

My Sister's Keeper

A BOOK FOR WOMEN
RETURNING HOME
FROM PRISON OR JAIL

COALITION FOR WOMEN PRISONERS

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The symbols at the beginning of each chapter are called Adinkra symbols. They are cultural symbols of the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa. Each symbol is associated with a specific proverb, saying or experience. Template Source: Jean MacDonald, Well-Tempered Web Design, www.welltempered.net/adinkra.

*If I am successful,
we are all successful.
I cannot remain silent
when there are things
that need to be said.
It is our obligation
to reach, teach and
touch lives. We owe
it to ourselves,
and each other.*

Patricia “Rocky” Zimmerman

This book is for women who are returning home from prison or jail. The words are those of women who have been right where you are now. It is our hope that their experiences and guidance will encourage you to stay strong as you cope with the challenges of reclaiming your life.

How to Use This Book

Introduction by Women On The Rise Telling HerStory

This book is meant to give you guidance from women who have been right where you are—facing the same experiences and challenges. The voices in this book are from many different types of women who are at various stages—the beginning, middle or end—of returning home. There is a person in this book who had the same thoughts that you are having right now. Read on and you will find that she was able to successfully work through her ideas and realize that there is hope.

This book is for women who want to define themselves as opposed to being defined by others. From your first day in prison or jail to the time you return home, you are on a journey. No matter how you identify yourself, many of the issues that you face on this journey are the same. You have to know how to navigate various systems and communicate effectively. Just because you have to accept something does not mean that you cannot change things. Some things are just a step to the next level.

We want the words in this book to help you grow and achieve your dreams. The most important thing that you must keep in mind when you return home is that you must be patient, flexible, and tolerant. These qualities often come when you begin to trust others and realize that others can teach you things. Trust will help you realize your own self worth and abilities.

Being open is really important. We all share values and a sense of the right way and wrong way of doing things. This is a foundation that is always with us, even if we strayed from it for a while. The key to creating

positive structure in our lives is rooted in the inner strength we have. No matter where you go in life, there will be guidelines. We must learn what they are, deal with them, and figure out how we can live a fulfilling life. Once we reconnect with ourselves, we can stop running, begin to face our fears, and be able to say what we do not know.

There are many formerly incarcerated people who found a way to get a job, get housing, reunite with their children and accept who they are and who they can be. They know that life is not perfect and that we are not perfect. It is okay to mess up. This is a learning experience. It helps you to grow. Trust yourself and if you have to fake it until you make it, do so. Sometimes you will have to give up a lot of things that you think are right for you at the moment to get to what is truly right for you in the end.

To find your way out of negative thinking and doing, you will have to listen to other people and see what other people who are successful are doing. Doing the same thing and expecting something different just doesn't work. This can lead to hopelessness. Instead, try to do things a different way. Keep it simple. Simplicity will help you to build structure in your life.

Trust yourself and if you have to fake it until you make it, do so. Sometimes you will have to give up a lot of things that you think are right for you at the moment to get what is truly right for you in the end.

While you are reading this book, we would like you to really think about what is being said. Look at the common themes in women's experiences. There is no one answer. In this book, women explain the reality of their lives and the self-awareness they have gained. Use these voices to help you think, observe and make choices. Recognize that you always have a choice about what to do. No matter what you are going through, there is a solution.

There will always be hills and mountains, but you can make your return home a successful one. When you hit rough spots, reach out for help. Also remember, though, that no one can do it for you. You must do the footwork. Establish relationships and use them as a means of moving forward and staying hopeful. When women trust and rely on each other, we are a powerful force.

Read this book with an open mind. If you cannot do that, then read it for the words on the page. If you grasp even one point or thought that gets you to think, that is a start to finding your place and claiming your right to being an active participant in your life.

Peace and blessings,

Tina Reynolds, Co-Chair
Denise Dunkley, Co-Chair
Women on the Rise Telling HerStory (WORTH)

***Women on the Rise Telling HerStory (WORTH)** is an association of empowered women seeking to transform the lives of women affected by incarceration through mentoring, mutual support, leadership, public education and policy advocacy.*

Coming Home

We have the right
to a new beginning.



freedom

**“The first couple of weeks—excitement, freedom.
Then you realize life is about everyday things.”**

Being home from prison or jail, you may feel many things at the same time: excited to finally be free; worried about how you will be received; anxious about getting things right; confused about what is “normal;” and surprised at how much hard work it takes to survive and maintain yourself. Here is what women have to say about coming home.

Feelings about coming home

- ◆ *The different times I came home, I had the same mentality. I have done four state bids. I wanted to do the same thing each time. But this last time I wanted a change. I was tired of being incarcerated. I was tired of being 48 years old with younger people telling me what to do.*
- ◆ *Small things were hard, for example, crossing the street. The cars were going by so fast, the light was changing, and people were everywhere. It was very overwhelming. It was terrifying. I froze and I had an anxiety attack. I had to call my mom. It's so different when you have been away for so long. You need someone who can be with you, like a buddy, who can help when you freeze.*
- ◆ *My first few days were hectic and I felt overwhelmed. A little bit of anxiety and it triggered a desire for drugs. I also had “gate fever”. I wish someone had let me know that it would get better and the cravings to use drugs would pass. I was used to sleeping a lot in Bedford Hills to cope, but I could not do this in the community.*
- ◆ *When it's your first time in jail, home is a fantasy. Getting out is the focus, not what to do once you are out. It's just, “I can't wait to get out.” A lot of people relapse two days before they leave a program. It's not a fantasy, it's a cold world, but there is help, resources, you just have to do the work.*

- ◆ *My family was mad at me, so they weren't going to help me. I wish someone had told me how to get some food and where to go and counseling for anger issues. I needed someone to let me know that I'm going through a different phase in my life; that I'm no longer in jail and I don't have to act like I am; that I don't need to fight for everything, be angry and aggressive. I wish someone told me that everything is not going to go my way and that I can't control people.*
-

Lorraine

When I first came home the most important thing to me was my healthcare. I was diagnosed with high blood pressure and I had been on medication for two years. My biggest fear was how to get my medicine. The medical staff at Bayview and Taconic had ingrained in me the importance of taking my meds. When I left Bayview, it was with two weeks worth of pills and prescriptions that I had to get filled. I was scared to sleep; scared of having a stroke. I had never been on public assistance, so I did not know anything about waiting to get on Medicaid. Finally, a peer, an old-timer, told me to go to the emergency room and sit there until they gave me my medication. That's what I did, even though I really didn't have the luxury of time to sit in the emergency room. I had to maintain my parole stipulations and go to groups.

When I was released, I had to throw all of the plans that I made for coming home out of the window. I thought that I could get Section 8 [subsidized housing] within six months of release. I applied while inside. I was not aware that I could be denied because of my felony conviction. I later learned that I could appeal my Section 8 denial and state a case for myself. I did not know the housing situation in New York City was so bleak, even worse for someone with a felony. The only solid piece of information incorporated into my plan was about a college initiative. I corresponded with them while I was at Taconic and they told me how to connect with them once I was discharged. I did what they said and they were able to help get me enrolled in college after I was discharged.

My addiction to drugs happened late in life. I was 31. I had used powder cocaine recreationally. I introduced myself to crack and it won. I ended up at Rikers Island twice. I was sentenced to a state bid because I received an alternative to incarceration program that I left eight months into the program – it was a 24 month program. Then I ran for five years without being picked up. When I finally was picked up, the district

attorney was adamant about me not getting another program. I received the sentence that I was to receive if I did not complete the mandated program—four and one-half to nine years.

Prison woke me up to what I had done to my life. I got committed to four and one-half to nine and I was determined to have something good come out of it. Inside, I went to a lot of volunteer programs to stay away from the negativity on the unit. Volunteers give you books and you work on yourself and you don't even know it. When you go to transitional services, volunteers come in to help. Ask questions: "How recent is this information?" "Do you know anyone who has used this information?" "Do you know the directors' names?" Talk to the civilian volunteers. They are the best resource because they have the most recent information. The people who work inside just get the information sent to them and disseminate it. Ask the volunteers.

My first parole officer was cool. The next one was not. She was trying to be too many things and requiring things of me beyond my stipulations. I was a full-time student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I

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When I left Bayview I
bought a phone, started
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You can't pick up if you
are on the phone.
That's my recovery.**

was working at a fast food place. She wanted me to go to additional groups even though I had graduated from a drug program. She wanted me to pay for tickets and attend plays, purchase books out of my pocket for her book club, and bring my family to parole events. She eventually did something that I felt was inappropriate, so a friend of mine and I complained and eventually wrote to Albany. My

mother always said, "Everyone has a boss." I challenged this positively and got results, not just for me, but for a whole bunch of women.

Initially, everyone back home welcomed me with open arms, but they were watching me out of the corner of their eyes. A big issue for me was finding my role in the family again with my mother and brother after being separated for so long. When I was using drugs over a 14 year period, they were together, so they had a tighter bond. My mother needed to protect herself. She did not know if I would act up or act out

or if she would wake up in the middle of night to ID me in the morgue. So do not set yourself up by expecting everything to be perfect. Realize and accept that you have hurt your family and they will protect their feelings by waiting and watching. My first Christmas home, I saw how my brother and mother interacted and felt left out. I had graduated from a drug program and felt they were going to believe in me, but they were unsure, so they waited to see how I would do. They were just being cautious because they were used to me being gone and they knew the type of things I was involved in. We have to remember to *remember*.

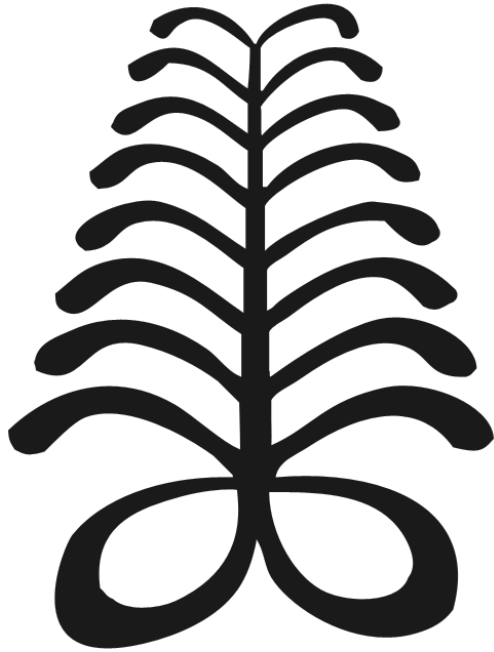
Most of the information that I gathered came from my peers. I come from a strong civil rights background. My parents were activists. I saw a lot of things in prison that were not correct. I am so peer-centered. I reach out to my sisters. My peer group from my transitional housing program is awesome. I get so much from my peers. Anytime we find out anything, like I can't get financial aid, a friend says let's go look for scholarships. Now my peers are professionals. I always said that I'm going to stick with the winners.

I have a network. When I left Bayview I bought a phone and started dialing numbers and talking to people. Talk about it. Use your words. You can't pick up if you are on the phone. That's my recovery. I've got enough minutes to call anybody that I need to call. And use your groups. I learned this in treatment. It's what they call a "prior concept." I knew what groups were for and how to use them.

Today, all I do is reentry work. I can't keep information unless I give it away. Getting what you want depends on what you need. I say to women, address what you neglected when you were inside. If you are MICA [Mentally Ill and Chemically Addicted], address your psyche first. Find what you feel good about doing. Heal yourself. My philosophies are "just for today" and "I made a mistake, but I'm not a mistake." I make the choice not to get high, not to use. Today, I can hear the smile in my mother's voice. I'm a wife, daughter, sister and a real friend. I'm not a part of the system anymore. Just for today, I focus on what's going on today. The only thing I see far ahead is term papers! By the grace of God, I am alive. Stick with positive people when you are incarcerated. Remember that the chip on your shoulder will get you caught up in more stuff. If you have a discharge date, then you are coming home. Therefore, prepare yourself to reenter.

Getting the Basics

We have the right to support.



resourcefulness

The early days and weeks home from prison or jail are often about survival and obtaining the basics: safe shelter, food, clothes, medicine, money, transportation to make appointments, and for many, drug and alcohol treatment to stay clean and sober. Here is what women have to say about obtaining services.

Finding a place to stay

- ◆ *My priorities were housing and money to get back and forth to the different appointments. I wasn't able to go to my family. They didn't trust me; they were not going to let me in their house. So I used to the point where I had to go to the hospital for mental issues. I was lucky because of my caseworker. I went to the Department of Social Services, but they made me wait 45 days. I started going from place to place until I got into a housing program. I wish there was someone I could have talked to in jail about transitional housing. Thank god for the women in the housing program.*
- ◆ *I've only been out three weeks from an upstate program. I had an apartment with my husband and he just lost it because he was using drugs. I got fed up and they put me in a shelter. I would tell others to look for proper housing first and then deal with the rest of the stuff later. If you don't have housing, you don't have anything.*
- ◆ *I didn't have any housing. My family didn't care and I was basically on my own. At first I tried to move in with my brother, but all he wanted to do was use me. Really, God helped me. He put me in the right place at the right time. I met this landlord, he had a small room available and I explained my family situation and he gave me the room... Once that was taken care of, I could take care of other things.*
- ◆ *I needed a place to stay, transportation to group meetings, clothing, shoes and personal items. I went to a program and they gave me a voucher to Ladies of Charity [upstate]. I also had gone to a half-way house. They helped me get on Medicaid and assistance. They made me wait 45 days. For food, I had the half-way house.*

Employment

**“This is an open and competitive market—
you have to make yourself employable.
That’s the only way.”**

- ◆ *When I was first released from prison I got a job. I started at \$4.25 an hour and I left at \$21 an hour. I had no work history and I learned on the job. It was a help desk for all HRA [Human Resources Administration] locations. You’ll get minimum wage but at least you get experience. Now I work on Wall Street. It’s a not-for-profit. You get out what you put in. Someone will notice your hard work and you will get a reference. Or go for training—there are lots of places. But this is an open and competitive market—you have to make yourself employable. That’s the only way. I’ve been incarcerated; that didn’t stop me. Put in your footwork. I didn’t have experience, so I got some connections. You can’t just stay stuck. You have to create a variety of skills and more opportunities. When they try to look at what you’ve done, you can sell yourself. And here I sit now as a secretary-receptionist. Even if you don’t like it, get a variety of skills because you have two strikes against you. First, you’re a woman. Second, you’ve been incarcerated.*
- ◆ *I went to several agencies, but no one called me for six weeks and that was the timeframe I had to get a job ‘cause I’m on work release. So I took a job at McDonald’s. Now places are calling me, so I’m trying to get out of McDonald’s.*
- ◆ *In a funny way in New York they are more forgiving. I tried the South but was treated like dirt and I came back. You’re being judged. It’s discouraging. They will think differently depending on the crime that was committed. If you were in for drugs, they think, “Do we have to hide the petty cash?” I learned a long time ago, go with the flow. I went to every prison agency and I found a job. I am bilingual. I had to wake up, because someone else walked in my path.*

Transportation, clothing & personal hygiene

- ◆ *My priority was remaining drug free and complying with court-mandated treatment. I wish someone had told me about transportation options for treatment. Outpatient counseling would not help with transportation. I relapsed because I could not get transportation to the meetings. I was too embarrassed to say that I could not come up with bus fare. The second time around I made different choices. I went to a house that provided transportation. I wasn’t afraid to ask anymore. I would want people coming out to take a minute and consider the issue of transportation to get to where they need to go for meetings because in most cases transportation may not be provided.*
- ◆ *My priority was shelter, food, and clothing and getting hair products because my hair was a mess. I did not want anyone to see me. I went straight to rehab. Transportation was okay. The rehab place where I was at only had white women hair products, not black women products. If you’re worrying about your hair; you’re not worrying about what you’re there for.*

Health Care

- ◆ *Get all possible medical issues checked out while inside because it takes a very long time for Medicaid coverage to kick in upon your release. I wish someone had given me a list of good doctors because most of the ones I have encountered have not been very good.*
- ◆ *When I left I had prescriptions and a temporary Medicaid card. I had a certain time to get a primary care physician. Then I went to welfare and applied for Medicaid, food stamps and cash assistance.*
- ◆ *I went straight to rehab. They took care of some of my health issues. I wish someone told me to be honest with the doctors because if you can’t be honest or you’re too embarrassed, you can’t get the help that you need.*

- ◆ *I had asthma, epilepsy, arthritis and needed a hearing aid. The second shelter had a nurse practitioner. He referred me to St. Vincent's [Hospital] to take care of my problems. I had no medication. I felt they did well regarding my papers for SSI [Supplemental Security Income]. I wish someone referred me where to go for medical attention.*
- ◆ *I wish someone told me about the free clinics as opposed to waiting for Medicaid. I needed help getting mental health meds. I had to go to the emergency room to get my meds. They gave me five days worth. I kept going back when I ran out.*
- ◆ *My head was not feeling right. I was suicidal. I went to crisis services and drug court. It was most helpful to know that I was not going crazy, that I just needed help. I would recommend that women get a full physical and mental health check.*
- ◆ *My husband was insured. When we separated, he dropped me. My husband used Medicaid as a form of control. If I didn't do what he wanted the way he wanted, I had no other choice. And I'm asthmatic. If I got an attack, I could only go to a city hospital. And after they stabilize an emergency they discharge you with prescriptions. But how can you fill the prescriptions without Medicaid?*
- ◆ *I got counseling while inside and it was helpful in addressing my issues. I wanted to continue seeing someone upon my release. I went to Bellevue and asked to speak to a counselor and psychiatrist. I wish I had been told about domestic violence programs. I heard about them while inside but never got a referral. Also, there should be information about where to go for help with all types of abuse.*

HIV/AIDS

“A lot of people are now incarcerated with HIV, but they don't want to say anything. I got tired of stuffing it. I wondered if people would continue to be my friends, but they stuck with me. Now I have better friends than before. If you get down in here, to the demons, it's better.”

- ◆ *When I found out I was HIV positive, this changed me. It was hard for me. At first, I told my sister I had cancer, but she knew I was lying. I found out when I was incarcerated. This was in 1990. In 1994, I had cancer of the uterus. I wanted to die at one time. I had friends in jail that helped me. They took me under their wing. A lot of people are now incarcerated with HIV, but they don't want to say anything. I got tired of stuffing it. I wondered if people would continue to be my friends, but they stuck with me. Now I have better friends than before. If you get down in here, to the demons, it's better.*
- ◆ *I did my own independent research about my medical care while inside. A lot of doctors don't care or are not up on the latest HIV treatment.*
- ◆ *I just found out that I'm a diabetic. When I was in jail, they didn't tell me. And I'm HIV positive. That's bad. I wish I had had counseling. Diabetes is bad. You need to get counseling to deal with it. In jail they don't tell you nothing, just that you have a medical problem and its name. You need to get the information—how to treat it, what you need to do.*

Substance abuse treatment

“Everything went into place when the addiction stopped. My biggest problem was the addiction.”

- ◆ *I had to go back to the apartment where all of the drama was before my arrest until they found me somewhere different. I was in a shelter. I had an addiction problem when I came out. I went back to the apartment, had a heart attack and went to the shelter. Everything went into place when the addiction stopped. My biggest problem was the addiction.*
 - ◆ *My mother carried me until I went to rehab. I wish I would've went bed to bed, you know, go from jail to rehab. I still had a problem. I knew I needed rehab. I knew that drugs were going to come back in my life. It couldn't wait. I had too much freedom when I came out. My free will took me where I wanted to go.*
 - ◆ *I didn't have any friends. They were all active drug addicts. I just had people in programs. My family rejected me. I've been at my program and never got a personal letter. I'm not allowed to go to my parent's home, even now that I am in recovery.*
-

Carole

Over a 10 year period, I was arrested five or six times and I've done three bids at Rikers. The first time I was arrested was in 1982. I was on welfare and working at the same time. I was being slick and they found out. I was young. I had a daughter. I had no money and I was afraid of being broke. They charged me with welfare fraud and I received probation. Every time I did jail time, it was due to my drug addiction. My first time at Rikers was in 1988 for a robbery and I did 40 days. Inside, I didn't know what help to ask for. I just wanted to go home. I was new to the system. I didn't know anybody and I didn't get to know anybody. I didn't ask anybody anything. I went back to Rikers again four months later. In the beginning, I would fight and cry. I was scared. They were offering me a lot of time. People would say to me, "Just do your time. Stop crying." I didn't know my rights so I took a one year plea for a five dollar crime. I did eight months. My last bid was in 1997 for a sale.

During the 1988 stay at Rikers, I was pregnant. When I got arrested, I was high, pregnant, and homeless. Gratefully, the baby was born clean. They interviewed me to be in the mother/daughter program before I left for the hospital. I had my daughter on December 23rd. On Christmas Day, the officer stationed to me was worried that she was going to have to spend Christmas at the hospital. So when the doctor said I was ready to leave the hospital, she took my baby from me and passed her to the nurse. She said, "I got my own family." I was hysterical. When they asked her how she could do this, she said, "If she really wanted a baby, she wouldn't be here." It was so traumatic. I was still crying at court a few weeks later.

The women in jail all had problems. We all had children and were on drugs. My social skills were totally warped from living on the streets too long. I couldn't get along with anybody. I had trauma triggered by

rapes, beatings, molestation and abuse and I didn't want to talk about it. I couldn't because emotionally I wasn't ready. Sometimes women do have information and they've got networks, but it is easier to do jail time than treatment due to the fact that after living for no one but yourself for however long you were addicted, it's really hard to go somewhere where someone is constantly telling you what to do. In jail they lay down the rules when you get there and everything is pretty much the same from day to day. In a program they force you to think and feel and sometimes thinking and feeling is too painful, so most women say they'd rather just do the time. I've often heard women say, "I can do time lying on my back. Fuck a program." Emotionally, we just aren't ready.

The turning point for me was being tired. In the beginning of my addiction, my family was there. By the end, they were sick of me—in and out of jail, rehab, detox. I'd had my third child in addiction and my family was tired. I was sick of staying with people, then being evicted and being back on the street. I started trying to get into treatment again. I would pack a bag and then say, "Just one more hit." I would plan to go the next morning, but then just sleep in from the previous night's episode of using. Then I was arrested for a sale. When a judge offered me three

The last time I had left a program, I used immediately. This time my counselor told me to go to a meeting, tell them I was just coming home from treatment and to get phone numbers. So I went to a meeting. I raised my hand, told them my name and said that I was just coming home so I could get phone numbers.

and one-half to seven for ten dollars of crack, I started to fight for my life. My son was two months old. I told the judge I had a bad childhood and that I needed treatment. I was tired of being beaten and raped in the streets. He said everybody says this and would not give me a program. Later in jail, I saw an article in the *Daily News* about women in prison who are in for non-violent crimes related to addiction. Most of the women had been abused and their children were being taken away from them. I copied the article and wrote the judge and the district attorney a two-page letter saying this is my story. I told them how drugs gave me

relief from my pain: my parents had left me; I lived with my grandma; my grandfather was always drinking; my cousin molested me; I was pregnant at 14 and I never could get over it. After that letter, they said I could have a program.

My final experience coming home from jail was difficult. I had lived in the streets and been addicted to drugs for at least 10 years. I didn't know how to do anything. My social skills were rusty. There was a technology boom and I didn't know how to use a computer. I needed education. I knew how to stop using drugs. I just didn't know how to stay stopped. I remember standing on the wall shaking. I was about to be released from a program to go home. My counselor asked me what was wrong and I told her I was scared to go home. The last time I had left a program, I used immediately. This time my counselor told me to go to a meeting, tell them I was just coming home from treatment and to get phone numbers. So I went to a meeting. I raised my hand, told them my name and said that I was just coming home so I could get phone numbers. I had low self-esteem and I thought no one was going to call me. Why would anyone help me? They never have before. But I tried it and as I was walking out someone said, "You have to get numbers." They gave me a booklet of numbers to call because I didn't have a phone. This worked. I started to call people and they called me to ask how I was doing or to go to a meeting with me or to go get something to eat.

My program found me a bed for a week. Then I stayed with my brother and then with a woman's program for a month; and then I went to a shelter for two years. I didn't go to a shelter until I knew I could stay clean. I was finally stable. I was in day treatment at a program. I did technology training. I got VESID [Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities] to pay for me to start college and I was in therapy. In order to stay clean and sober when dealing with past trauma, I believe women have to be in therapy.

It's really hard. It takes spiritual enlightenment. It's a higher power, spiritual enlightenment, being traumatized, and being tired enough. Each woman gets to a breaking point. I can't say what it will be for everyone. Once you are there, you can't go back. Even if you fall, you will pull yourself up stronger. I think it's true for everyone in recovery, unless they die from a relapse. That is the hard part about not being able to stay clean. You sometimes forget you stopped using. It's just such a habit. A friend would knock on the door and offer me a hit and I'd take it and

get high. Then I'd remember I had quit and ask myself, "How'd this happen?"

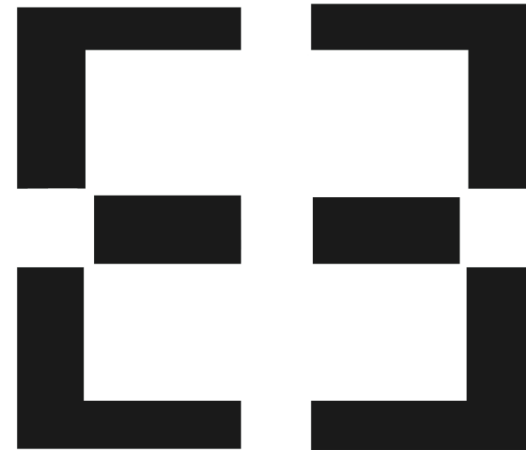
Today I am a member of the Coalition for Women Prisoners. I got involved in the Coalition after speaking at a conference on a panel with one of the Coalition's coordinators. I speak about my experience with the criminal justice system and ACS [New York City Administration for Children's Services]. I work on two of the Coalition's committees, the Reentry Committee and the Incarcerated Mothers Committee. I'm also a member of WORTH [Women on the Rise Telling HerStory]. I've gone back to Rikers to talk to women. I saw women I knew and women I didn't know but who identified with my story. I even saw a woman I used to use with. She had tried to get clean, but she had old charges that she never took care of and they picked her up on an old warrant. She really wanted to get clean.

During the interview for my last treatment program, I was asked when I started using. I said in 1984. Then I realized it was 1997 and I just started crying. This was how I spent the last 13 years. My child was four years old. She's now 17. Her childhood is gone.

You have to be your own strength and realize that your life is going by. Keep trying no matter what.

Parole

We have the right
to be treated
as women
with potential.



support

“I have been on parole, probation, on violations, whatever... It’s not easy. You have to adjust yourself. It’s what you put into it.”

Each woman has a different experience with parole—some good, some not so good. Communication and attitude are two of the most important things to keep in mind. All relationships are a two-way street, including your relationship with your parole officer. It helps if you show parole that you are serious and motivated. Here is what women have to say about parole.

Knowing what to expect from parole

- ◆ *My relationship with parole was nothing like I expected. Originally I had eight years left, but I got released on good time after three years. We had very good supervisors over my parole officer at that time and that made it much better. We had a women’s focus group every Tuesday—women from different walks of life, in different places in their reentry. It was a good place for networking and to find things out. Sometimes, if a parole officer feels that she isn’t being supported by her superiors, she stops caring. That was not the case with mine.*
- ◆ *I have been on parole, probation, on violations, whatever.... It’s not easy. You have to adjust yourself. It’s what you put into it. A lot of times I didn’t want to report. The support I got was good as far as women go. My motivation showed them that they should work with me. If I showed poorly, then they wouldn’t work with me.*
- ◆ *My parole officer, the guy was cool, but the woman was religious. She didn’t respect me being gay. She didn’t call me by my preferred name.*

Reporting

- ◆ *Parole is an extension of restricted life. Do what you have to do, to do what you want to do. You always have rights, but don’t cause a lot of problems and do the program requirements you have been mandated to do.*
- ◆ *I had three different parole officers and I can’t say anything bad about them. It was what I expected. I knew the drill. Be honest from the get go. Don’t talk to them like they are stupid, like when they ask you to pee in a cup, you say I can’t pee right now or I wasn’t drinking I was eating fruit.*
- ◆ *I have been on parole before and it’s different now. Two different parole officers can run things differently. I say stay on a straight line and do what you have to do. It will work out. I wish that someone had told me that sometimes it will be difficult, but it would get better.*
- ◆ *Do what you have to do. Report. Make sure you report. If you get out in the evening, go early the next morning. If you get out on the weekend, make it a point to get there early Monday morning.*

Communicating with your parole officer

- ◆ *Parole was easier than I thought it would be. All of my parole officers have been fantastic. Keep clean urine and get a job and housing if you can. Communicate with your parole officer and be truthful.*
- ◆ *Listen to what the parole officers say. Don’t be afraid to share your fears. My fear was going back to those neighborhoods where the worst part of my life was. He said stay away from people, places, and things. I was fearful of parole at first. I heard they will violate you first thing, but it wasn’t like that.*
- ◆ *My current parole officer is beautiful. Actually I never had a bad parole officer. I’ve always been blessed with good parole officers. Do what you have to do. Don’t try to be slick and they will work with you. Make sure you pay your bill [parole fee]. You could get*

this fee waived. Be honest about everything you can do. Abide by your curfew. Do the same with your probation stipulations.

Knowing your parole rights

- ◆ *If you want to get your parole officer switched, you can when you have a conflict of interest. You can write to the supervisor and call the Division of Parole. You must get the parole officer supervisor's name and number. This is a general thing just in case the parole officer is not there.*
 - ◆ *I wish I was told that that you always have a right to ask to speak to your parole officer's supervisor. Many people get intimidated because they don't want to be violated.*
 - ◆ *Definitely use the mechanism of parole for your benefit. If you feel boxed in, don't be afraid to take it to a higher place. It won't fall on deaf ears. Take it to your organization. Parole doesn't have to be seen as another form of discipline.*
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Views from Women with Experience on Rikers Island

Jacqueline

I was in jail three times. Right now I'm in school at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. My major is writing. I have an 11 year old daughter. Her father died before she was nine weeks old. Life taking a turn for the worst.

The first time I went to jail it was at Rikers as a juvenile at age 17 for assaulting another chick. I brutally cut her face. After two weeks at Rikers, I beat the case at grand jury. The second time I did jail time was when I was about 22 years old. I tried to open a \$10,000 credit card and went in for credit card fraud. That was in another state on New Year's Eve, so you know where I spent that night. My cousin finally bailed me out. My daughter was about two years old at the time. The third time, seven years later, I had to do six months on Rikers Island and five years probation for a drug charge. That was my first felony. I was bailed out and tried to fight my case, but I realized I could not get away with no jail time, so I took a six month plea and ran with it.

My arrests span over a long period of time—15 years. My reason for going back and forth to jail was lack of money. I was single and taking care of my daughter. It was hard to get a good job, especially the types of jobs I felt I was smart enough to do or be taught to do. For a lot of women, it's drugs. There are a lot of women on Rikers who couldn't wait to get out of there and go back and use—to get their next hit. I'm

not going to say I don't have an addiction. I have abused weed and liquor.

When I was arrested the third time, I was bailed out immediately, so I had two months before going back into Rikers. I spent two months knowing I was going to jail. I had to tie loose ends, cutting off the gas, buying my daughter school clothing and supplies. I had to talk to my daughter and explain. She had been through a lot since her father was gone. I was the only one she had and I couldn't stand on my two feet. She was making a woman out of me, just the look of disappointment on her face. I had to explain to her daycare that I was going away, going to Puerto Rico to take care of my grandmother. They knew I was lying. I had to tell my daughter to lie. I sent my daughter to my friend in Massachusetts for a while. Then she stayed with my boyfriend and my mother. My daughter is my life. Without my daughter I am nothing.

When I got to Rikers, I didn't want anyone to visit me for the four months, but my daughter and best friends came. My daughter was eight years old but she sat in my lap holding onto me and laying on my bosom like a baby. It broke my heart. I couldn't be strong for her. I couldn't hold my tears. She broke everyone's heart who worked in the visiting area. Because I worked in the visiting area, they let me have a longer

There were counselors and groups, like NA, AA, coming through. You name it, they were there. The groups were all voluntary. I sat through almost every one.

visit, three hours instead of the one hour. Seeing her go through that was too much. When I got back home and spoke to her teacher, the teacher said that my daughter was much better in school. When I was gone, she was a bad student, mean to the teacher and to her classmates. Four months was an eternity to my daughter. She made me promise never to go away again.

In retrospect, I felt like there was help at Rikers. I saw a flier for the RIDE [Rikers Island Discharge Enhancement] program. There was an officer who told me a little more about it. One week after asking about the program, instead of being housed, they sent me to the trailers. In

RIDE there was discipline, organization, and structure. We woke up at 5:00 a.m. and were assigned chores. They soon realized I was tidy so I got other jobs, including a job in the bubble. There were counselors and groups, like NA, AA, coming through. You name it, they were there. The groups were all voluntary. I sat through almost every one. I did see a counselor once a week. I could have turned it down, but I needed to get away and talk to someone who didn't treat me like an inmate and who had on regular clothes—someone who was actually there for my well-being and hopefully cared.

During my last bid on Rikers, I knew I wanted to do something different. When I saw that RIDE poster, it was a bit misleading because the woman on the poster had a uniform, so I thought it was about a job off the Island. The resources in RIDE were scarce, so I can only imagine the resources on the rest of the Island.

Women envied me, thought I was a good girl. People were nice to me. I did get help, referrals to outside services. People would come in from colleges. But there was no school at the jail. GED programs were only available for juveniles. You could wax floors and do buffing, but I was not trying to go home and be a janitor.

I think it was my lack of experience with jobs, lack of job skills, lack of money, and discrimination that led me to go to jail. People don't want to teach you or let you acquire skills. I went back to school after I got fired from my job because I was taking my daughter to a different neighborhood to get her into a better school. It was a strain getting to work on time. After being a medical assistant for three years, I got fired. I had self-esteem, abuse and trust issues. After my first semester I had no money, so I started holding drugs. It was either school or a full-time job and the job was a dead-end job. I wanted to give my daughter more.

With respect to returning home from jail, I needed help getting reconnected and counseling for my child. I had to live in a shelter for one year and three days. Right now I have help. I'm scared all of the time that something will happen and I could lose my housing.

I would say to women on Rikers Island, stay out of trouble. I had a mean fighting streak. This girl had a problem with me and I ended up getting in a fight and spending 20 days in the box. That was an experience in itself. So to deal with Rikers, stay focused on doing the time without

trouble. It complicates things. When I faced adversity, I thought about how I had promised my eight year old daughter that I would be home.

In the dorms at Rikers, meetings were held in the middle of the room, so even if you did not sit through a meeting, you couldn't avoid it either. You still heard people's testimonials. They were amazing. I thought my life was over—a felony on my record was so scary to me. Also, it bothered me to see people leave Rikers and come right back. People would leave happy, they had gained weight and the officers would say, "Oh they'll be back." And they did come back looking dirty and skinny from drug abuse.

This may sound weird, but jail was a time for me to look at my life. I started to welcome being alone. I'm grateful that I went through that—the box. Other women at Rikers in the box were going insane. They needed attention. But I welcomed the box, except for their screaming. I read books, something I had never done at home. I had never been sober for that long—four months. I thought about the things I could have accomplished over the last 13 years.

I used to get so drunk because I didn't care. I lost everything because I was molested. When I went to jail, I felt like I was the only one molested, the only one whose baby's father was dead. But I wasn't. It was the norm of the women there. My best friend went through similar things. Just recently she got off heroin. It's a different experience for everyone. People do things out of habit, even things they don't want to do. Like I would be sitting with friends who are smoking and I would tell them I'm not smoking; then a blunt is passed to me and I take a hit and once I'm high, I remember I didn't want to smoke. You can be broke, with no food, but someone always comes with drugs.

I've actually been back to Rikers to speak to women there. The woman who helped me get in school invited me to go speak. I saw people I had seen when I was there. One woman broke my heart. She looked at me and said, "Don't I know you?" I said, "Yes, I was just here." She just started crying. I told the women to use the resources. If you can do jail over and over again, you can do anything. You just have to want it bad enough. No judge can help you with your kids. Do whatever you have to do. If you have to go to shelters, do it. Reach out to people. All of the counselors in jail are not bullshitting. Network. Get information.

Marion

I had been arrested three times and served one bid on Rikers Island. Once was enough for me. As women serving time on Rikers Island, we often don't know what to ask for because we are so out of touch with ourselves. We don't know about resources and most importantly we don't trust others and lack confidence in ourselves. We don't believe our lives can change, but we can stop the cycle. Women who have no choices and don't get offered other options will most likely return to jail because they go right back to what they came from. That's what I saw during my eight months on the Island: women who returned to the same situations, went back to the 'hood or to abusive relationships, or to cop drugs and wound up locked up again.

When we are locked up, the desperation of that situation and the loss of freedom makes us hasty in our decisions. All we want do is get out. We either feel, "I won't do it again" or "I can't wait to get back to the block." This mentality has to change. I saw jail as an opportunity, a second chance. I always acknowledge that getting arrested saved me from myself when I couldn't help myself and I have not looked back. I have more compassion for my fellow man and I have changed the way I think and what I do because of the jail experience.

We need to re-humanize the discussions for women in jail and help people get back to their roots, to being born, to appreciating themselves and the fact that life is a temporary spot here on earth. It was not meant in the divine order for us to be here suffering in a bad place. We must believe that we have the power to change our lives. Yes, pain is inevitable, but suffering is totally optional. We are not victims of society's ills. We are powerful people. We can change our lives; better our families; our communities, and the world, one person at a time, starting with me.

Women should ask themselves, “What do I want? What does success mean to me? What would make me happy?” Many of us never took a good look at ourselves. We fall into a caretaking mold, always worrying about others and just doing what we have to do. I believe that it is critical to teach women to search for information about what affects them and then do real work in that area. I am always looking for information. Folks must become involved in a cause for others as well as themselves. Many of us who are involved in helping others are doing okay since our release from jail. I have found out what makes me complete and brings a real feeling of satisfaction: it is the fact that I can give selflessly. I believe in good karma and I have seen clear evidence in my life and situations around me that what goes around comes back around.

There is a definite difference between women who are serving time on the Island and those serving time upstate. Women on Rikers Island need more discharge planning and resources. There should be a guide for women to review prior to meeting with counselors at Rikers so women can see what help is out there and choose what might work best along with help from the counselor. The counselor does not just *know* what each one of us needs and there is not enough time to tell our whole story, so we need to take time out to focus on ourselves. After all, what do we have in jail but time? I suggest that women use that time wisely. It could change your life. Come to the table with information and be persistent, that makes people work harder because they see our passion. We are in a vulnerable state in jail—beaten down and disgusted. We’ve got to believe that there is a better way.

I have been home for three years. There are so many resources for women and women with children. We just have to tap in. Do research and follow up out here in the world. I am still finding new information and I thought I was informed. Women who have been successful at changing our lives have a responsibility to give back to those women who are struggling with self-identification and loving themselves. Be a mentor, a sponsor, and build relationships and friendships. Share your knowledge and your experiences as to what worked for you. This is

Be a mentor, a sponsor, and build relationships and friendships. Share your knowledge and your experiences as to what worked for you.

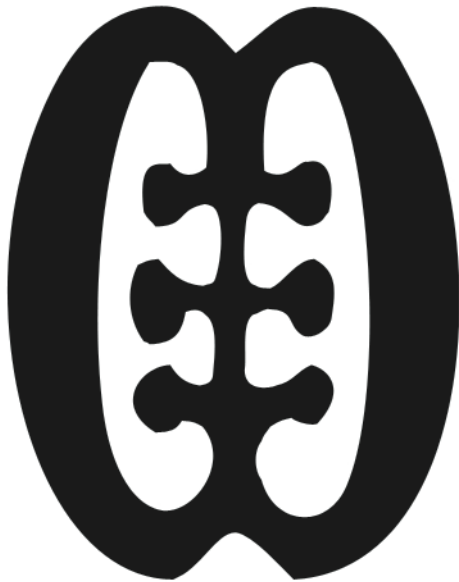
critical to anybody’s success, especially those of us who have done time. Many of us did not have positive role models or healthy relationships in our lives before we got locked up. We need to learn how to build them. I promote volunteer work in whatever field a person wants to work in as a good way to get a job. Educational opportunities, workforce programs and financial planning are critical for women coming home from jail. Don’t give up. You owe it to yourself.

Suggestions from women on Rikers Island

- ◆ *Plan to do a program. It can be outpatient and you can do it forever. And work. And be connected with somebody.*
- ◆ *Meet people, create new social circles. NA groups kept me clean and opened other doors. You must have patience to make change. It will not happen overnight.*
- ◆ *Be on top of your game. If you have a tough parole officer you know you have to follow all of the rules. If you have a curfew, you know you need to be home. If you don’t follow the rules, you know what happens.*
- ◆ *Women should express to the parole officer when they have individualized needs. Talk to your parole officer and counselor.*
- ◆ *I had no plan and a lot of anxiety and confusion. I was always in and out of Rikers – skid bids. I wouldn’t ask for help. I wouldn’t know what to ask for. Then after the tenth time at Rikers I heard of a women’s program in New York City and what they offer. Most of the information I got was inside from other inmates.... I trusted the information enough that it planted a seed in my head. If a woman comes to me who has been where I’ve been, I trust it.*

Relationships

We have the right
to be in healthy
relationships.



interdependence

“Be real with yourself about relationships that you have. Is that a good, healing relationship and can it benefit you?”

Reconnecting with your family and friends can be a hard test. No one can tell you how to deal with your family and friends. Expect that you will have to spend time earning their trust again. Expect that there are some things that you might have to just accept and then move on. To help family and friends understand what you are going through, you will need to be patient and help them understand about your experiences in prison and about what you are going through now. Here is what women have to say about reconnecting with people after prison.

About family and friends

- ◆ *Be real with yourself about relationships that you have. Is that a good, healing relationship and can it benefit you? Not every relationship is positive. If it is negative, you don't need that. If it was a bad situation before, stay away.*
- ◆ *When I got locked up, I didn't expect my sister to do much, but she took my son. I thank her every time we talk. It was not easy for her having an extra mouth to feed and working. When I got home, she said, "I hope you learned your lesson." She accepted me and my baby with opened arms. My advice is to think about your family and not just about yourself. You hurt others too.*
- ◆ *I knew that they were keeping a close eye on me to see if I was going to resort back to my old behavior. You should give your family the time to heal from the damage that you have caused and also to let them see that a new way of life is possible if you are willing to apply yourself.*
- ◆ *I get positive feedback from NA and my job. They trust me with keys and tools. They know my whole situation. They use my situation as inspiration. It is nice to know people will give me a second chance even when my family won't.*

- ◆ *I had to kick my family to the curb. My mother accepted me okay, but said, “When are you gonna leave?” She made an issue of the plate I used because I’m living with HIV. Another brother saw me as a crack head. My mom said, “I don’t understand why you can’t stop using drugs.” A parole officer didn’t like my brother and took it out on me. I had to wait 45 days for social services, even though I’m HIV positive. Also, my kids wondered when I went out, whether I was coming back. NA and AA meetings, I was going to them, but I stopped because they were stressful. Eventually I left upstate and came to New York City. This is what the girls inside told me that I should do. I stayed with a cousin; found a clinic. At first I didn’t understand groups. A social worker found me another transitional housing place.*
- ◆ *My mother, my children...there is no relationship. It’s weird. I got high for 20 years. In their eyes it was just a matter of time before “the bitch goes back.” In my mother’s mind, it was “How long is she gonna stay out?” Family can be fucked up even when you do the right thing. If they guilt trip you, you are better off staying away until you get yourself straight.*
- ◆ *Cold, closed doors. I am treated as the only convict, spreading a disease into the family. My advice is to go at your own pace, so you are comfortable. I wish I knew it was going to be a hard test.*
- ◆ *I was used to living off my husband. I was co-dependant. He was controlling. He started drinking beer, calling me a bitch, treating me wrong. We fought, we argued, we separated and now I’m fighting for my children. Is it going to be hard? Hell yeah. On drugs, I worked real hard at tearing up my life. There is no snow today that will stop me from getting what I need. Find your purpose.*
- ◆ *Most of my friends were my get high buddies. Now we don’t have a lot in common. It’s very lonely. To deal, I take weekend passes and stay with my son or his ex-wife. My closest friend right now is 81 years old. She is my former daughter-in-law’s mother. I talk to her a lot about anything. She’s lived a rich life. We keep promising that we will go to Atlantic City together. I’m limited in terms of family or friends. They have passed away or are not in New York.*

Being open

- ◆ *My advice to people is to be open because we put them [family and friends] through a lot. They may not receive us the way we want because the trust is not there. Be open to not getting instant gratification. Sure, they are going to watch you. In time, they will see what you are doing.*
- ◆ *Be patient, open, and accept criticism. Also, don’t worry when people start to take bets about how long it will take you to re-offend.*
- ◆ *Allow your family to have an opinion, just don’t let it lead your decision-making.*
- ◆ *I realized that I don’t have to stay with the same people who hurt me, so I can try new things. Get some help. You don’t have to be alone with the same old friends and doing the same old things you’ve always done. Try something new.*
- ◆ *Expect family to be cautious. My family has taken so much. Be with friends, but stand your ground. Friends are still going to do what they do—the same thing. This is not going away. Stand up for what you want to do.*
- ◆ *Expect lots of distrust. My mother still does not speak to me. Coming home, I was told that I have to work to earn trust, but I found no one would welcome me. I need to rebuild relationships. I have patience, but no high hopes. High hopes could lead to destructive behavior.*

Tina

My priorities when I first got home were to not get high and to focus on my baby. My transition process was different this time compared to the other times I was released. My son, whom I had in prison, was with me. This time was definitely different. I felt very afraid that if I was not careful, I would have a slip, so my priority was to keep away from people and places of the past—stay away from the block.

In the past, I was very hard-headed so one of my resolves was to seek out positive people who could guide me. I was told while I was inside to make AA meetings and that I would find people who had successfully stayed away from a drink and a drug one day at a time. While making meetings I began to let other people suggest to me how to stay sober. I chose specific people by watching them. This time, I knew that how I did things in the past was not the right response for now. So I was determined to watch people. I would ask how much time they had, if they had kids, and if they also had felt something in line with how I felt—the shame, the guilt, etc. Those whom I observed who had come through the other side, I would ask them specific questions.

The only way that I could get to a new place was thinking it, imagining it, because I brought along a lot of ideals from my experiences, like lack of trust and shame, so the structure helped. In the beginning, I had to have blinders on, just go from one place to the next, then get home. I had to build structure and stay within it. Slowly, I could incorporate the simple things. I would make sure that I didn't do things that I would regret. I would ask people from my outpatient program and AA for suggestions. I depended on those rules to maintain myself. I began to learn these rules while in prison with my son. I had to attend groups and see a psychiatrist. I began to build a point of reference that I would be able to rely on.

I had no clue about intimacy and relationships. My relationships in the past had been one-sided. When I thought I was ready for a relationship about four months after I had been home, I found myself involved in the same abusive relationship as I had been in when I was using drugs. The person I was before I went to prison was choosing partners for me. I had only been told not to get into relationships. There was only one person I would have listened to, a counselor at the prison, but that person didn't tell me anything about that. I didn't hear it from others. When the shit broke loose, I realized I had to stop seeing the same type of person I was used to being with when I lived a destructive lifestyle.

I was pregnant in prison, but didn't really have any medical needs. I was pregnant for most of the time when I went in. Intermittently, I would get pre-natal care. Before and during my incarceration, I had experienced a lot of trauma and had low self-esteem. I realized the last time I was arrested on a parole violation that if I didn't find someone to talk to, I would keep getting locked up. One of the requirements of getting into the nursery while I was inside was to go to therapy. I had to get past my trust issues. I began telling secrets that I thought were damning to me, that I would never think about telling; about what led me to pick up. So when I went to therapy, I started to talk. At the time, I received a diagnosis and that helped me put a finger on what it was. When I found out that I was extremely depressed and had anxiety. That helped. Once I knew what was wrong, I could begin to do something about it. When I came home, I sought out help and therapy. I wish someone had told me about how to take care of my health. I wish people would have told me about getting regular check ups. You didn't get that on the inside. You were never told anything. I wish people told me to make sure I was okay.

I had been to parole after completing a six-month bid at Lakeview Shock camp. I was traumatized. I was living in a shelter and my life felt disjointed. Any connection to parole or the police and I did not do well. I felt vulnerable and anxious. After Shock, I went back to prison for a parole violation because I did not report. I was traumatized having to go and report. It was a set up. When I was released to a half-way house in 1995, a female parole officer would come to the house that I was living in. She met me in my own environment and that was supportive. I wish someone had told me that parole was not empathetic and unknowledgeable. They didn't understand addiction; that a person needed time to get their lives together. When I had gotten released after

completing Shock, the parole officer thought that I got what I needed and that I just needed to get a job. They did not want to take my history into account. I wish I knew that they would not understand. If I knew, I would have been able to deal with the ignorance. It was just a continuum of abuse and oppression from prison. I had an expectation that parole would have more understanding. Instead, they would read my record and make snide comments. They had control issues. I thought all the parole officers were like that, a continuation of humiliation and degradation.

Throughout my whole addiction and incarceration, my family didn't really know. Only at the end, the last five years, did they begin to know. Most of them ostracized me; didn't know how to deal with the fact that I used drugs and as a result went to prison. So my children suffered a lot. My family felt shame and embarrassment. Many times they didn't know where I was. When they did, they never brought my children to see me. I wanted to see my children, but my family wasn't educated about addiction and they were unforgiving. They never upheld my love for my children by telling them no matter what I loved them. Some of my kids

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were raised by my family. When I got home, my older kids, who I had a relationship with before my many incarcerations, expected that I would be able to pull everything together. So when I relapsed and returned to prison, everything shifted. They probably thought, "She isn't reliable." The second time, they did not try to have a relationship with me right away. When I was able to parent my younger kids, the older kids thought, "Why hadn't I stayed with them?" The adults who raised some of my children would say to me, "We don't really know you." But we're family!

To this day, my family does not reach out to me or my children who are with me. I have to do all of the reaching out. It's my responsibility. I

have caused this situation in my life and unfortunately my children suffered. My older children are back in my life. As for the other children who lived with relatives, they go on with their lives. It is still a struggle. I didn't know how to establish a relationship with my family, to speak my mind, take a stand for myself and my children as to how they had been treated. I wish someone told me about how families can be unforgiving.

Everyone experiences their own situation with their family. I wouldn't know what to say to someone else. My own experience is that I ultimately had to rely on myself and take my time with establishing relationships. I knew that once I could take care of myself, that if I thought about me, then I would be able to take care of other things in my life, but first I had to take care of me and the two children who depended on me. Accept your family to the extent that you can, but do everything yourself and understand your limitations. Have no regrets. They keep you from moving forward. Everyone has their own higher power. Family relationships are really a sticky thing if you've never received their support during your incarceration. To this day, my family doesn't think of me, what I might need, if I need help, if I am paying the bills. They have never offered. I have never asked. I didn't have friends due to the lifestyle. I also didn't trust people. When I got out, I carried that over. If I met folks who didn't have the determination it takes to stay out, I didn't want you to be close to me. I didn't establish friendships right away and still it is hard for me to let people in. I have a few close friends today and I have been out for 11 years. I don't use that word [friend] loosely.

To my advantage, I was housed with others who came home with children. At the end of the day, we could informally sit down and talk. It was informal so it was not intrusive. We were given a space to have these moments. When I went to meetings in the beginning my son was nine months old and some of the members were annoyed that my son would make noise and not sit still. My son went with me wherever I went. I wasn't going to leave my child and I was not going to stop making meetings because my son was disruptive at times. I wasn't going to miss out. So I said to the others, "If you don't want to deal with my son, don't touch him, just let him be... and know that I am not going anywhere so just get used to us." They did eventually and I attribute my sons' attitude and demeanor to the exposure they have had in AA. They still make meetings with me sometimes.

To cope when I was at my lowest, I played with my son. I probably would have used if I didn't have him. I had no sense of self while alone, so at first it was all about him. I would wake up at night and just look at him. Just looking at him and not going through a door because I had no direction...being still when I didn't have the answers. Fortunately, those low times didn't come very often.

Today, I am a co-founder of an organization: WORTH, Women on the Rise Telling HerStory. WORTH is an association of women who have been impacted by the criminal justice system. The members of WORTH strive to change public perception and policy as they relate to women. I say give *time* time. Now you have an opportunity to take the time. Before you *did* time or time *did* you. Now instead of counting down, you can count forward. You have the opportunity to do whatever you want with that experience. Detach yourself from your experience. It is not who you are, especially for women, because women are seen a certain way and women get a lot of pressure and put a lot of pressure on themselves. Every day just being able to go to sleep and wake up is a lot. Hook up with your sisters and be supportive of one another.

You and Your Children

We have the right to have
meaningful
relationships with our children.



patience

An especially hard experience for mothers coming home from prison or jail is dealing with the emotions around reuniting with their children. If you are a mother, you might be worrying about what your children are feeling about you, what they will say to you, and how they will act towards you when you get home. Your children may have grown and changed in ways that you don't expect. It is important to forgive yourself for past mistakes and move forward with your children in a healthy and responsible way. Here is what women who are mothers have to say about connecting with their children after coming home.

Reuniting with your children

- ◆ *The relationship with my children was strained. Getting to know them was the hardest because they were their own individuals, different from when I went to prison. Be patient and give them time to heal and know you. I wish someone told me everything, what my kids were thinking, what they may feel, what to expect, and how to deal with their feelings.*
- ◆ *Before you try to reestablish connections, you need to get yourself together first. You must befriend your children before you try to step into the “mommy” role. You should start reconnecting with your kids while you are still inside.*
- ◆ *I have a lot of problems with my children. I have to go through the caretaker just to see them. I had the idea that it would be okay once I proved myself. I waited nine to ten months with the caretaker stringing me along, promising me that I will see them. Weeks of excuses even though they would promise. It became obvious that it was bullshit, so I went to court. I felt very empowered. The court looks at what you're doing now. It leveled the playing field.*
- ◆ *I do not have my children because they are in another state. My relationship is strained and I have only spoken with them once in ten months. I want to resume a relationship, but I am not able to at the moment. My advice for others is to be patient.*

- ◆ *The hardest thing was not seeing my son for over nine years and getting in touch with him the first time, accepting him and listening to the changes in his character. I was surprised seeing him grown up. I had lost touch with him because he was taken at the age of two because of my drug use. Stay clean, keep in touch, listen to your child, be open-minded and do not view your parenting role as a burden.*

Dealing with your guilt

- ◆ *The hardest thing was forgiving myself. I am even harder on myself than my child. Be patient, understanding that we make mistakes.*
- ◆ *It was awful, painful, guilt-ridden. I haven't really assumed a relationship with them. My relationship with my kids is non-existent by their choice. My children are grown now and they have their own agendas. I would say to other women have great expectations of your children and jump in where you left off. In many cases, you have to be a friend first, then a mother.*
- ◆ *At first, my kids wanted nothin' to do with me. About a year ago, they started talking to me. There is a deep loathing that my two kids have for me. I have to forgive myself for what I've done to my kids. That's my advice. Forgive yourself. Let the guilt go 'cause it will eat you alive. Don't let the guilt take you out.*
- ◆ *I'm on the biggest guilt trip. My son is 25. We have no relationship. He hates me. He's angry because I raised the other kids and not him. My other child is in the system. I chose him to be raised by his father, who is abusive and so now my son is in the system. My twins respond with anger and rebellion—and I raised them. Love and patience helps, but they need more. The hardest thing is fighting with the child welfare agency for my kids. I was a fallen child of the system. The system didn't work for me. Don't give up in dealing with the system. The system does things to make you turn away. It is very easy to give up, but I don't want my children to go through the same thing. I try to focus on my inner feelings.*

Establishing trust

- ◆ *They were happy to see me but did not trust that I would not go back to jail. Building trust was hard. Give children time to trust and heal. I wish someone had told me that my kids would be leery of me.*
- ◆ *Not talking to them was the hardest. I couldn't have contact with them. My mother didn't trust me yet. Take time getting reacquainted with your children. The caretakers may not feel you have actually changed.*

Sharing the fact that you were incarcerated and dealing with your children's reactions

- ◆ *I didn't sugar coat it. I just told them and said I would make up for it. My son didn't ask many questions. He was understanding.*
- ◆ *I thought it was going to be easier, but it's not. Sit down with the children if they are old enough to understand and be honest.*
- ◆ *My child is angry and is rebelling. I thought it would be easy, but my child is resentful and hostile and I feel that I cannot get angry. My advice to others is to not hold onto the past.*
- ◆ *My son was blackmailing me with things that I had done in the past. Make sure that you try to spend a lot of time with them. Set some goals that can be achieved together.*
- ◆ *They were angry and hurt. While they missed me, they kept a wall around them to avoid being hurt again. Do not expect instant acceptance.*
- ◆ *I'm not going to let my children take me on a guilt trip. The past is the past. I'm not going to buy your love back. You're not going to act out. We can grow together.*

Knowing your rights as a parent

- ◆ *What I would tell a woman with kids to be careful of the termination of your parental rights. You can lose your rights and if you lose them, they are lost. Don't get caught up in the system and monitor where you are with your rights.*
- ◆ *I have three kids and two grandkids and another grandkid is on the way. I am just starting to rebuild my relationship with my kids because I was using. They were adopted by a foster mother. I blame myself because I didn't know. I had drugs. No one showed me how to be a mother and then they took my kids. And once they took my kids away, I just got high all the time. So don't lose your rights as parents, because once they are lost, you've finished your relationship with your kids, if they didn't give up on you already. And you have to do it right in time. Not too late. Sometimes when I am down and depressed and I hear my grandkid say, "I love you" that's everything to me. It's difficult. It takes time. I don't have your typical mom-kids relationship. Don't give up on your kids and being a mommy. Right on time I got my act together. Once you've lost faith from your kids, that's it. Find out your status from ACS [New York City Administration for Children's Services.*
- ◆ *My child was adopted while I was in prison. I wish someone had told me to maintain contact with the courts and my kids. My parental rights were terminated. When I found out that I lost my son, it was so hard. My son thought I abandoned him. Maintain contact with your kids...it's really important. You need to believe in yourself and have faith in God. I believe my son will come look for me when he is older. That's what makes it easier for me to deal with the situation.*
- ◆ *I sought it out. You got advocacy groups...my children are with ACS. I have been fighting for two years. A case worker could've helped, but I did it for myself. I read. I am nosy. I was not waiting for the social worker to set me up.*

Being a positive model and helping your kids heal

- ◆ *Be a productive parent. Be assertive with kids. Don't let them get over. Love them productively. Don't give them everything or spoil them. Let them know they have to work for stuff.*
 - ◆ *My son and I have been close, all through everything, when I was inside. It's hard for him. He doesn't want to be bothered with his mother now. He's not accepting the fact that I have changed and I don't want to do that [certain things] anymore. I'm upset because of the influence I have had on my son. When you're in that lifestyle, you will smoke and drink. My son doesn't think about the consequences of his behavior. He doesn't have a place to live. Love yourself. Keep communication open. Reach out.*
 - ◆ *I have a good relationship with my son. I do things with my son, skating, talking to him about girls and how he should treat a woman. I want him to be a good man. I'm like his friend, not just his mother.*
 - ◆ *Love your child to death. Hug them. Apologize. Love them to death. When I came out my child was so happy to see me and I didn't want to let go. My two-year-old daughter wears my shirt to bed. She loves the smell. She doesn't want to let me go. Love your kids. And don't leave them alone.*
-

Russelle

I became a mom at age 15 and at age 19 moved in with a man four years older than me just to get out of my mother's house. When I went to prison, my daughter was 13 and I had three sons—nine month old twins and a one and a half year old—who were placed into foster care. My mom took my daughter. She had the opportunity to take my sons but refused, so my sons ended up being adopted. They are adults now. I was at Bayview when I was given a furlough. Right before my furlough, my counselor told me my sons were about to be adopted. I was always trying to find my sons. My counselor told me my kids were being adopted that day, the day I was being released. I told him I wanted to stop the adoption. He said, "If we gave you your kids today, what could you do for them?" I couldn't say anything. I didn't know my rights and I felt I couldn't fight. If I had information about my rights, I could have fought and I'd have my sons today.

I am living with AIDS. I came to prison in 1991 knowing my HIV status and in deep, deep denial because of fear and stigma. I was afraid of people finding out. I got sick and wound up in the infirmary. I became a part of ACE [AIDS Counseling and Education program at Bedford Hills] and met some great women—all of the greats in early HIV activism. They helped me accept my disease, to become an advocate, to look for resources, and to educate myself. By the time I got to Albion, I was more comfortable with myself. I met with a counselor. I looked for jobs I needed. I worked in the kitchen for one week and then became a peer in the AIDS Resource Center. I eventually became a certified AIDS Counselor.

When I came home, I wrote for the PWA [People With AIDS] newsletter. I decided then that advocacy would be my career. I was part of ACE Out in New York City. I found ACE Out because I stayed in contact with women at ACE. But that doesn't erase the fact that I almost died

in Albion. I saw women pushed in wheel barrels and not getting their meds. I got sick in the dorm and the women took care of me. Women helped me to care about my health.

When I came home in 1993, I had no Medicaid. I had to get ADAP [AIDS Drug Assistance Program]. Because of my affiliations inside with ACE, I could do things to prepare. I was able to continue my relationship with my doctors inside and outside. At the time there were only two medications and I had bad reactions to both. However, because I was proactive and educated, I was able to move things along. I was in positions while incarcerated that enabled me to do well outside. It's all about how you do your time. Prison allowed me the opportunity to grow up.

Fortunately, I had a good relationship with parole. My parole officer laid it out. She said, "You have a choice: go back into the community or come back here and we'll have a cot. It looks like you have a good head

It is important to be real with yourself about the relationships that you have. Is that a good, healing relationship and can it benefit you? Not every relationship is positive. If it is negative, you don't need that. If it was a bad situation before, stay away.

on your shoulders, but it's up to you to make a choice." I came out on work release. I worked at Women In Need. This was the best for me, working for women like me who needed help. I was able to form relationships with them. The job at work release led to full-time employment. I came off of parole with a full-time job. Listen to what the parole officer says and don't be

afraid to share your fears. I used drugs from 110th Street to 151st Street. My fear was going back to those neighborhoods where the worst part of my life was. She said stay away from people, places, and things. I was fearful of parole at first. I heard they would violate you first thing, but it wasn't like that.

I lived at the YMCA because I didn't want to go to my mom's. I had changed. I stayed at the Y for eight months and then got my own apartment. I had to fight to go to the YMCA. My P.O. wanted to send me back to my mom's. Because my mom is an enabler and uses drugs, I knew if I were around her, I would use. I was told if I was released to a place, I had to stay there, but this was not true. It is important to be real with yourself about the relationships that you have. Is that a good, healing relationship and can it benefit you? Not every relationship is positive. If it is negative, you don't need that. If it was a bad situation before, stay away.

In the beginning I thought that just because I was the mother that I could mother my children. I thought I understood this coming out, but knowing and experiencing are two different things. When I went to prison, my daughter was 13. The day I was arrested, she saw me arrested and then I was gone three years. When I came home, she was 16. She had grown up and raised herself. Emotionally, my mom wasn't there. Anger, pain, frustration—all there. My mom said to her, give her (meaning me) six months, she'll be back in jail. Remember, I drugged before jail, so there was no trust. My daughter was offered the choice to stay with me or my mom. She chose to stay with my mom and with me on the weekends. We gradually got comfortable with each other. I had to accept this. She would come after school to the Y to hang out during visiting hours. We would walk and talk about everything. On weekends, I would go up and stay with her.

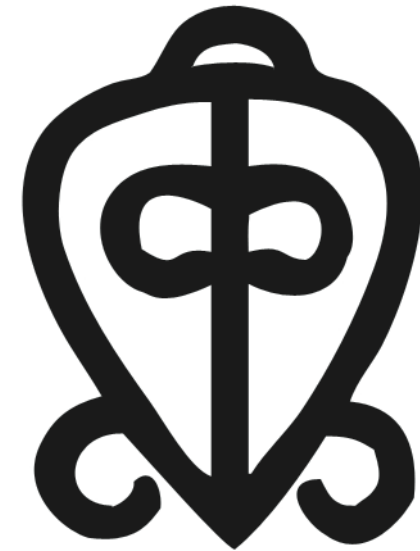
I am a woman living with AIDS, an ex-offender, and a mother. I still have close friends who are ex-offenders. We are still friends and I rely on their support in my everyday needs. For many women, the relationships with their kids have been badly damaged. It takes time to repair. I sought information from the church. My godfather led a prison ministry. He put me in touch with the right people. For example, at Christmas, the church had a Christmas party and toys. They helped me get toys and provided a place to bring my daughter without being around my family. A minister at Bayview had a church that I would go to. She provided me with access to a food pantry so I was contributing to the household. These things are small, but important. They gave me a sense of belonging and kept me busy. I had positive places to take my daughter. I was able to spend time with her in a place where she didn't have to worry about me drugging or going off with a man. They paved the road for me.

I got what I needed by trial and error. Trust your gut and listen to your inner voice. I know that I needed to be quiet enough to hear it. If there is chaos, then other people are leading me. If it's quiet and still, I will know the right thing to do—stinking thinking versus your gut. You must be comfortable with yourself in order to do this. Trust your thinking and your experience, that it is good enough to make decisions. As women of color coming out of bad relationships that wore out our self-esteem, we haven't trusted our own thinking because we have been told our opinion doesn't matter, just do as you're told. I had to learn who I was, what I liked, what I wanted so I could stop. You are not as stupid as others say. Don't dumb down for others' purposes. It's not relationships, but thinking.

I coped by praying and still do today. I talk about what I'm feeling because 12 years later, I still get the feeling that I want to get high. There are tests. Some are harder than others. Each test takes you back to the first day of release where you had to explain who you are and how you got there because there are people who believe that you don't deserve to be here. I wish there were more programs for women, where women could feel comfortable as women, to share their fears and strengths and not have to run around to get the big picture.

Lesbians & Transgender People

We have the right to our gender
identity and sexual orientation.



power of love

Women who identify as lesbian or transgender may face insensitivity and even hostility when seeking services and support after returning home from prison or jail. Finding sensitive services to meet your specific needs may not be easy depending on where you live, but remember to keep searching until you find what you need. Here is what women have to say about finding affirmation and support.

Denise

In my early days after coming out of prison my priority was to go back to the block, but when I did, I realized that I was scared and my priorities became finding housing and a job. I had to make the decision about whether to go to my family or to a shelter and I chose the shelter. Parole helped a lot. The shelter helped a lot. I realized in the shelter that I was back in prison in a way because of the other people who were there. I was in prison for selling not using. I wanted to get into the clean and sober dorm in the shelter, which I could get into if I did a program. That is what I did and it gave me stability and structure. I was in the military, which is all about structure. Later, I went to NA where they told you if you go with your feet, your mind will follow. That also helped me with the structure. It also reminded me of the morals I had prior to my negative behavior.

I wish someone told me that I needed to be more flexible in my thinking. I am an aggressor. In prison I was a boy and that played a huge role in trying to get employment. I had to change the fade, do something different. I learned that I couldn't just wear jeans and sneakers. I realized I had to be by myself and get to know myself. I would have trusted that information from my prison father, my father of choice.

My mental health and learning needs were intertwined. I knew what I needed when I left prison, but because I was taking a mental health

medication that was considered a controlled substance, it was difficult to get a shrink to give it to me. I had no proof, no comprehensive medical summary. It was a really long wait and I was in such a dysfunctional shelter. Also, I left prison with an additional "diagnosis" because I am a lesbian. I wish someone told me about clinics that were gay-friendly. For me in prison, the medical staff was male and that was not good, especially the gynecologist. Therefore, it took me three years after I got out to find a doctor.

I had no expectation regarding parole. I didn't know what to do. I used to drink when I hung out with friends. Then I realized that I couldn't do that. Or, if they [the parole officer] came by the shelter, I couldn't be in a bad mood. After one

and a half years, I stopped going. The male parole officer I had kept saying I needed to get a job, but I needed to get my life together first. Let me finish my program first, let me get a foundation first. The second parole officer I had was a woman and the dynamics were better. The male parole officer would not let me get a job in construction and this is what I had skills in. By the time I got the female parole officer, I knew a little better—like not to wear my hat sideways. They had access to evidence of my crime and ran a list of people from my past that I could not associate with. I wish they told me in advance that they would know their names and would throw them back at me. It made me feel really uncomfortable.

I had no relationship with my family. I am a strong believer in you make your bed, you lie in it. My mother did not know where I was. I was also adopted and that had its issues. That was the simplest aspect of reentry for me. I had no one pressuring me or giving me opinions. I just had myself. Loving, caring family members don't realize how much pressure they are putting on people. It is better to live by yourself and get stable first. It is better for you if you understand this will happen when you get out, than trying to get them to understand. I didn't have friends—not safe. When I first got back, if I started hanging out with my associates, I would not have made the right decisions. Now, I have associates. I don't call them regularly. I don't want anybody too close to me. It is too much work for me to figure out if I can trust you.

You just got to keep it simple. You are where you gotta be. Don't complicate it with more.

There are survival traits that I continue to use today. For me, it's what people think of as my mean disposition and that's a good rollover. If you are about junk, you know not to approach me. The skills from the street that I use today are organizational skills, critical thinking, presenting that I am in control, and persuasion. Some of these can be used negatively, but you're not going to lose all the bad habits you had because they are survival skills. I believe in positive manipulation. As long as no one is getting hurt, it's about how to persuade people. Don't manipulate people negatively. Do it in a way that empowers you and keeps the person thinking positively about you.

In terms of special needs, if you are a lesbian you have to realize you are a woman, that you are living in a society that doesn't give a damn and you have to be aware. You have to understand if you go into the system, they don't give a damn. You have to find your group. You will be seen in one way only and get no special treatment. I felt that I was alone and didn't have anyone to express myself to until I found the Center [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center] where they had AA and NA groups. I didn't have to trust the people in the room. I just had to talk to them, to grab information.

For someone coming out of prison now, I wouldn't say anything to her unless she came off the bus and said, "I'm here." Then I would take her hand and walk her personally to that help. I would tell her, "Now you have to take the suggestion of the next person. We're going to show you that there's more you can do than run or get high."

As far as coping, my personality kicked in. I was cocky and arrogant. I refused to fail. This, being home, beats any fucking day behind bars. I refused to ever be incarcerated again. That was the lowest time of my life. For any woman coming home, she needs to be affiliated with an organization where they will feel comfortable enough to talk to someone about what's going on in their head. Not a family member, but someone to feel connected with. You just got to keep it simple. You are where you gotta be. Don't complicate it with more. Hook up with your sisters and learn how to judge character.

Some thoughts from other lesbians to consider

- ◆ *Keep the focus on yourself. If you have a lover upstate, keep her in your heart but keep the focus on your self, not on your girl. Get yourself together.*
 - ◆ *There's a place called The Center on 13th Street [in Manhattan]. They have meetings, groups, dances.... You can meet people. Stay away from women who get high.*
 - ◆ *I live in transitional housing with men and women. I need respect. Men have something about aggressors.*
 - ◆ *My parole officer, the guy was cool, but the woman was religious. She didn't respect me being gay. She didn't call me by my preferred name.*
 - ◆ *My parole officer, a woman, said, "I know I'm gonna have a problem with you."*
 - ◆ *Most of my family is dead. My family doesn't like me because I am gay. They think I have a disease. My brother took me to a shrink and turned to him and said, "Cure her." The shrink told him that being gay is not a disease and to get out of his office. The psychiatrist educated my brother. I kept seeing the psychiatrist for a year. I could talk to him.*
 - ◆ *You make your own family. My family is my significant other and my kids.*
 - ◆ *I wasn't there for my 15 year old daughter. I was in and out of her life. In 1995, I decided I wasn't going back, so I stopped using. I got her back. She didn't like my husband. Now she loves my wife. She loves my lifestyle. Now for the first time she's calling me ma. My son, who is 10, loves my partner. They do things together.*
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Mariah

I was born and raised in New York City. I have been incarcerated at Rikers Island four times. My experience is as a transgender woman. At Rikers, transgender women are housed with the men. My last bid at Rikers was the longest—40 days—and my worst.

Being a transgender person is not about playing dress-up. It is a total psychological way of being, but our physical and psychological issues are not addressed appropriately by society. There are very specific things about the transgender experience in the jail setting that make returning home extremely difficult for us. For example, a transgender woman may not have access to hormones, so she grows a lot of facial hair while in jail and has to return home with a full beard. A transgender woman gets ridiculed when she goes to pick up her clothing package before release and someone sees a frilly dress. Then she has to wear that dress home with hairy legs. Transgender women leave jail with no clothes, no food, no hygiene stuff, and no where to live. Because of the lack of transgender-specific services, there is often no alternative but for a transgender woman to immediately go back on the stroll. Even the way we are released from incarceration can be a challenge. Being released from court can be better than being released from Rikers at 6 a.m. and having to jump into the stream of things at 9 a.m.

I am luckier than most transgender persons because I was in the foster care system. As I was aging-out of the foster care system, I was entitled to certain services—such as a housing subsidy, food stamps, health care and legal help. I was a ward of the state, so I demanded these services and they had to give them to me. Many girls have nothing. They just buckle down and make a plan, usually to go back on the stroll. It is hard to tell someone not to work the stroll when she has nothing.

The priority need for transgender persons returning home from jail or prison is more transgender-specific services. Transgender people have many medical issues, including HIV and Hepatitis C infection. It is hard for many to get hormones. We also have other health issues like heart palpitations and mental health issues. Accessing medical services inside can subject a transgender person to ridicule, harassment and insensitivity. Medical personnel will say, “I’m not touching her or him.” Or there is no confidentiality. I once refused sick call at Rikers because they would call us to the gate to talk about medical problems and not take us somewhere private. Another time I was in medical—I had a pain in my leg because of the hormones—and the medical person said, “So just stop taking the hormones.” When non-jail personnel do show some sensitivity by addressing me as a female, jail personnel get in the way by saying something like, “No, that’s a man.”

I have been an activist since I was 13 years old. My mom died of AIDS and I got involved in AIDS activism. In 1998 I became more involved in gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/queer issues. I am a founding member of Fierce! [a community organization for transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirit, queer and questioning youth of color in New York City]. I had a case against the [New York City] Administration of Children Services where I won the right to dress as a girl when I was a resident in a boys group home. I was a spokesperson when they were closing gay housing at Rikers. I got a judge to order the state to pay for my sex change. So I’ve always spoken up. I have a thick skin. When I feel something is wrong, I can’t rest until I fix it. Sylvia Rivera [a civil rights activist who fought for the rights of transgender persons and others] was my role model. She was very powerful to be around. You could not be around her and not be an activist. She taught me that there is always a way to win and that if we want change, we must do it ourselves.

Transgender persons are not universally damned. We are entitled to humane treatment. To transgender people who are in my shoes I say the first step is to identify what you are feeling. What’s wrong? Is it an unfair policy? A guard with an attitude? The circumstances of the day? Then figure out what your goal is, like, “I need my hormones.” Assess what you want and how you are going to get it. Then, take action. Do you need to file a grievance? Do you need to see a lawyer? Do you need an advocate? Don’t take things lying down. So many transgender persons have been broken and conditioned by the system that they can

be treated any kind of way. This frustrates me. I say become an activist. Engage in self-empowerment while inside. This will follow you outside into other areas of your life. When you demand services inside you will feel empowered to demand services outside.

I try to surround myself with positive people—people who have jobs and who encourage me. I would say to transgender women, try to come home and be around motivated people and not someone who sleeps all day. A wise man learns from fools' mistakes and not just his own. Learn from those around you. There is no reason to do things the way that others are doing them if it is not working for them. Don't just spend your money on food, drugs and clothes. If you are smart, then don't be lazy. If you have a support network, don't choose to stroll just because you don't want to pick up the phone and call your family. Learn from the one or two who are doing the right thing.

Only people who have been incarcerated can understand that the experience stays with you. It is hard to describe. I have talked to other people about a spot in the subway at Canal Street that smells just like

To transgender people who are in my shoes I say the first step is to identify what you are feeling. What's wrong? Is it an unfair policy? A guard with an attitude? The circumstances of the day? Then figure out what your goal is, like, "I need my hormones." Assess what you want and how you are going to get it. Then, take action.

Rikers Island. Maybe it's the cleaning stuff they use. I don't know what it is, but when we smell it, it brings us right back to that experience. When I get dressed in the morning, I look at my socks, my shoes, my clothes and say, "Will I be wearing these clothes when I get undressed tonight?" There is always this feeling that I might go back. Being incarcerated is traumatic and it stays with you.

Right now I work as a transgender services coordinator for an AIDS service organization in Brooklyn. Jails need to understand that in order

to provide more effective services for transgender persons, they must invest the money and time in release programs to help us connect with services—period. Does this involve complicated solutions? Yes. Transgender people need to feel that the system will work for them and that there are people who want us to succeed and do better.

When I feel low, I cope by thinking about what I have accomplished. I also think of the people who are proud of me—the younger girls who have someone to look up to. I am also spiritual. We are all here for a purpose. I remind myself that I am not the only one and that this is not the end of the story.

Believe in Yourself

We have the right to have confidence in who we are and who we can be.



transformation

You can make coming home be about more than getting a job and finding housing. You can use it as an opportunity to create a new space in the world for yourself. You have the right to work toward your hopes and dreams, to love yourself and to believe in what you can be and do, just like everyone else. Your mistakes do not make up the sum total of your life. They are only a part of it. Here are some things that women have to say about the importance of knowing who you are and building your self-esteem and confidence when you come home.

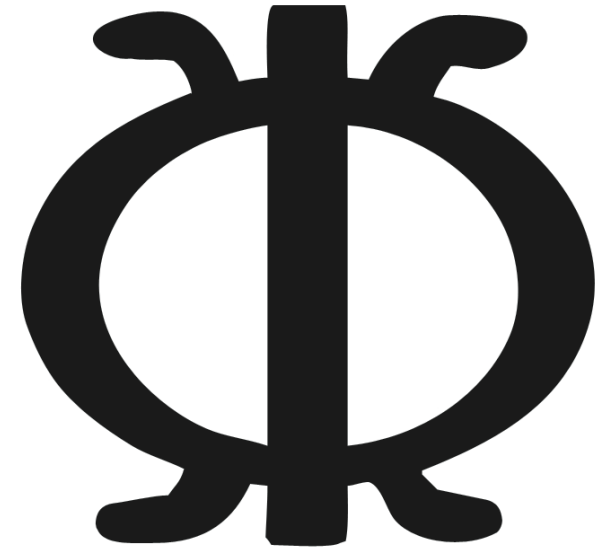
Developing self-reliance and recreating yourself

- ◆ *Don't expect too much at once. Work on yourself and your issues. Make amends.*
- ◆ *I have a sponsor—she is very connected—to help me get a sober network. I used to think that people who didn't get high had no life, but they are living. Boredom is relapse. NA has a lot of functions. It's not just a bunch of junkies. People are looking good and living sober, having the time of their life—parties, fashion shows. Make friends. Go out to lunch, to the library, to the park, to the gym, simple things I took for granted, like bowling.*
- ◆ *I'm so busy I don't have time for anything. I feel obligated to call my friends. I feel bad. I call from time to time to say hi. Everyone wants your time. Everyone's expecting so much. Gotta keep up front. I come first.*
- ◆ *I didn't want people to give me things. It's always having that person who knows you, mentor, relative, friend, not to do for you or make choices for you, but just to be there, "I'm here." This is really important.*
- ◆ *I learn by listening now because I didn't have a chance coming up. I wish I had family that guided me from the beginning. I came from the foster care system as a child. Today I fight for my children. I am happy to have that. Go with your determination and create your own path.*

- ◆ *I was always in the system—foster care, girl's home.... I am a product of the system and so I always knew there was help out there. I just didn't ask for it or tap into it. I think don't be shy is the most helpful tip. Take initiative. There are people out there fighting for you and your cause. Give your voice. Life is worth living. The records of your past don't dictate your worth.*
 - ◆ *My philosophies are "just for today" and "I made a mistake, but I'm not a mistake."*
-

Coping

We have a right
to our feelings.



perserverance

**“You just got to keep it simple.
You are where you gotta be.
Don’t complicate it with more.”**

In order to cope when the going gets tough, you must be aware of how you are feeling at all times. Be ready with positive ways to deal with feeling frustrated, angry, sad, depressed, as well as any negative behaviors. Here are some of the things that women have to say about coping when they are feeling low.

Focus on the positive

- ◆ *Give time time. Now, you have an opportunity to take the time. Before you did time or time did you. Now instead of counting down, you can count forward. You have the opportunity to do whatever you want with that experience. Detach yourself from your experience. It is not who you are.*
- ◆ *I thought of my son. He needs me. I can’t say “fuck it” any more. My son is 10 and he needs me. My son is like a little man. He gives me advice. He is a big motivation.*
- ◆ *I was motivated because I kept looking at my kids. I thought of my mother when she said that you have to set the example. I was 350 lbs. I lost over 100 lbs. I prayed if God opened my eyes I would live a different way. Every time I have a hard day, I know there is a degree with my name on it. I have passed the test. Today is the first day I could tell my story because I was so fearful it would bite me in the ass. I’ve been running inside.*
- ◆ *My sister helped me. She said think of your kids because no one else will care for them like you do.*

Do something healthy that makes you feel good

- ◆ *I hit my lowest a lot of times, especially in the shelter. I resorted to prayer. I tried to stay busy. Also, I dressed my best. I looked my best—looked the part even if I didn’t feel it.*

- ◆ *I like to draw and write in journals. Stories are my getaway.*
- ◆ *I started going to a Christian church and Bible study where I met other parolees and addicts seeking some type of peace. This helps me focus.*
- ◆ *I would go into myself and read the Koran and the Bible, pray, call my family and parole officer. I have a built-in support network.*
- ◆ *Pray, family, friends, make meetings and watch comedies.*
- ◆ *I call friends and family or my sponsor, go to AA meetings, pray. I encourage others to reach out for help and recognize that you will not be judged. Be open-minded. Listen and wait till the next day.*

Reach out

- ◆ *Talk to friends, family Shake it off and realize that low points pass.*
- ◆ *When I was feeling low, my mother was there for me. I talked to friends and family. It’s so hard being gone for such a long time and then coming back, it can be terrifying. You need someone to talk to.*
- ◆ *I use my support system in any way. I network with my sponsor, the people at my community residence, my counselors, and my psychiatrist at my program.*
- ◆ *Reach out to somebody. I keep my diseases—addiction, mental health status—upfront. And I have a great support network....The door is always open at my program.*
- ◆ *NA has been a big thing. It’s a social network. When I’m walking around lonely, I get out my meeting book. I get a lot of hugs and movies, and go out to eat after the meetings. I got involved in volunteer work. They teach me and trust me. I can make a mark on the world and express myself. At the training program, I can get a good reference. They got to know me. This helped me deal with the loneliness.*

- ◆ *Get involved in advocacy and support programs. Meet with advocates. There is still hope and determination. This helped me most. Focus on yourself, know what you have to do and take action. I wish I was told that many resources work if you try. Focus on yourself, know what you have to do and take action.*
- ◆ *Get involved and meet others in similar situations. Stay away from the wrong crowd and negative influences. Don't beat yourself up.*

Realize that you don't have to make the same mistakes

- ◆ *They always say that you will follow in your parents' footsteps. My mother was an alcoholic, so I believed this. But you can break that cycle. I'm here today. It can be done.*
- ◆ *I didn't follow in my mother's steps. She did everything in the book. My brother is doing time and that got me scared. My brother almost overdosed, that made me scared. I got locked up, not for using drugs but selling. Greedy for money. What keeps me strong? I said I'm not going to be like her. My father was an alcoholic. I learned from that. I said, "It won't be me". I didn't get a high school diploma because I had no one to guide me. I took the GED and I'm waiting for my results. I want to go to college for nursing.*
- ◆ *My foster parents told me, "You're going to be like your mother." I'm just shaking this off. I don't have to be like that.*

Susan

I was better prepared than most because I had run the pre-release program at Bedford Hills. My priorities were getting clothing and finding a job. I didn't want to live off of my family. I had lived on my knitting in prison. Also, I wanted to gain confidence. I remember walking with my head down. I felt like I had a big X on me. Then I realized no one knew me—they were looking at me because I was a white in a black neighborhood. I had top-notch support from my family and friends. I needed to know the New York City subway system because I didn't live in New York City before going to prison. I got it from a nun who gave me a map, but she wouldn't show me how to use it. I learned it within two weeks; then I could go anywhere in New York City.

I'm diabetic and I have hypothyroidism. I had an incredible experience at welfare. My first day there, I got a Medicaid card, emergency money, and a list for donated food. I needed medication. I had to go to a clinic, or so I thought. I wasted all morning waiting. I was sent to a diabetic clinic. It dawned on me that I had a Medicaid card and I could go to any doctor.

I was incredibly lucky to go to a women's program in Brooklyn. My parole officers there were supportive. I knew I could go to either one of them. All I had heard were horror stories; these were people who essentially controlled your life. But I had just a positive experience. One of my parole officers saw me and my sister. We got all of our questions answered, that was very helpful. I wish someone told me there were people who cared. My experience has been if I go to somebody and say I'm having a problem and can we talk about it, they will find a resource for me to use. You have to talk in a non-confrontational way. You have to trust.

My relationship with family and friends was excellent. I used them a lot of the time and to this day. I don't need them to get through. I get lonely for shared experiences. I didn't want people to give me things. I just wanted to know that I'm normal. To this day, I don't know if I'm normal or not. People ask me what do I do when I get home. Is it what normal people do? It's hard to feel I know what normal people do. Other people go home, watch TV, eat dinner.... There are still things I don't do. I haven't been to the movies.

And no elevators. I still have a fear of crowds of people. I don't feel safe. In prison you always had to be careful, always had to know who was behind you, sit with your back to the wall, that kind of mentality. So I avoid really crowded places.

Find one person that you trust to go with you places. I have someone who knew me well enough to help me out when I started to panic. It's always having that person who knows you—a mentor, relative, or friend. Not to do for you or make choices for you, just to be there. This is really important.

I've known one friend since 1974. When I got out she was there with my sister and brother-in-law. I know her children and grandchildren. Another woman I knew inside is now doing really well. She's been good about helping me get through. So I'm that person to others too. My philosophy is I was helped, so I have to give back.

It takes time. As a long-termer you come home to some scary new experiences. You have to be willing to ask questions and accept what people tell you. You can't have too much pride. I never talked about my feelings. I was scared to death. I didn't know how to get a subway train. You just gotta push ahead. I needed a sweatshirt and it cost \$30. I

Find one person that you trust to go with you places. I have someone who knew me well enough to help me out when I started to panic. It's always having that person who knows you—a mentor, relative, or friend. Not to do for you or make choices for you, just to be there. This is really important.

could not pay that. I said let's go to Kmart. It was the same price. This is when I realized that the prices were different. So many things had changed—the type of machines out here, the airport and the moving sidewalks.... Again, it's that support group who will giggle and help you laugh at yourself.

When you are older, you appreciate things differently and are willing to take it slow. I learned to think before I act. In the first couple of weeks—excitement, freedom. Then you realize life is about everyday things. I did 27 years. I want to give back by helping someone coming out. To be there, to be that person. Women who did a long time in prison have that. We are the ones the younger ones come to when they didn't make their [parole] boards. Nurturers.

I say know your good qualities. I found it necessary to stay in touch with other long-termers. They've experienced the heartache of everyone going home and leaving. I always made friends with other long-termers. It bothers me to know that other long-termers who are doing well totally block prison out of their minds. I wouldn't recommend this. I can engage in conversation about my experience. It made me who I am today. I'm not denying it. I really have to adjust. This is the one problem I had at my program with women who did one to two year bids. To me they didn't appreciate what they had.

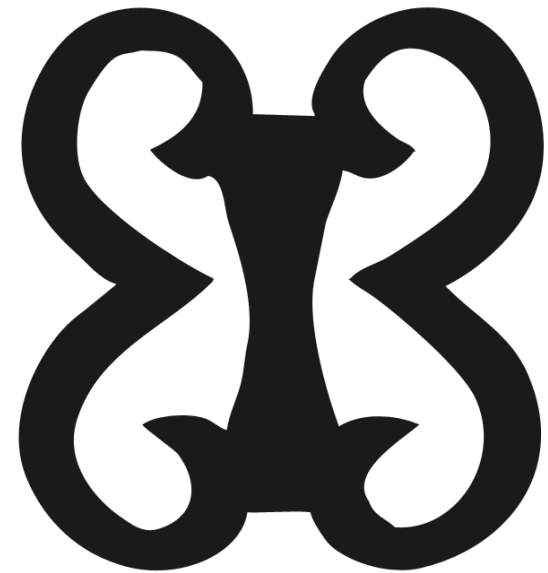
Reentry starts the minute you hit the prison grounds. I got a lot of information from my work in pre-release. You need to know this stuff, how to build and how to present yourself. You have to prepare from day one. I worked in a professional office as administrative assistant trying to keep my skills up. I made sure I had the names of supervisors I worked for so I could get references.

Is a person always in reentry? Probably. I'm always trying to do something because in the back of my head there's always that thing, that fear.... I don't think about parole because I'm not doing anything. I've never been hassled. They don't bother me. I don't feel like I'm still in reentry. I feel so strong. I feel in control of my life. I am who I am. If you like it, that's great, okay. If I have to live alone for the rest of my life, okay. It goes back to my support system. Once you get past employment and you set priorities, then you just do it.

I had a guy [friend] that came out a year after me and committed suicide. I was so pissed. He survived 17 years in a male facility and then got out here and couldn't cope. He didn't reach out. It took a lot out of me. Then it just made me more determined to stick my nose in others people's business. My advice to everybody is to reach out and to get help. Then reach back and help somebody behind you.

Knowledge is Power

We have the right
to information and
self-empowerment.



preparation

“It’s important to ask questions and don’t be afraid.”

There is one thing that almost all women will say to other women coming home from prison or jail: ask for help and support. It is one of the most empowering things that you can do. You don’t have to go through the transition home by yourself. Also, stigma and discrimination against formerly incarcerated people still exists, so you will also need to know your rights and learn how to be effective in fighting for and protecting them. Here is what women have to say about gaining and using knowledge to help yourself.

Asking for help

- ◆ *I am not homeless anymore. I have been clean for almost six years. I did not give up. If it wasn’t for the program I would be back smoking crack. Accept help. It will keep you on a positive track.*
- ◆ *I got help through social services, friends, my half-way house and my mental health group. The support I got from others who know what I have been through was comforting because I didn’t want to put myself in a bad situation again. I would recommend that women get connected and keep trying even if you’re discouraged and all the doors are being closed in your face.*
- ◆ *As individuals, we need to be motivated even if it doesn’t come from outside resources. Keep it internal. Stay motivated and focused. It will come. We all suffer and cry. Roll with the punches.*
- ◆ *Shed the layers. Reveal layers of yourself. You think no else has been there. You have to look in the mirror and love yourself. This is the reality of reentering anything.*
- ◆ *Ask the girls. I found out who was in charge. It requires foot work. I had to fight for a program and a judge said, “I’ll give you one chance” because my history was terrible. I had no more options. I begged, “Help me help myself. I’m tired of having nothing to look forward to.”*

- ◆ *I found out by networking and word of mouth. It helped that people gave me positive direction and information. Ask for help and information about other agencies and services. Always ask questions.*
- ◆ *Court was really helpful. It was really helpful to have court-ordered housing, counseling and mandated treatments. It made me realize I wasn’t alone.*
- ◆ *I went to crisis services and drug court. Ask questions. Don’t be afraid to ask questions.*

Using programs and services in prison and out

- ◆ *I got a lot of information from my work in pre-release. You need to know this stuff, how to build and how to present yourself.*
- ◆ *I wrote letters to the half-way house when I got my release date and they wrote me back accepting me. They helped me in the transitional services and pre-release class preparing me for getting back to work and school.*
- ◆ *I heard others speaking and started asking questions. It was helpful when agencies visited the prison because I could gather information and if I did not use it I could give it to someone else. I would advise others to seek help and don’t give up. Keep going.*
- ◆ *I found that finding out about programs was helpful. I recommend that others find out as much as they can. Have a game plan and use available resources while in prison.*
- ◆ *ACS [New York City Administration for Children’s Services] brought my daughter to visit. They helped with my apartment and taught me about HASA [HIV/AIDS Services Administration]. And staying connected once you are out. When I first came out, I didn’t think these groups could do anything—housing, benefits, assistance—but I stuck with it and it’s amazing what they can do for you.*

Virginia

When I returned home naturally I needed some form of housing. I had an upper hand because I worked in pre-release at Beacon. I was the one that set up the groups to meet with the women. I also needed employment when I got out. During my incarceration, I maintained friendships with people who got out before me. My friend, who was off of parole by then, picked me up on the day of my release to take me to a program in Brooklyn. In the car, her boss called her and asked to speak to me—he owned a painting company that hired a lot of men coming out of prison. He asked what my plans were and I had none. He said, “I’ll create a position for you.” I worked as an administrative assistant there for three months and learned book keeping, accounting, and Quick books. During that time, a position opened up at a reentry program for women. I switched to work at that program after three months.

Networking wasn’t me before incarceration. I was really an introvert. During the course of my incarceration, 17 years, seeing people coming back in and asking what had failed them, many felt they didn’t have support. An organization is good, but you have to make your own community of support. Stay informal though, any regiment is like being back in prison. The same things I did in prison, I did on the outside: shower, brush teeth, work every day.... Coming home is not as easy as you think. You can’t pick up from where you left off. The amount of time inside has nothing to do with it. Things are changing within you that don’t necessarily affect people on the outside.

Medically, I actually had more issues inside the facility than on the outside. I have a history of fibroids and cysts in the breasts. I found an attorney to fight for me because inside they were taking their sweet-ass time. They waited nine months to do surgery. It took me five months to get an attorney and it took him four more months to get the surgery. I went out for so many mammograms I thought I wouldn’t have anything

left! If you ask me, it was pure negligence. When you get home, it is important to find yourself a primary care doctor as soon as possible or at least get a full physical.

Grab the resources, whatever you can. You may feel that it doesn’t suit you, but make that call once you know.

My relationship with parole was nothing like I expected. Originally, I had eight years left, but I got released on good time after three years. We had very good supervisors over my parole officer at that time and that made it much better. We had a women’s focus group every

Tuesday, women from different walks of life in different places in their reentry. It was a good place for networking and to find things out. Sometimes, if a P.O. feels that she isn’t being supported by her superiors, she stops caring. That was not the case with mine. Originally, I thought it would be a lot more rigid, but each individual is doing what they should have done for themselves. Seeing people coming back and forth to prison, you know it is not parole’s fault. Definitely use the mechanism of parole for your benefit. If you feel boxed in, don’t be afraid to take it higher. It won’t fall on deaf ears. Parole doesn’t have to be seen as another form of discipline.

Through communication you begin to identify how you are feeling. Certain things that you have to do, you should do. But not every day is happy or picture perfect. Try to be unregimented to resolve issues. If you usually shower at 8:15, take a shower at 8:45. It might change your whole day.

A lot that I had previously, I no longer had. Within my 17 years inside all of my family died except my kids. I lost my mother, father, brother and sister. My nuclear family changed and it was hard. My children had already relocated out of state. I’m their biological mother and they give me the title of mother, but my mom was their mother.... I did the trailer visits and mom never refused a collect call. We did the host family summer program. My family also put in effort, but your life goes on and so does theirs. As much as you are changing, they are too. Have a continuing dialogue. Talk about your experiences inside and outside. Talk about the expectations you have and they have.

My clients at the program I work for will say, “My mother doesn’t understand.” It’s hard for families to accept, even if you are putting in the extra mile. All they know is your history of making the same mistakes over and over again. It is true for all relationships. As I said, I came home biologically their mother, but that was the extent of it and at times it was strained. I wouldn’t call for weeks. I was coming to terms with the fact that they were growing up. I was saying, “You really shouldn’t do this or that.” or, “Your skirt is too short.” I had to make a conscious effort to withdraw and to realize that they were grown adults and I wasn’t always going to be part of it. If they had a dinner party, mom wasn’t always going to be invited. I had to form my own friends. It was hard for me. It’s a totally different role. They are older. You are older. It is different when kids are teenagers. Coming home to younger kids, I didn’t have that opportunity.

Take it slow and keep lines of communication open. Give both sides the opportunity to say what they need to say, even if it hurts. People on the outside might not be making the same changes. For example, when I came home, I tried to be as independent as possible because of my domestic violence background. Little things like going to the store and not being timed are important. What matters to you might not matter to them. It’s trial and error and open communication. Be willing to take risks.... I wondered, “Do my kids hate me?” I took their father’s life when they were seven and five years old. It’s not about hate. I accept that I took their dad and I took me away from them. I was out on bail and we worked with a domestic violence specialist for children. They continued to work on issues of understanding cycles of abuse; that it overflows to other people in the same environment. They went to the specialist for years as a way of coping. You have to work constantly.

I went to a program for domestic violence survivors when it was first forming. I found a place for me to get support. Also, I’m a lesbian and I found no support in Brooklyn. Now I’ve relocated to New Jersey. It is again hard to find places to meet people. You want to go out with your partner and feel comfortable. In the program for survivors, I am the only woman in the group released from the violence, everyone else is trying to work their way out. To network, I take myself out of the borough. It’s important if you can, prior to getting out, to get a list of organizations that might meet your needs and follow up with an organization. Take yourself out of your comfort zone and the end results are that you will be glad you have taken it.

Inside I worked with pre-release and knew the resources available. After a substantial amount of time, release is stressful. I still shopped, cooked, went to the movies, but I also had security. Grab the resources, whatever you can. You may feel that it doesn’t suit you, but make that call once you know.

How do I cope when feeling low? Music. I am also in the habit of finding something new to do. Like I am dying to read this book and I can take myself out of a moment—make it feel less heavy, like it really wasn’t as bad as you thought.

When I first went to prison, my counselor gave me a piece of paper with my time in months, eight and a third to 25 years, and I crumpled it up. With a large sentence, you are not thinking about reentry, you are thinking about making it through the days. It is a continuous cycle, whether you did a month, county time, flat city time, state, federal.... I’m out for five and a half years and I am still saying this is a part of me. I was already out for one and a half years and I was at the Port Authority to meet a friend. I went into the ladies room and I am saying how do you flush? What am I gonna do? I waited for a few minutes, but then decided to go. I finished and the toilet flushed automatically and I said, “Oh my god. I don’t believe it.”

It really makes a difference if you served a lot of time versus seven or eight months. You continue to change. Some blossom. The longer that you are in, the process is entirely different.

A Closing Thought

We have the right to thrive.

“People who have experienced incarceration are always on the journey of discovery. It is a life-long process.”

Give *time* time.



faith

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For more information about the Correctional Association of New York visit http://www.correctionalassociation.org/WIPP/WIPP_main.html

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REENTRY RESOURCES

The following resource guides and organizations can direct you to the many organizations and agencies in New York State that provide services for people returning home from incarceration.

New York City

Connections: a resource guide for formerly incarcerated people in New York City. Some prison libraries have it. Incarcerated persons can also receive a free copy by writing to:

Institutional Library Services

The New York Public Library
455 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10016

Connections can also be accessed online at www.nypl.org/branch/services/connections. The Spanish language edition, *Conexiones*, is online at www.nypl.org/branch/services/conexiones.

The Center for Community Problem Solving Reentry Guide: A Handbook for People Coming Out of Jails and Prisons and for Their Families and Communities, 2005. To order, contact:

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Website: <http://www.cpscps.org>

**Coalition for Women Prisoners
Women in Prison Project
Correctional Association of New York**
135 East 15th Street
New York, New York 10003
Tel: (212) 254-5700
Fax: (212) 473-2807
www.correctionalassociation.org

311. 311 is New York City's information phone number for information and access to all New York City government services and information. All calls to 311 are answered by a live operator, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Immediate access to translation services in over 170 languages is available. You can call 311 from any borough of New York City. Outside of New York City, call (212) NEW-YORK (212-639-9675). The TTY number is (212) 504-4115.

New York State – General

WWW.REENTRY.NET

Reentry Net/NY: A support network and information clearinghouse on reentry from jail and prison and the civil consequences of criminal proceedings.

Westchester

Westchester Connections

Available on line at www.wccdinc.net

Hudson Valley

Hudson Valley Connections: A resource guide for persons returning to Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Putnam or Ulster counties.

Available in English and Spanish. This manual is produced by the Mid-Hudson Library System and can be obtained for free by writing to:

Mid-Hudson Library System

Outreach Services Department
103 Market Street
Poughkeepsie, NY 12601

Back to Ulster County is a guide for Ulster County only. This manual can be obtained by writing to:

Restorative Justice Group

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Catskills
320 Sawkill Road
Kingston, NY 12401

It is also available online at www.uucckingston.org/comingback.html.

Capital District

On Your Own: Information and Resources for Persons Formerly Incarcerated, the Convicted and their Families in the [New York State] Capital District. This is produced by the Center for Law and Justice in Albany. Copies are available by writing to:

Center for Law and Justice

Pine West Plaza No. 7
Washington Avenue Extension
Albany, New York 12207

It is also available on line at www.albanypubliclibrary.org/firststop.html

Rochester and Monroe Counties

Making Moves: Handbook for Ex-Offenders Returning to the Rochester and Monroe County Area.

This handbook can be obtained by writing to:

Extension Outreach Department

Monroe County Library System
115 South Avenue
Rochester, New York 14604

Buffalo and Erie County

Connections: A Guide to Transitional Services in Erie County,

To obtain a copy write to:

Buffalo & Erie County Public Library

Extension Services
1 Lafayette Square
Buffalo, New York 14203

Ontario/Wayne Counties and Livingston/Wyoming Counties

Community Connections for Ontario/Wayne Counties and Livingston/Wyoming Counties. To obtain a copy write to:

Outreach Department

Pioneer Library System
2557 State Route 21
Canandaigua, New York 14424
(Be sure to specify the county you want.)

Transition Guide: How to get a good start on the outside

Produced by the New York State Department of Health.

For a copy write to:

New York State Department of Health

Corning Tower
Empire State Plaza
Albany, NY 12237

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