

**Sometimes  
You're the Hammer,  
Sometimes  
You're the Nail**

***Getting Along in Prison***

A publication of Oregon CURE

## *FORWARD FROM OREGON CURE*

*Over the years, we've been asked questions about various aspects of getting along in prison by prisoners, and listened to the concerns of prisoners' family members and friends.*

*We thought we'd get advice from some experts and publish a relatively short 'compendium,' that will hopefully provide helpful information that's not in the rule book. Our experts aren't nationally known researchers or writers, they're the folks who have been or are still 'there.'*

*The Steering Committee and Members of  
Oregon CURE*

2008

## Forward from a Prisoner

Welcome to prison-how do you like it so far? You seem mad, frustrated and scared. What's the problem, isn't this what you wanted? Let me guess: you're not guilty, didn't do it, it wasn't your fault, someone ratted you out.... Well, hello, no one cares! The bottom line is that you're here because of unmet expectations. You expected to get away with it. Well, you didn't, you can't change it now, so quit whining and get on with your life. The question is, what are you going to do now?

If this is your 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> or whatever time here, you may want to think about whether you subconsciously like it here. Are you so comfortable that you are institutionalized now? Do you identify yourself as a robber, car thief, drug dealer, meth cook, convict, killer? If you do, your behavior is pretty predictable no wonder you're in prison. You are what you think, with a self-image like that you'll be in prison for the rest of your life, providing job security for the staff.

For you that are here for the first time, take a good look around at the guys coming back for their 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> time. Or the guys who will never leave here. After 22 years, I can make it look easy because I've become institutionalized. Prison is my life. Is it really the life you want?

Okay, you're here now. What are you going to do? Who are you going to hang out with? Identify with? There is a wide selection: burglars, robbers, drug dealers and addicts, child molesters, rapists, murderers, but no one who's making it on the outside. You are or you become

who you hang out with. And what are going to do for the next 70, 90, 120 months? If this is a big joke to you, hang out, tell war stories, chase tobacco or drugs, and plan your future criminal career.

Don't forget to include some more prison time, though. And a word about war stories, the key is "stories" meaning about what you think it does. They tend to get better all the time. No one in here really cares what you decide to do. They just deal with it as they need to.

For those who can see that this life is really hell, here are some things to think about. Your life here will be so structured and controlled that you will wind up institutionalized and penitentiary orientated; and so full of hate and anger that you can't see straight. You become "socially retarded" unable to function on the outside. I've fought this system for most of my life and spent more time in the hole than many of you will spend in prison running my head into a wall trying to beat these people. But prison is a business and these people are doing their job. They don't care how you act, how many lawsuits you file or how you choose to do your time. They will deal with you as they need to in whatever way you choose to be. I've given them half my life already. How much of yours are you going to give them? It's up to you. But I'm telling you the only way to beat "the system" is to get out and never come back.

-24 years and counting- (as of 2008)

*Oregon CURE hereby thanks David Gessner, Mathew Ballard and A Prisoner for their considerable contributions to this publication- it wouldn't have been possible without them.*

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## *Upon Entering Prison*

*For most people entering prison is a strange and frightening experience. It's a transition from what you've been familiar with into surroundings you may never have imagined. This phase of your prison term is called 'culture shock'. You can expect to have abnormal feelings about your present situation for the first month or so.*

*This where you're vulnerable to getting into trouble, with both other prisoners and /or authorities you'll be spending the next few months or years with.*

*While in this phase, learn as much as you can without saying much at all. Watch how things are done and if you have questions, look for people who are willing to help. There are people who are willing to be helpful if approached with respect and courtesy.*

*Remember where you are! There are people who will take advantage of you when you're unaware. Learning who really will help you and who will take advantage of you is important for you.*

*You also need to know all the rules of the institution you're in. Rules vary from one place to the next. You'll usually go through A&O in every institution; you should get a rule book there and you'll be held responsible for knowing the rules. You may choose to follow them or to violate them, but at the very least you should know which choice you're making. Read the inmate handbook.*

*Minding your own business can be tough, but it's possible. Peer pressure can be avoided tactfully. Try to get along with everyone else while respecting individual beliefs and boundaries. Appear*

*friendly and relaxed, treat others with respect. Also respect yourself. Move with the world and work on changing yourself, not everyone else. (This works on the street, too!)*

## Surviving Prison

Respect is a BIG thing in prison. The best way to get respect is to give respect. You bump into someone, say 'excuse me.' Don't look into other people's cells when you walk down the tier. Be quiet, especially after 9:00 pm or 10:00 pm. You live in close quarters: when you use the toilet, flush it. Flush it 10 times if you need to, no one wants to share yours any more than you want to share theirs. Be aware that whatever you do is going to affect everyone else around you; make sure that the effect is something you'll want to deal with later. A good rule of thumb, don't lie and don't steal! All you have in prison is your word and your heart, make sure they're both good.

Don't trust anyone! Do your own time and don't worry about what anyone else does. Be aware at all times of everything around you, THINK FIRST, don't just react! You can't control what happens around you but you can control what you do, stop and think first and then respond appropriately. Learn from this experience: patience and tolerance are your friends- use them!

There's a sort of 'pecking order' in prison. Murder, drugs, theft, assault, depending on the person and how he carries himself, are 'good' beefs. Sex offenses, child molestation and rape are not. Like everyplace else, prisoners are judgmental, even worse because so many try to make

themselves look or feel better by putting others down. Someone (or many someones) will ask to see your paperwork. Saying 'they' wouldn't let you have it won't fly, everyone knows better than that. If you can't produce it, they'll assume you are a sex offender.

Worse than being a sex offender is being a rat (informant). Everyone hates a rat. Living in prison is bad enough, but having everyone hate you makes your life incredibly harder. You won't get rewarded by anyone for being a snitch.

Stay away from gangs, drugs, gambling and sex with others. Keep a good attitude: your attitude will dictate your ability to survive in prison. Don't think about what you don't have, learn to appreciate what you do have.

### *Adapting to Prison Life*

*One thing I would like to emphasize is the importance of adapting to prison life without becoming institutionalized.*

*When a person adapts to his/her new surroundings, that means he/she is more likely to be getting on with serving their time and reentering society once their sentence is completed. There are some people who never adapt to their surroundings and in turn make their time harder on themselves and everyone around them- including their families.*

### **Institutionalization**

You know you're 'institutionalized' when you're addicted to the security of the routine and everything being taken care of for you.



In time you become so accustomed to the routine that if counts run late, chow is late by 20 minutes, or yard or sheets are a day late, you get mad because you expect it all to happen on time.

Humans are creatures of habit, and over time get used (adapt) to their environments. Prison is extremely structured environment. You're told what to do at all times; when to eat and what you'll eat, when to shower, to change your clothes, clean your cell, to go to the yard and come in, when to sleep, when to sit up and be counted, walk on the side, tuck your shirt in and button it down all the way up, where you can wear your coat and where you can wear your gym shorts, etc. Everything (the basics) is taken care of; here's your cell and your bunk, clean sheets and towel once a week, clothing exchange once week, your shower time, your chow time, when you can go outside or make phone calls and so on. Everything is controlled by someone else.

Life's responsibilities don't exist. You never get evicted because you can't pay the rent, never can't buy gas or food or clothes; never have to feed the dog, take your wife to the store or pick your kids up from daycare. It's easy to become so used to things that you won't be able to function outside once you get out, all those demands of daily living in the 'free' world suddenly get dumped on you and it's overwhelming (but that's another book).

So, how do you keep from getting "institutionalized"? Well, you can't avoid it completely because you have to have some adapting just to survive. Fighting 'the man' isn't going to prevent it. You can be aware from the very start that it happens gradually. Work at keeping balance in your life (keep reading this), stay in touch with the outside world,

And, from the time you get here, start preparing yourself for your release.

## Getting Along With Staff

Another thing that needs to be mentioned is staff, the people that work at and run the prison. You can't get away from them, so how are you going to get along with them? Everything you do is going to be done through staff, so you may want to think about it.

To start with, they aren't the ones who put you here, and blaming them because you're here isn't going to help you at all. Staff are people like everyone else, they just work here and are trying to do their job which is first and foremost to "maintain the security of the institution".

You're in control of how they perceive you, and so, of they treat you.

The first impression a staff person has of you is going to last a long time, it's wise to make it a good one. I've seen so many prisoners make the mistake of thinking they have something coming and come off with an attitude demanding instead of asking for something. Hey, you're in prison and you actually don't have anything coming.

Of course, just like anyplace else, there will be some staff you get along with and some you don't. Be patient, if you have a problem or need something and don't get along with who's on duty, relax, wait until the shift change and then ask whoever comes on. There are some staff I won't talk to at all unless they talk to me first. Then there are other staff who will help me get a special visit approved from someone coming out of town. It's all in the rapport you begin developing the first day.

Treat staff with respect and you'll generally be treated with respect in return. Treat them the way you want to be treated, say please and thank you. A little consideration goes a long way and it will make your life a lot easier.

### *Booby Traps*

*These are some things that will probably arise that could delay your release or extend your time in prison. You may become very good at spotting these traps, especially after spending your first year in prison. Remember, not everyone has the intention of becoming a better person or staying out of prison. These people are choosing to the easy and irresponsible path through life.*

*Unfortunately, these people will probably spend a large portion of their lives in prison and (statistically) will not live as long as most other people.*

*For the person who wants to make the most of their life and use their present situation as an opportunity to figure how to do that, the following 'tips' may help.*

- 1. Mind your own business, do your own time and follow the rules and regulations the best you can.*
- 2. Treat everyone with respect, and respect yourself enough to be your own person.*
- 3. Avoid prison politics, negative discussions, gossip and taking part in 'drama'.*

4. *Don't talk bad about anyone, don't say anything behind someone's back you wouldn't say to their face. Someone always tells them what you said and it will come back to you.*

5. *Avoid people with very obvious negative or antisocial personalities. Often those people are violent and they are not concerned about anyone's general safety and welfare. Unhealthy friendships get you into positions that aren't in your best interest. Think long and hard before you decide to accept someone as a friend.*

6. *Also be cautious about the person who wants to be your very best friend right away, this may be a way to get you into a position of 'owing' something to someone and the payment may be something you don't want to pay.*

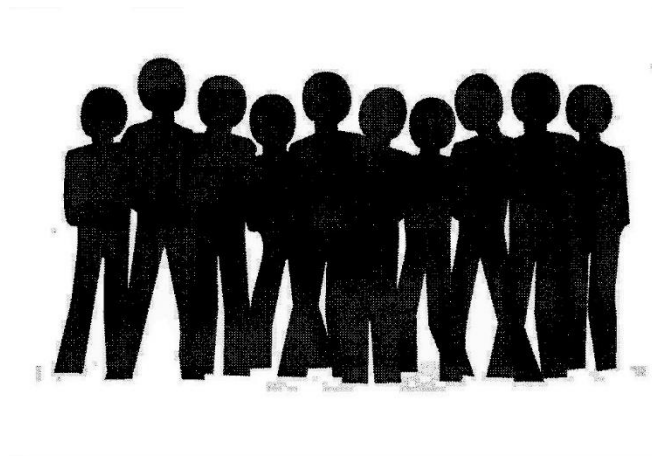
7. *Forced or manipulated sexual activity does happen, but it's being taken more seriously now than it has been in the past. Staff are being instructed in how to deal with it differently than they have been before. Also, the 2005 legislature made sexual contact between staff and prisoners a crime. Even though perpetrators will likely get formal charges, go to court and get more time (consecutive), it's up to you to protect yourself. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure: be aware and don't let yourself be caught off guard.*

There are a few things that are guaranteed to cause you problems and get you into trouble. Aggressive behavior or a bad attitude of course, but the main things are gang (Security Threat Groups or STGs), drugs, gambling and sexual contact/relationships with others.

Drugs (and tobacco goes with drugs). They're expensive. You'll get yourself into serious debt. Once you're on the hook, it never ends. People are beat up, stabbed, and even killed over drugs just like on the street. Plus, dirty UA's are hole time, and in some prisons a \$100.00 fine and loss of visits for one to seven years. If you are caught with drugs or a syringe, you'll get hole time, a \$200.00 fine, loss of visits and quite likely be taken to court and end up with more prison time.

Gambling- if you're going to play, be sure you can pay. It's their game, know that violence comes with it. It's also serious hole time plus a \$200.00 fine.

Sexual contacts/relationships cause more problems than you can imagine. There is more violence over them than anything else. It's a serious write-up and you're tagged for life.



Disease-HIV, Hepatitis C, and more run rampant in prison. With drugs, before you stick a needle in your arm, you may want to consider how many other arms it's been in! Before you even think about sex with another prisoner, consider who else and how many have been there, and what diseases that person may be carrying.

## *Self Rehabilitation*

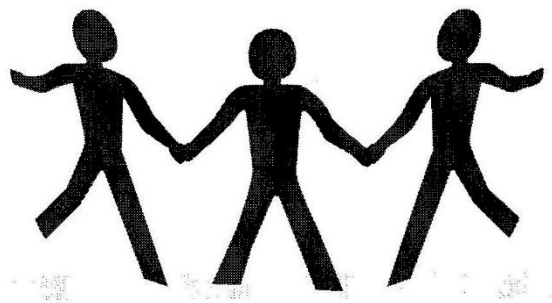
*There is little in the way of prisoner rehabilitation available in Oregon prisons these days. ODOC's first concern is safety, not preparing prisoners for reentry into society. There are, however, things you can do to improve your chances of success once you are released.*

- 1. Sign up for GED or other education opportunities. Good reading and math scores on institutional testing are essential for any vocational training that may be available in prison. Vocational programs change, and different ones are available at different institutions.*
- 2. Most institution' offer some self-help programs. It's a good idea to take any program available to better yourself and to keep your mind working. It's also something to do with your time. Request to attend by kyting your counselor or the Education Department.*

*3. Reestablish family ties by writing letters often. Establishing a meaningful, close relationship with one or more responsible people outside is very important for your continuous struggle in prison. By practicing honesty, consistency and reliability, your people on the outside will be able to see the efforts you're making toward living a better life when you get out.*

Prison can be a good experience or a bad experience. It's all in your perspective and what you make of it. You can be angry, hang out on the yard and bitch about everything, push everyone you know away from you, get institutionalized and penitentiary orientated, become that criminal they claim you are, get out and catch a new beef and come back for more.

Or wake up right now and realize you want more from life than this. Follow the rules: if you can't follow the rules in here, how are you going to follow them on the outside? Better yourself while you're in here. Read and educate yourself, take everything you're offered- program, classes, vocational training. Work in industries and learn a trade if you can. Figure out what you want and where you want to go, then put together a plan of what it's going to take and how you are going to



get there. Don't let distractions take you off your course: what are you doing today to get you closer to your goal of 'FREEDOM'? If your answer is 'NOTHING', you need to take a closer look at your priorities. That is, you're serious about not giving any more time to the system.

## *Your Family on the Outside*

*As we said earlier, staying in contact with your family and friends on the outside is very important. While it's important to reestablish broken relationships, it isn't good to add to their worries, make demands or burden them with extra expenses. The easiest way to do this is by not making a lot of phone calls or request to put extra money on your books.*

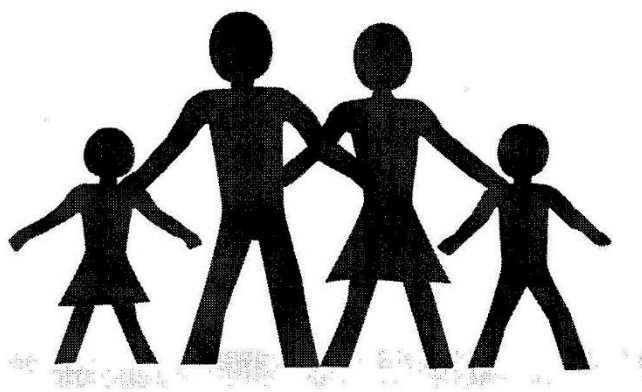
*This is your chance to show loved ones that you care about them as much as you do about yourself. It's a great opportunity to be thoughtful toward people you have neglected (or worse) in the past. You need to understand that many of them are going through emotional hell while you're going through the criminal justice system. Encourage them to get in contact with other people outside who have loved ones in prison; the emotional support can be tremendously helpful for them, and then they can be more positive about you. It's also a good opportunity to figure out who you want to keep as important people in your life. For many of you, your family will be your best contact and lifelong support on the outside. Treat them well and you'll increase your chances of a more productive life in the future.*



*For others with unhealthy ties or no family, you'll need to find people who can truly be helpful somewhere else, such as faith groups, AA/NA, clubs, etc.*

*Statistics show that ex-cons who have one or more supportive family members or friends on the outside do much better at not reoffending and not coming back to prison. In some studies, the chances of relapses back into drugs or alcohol have been reduced by 50%, just by having a close friend that you can talk to in times of distress.*

If your family and friends have stuck by you to this point, it's time to consider them! Phone calls can be expensive. Limit your calls, write letters and don't run up their phone bills. Don't unload your prison frustrations and problems on your family or friends outside, there usually isn't anything they can do about it. It's not their fault you're here, and you may only push them away. Any write ups you get are likely to carry a fine. Don't expect your people on the outside to give you money to pay for those. Don't become a burden, they usually have more than enough to handle as it is.



## *The Continuing Struggle*

*There are those who can see a light at the end of a tunnel and those who can't. By establishing and maintaining a balanced lifestyle, you can see the light of completing your sentence and continuing on to a productive life on the outside. Some of the ways to direct yourself toward the end of the tunnel are by being:*

- 1.Honest with yourself and what you must change about yourself to be a free member of society.*
- 2.Dedicated to becoming a better person, this comes from within and takes time and practice. There are a lot of good helpful books and you've got the time.*
- 3.Dedicated to being free and making the effort to remain so on the outside.*
- 4.Spiritually at peace with yourself, thinking about continuous self-improvement and maybe sincere ways to help others besides yourself.*
- 5.Goal orientated- write down what you want to accomplish, both short term and long term. They should all build toward your ultimate goal-getting and staying free.*

Don't put it off. Start today on your path to mental fitness. If you let it, prison will chew you up and swallow you. If you don't start right now you'll get complacent, lazy, depressed and out of shape.

It's easy to sit in your cell and do nothing or hang in the yard playing cards, games or 'BS'ing. You get used to it. It's not so bad so you kick back and do nothing to prepare for release.

Minding your own business can be tough, but it's possible. Peer pressure can be avoided tactfully. When you get out, life overwhelms you and it's easy to fall back into old habits which takes you back to prison where you've become comfortable.

You must keep balance in your life: SPIES can help you keep in mind what that means:

## SPIES

Spiritual

Physical

Intellectual

Emotional

Social

Balance all 5 areas of your life.

Figure out positive, constructive ways to keep active in each of these areas to gain health and strength. We co-create our own experiences, so keep a positive attitude and find that balance that will keep your life better for you and everyone around you.

## In Conclusion, from the Prisoner

Listen, this isn't rocket science we're talking about, it's 'just' life. We're all different, different personalities, different issues. Life isn't cured, it's managed. How's your track record of managing life? Yeah, I thought so, we've both done lousy- we're fired!

Prison is a humbling experience because we have so little control over our own lives. One thing it can do is give you the time to learn to be a good manager. There will always be challenges and problems, that's part of life. It's not whether you get knocked down, it's whether you chose to stay down or to get up again. Expect that, so you don't get caught off guard and do something you'll be sorry for later, manage it in way that will make you and others proud.

## *List of Resources*

*Houses of Healing A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom*  
Robin Casarjian, 1995. Available from the Lionheart Foundation  
Box 194 Back Bay Boston, MA 02117 \$15.00 for the non-  
incarcerated; \$8.00 for prisoners. Also available in Spanish. Based  
on "Emotional Awareness Emotional Healing" classes taught by the  
author in Massachusetts prisons since 1988, this is a comprehensive  
easy to use guide to emotional healing. It can be used in a group  
setting or as an individual self-help workbook. This book reflects  
the authors understanding of the tremendous human potential  
lying dormant in our prisons. A must for anyone who wants to  
change. Relevant to anyone in or out of prison.

*Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus. A Practical Guide  
for Improving Communications and Getting What You Want in  
Your Relationships.* John Gray PhD, 1992. The title says it all,  
helpful in understanding how each other works emotionally.

Bo Lozoff: *We're All Doing It, (Spanish) Todos Estamos  
Encarceladas, \$10.00; It's A Meaningful Life-It Just Takes Practice,*  
\$13.00. Human Kindness Foundation PO Box 61619 Durham, NC  
27715 USA. Books sent free to any prisoner who requests a copy.

*Learning to Live Without Violence: A Handbook for Men.* Daniel  
J. Sonkin, PhD & Michael Durphy, MD 1997 \$15.95 Amazon.com

*Ned Rollo OPEN, Inc.*

*99 Days and a Getup; transition and reentry \$9.95*

*Life Without a Crutch: Getting Ready for Addiction Treatment  
\$7.95*

*Man, I Need a Job! (also in Spanish) \$7.95*

*A Map Through the Maze: Surviving the Criminal Justice System  
\$9.95*

*Indigent offenders can write OPEN at PO Box 472223 Garland, TX 75047-222311 and request a free copy of books and they will send them.*

*People with internet access can go to [www.openinc.org](http://www.openinc.org) and find more helpful information.*

*Contrary to Love: Helping the Sexual Addict Patrick Carnes 1988  
Available from: Hazelden Publishing 15251 Pleasant Valley Road  
PO Box 176 Center City, MN 55012-0176 phone (800) 328-9000.  
Other titles by the same author on the subject also helpful.*

*Wounded Boys, Heroic Men: A Man's Guide to Recovering from Child Abuse. Daniel J. Sonkin, PhD 1998 Barnes and Noble*

*Life Beyond Loss: A Workbook for Incarcerated Men*

2<sup>nd</sup> Edition Beverly K. Welo, LAC 1998, \$20.00, available from Amazon.com ACA (see below)

*Picking Up the Pieces: A Workbook for Incarcerated Women*

Beverly K. Welo, LAC 2004, \$20.00, available from American Correctional Association,

attn: Customer Service Department 4380 Forbes Rd, Lanham, MD 20706-4322

*Hazelden Publishing Company has a catalog with many good books on recovery from a variety of addictions. Write and request a catalog.*

*Don't forget to check out the prison library and the prison's chapel library. They are good sources for a lot of self-help materials on anger, attitude, mental fitness, spirituality as well as other things.*

# Oregon CURE

*“Advocating for Prisoners, Their Families and Friends”*

*Write:*

PO Box 80193  
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*Call:*

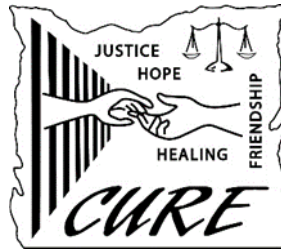
503 844-9145

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