

Making It: A Prison Survival Guide

A survival guide for entering prison

The staff of Inside Journal, Prison Fellowship's "Hometown Newspaper of America's Prisoners" has reached throughout the prisoner and ex-prisoner communities to compile this manual. Throughout you will find practical, helpful survival tips from those who are currently in prison or have previously served time.

Introduction

It was a sultry, late-summer day in 1974. I was in an Alabama prison. I was no longer a respected lawyer, no longer an adviser to the President of the United States. Now I was C. Colson, Prisoner #23227. I was at the lowest point in my life. A prisoner has a choice to make. Will this experience "make" or "break" the individual? Each one has this choice to make.

My advice is, don't let it break you. Let it make you into a better person. Whether you're facing a long sentence or a short one, you have some choices to make. Prison can be terribly difficult. But it is possible to survive. And it is possible to begin a new, positive direction for your life. Now, while you're still in. And it can continue after you're out.

After release, I never wanted to see a prison again. But I couldn't forget the prisoners I'd left behind. And from my awful experience, under the direction and empowerment of a sovereign God, has come a movement of people that is helping all those touched by crime; Victims, families, those in the criminal justice system, and prisoners, especially prisoners.

The people of Prison Fellowship care about you. We want to be there for you. Read this little manual carefully. Feel through it the surging voices of thousands saying, "You can make it." "You're not alone." "Success is possible." May God bless you and care for you. And may He make you a better person through this experience.

Charles W. Colson
Chairman of Prison Fellowship Ministries

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1. A Shocking Experience

"Let me give you a little advice," pressing his body against my cell bars; Buster appropriated a father's character. He poked his left hand into my cell and began to count by lifting one finger at a time.

"First, don't gamble. You get in debt, and you lose your virginity, or get your brains beat out. "Second, don't mess around with punks or their daddies, jocks. Most people in here get hurt because of sex. "One more thing kid, Do your own time. Know what I mean?" "I think so." "You don't see or hear nothing. You rat on someone, you dead meat. "Gotta go," "Cell number?" echoed a turnkey's voice. "Eleven," shouted Buster. Click! My neighbor disappeared, leaving me to contemplate his jailhouse wisdom.

Marvin Dixon, That Saved a Wretch Like Me, published by Chalice Press, 1993. Used by permission.

Becoming a prisoner, especially for the first time, is a traumatic event for most people. The sights, sounds, and smells of prison unleash strong physical and emotional reactions. Physically, don't be surprised if you experience:

- † Nausea
- † Diarrhea
- † Trouble sleeping
- † Upset stomach
- † Lack of appetite

Of course, if you have been addicted or heavily used, alcohol, or other substances, you may experience additional physical discomforts. Emotionally, you may feel:

- † Afraid
- † Angry
- † Depressed
- † Anxious
- † Guilty
- † Grief-stricken
- † Out of control
- † Sad
- † Lost or abandoned

Some have suggested that those entering prison experience the same emotional stages that accompany the death of a loved one. These may include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Your thinking will be affected. Expect to be confused. Bewildered, Disoriented, Forgetful, Easily distracted. All these are normal. You're not weird or abnormal if you experience them. Recognizing this is an important first step to adjusting to prison life.

2. Be Prepared

Before You Go

Stan Jarrett, who served many years as a Prison Fellowship area director, has the following advice for those who have a little time to prepare:

1. Prior to going in, contact the nearest Prison Fellowship office or the prison chaplain and ask for a list of what you can bring in and what you can't.
2. Do not bring expensive watches or jewelry. Buy only cheap ones, or bring none at all. Gold jewelry, books, fancy clothing, or electronic devices invite theft or demands from other inmates.
3. Check on the institution's procedures regarding prisoners having money, receiving and sending mail, and making telephone calls.

For New Arrivals

1. Memorize your Department of Corrections ID number and the prison's mailing address.
2. Listen a lot and talk little.
3. Be a follower, not a leader, at least until you "learn the ropes." This is no place to be assertive.
4. Be 100-percent cooperative with guards and DOC staff. Don't bug your case worker with unnecessary complaints or frivolous questions.
5. Find out the normal provisions for toiletry items.
6. Discover how the mail and telephone system work.
7. Find out what you have to do if you become sick or get hurt.
8. Get to know the chaplains and their inmate helpers.

3. General Hints

1. **Do your own time.** Don't get immediately into discussions with others about either your conviction or theirs. Daniel, writing from a prison in Wisconsin, says, "Don't dip into other inmates' crimes or personal lifestyles. Have respect for everyone, and you will be equally respected."

Michael, who's in prison in Ohio, says, "In most cases, the first people to try to talk with new prisoners are bad news." He counsels, "Be respectful, careful, and observant!" He recommends going to the prison chapel or church to find someone who knows the ropes and will give you how-to-get-along advice. Charles, giving advice from North Carolina, says simply, "Keep your case private. Discuss it only with your attorney."

2. **Don't gamble.** It is not easy to get money in prison to repay debts, and to owe someone something can cause all kinds of trouble.
3. **Daniel also says, "Remember the D.T.A. rule - Don't Trust Anyone."** He means, choose your friends wisely. A chapel, he says, is the best place in prison to find real, decent people. Ronald, giving advice from an Illinois joint, puts it like this: "Do not associate yourself with toxic individuals." He warns against associating with "negatively charged individuals" who are determined to pull you "into their miserable little world."

4. **Never borrow.** Eugene, imprisoned in Florida, says, "If the state didn't give it to me, then I don't need it." Michael, giving advice from a prison in Ohio, says, "Do not accept any cigarettes, coffee, food, or drugs offered to you. Believe me; it will not turn out to be free, no matter what they tell you." John, imprisoned in New York, warns: "You may be getting married and not even know it. They may come for a payback. As a rule of thumb, do without rather than taking from a stranger." Charles, writing from a prison in North Carolina, says, "If you owe debts, they may demand payment from you like sex, high interest if you have money in your trust fund, or you may even be setting yourself up to get stabbed or raped."
5. **Stay away from dope and booze.** They're available in many prisons, just like on the outside. They're big trouble. Stay away! One prisoner warns, "Don't try any drugs, alcohol, or any pills that a doctor did not prescribe for you."
6. **Avoid homosexuals and gangs.** John, who's in prison in New York, says, "You never know whose husband or jailhouse wife you are talking to" they may feel you're moving in on their property."
7. **Treat guards with respect, but don't spend much time talking to them.** John, from New York, says, "Being seen talking in private with a guard may lead another inmate to call you a rat" one of the worst things in the penitentiary that can happen to you." William, who is in a prison in Michigan, says: "Don't snitch or get chummy with correctional officers."
8. **Be careful for your physical safety, at least until you learn the particulars of your institution.** Charles, in North Carolina, says, "Avoid corners where there are no guards to view you or another inmate who would assist you if you needed help."
9. **Take advantage of helpful programs and opportunities in prison.** Bible studies. Seminars. G.E.D. and college programs. Vocational training. Self-esteem and personal development courses. Charles, in a North Carolina prison, says "Keep your time moving smoothly instead of playing games. An idle mind really is the Devil's workshop."

"My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God." *Proverbs 2:1-5*

4. Keeping Physically Fit

With time on your hands, and so much of your schedule decided for you, it's possible to maintain (or gain!) a new, higher level of physical fitness in prison. The keys are:

- † Eat right
- † Exercise properly
- † Avoid physically harmful habits
- † Get health care when needed

You may not have as many food choices as on the outside, but in most prison chow halls you can make some of these intelligent decisions:

- † Avoid saturated fats as much as possible. Go light on the butter, margarine, fatty red meats, fried foods, whole milk (skim is better) and dairy products.
- † Cut back on caffeine from coffee, tea, and soft drinks.
- † Eat fresh fruits and green vegetables whenever possible.
- † Utilize your prison library or read Inside Journal for continuing hints on "How to Eat Prison Food and Stay Healthy."

The iron pile and exercise yard are where you'll usually find the fittest prisoners. But everyone can benefit from a moderate routine of some walking or some light calisthenics (stretching, situps, pushups, jumping jacks).

Thirty minutes or so of moderate exercise three or four times a week will improve your cardiovascular system, keep your muscle tone up, and generally make you feel better all around.

Of course, avoiding tobacco, if possible, will pay some of the greatest health dividends. Maintaining some personal disciplines is especially important when so much of your environment and schedule is controlled for you.

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made..." *Psalms 139:13-14*

5. Spiritual Fitness: The Most Important

Giving Your Life to God

The tougher your situation gets, the more you will need strength from beyond yourself. Paying attention to your spiritual fitness is the only way to be truly "free behind the bars."

1. The Bible is God's guidebook for life and is the best ongoing source of help and guidance. If you don't have one, ask your chaplain for an easy-to-read version. Two organizations will send you a Bible if you can't obtain one any other way. Write to ***International Bible Society, Attention: Ministries Department, P.O. Box 62970, Colorado Springs, CO 80962-2970***. Or have your chaplain write a letter for you, requesting a Bible, to ***American Bible Society, Attention: National Distribution, 1865 Broadway, New York, NY 10023***.
2. Begin a personal relationship with God" the most important decision you will ever make. Not much is offered to us with no strings attached. But God's love comes that way. *"I love you with a love that will last forever," God tells us in Jeremiah 31:3. And nothing is able to separate us from that love (Romans 8:39).*

Sadly, most people never experience that love. The reason is sin. *"All people have sinned and are not good enough for God's glory," Romans 3:23* tells us. It's not a question of the good deeds weighing more than bad deeds. It's not an issue of living a better life than the guy in the next cell. Compared to God, we all fall short of what we should be. And that cuts us off from feeling His love and purpose in our lives. But God's love never quits. And out of that love He sent Jesus to pay the price for our sins through His death on the cross. Then, to prove to the world that He could break the power of sin, God raised Jesus from the dead. God loves each one of us. We can be saved from God's punishment and from the power of sin in our lives. It

requires accepting Jesus as our Savior from sin and as Lord of our lives" realizing that we can never be "good enough" without Him. Salvation is nothing we can earn. It's free to us, but costly to God. It cost the life of Jesus. But it costs us nothing, except maybe our pride. If you want to know the love and freedom that only Jesus can give, pray a prayer something like this:

"Heavenly Father, I want to experience Your love and freedom. The Bible says that if I accept Jesus as my Lord and believe in my heart that You raised Him from the dead, I will be saved. I believe that You are God and that by Your power You can forgive me and make me a whole person inside. I believe that by that same power You can give me peace. Forgive me for anything that I have done that was against Your will. Things I have thought, things I have said, things I have done. I accept Jesus as my Savior. Thank You for loving me. Thank You for forgiving me. And thank You for giving me eternal life. Now please guide me in my new Christian walk. Amen." Welcome to God's forever family! You have just made the most important decision anyone ever could make.

Follow-up Steps

1. Get a Bible and read the following verses to confirm what you have just done:

- † **John 3:16** - "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."
- † **Romans 5:8** - "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."
- † **John 6:37** - "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."
- † **1 John 1:8, 9** - "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."
- † **1 John 1:10-13** - "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has his testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son."

2. Write and tell the staff of Inside Journal what you have done. We want to send you a brief Bible study to help you start your Christian life. Write ***Inside Journal, P.O. Box 17429, Washington DC 20041-0429.***

3. Find your chaplain and share with him or her. Ask how to make contact with the nearest Prison Fellowship field office, or with any Prison Fellowship volunteers who come into your institution. Most prisons in the U.S. have some Prison Fellowship programming, whether regular Bible studies, weekend seminars, or occasional special programs.

4. Talk to God every day and read your Bible faithfully. Good books to start reading are the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament and the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. You'll find plenty to think about and apply to your life!

6. Relationships with the Outside

It's unfortunate, but many marriages do not survive when one of the partners does a prison term. Yours can be the exception, but it will be hard.

Steve and Donna Varnam had been married for only five years when Steve was sentenced to five years at Eglin Federal Prison Camp in Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. Steve and Donna realized their marriage would survive only if Christ was at the center of it. So they spent this time learning and applying biblical principles to their marriage. Here are some helpful tips from Steve and Donna.

He Said (from Steve) Steve Varnam says there are many things a husband in prison can do to maintain and even strengthen his marriage:

1. Get over your self-pity and accept responsibility for the actions that put you in prison. Only then can you get a fresh start on life and your marriage.
2. Learn to communicate with your wife honestly. By the point that you have been incarcerated, you have undoubtedly damaged her trust and confidence in you. Only by being completely honest now can you begin to reestablish your wife's trust in you.
3. Be sensitive to what your wife is going through right now. She has been forced to assume a lot of new responsibilities all by herself. She, too, feels very alone. Keep your expectations of your spouse realistic. Do not place unreasonable demands on her.
4. Use whatever opportunities you have to communicate with your wife (letters, telephone calls, and visits). Encourage and lift your wife up; don't tear her down.
5. Use this time to build a strong relationship with Christ and a firm spiritual foundation for your marriage.

She Said (from Donna) Donna Varnam says there are many things a husband in prison can do to make sure he and his wife stay and grow closer together:

1. Tell your wife you're sorry and ask for her forgiveness. It will mean so much to your wife to hear these words.
2. Don't relinquish your role as husband or father. Make it easy for your wife to tell you about the things that are happening at home. Discuss and share family decisions with her as much as possible.
3. Communicate honestly and frequently with your wife. Letters mean as much to her as they do to you.
4. Trust your wife. Do not let others plant suspicions in your mind. Do not let the disappointing experiences of other prisoners make you doubt your wife's faithfulness and commitment to you.
5. Take spiritual charge of your marriage. Ask Jesus Christ into your heart and then lead your wife to do the same. Your marriage is divorce-proof only when you are both committed to the Lord.

Additional Tips

Former Prison Fellowship Area Director Rose-Marie Armstrong offers the following advice from her many years' experience dealing with prison/family relationships:

1. When calling home collect, particularly when it's long-distance, call different members of the family rather than always calling the same person (spouse, mother, sibling).
2. Plan your calls by making a list of things you want to talk about. Otherwise, you'll forget something, call on impulse, and then feel guilty about calling again so soon.
3. When requesting books, food, money, or clothes from family members, request them from various people rather than the same person every time. This will help ease guilty feelings by those who can't respond because of lack of money.

7. Closing Thoughts

1. **Read Inside Journal regularly.** It is distributed free into nearly all U.S. state and federal prisons plus numerous county jails and youth detention centers, approximately 1,800 institutions in all. Each issue carries inspirational stories of ex-cons who are "making it," practical tips for making a success of your time in prison, and helpful information you can't get any other place.
2. **Get into a pen-pal relationship.** A good friend-by-mail, even someone of quite a different age, gender, race or station in life, can give you balance, perspective, and encouragement. Write to Prison Fellowship and ask for the Pen Pal application.
3. **Depend on God.** With dependence on God, you can make prison a life-changing experience, for the better! Remember, Prison Fellowship and Inside Journal staff members care about you and want you to succeed.

This manual is provided by Prison Fellowship Ministries and sent to you from:

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"For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you, not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future..."

Jeremiah 29:11