also that each facility has its own regulations, so be sure to consult closely with your prisoner before you buy him anything.

A few important points:

1. It really does get cold in here. Many older prisons have factory-style windows, single-glazed, often missing panes, and steam heat that turns on in October and turns off in April, regardless of weather. Prisons are very drafty places. It can get cold in winter. State-issue clothes, bed linens, and blankets are single-layer affairs. It is not uncommon to see new prisoners sleeping in State-issue boots, pants, and jacket under a State-issue blanket during winter. It is one of life's small mercies that fans are sold on prison commissaries; summers can be as stiflingly hot as winters are cold. Air conditioning only exists in the newest prisons. Mattresses and pillows are thin and covered with hospital-style vinyl. Both are issued used. It sometimes takes months to get replacements for either. You can't send your prisoner a pillow or a mattress, but you can send him some better sheets, pillowcases, and a fire-retardant 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 cushion 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, prisoners use the whole whale, meat, bones, blubber, baleen, and ivory; nothing is thrown

away before its usefulness is completely exhausted. Again, remember to consult your prisoner before you send anything, as each facility has its own rules, and only two nonfood packages can be received each year.

3. At the end of the day, people are pretty resilient creatures: when the rudimentary standards of civilization are met -- palatable food, a warm place to sleep, maybe a book to read or basic cable, a nice photo on the desk, the warm afterglow of a friendly phone conversation to contemplate -- your prisoner can endure pretty much anything that doesn't outright kill him. Little things help a lot.

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.

It is true that most prisoners are guilty of the crimes of which they have been convicted. It is equally true that some are not.

The first thing that 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, the integrity of 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. 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, 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 inside, and even then that power is predicated upon the relationships 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 that 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 prisoners 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 in exchange for commissary items, but this should only 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 his ordeal, 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.