Beyond Going Home: From Reentry to Reintegration
Leaving prison is easy. Reintegration is the challenge.

The desire to return to the community evokes different images in the mind of each incarcerated person. Some people look forward to being with their families, while others look forward to working and being productive members of society. Still others simply look forward to breathing the air of freedom and enjoying the “little things,” such as eating at a restaurant, watching their favorite television shows or taking a walk with the dog. After years lost in prison, it is natural to want to make up for lost time by seeking immediate financial, social or personal success. Unfortunately, the desire to achieve goals immediately can promote an unrealistic or even self-destructive view of freedom. All too often, “going home” is viewed as a single event that occurs on the day when the gates open and you are finally allowed to leave. In reality, going home is best viewed as a series of small, yet attainable, steps.

Researchers repeatedly associate avoidance of criminal activity (desistance) with a certain few building blocks that come together to form the solid foundation needed for a fulfilling life. Similar to basketball, where long-term success comes not from trick shots but from practicing fundamental skills, a successful and satisfying life can be built on fundamentals such as social connectedness, living-wage employment and community involvement. Below are some tips for a successful reintegration.

1. Work to Establish a Positive Relationship With Your Parole Officer.

Most people who are released from prison are required to undergo a period of supervision. It is common for incarcerated people, prior to their release, to worry about potential problems with their parole officers. While this is natural, it would be more productive to instead focus on laying the groundwork for a satisfying life, which in turn will go far in ensuring that you satisfy the conditions of your supervision. It is important to have a positive line of communication with your parole officer. This may initially be difficult because it may seem that your parole officer does not trust your sincere desire to live a law-abiding life. Do not let this initial period of distrust put you off – it is your parole officer’s job to be skeptical. If your actions back up your words and you comply with the conditions of supervision, your parole officer will eventually realize that you are serious about your goals. Your plans are important, but it will be impossible to put them into action if you are not able to establish a working relationship with your parole officer. It is important to find the balance
between meeting your obligations to parole and building the positive life you seek.

2. **Establish Positive Connections in the Community.**

You will find the clearest reflection of who you are in the faces of your friends. Who you choose to associate with has a great deal of influence on your development, even as an adult. Friends or family members who are well-established, mature and responsible will model the positive changes that you are seeking to make in your own life. For example, a friend with a home and a steady job, and who chooses not to engage in risky or illegal activity, will provide legitimacy to your goals. This could be a co-worker, family friend, former teacher, job coach, mentor or community leader. On the other hand, if you align yourself with people whose priorities are diametrically opposed to yours, you are likely to be distracted from the positive goals you have set for yourself. In short, you should choose to associate with people who embody the characteristics that you want to see in yourself.

3. **Meet the Challenge of Obtaining Employment.**

While finding employment will be important, there is no question that it will be challenging to find work as more and more employers conduct background checks on job applicants. You should try to connect with community-based agencies that provide job training, employment counseling and advocacy for people with criminal conviction histories. Just as importantly, do not automatically say “no” if the first job available to you is not your ultimate employment goal; in fact, you should make a habit of saying “yes” to every positive opportunity that comes your way if it will help you move toward your goals. If a job has a lower salary than you were hoping for, look for the other potential benefits that the job provides, such as valuable experience and skill development that can lead you to a better job in the future, or the financial stability you need while you continue your search for something better. Your first job, in most cases, is better than being unemployed.

Work offers not only the financial stability required to pay living expenses, it also can help you to develop the positive associations that are so important to your long-term success. Identify potential leaders at work and reach out and develop a good working relationship with them. Not only will being around positive people provide moral support for your efforts, you will have people with whom you can compare goals and exchange ideas and from whom you can ask advice when necessary. Many people make connections at work which later open the door to better work opportunities.

4. **Get Involved in Positive Community Activities.**

In addition to being around the right people and developing positive friendships, community involvement can help anchor you in a positive way. Associating with groups that do positive work will give you the opportunity to demonstrate the impact you can have on your community, and can also ease your efforts to gain acceptance back into society upon release. In Syracuse, there is an occasional “Block Blitz” where members of the community and local contractors volunteer for one day to work on building projects, cleaning, painting and generally refreshing an area of a neighborhood. One neighborhood has a “Residents’ Coalition” that meets bi-weekly to plan projects and discuss neighborhood issues in order to create better opportunities for the people who live there. There are also social justice groups that include among their members many people who understand the challenges of prisoner reentry and who welcome people of diverse backgrounds with shared interests.

5. **Accept the Fact That Things Out There Are Not How You Remember Them.**

Memory is selective. With all the time that prison provides you to think, it is too easy to dwell only on your positive memories. These memories can fuel your longing for home and can contribute to an unrealistic picture of what you expect life to be like in the future. When people reminisce, their natural tendency is to focus on the good things and to think that, in the past, “life was better than it is now.” While that may be true while you are in prison, upon release it will be important to balance these positive memories with a realistic picture of
what life was really like prior to your incarceration. Life has its challenges no matter what stage you are at. Take enough time to review the past, and you will remember the less pleasant times, whether they were paying bills, not liking your job, or relationship issues. It is important to stay in touch with these thoughts for two reasons. First, measuring your future progress against an unrealistic standard can be destructive by creating the perception that you are destined to fail. Second, if you measure accurately, you can assess any important personal growth that you have undergone during your time in prison and beyond.

**Conclusion**

It is important that you take time to be thoughtful about how to deal with the various issues you will face when you get home. It is also important to be patient and to accept the fact that your progress will come in small steps. Over time, those small steps will add up, and when you look over your shoulder you will be amazed at the distance you have come.

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