

Culture Shock!

We expect formerly incarcerated people to get right back into the swing of things when they are released. We assume they are ready, that just serving time is enough to consider the impact of their crime and make plans for reentry success.

But do those of us outside of prison really understand the challenges of prison life, and the difficulties faced in adjusting from being incarcerated to rejoining society? Life in prison, in many ways, functions opposite to life on the outside.

When we return home after spending time in another culture our own customs can feel a little strange. Although we cannot fully grasp what prison culture is like here, when we picture living for several years on a confined piece of land surrounded by fences and in buildings made of cement, we get quite a different perspective of daily life. Inside prisons there usually aren't any potted plants, pictures on the walls, or carpets on the floors to absorb sound. Everyone is tense and on their guard at all times. Quarters are very small, made smaller by the addition of a toilet and sink, and most likely a cell mate. Alternate sleeping accommodations can be found in large dormitories with dozens of bunk beds and little privacy or quiet.

People do adjust to these conditions in time, but it changes them—they become institutionalized and find it difficult to set schedules and make decisions upon release because prison administrators have done this for them for so long. We now begin to see why the transition from incarceration to independence can be quite difficult.

To appreciate some of the cultural challenges a newly released prisoner has, consider the following lifestyle differences:

Persona

IN PRISON: Survival in prison requires a tough appearance. Gentle and kind people are often perceived to be weak and can be taken advantage of mentally, physically, or both. Suspicion, toughness, and keeping your thoughts to yourself are crucial tools for success in prison.

OUT OF PRISON: Friendliness, smiles, and engaging conversations show others we are open to interaction. These sociable attributes are crucial for success.

Violence

IN PRISON: Very high tension, combined with boredom, often results in violence. Extreme violence can happen quite often.

OUT OF PRISON: Violence is more prevalent in some areas, but overall the level of violence in our communities is sporadic rather than a constant threat. In general, violence is not tolerated.

Helplessness

IN PRISON: Incarcerated people often witness the most shocking and atrocious acts against human beings imaginable. Our basic urge is to help a victim by physically protecting them or finding someone who can improve the situation. Incarcerated people who "snitch" or help out, however, can find themselves in the same situations they were horrified to witness. Caring souls can even be targeted for helping a victim after the assault.

OUT OF PRISON: We watch out for each other and act on injustices. We understand that we must participate in the protection of each other to maintain our own safety and ensure safety for all.

Trust

IN PRISON: Trust is nearly impossible in prison and rarely attempted. One of the most valuable survival skills is concealment.

OUT OF PRISON: One of our most treasured human qualities is honesty. Trust is an important element in any relationship whether with family, friends, or work-related. We work hard to build long-lasting relationships. It is within these deeper relationships that we can learn more about ourselves. We can hear difficult things from people we trust and we can say difficult things to them.

Long-term Relationships

IN PRISON: Long-term relationships are very difficult in prison in fact, incarcerated people are often transferred without notice and correspondence between incarcerated people is forbidden.

OUT OF PRISON: Long-term relationships are very important and require time and effort to maintain. We often find our best connections to employment, new friends, interests, and opportunities through the relationships we have built. When we lose a trust-worthy reference, it is exponentially more difficult to achieve these valuable benefits.

Choices

IN PRISON: In addition to having an established schedule in prison, incarcerated people do not have a choice of where to go, what to wear, what colors they would like to see on the walls, or what they want to eat for breakfast. Daily life inside prison is often much like the previous day.

OUT OF PRISON: We must constantly make decisions. Our life moves at a brisk pace with frequent changes. Sometimes friends and family ask us to change our plans to join them or help them. We must decide how to prioritize our schedule to accommodate others and still keep time for ourselves.

Organizing Time

IN PRISON: Chores are optional. Food is purchased and prepared, the kitchen is cleaned, and the dishes are washed, dried, and put away... all an incarcerated people has to do is show up to eat. In addition, clothes are washed, dried, and folded. Yard maintenance is taken care of and the only cleaning responsibilities revolve around a small cell. Prison is often considered a tremendous waste of time and many prisoners suffer from boredom.

OUT OF PRISON: Chores take up a significant portion of our day. We must prioritize our tasks to get everything done. We want to make sure we have enough time to work, get our chores done, exercise, and enjoy relaxing time alone or with friends and family. We often find there are not enough hours in the day!

Quiet Time

IN PRISON: Prisons are noisy places. They offer few quiet places or opportunities for time alone. The buildings are made of concrete and rarely use carpet or other noise reducers. When people get upset they are often loud, affecting everyone. Many incarcerated people keep earplugs with them at all times.

OUT OF PRISON: Life is very busy and we are constantly interacting. We need time alone to reflect on our day, our life, or our perspective, or simply to think things through. Quiet time alone is rejuvenating and reaffirming.

Reflection and Meditation

IN PRISON: Because it is difficult to get close to other incarcerated people, reflecting and soul searching can be challenging and often must take place alone or with books.

OUT OF PRISON: We often turn to family and friends to support us through difficult times. We can tell them everything, which helps us hear our process and our progress. These steps enable us to move through change.

Humanness

IN PRISON: Incarcerated people are referred to as offender or by their ID number. They often suffer from a loss of self respect, respect for others, and respect from others. They sometimes feel they are no longer a valuable person to anyone.

OUT OF PRISON: We want to be treated with respect! You need to respect yourself in order for others to respect you. Just as we want people to see the things in us that deserve respect, we must see the things in others that we respect. This is one way we can find common ground.

Language

IN PRISON: As with many sub-cultures of Americana, prison culture has a language of its own. Not only do many words that we use every day have completely different meanings, alternate pronunciations and slang are frequently used as well.

OUT OF PRISON: Most of us have a familial or peer-group lingo that we use when we are at ease. In our work-life, however, we strive to create a uniform language with established rules that facilitate understanding since verbal communication is tough enough, even when we use the same words with roughly the same definitions.

Physical Barriers

IN PRISON: Close quarters, brick walls, tiny windows, fencing, and razor-wire are constant reminders of a very small world in which to circulate. There is very little free roaming; prisoners are accounted for wherever they go.

OUT OF PRISON: We are free to decide where to go, and we have a large range of options. We can decide how much fresh air or sunlight we want to let in, we can paint our rooms in comforting colors and enjoy a visual and tactile variety of surfaces from wood floors to brick patios to soft, grassy lawns.

Care-giving

IN PRISON: Incarcerated people have no opportunity to provide daily physical or emotional care for children, partners, parents, or pets.

OUT OF PRISON: Caring for others is constant, taxing, challenging, and invigorating! We need to be needed, and we feel good supporting those we care about.

Physical Contact

IN PRISON: Affectionate touch is limited to family visits and close friends (of which there are few, if any).

OUT OF PRISON: Hand shakes, hugs, friendly kisses, and other signs of affection are welcome and encouraged among relatives and friends.

Information

IN PRISON: Incarcerated people can access a limited amount of information through magazines, newspapers, television, radio, and letters.

OUT OF PRISON: We have a diverse array of opportunities from which to obtain information. We have the media, certainly, but with a much wider scope of options. We also have the internet with fairly limitless boundaries of information and misinformation to choose from. We share a greater variety of current event experiences and participate in creative, spirited conversation and debate.

Illness

IN PRISON: Incarcerated people are cared for. Granted, it is not always the most comforting care when they are ill. Doctors are summoned, food is prepared, and linens and clothing continue to get washed and delivered. When necessary, teeth are repaired, glasses are procured, and antibiotics are prescribed.

OUT OF PRISON: At home, we have to take care of ourselves when we are sick or wounded. We must get ourselves to the doctor or dentist and have a way to pay for the services. We must also maintain our home and our health while we heal, which is sometimes very difficult.

Patience

IN PRISON: Prisoners must learn to wait for assistance, services, and professional help including doctor visits, rides to see specialists, meetings with administrators, phone calls, and daily meals.

OUT OF PRISON: We can get medical help immediately if necessary, we arrange meetings according to our schedule and we can spontaneously do things at will.

Possessions / Money

IN PRISON: Possessions, money and the value of objects of desire are greatly distorted in prison. Retirement savings and investments are rare and most money is acquired and spent quickly. Money is not even necessary, often goods are traded. Incarcerated people do not need to worry about the cost of food, a roof over their heads, or transportation.

OUT OF PRISON: Money is our primary currency. It is very difficult to live hand to mouth as quite often unexpected expenses arise. The cost of food and shelter fluctuates and must be considered in budgeting, and all cars, old and new, break down and hit us with surprise bills.

It may surprise you to know that we are alike in many ways, too –

In prison, people continue to love children, wives, husbands, and family members. We all appreciate humor, support our favorite sports teams, and relish our favorite foods. We feel sad, scared, excited, and loving. We worry about the future and regret past wrongs. We need people and hope, there are people who need us. We are connected to each other through our faith, our culture, and our communities.