

TEN STEPS

TRANSITIONING TO FREEDOM



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Ten Steps: Checklist for Transition from Incarceration

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1. First and foremost, avoid becoming a victim.

An individual coming out of prison is vulnerable to so many things: your own PTSD from prison and maybe from the streets; your insecurities about the future; your confusion over what to do and how to act in the free world. As the saying goes, "You don't know what you don't know." So, adopt this rule: Don't make big decisions for at least a year, especially ones involving relationships and money—anything with serious consequences. This includes getting engaged/married, having a baby, investing money, starting a business, or making a big purchase on credit. Watch out for scams, fraud, and being taken advantage of by con-artists and grifters, whether in person, on the phone, or over the Internet. Crime has become very sophisticated, and the most powerful weapon they have is your naivete or ignorance. The law has few protections for you, so protect yourself. Search the internet for "common scams" and "current fraud trends" on your computer. Be aware and beware.

Why is it so important to avoid big decisions after getting out of prison? Any big change, even if the change is positive, triggers a state of *crisis*. Getting released from prison is a special kind of crisis. A crisis generates excitement, but also fear, which messes with your emotional balance and mental clarity. Nobody is at his best at judging situations, reading people and making decisions in the throes of excitement and fear. Your decision-making will improve as you balance your emotions and clear your mind, but you need time to do that.

Being freed is *a crisis of opportunity*. There is a fine line between opportunity and danger. Learn to distinguish between the two. Protect yourself so that your opportunity grows additional opportunities, instead of inviting danger and provoking crises.

If something looks “too good to be true,” it usually is. If someone is too friendly, moves too fast, pries into your personal life, is excessively generous, or gets access to your personal information, take it as a warning sign. Keep things like your social security number, phone number, bank account numbers, driver’s license, email address and all passwords private. Ask for advice from knowledgeable, experienced people. When choosing a potential friend, lover or business partner, or embarking on a new venture, ask a million questions. Verify the answers you get. Don’t take anyone’s “word” at face value. Take a hard look at the risk. Weigh the potential upside against the downside. If there is any chance of a catastrophic outcome, step aside. Bring people into your circle of trust slowly. As the saying goes, “Marry in haste; repent at leisure.” It doesn’t take special skills to avoid danger; just practice caution and investigate like your life depends on it, since it does.

2. Protect yourself from sensory stress.

Living in a prison is full of sensory extremes. On one hand, it’s constantly noisy with people shouting and metal clanging, as well as bright lights constantly on. At the same time, prisoners lack exposure to the normal, everyday sensory stimuli of modern life: public spaces, diverse buildings and housing, people moving about, traffic, animals, nature; also, lights, noises, colors, smells; and a variety of interactions or passing contact with store clerks, drivers, pedestrians, police, delivery people, co-workers, homeless people. You can also be overstimulated by digital devices like smart phones, tablets and computers. Research has shown that engaging in too much “screen time” is unhealthy for your body and mind. It often replaces socializing and communicating in real time with real people, which is exactly what you need to do. Beware of getting sucked into social media: at best, it can waste too much of your time, and at worst, expose you to

disturbing images, lies and hate. Only connect with people you know. Don't "friend" anyone who isn't really a friend. Just as in the streets, you can be judged by the people you "hang out with" on social media. Pay attention to the websites you visit and the information you seek. Avoid porn sites like an STD. Your internet search history is trackable and can be used against you.

In the free world, you can feel bombarded by a million unfamiliar sensory stimuli and freaked out by the long-lost experience of silence and darkness. It may surprise you how powerfully these sensory changes impact on you physically, mentally and emotionally. They can create an ongoing state of stress "running in the background" of your unconscious mind. When we add to these unconscious sensory stressors the challenges that occupy the foreground of your new life, the learning curve feels even steeper. Front and center, you must take care of details like: learn to use technology; get "official" documents such as a social security card, medical insurance, a driver's license; gain new skills; get a job and work steadily at it; travel to and from a residence and work; renew family relationships. In time, you will adjust both to your sensory issues and your practical challenges and take them in stride. Just as in prison, you will realize what you should pay attention to and what you can ignore. Success will come by taking "baby steps." Meanwhile, do whatever helps you de-stress in healthy ways: breathing, physical exercise, meditation, being in nature, hobbies. Confront different stimuli and degrees of stimulation slowly; protect your peace and sanity and you'll do fine.

3. Let down your guard.

In the streets, many of you had to be hyper-vigilant to "disrespect" or "challenges," from other males or gang members to avoid being shamed or preyed upon. In prison you also had to be hypervigilant against threats and dangers—this time from other prisoners and correctional officers. In the streets and in prison, hypervigilance is an unfortunate fact of life because the threats are real and could result in injury or death. But unless you are being released to a violent neighborhood or gang territory, hypervigilance will not protect you. In

fact, it may put you at greater danger. You will look out of place and draw attention to yourself if you walk around tense, jumpy or suspicious. People might think *you're* the one up to no good. Worse, you could overreact to an innocent movement or escalate a minor incident into a major scene. Applying "street" or prison-based vigilance to people or situations in unlike environments may get you into trouble. Instead, observe how ordinary citizens behave and adopt their behavior. Literally mimic how they walk, stand, move, use their eyes and face. "Fake it until you make it."

It may come as a shock that outside of prison and gang infested communities, people can be rude, impatient, irresponsible, racist, or invade other people's space and no one feels the need to react. Or, people might be aloof, unaware, lost in thought and focused on themselves and that is also considered normal. Most people don't react because they know obnoxious behaviors are almost never about us. If someone cuts us off on the road, we ignore it; if it's serious, we take a video, get the license plate and call the police. Likewise, if someone bumps into us in a crowd, we check our pockets but move on. In time, you too will get used to the casual rudeness and self-centeredness of modern society. When you're secure in your own self-respect, you'll be less sensitive to a stranger's respect or lack of respect for you. As a wise man once said, "What other people think of me is none of my business." Let down your guard and spread out into your freedom. When you relax, you'll discover many people of goodwill, tolerance and kindness. Those are the very people you will miss if you are constantly looking for trouble and preparing to defend yourself against it.

4. Be aware of your "authority figure triggers."

No one has more experience with authority figures than a prisoner or former prisoner. For you, authority figures likely included attorneys, judges, social workers, police, correctional officers, parole officers, and government personnel in general. Because you've been incarcerated, it's safe to assume those experience were largely negative. Even people in "helping" positions—like teachers and counselors—might have been rude, bossy, condescending or mean. Your status as a

prisoner forced you to be submissive, because anything less could provoke harsh reprisals. But it is not in human nature to accept submission to authority lightly—especially if you think it’s unjust. If you have lived a lifetime “under the thumb” of people in authority, you have good reason to feel resentful and rebellious. Experience has taught you to be guarded around authority figures and skeptical of their sincerity. Life is a pecking order, and the smallest chickens can die from a thousand pecks.

No matter how low on the pecking order you are, freedom has given you a real opportunity to take back your power, self-respect and freedom. To take advantage of this opportunity, you will need to rehabilitate your relationship with authority. After all, there will always be people with power over you—whether it’s a parole officer, job supervisor, or a clerk at the DMV. Becoming adept at handling authority is necessary for your self-preservation and long-term advancement. However, if you have had a history of bad experiences related to authority figures, you probably have developed a trauma trigger. Some signs that you have authority figure issues are: failing to take steps that are necessary or even beneficial (like paying a traffic ticket or qualifying for benefits) just to avoid dealing with authority; being flooded with memories of negative past experiences with authority figures; discounting positive experiences with people in authority and giving more weight to negative experiences; feeling sullen, resentful, defensive or hostile when dealing with unequal power situations.

When you find yourself encountering an unequal power situation, first give yourself permission to feel uneasy. Breathe deeply and take a few seconds or minutes to recover your balance. If necessary, walk away and try again later. Pay attention to the feelings that rise up in you and let them pass. This will give you time to overcome the instinct to react impulsively or repeat past maladaptive behavior. Just like Cesar Milan, the “Dog Whisperer,” advises, stay “calm and assertive.” If you respond to tension with tension, things tend to escalate. *Shift your tension to attention.* Advocate for yourself without any attitude. Avoid

taking things personally, *especially* if it's meant to be personal. Don't be a pine tree that cracks; be the willow that bends. Most of all, don't drag the entire dead weight of your history with authority figures into this moment. Be present. Allow something different to happen. To change a "win-lose" situation into a "win-win" situation, "Be the bigger person." Sometimes to win a war, you must lose a battle. Which is more important?

5. Reframe your status from "Outcast" or "Outsider" to "Outlier."

As a prisoner or former prisoner, you either are, or have been, literally "cast out" of society. Humans seem to have an instinct for creating outcast groups, so trying to change this may be as doomed as a dung beetle pushing his ball of poop up a hill. What you might do instead of trying to change human nature is to change yourself. Change how you view yourself from outsider to "outlier." That is, take what makes you "different" to a higher level. An "outlier" is anything that falls outside the average; it's anything that stands out. Since you stand out anyway, why not make it work for you?

Having survived the streets and/or prison gives you a unique perspective on society. You have experiences and insights that others may find interesting and valuable. Having faced ongoing threats to your survival puts you in the same league with combat veterans, even though some may argue against that comparison. Taking something as oppressive and limiting as prison and carving out opportunities to learn, grow and advance is also special. Focus on these, and many other, positives that make you "different." Build an "outlier" identity that expresses who you are and doesn't box you into a category or "type."

Meanwhile, reject the idea that you are an outsider. You may believe you're an outsider because you were "different" from other kids as a child. Maybe you didn't have a father, grew up in foster care, or didn't

do well in school. But none of these things is unusual. No matter how “different” you think you are, you are part of a very large group. More people feel “different” than you realize, even if their differences are not the same as yours. Instead of isolating, or shutting down emotionally, open up to people you trust. Ask them, “When was the first time you felt different?” Notice that you are not asking *If* they ever felt different; you are asking *when?* Every person’s story that involves feeling “different” will reveal a lot about their identity and challenges in life.

Once you have started to change your identity as an “outsider” or “outcast,” find ways of adapting and blending in so that you can shake that feeling. This is not the same thing as “conforming.” Nothing is being forced on you. You can choose to dress and act more like the people you want to be like, join groups that share your values or interests, take classes that interest you, or volunteer. The more you embrace your freedom to choose, and do things that connect you to others, the less of an “outcast” you will be as a matter of fact. In the end, you will realize that few people are looking to judge you. Most people have their own troubles and challenges and don’t have the luxury to throw stones at you.

6. Build your “Can Do.”

In prison, opportunities to take initiative, make choices, and change your circumstances were limited. By contrast, in a free society, nothing good will happen unless you initiate it and follow through. In prison, asking questions and requesting help was possibly frowned upon, or even punished. In the free world, you must ask questions and ask for help because this is the way you will get your needs met. “I don’t need anything or anyone” is not just untrue; it is a great way of going nowhere fast. Self-efficacy means knowing how to meet your needs and doing so. But getting there is a lifelong process, assuming you are growing and changing, not standing still.

When you get out, do the “first things first.” Get a state ID or a driver’s license and MediCal insurance for medical and dental care. Purchase a cell phone and learn to use it. Buy casual clothes for everyday use and a set of professional clothes for job interviews. Learn to use public transportation; the entrances and exits of the roads and highways you must traverse; the best grocery shops and gas stations around you; and the areas to avoid due to gang presence, high crime and homelessness. Brush up on current laws that might affect you—for example, driving laws, parole violation laws; the laws regarding substances; etc. Watch local news to stay up to date on current issues and events. Identify the organizations, institutions and agencies that might help you with information, materials and services. Find a neighborhood library and become friendly with librarians who can help direct your searches.

Most people fresh out of prison suffer from some degree of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. You aren’t alone. People who have never been in prison also suffer from the same issues. No matter what the causes might have been, the solution is the same: do something about it. Build up a track record of success in handling your business. This includes all areas of life: finances, housing, health, relationships, education and work. If you neglect one of these areas, eventually you’ll have to contend with multiple problems. Even though “Rome wasn’t built in a day,” the Romans worked consistently until the job was done. Even after that, they worked to maintain, repair, add to and improve on their efforts. That’s why many of the old Roman roads and structures are still standing to this day. You can do the same. Your motto should be, “I can do it!”

7. Pay close attention to your impact on the people around you.

When anyone goes through a crisis, everyone close to them will be affected by their proximity to their crisis. Getting out of prison is a kind of crisis, not just for you but also for your loved ones. A spouse, children, siblings or parents will be most affected when you’re suddenly a part of their lives, possibly for the first time. The prospect of reuniting with loved ones has the potential to heal, make people

happy and open up new directions. At the same time, your presence in other people's homes is a huge change to which everyone will need to adjust. Particularly if you are living with family or old friends (not new roommates), keep in mind that it is your job to fit into their lives. You are entering into an already set and established situation.

Your first challenge will be to learn who these people are now, how they live day to day, what their needs are, and so on. Pay close attention to how your presence is impacting on their space, time, attention, finances, etc. What has changed because you are there? What responsibilities, stresses or worries have you added? How can you reduce or do away with any negative impacts? How can you add some benefits? With awareness and love, you can make adjustments that meet your needs, while meeting other people's needs as well. If you aren't willing or able to make these adjustments, things can go downhill quickly. Invest in frequent "check-ins" with your closest relationships. People are unlikely to understand what you are going through if you don't communicate.

Keep in mind that adjusting to you and your needs is also difficult for others, and nearly impossible if they do not understand what is going on with you. It is not a sign of "weakness" to admit sadness, insecurity, confusion or a need for help; rather, it is a measure of your maturity and strength. If those around you are unable to help, seek help elsewhere. Bottom line, be a good housemate, friend or family member. While you're there, contribute something good to the mix. Be a person who is pleasant to be around, supportive to everyone, and pulling his weight. Don't behave like a moody, silent, self-absorbed, lazy adolescent. There's a big difference between a boy and a man, a girl and a woman. Your family and friends are your biggest and longest-term support system, so treat your relationships with care.

8. Deal honestly and tactfully with others' expectations of you.

When you come home, family members may expect you to be “the cool older sibling” they once knew; the “long lost child” who will sacrifice for their elderly parents; or the perfect “spouse, parent and provider” they always hoped you would be as a marital partner. The truth is, right out of prison, you are more like a “fish out of water.” That is, you are no longer in the familiar “element” where you have survived for years or decades. You might predict that your biggest difficulty will be adjusting to a world very different from prison. While that is true, a more important issue will be making up for the damage that being imprisoned has done to you. Many aspects of your Self (self-esteem; initiative; ambition; imagination) have likely been injured, leaving you with some degree of PTSD. Your natural maturation process has also been compromised—for example, if you were incarcerated at a young age, you can now be middle-aged with adolescent behaviors and attitudes. In addition, your life experiences in most areas of human development (education, recreation, spirituality, family, work, social relationships, citizenship) have definitely been limited in prison.

While you are making the effort to heal the damage and fill in the gaps in your understanding and experience, invest in communicating with people who are important to you. If you neglect this, others may misunderstand you or become disappointed in you due to their unrealistic expectations or wrong assumptions. In fact, you might also have unrealistic expectations of yourself. If you do, you might be setting yourself up for “failure.” Your identity in prison does not carry over to your identity in the free world. This can make you feel anxious, but a “blank slate” is a good thing after prison. It’s going to take you more than a minute to recover from the old limitations, find yourself again, and set a path to accomplish new goals and ambitions. First, check off small, practical objectives. Share the plan with your loved ones so they will understand and help.

Meanwhile, others are looking at you with some expectations, whether conscious of them or not. What are those expectations? Discuss these

questions frankly with your loved ones. People in general have limited insight into the diverse damages that incarceration inflicts on humans, and that includes you. If you want to take back your life, you must “put in the work,” which begins with self-awareness and self-acceptance. Just remember that “free people” have many of the same injuries and challenges as you do, due to poverty, racism, sexism and various kinds of trauma they or their families have suffered. Privileged people have also been injured in their humanity; they just don’t know it. Privilege doesn’t “hurt,” so the damage is often not noticed and identified.

9. No Man is an Island.

In prison, you might have felt like “an island.” That is, you were surrounded by thousands of people but were essentially alone. It’s likely you developed some habits from years of this unusual form of aloneness. Some examples include keeping personal information close to your chest; keeping others at arm’s length; and being stoical in any situation where you felt upset but helpless. These strategies may make sense in prison, but they will create obstacles for you in the free world. For one thing, the way we all survive and thrive is from our relationships with people we love and who love us. It takes experience and practice to nurture these relationships. Years of relationship deprivation and the long practice of stoicism will have kept you from learning and practicing such skills as knowing what you are feeling, expressing yourself accurately and honestly, listening with your head and your heart, supporting without taking over, and giving and receiving respect and love. When you return to your loved ones, acknowledge that you have a lot to learn. Ask for their patience, understanding and help.

To practice your social skills and communication abilities, surround yourself with like-minded, positive people. This can include post-incarceration groups, AA, NA, CGA, church-sponsored or other community-supported groups. Overcome the urge to withdraw from people and keep to yourself. Injured animals do this for self-protection. But we are human and need other people to help us heal.

It's not so much the specific "teachings" or the particular individuals that can make a difference, but rather our shared humanity. Sometimes complete strangers connected by mutual suffering can feel more like a community than our own families. The point is, "No one heals alone." Humans become weird and sometimes even delusional when they get trapped in their own minds. Do not be put off by the thought that you won't fit in—e.g., "But I'm not a Christian," or "But my trauma is not as bad." This is a flimsy excuse for avoiding the challenge of dealing authentically with other people.

If you insist on finding a group fitted to your exact measurements before you will join it, you will be the only person in that group. The most democratizing thing in the world is loss, suffering and the yearning for healing. It cuts through money, class, status, age, beauty, education and intelligence. School shooters think delusionally that they are the only "outsiders" in the world. Their "outsider" sense of rejection, self-hate and isolation is so painful that it must be turned toward others in acts of pure destruction. To stay human, we must avoid the illusion of being exceptional—exceptionally great or exceptionally worthless. The best way to do this is through the exercise of compassion—the meaning of which is "to suffer *with*." Practicing compassion is something you can only do with other people.

10. Deal proactively with your trauma. Incarceration causes trauma. If you were involved in a gang or lived in an active gang area before prison, the trauma might be even worse. Symptoms of trauma include hypervigilance toward potential threats or dangers, nightmares, night sweats, intrusive thoughts or memories related to a past danger, and depression or anxiety unrelated to here-and-now problems. An extreme startle reflex, an angry outburst for no reason, panic attacks (might feel like a heart attack), trembling and shaking without cause, and sudden lethargy (no energy, wanting to sleep all the time) can also be symptoms of trauma. Trauma results from an experience that feels life-threatening. This can even include an emotional threat like being abandoned or having your trust betrayed. Trauma can happen to anyone and is not a sign of weakness.

However, if you don't deal with the trauma, it can limit you, cause you to make mistakes, hurt your relationships, and provoke you to self-medicate with self-soothing—but also self-destructive—behaviors.

If you don't heal your trauma, you are likely to experience a version of it again and again. This is called "the compulsion to repeat the trauma." Even though you aren't choosing to be retraumatized, your negative emotions (fear, anger, grief, shame) can be triggered whenever something happens that "feels the same" as your original trauma. Sometimes events that "feel the same" aren't the same, but since you are *biased toward trauma*, you may misinterpret them. This is how trauma gets reinforced—through repetition. To free yourself from this pattern, you must stop identifying with the *powerlessness* that made your original experience feel life-threatening. Since we were most powerless as children, most of our traumas originate from childhood. However, we are no longer children who are too helpless to fight or flee. Nor do we have to freeze. We are now adults with the powers of understanding and choice we lacked before.

Adults have many advantages over children for overcoming trauma. However, the injury to our child-selves often disables us from using these advantages. It's as if, in relationship to our traumas, we are "stuck" in a state of vulnerability like the children we once were. When we're stuck in childlike vulnerability, the way we deal with trauma tends to be simple and immature. The two solutions we are prone to choose are stoicism and self-medication. Stoicism means "stuffing" or "numbing" our painful emotions and acting "strong." But stoicism is about as effective in overcoming trauma as holding one's breath is effective against bad smells. Sooner or later, we have to breathe. Self-medication means indulging in behaviors that dull our pain or distract us from it. Sex, "partying," gambling, substance abuse and other risky behaviors can accomplish this temporarily. But of course, self-medication doesn't reduce our trauma; instead, it leads to additional problems.

Trauma healing is possible and even necessary to be safe, healthy and happy. Educate yourself on trauma and your specific trauma; seek counseling; join a trauma survivor's group. You are not the same person who was overwhelmed by life-threatening events in the past. You have new strengths and awarenesses. Let your trauma be an artifact of your colorful, dramatic history, not a driving force in your current journey.