

## My Loved One is Incarcerated: Questions too Daunting to Ask, Part I of III

### **Intro: Missy**

She was so beautiful she could have been a model. She had a wonderful Christian family, too, that loved and supported her. She was admired and popular, enjoying her work at church with the youth. In addition, Missy was a skilled gymnast, surfer and snowboard athlete. She enjoyed entering contests, teaching and encouraging others in these sports she loved. Plus, her scholastic abilities could hardly be overlooked: she began college prep at age 16. Missy was elected Class President in high school four years in a row.

With such a promising career ahead, and yet with only a few years behind her in college, Missy woke up one day in a hospital room with handcuffs around her wrists, confining her to a bed. Her nurse glared at her in disgust. After all, Missy's awakening had everything to do with a drunken stupor and blackout that ended in the deaths for four young teens, plunging these families into utter misery. For Missy, it also meant a life sentence...(Jenkins, 2010).

### **Your Loved One<sup>i</sup>**

Missy's story resonates with many who come to jail. While circumstances and backgrounds vary to some degree, family members, including their incarcerated Loved One, are left in utter shock and confusion. Some of these families disengage from the Loved One soon after the Loved One is incarcerated because the humiliation, shame, pain and rejection from society are just too hard to bear (Hiller, Knight, & Simpson, 2006). Further, that rejection often flows to the one in jail, creating a repeated recidivism cycle and struggling mental health issues; that is, the family member's Loved One returning to jail over and over again in a cycle of turmoil and conflict (Abram, Teplin, McClelland, & Dulcan, 2003; Hiller, Knight, & Simpson, 2006). In short, families need answers, often to very frightening questions, so that they can stay connected through the process.

### **Daunting Questions**

- 1. *I want to know how to visit my son but the prison rules are so confusing I do not know how to manage them. What are some steps I can take?***
  - a. First, know that your Loved One is contained in a culture known as the system.<sup>ii</sup> Systems are embedded with rules and regulations that vary from state to state. The correctional system, specifically, is one that almost feels as equally punishing to the family of an inmate as the inmate. In some cases, to get on a Visitor's List appears difficult as you will be required to provide a lot of information. Contacting a Chaplain's office of the particular prison is often the best way to start as the process can be managed with appropriate help from that person.
  - b. Another way would be to contact the Kairos Ministry in your area. Start by seeking Kairos Prison Ministry International (KPMI) at <http://kpmifoundation.org/index.php>. Kairos people, especially leaders, can provide you with direct contacts and some information, again reducing the confusion or what seems like punishing feelings.

- c. Submit your application to the proper authorizing body (from prison to prison, this body can vary). Make sure you fill out all information accurately. Providing faulty data can result in delays toward obtaining visits.
- d. While there are no guarantees that you will encounter a friendlier ride toward getting on a Visitor's List, you can know that perseverance is probably your best strategy toward making that happen. Remember, too, certain limitations can occur, such as a restricted number of visitors allowed, time constraints (times for a visit), or even special rules you must follow. Plus, if you already are a volunteer in a prison, you are typically not allowed to visit particular inmates. Therefore, contacting the ministry or Chaplain of the local prison (for which you want to become a regular visitor) is a great start. Remember, too: you will be subject to searches, sometimes removal of garments (in front of a same sex officer and in a private location) and often enter a visiting area under very strict surveillance.

**2. *What type of ID do I have to have to get into visit?***

- a. Many of the following are acceptable (note each must have photo):
  - ✓ A driver's license (from any state)
  - ✓ A Department of Motor Vehicle identification card (from any state) An armed forces identification card
  - ✓ A United States Department of Justice Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) identification card
  - ✓ A United States passport with photo or a foreign passport
  - ✓ Foreign consulates can also be acceptable in some locations (always check at the prison for what type of ID is required).

**3. *My Loved One seemed to be in trouble most of his life, and now, even farther away than ever. Where can I get help?***

- a. There is a considerable amount of help from KPMI (see link above). Reaching out to this organization is a wise first step as there are several groups that reach out to people just like you. In fact, there are retreat weekends for the family members of inmates to help the whole family (not just the inmate) through the crisis, also providing a new support system to carry them through what seems to be the bleakest moments of life. They can also assist you with your own needs at the time. Finding new avenues outside of the support systems you currently have makes KPMI specifically unique to what you are experiencing. As I often tell inmates: do not wait until your hands weigh 500 pounds before calling or emailing for help.
- b. Sometimes, it is possible to find support groups in your area. Reaching out to these programs is a way of getting more information. KPMI often provides support after the retreat weekends. This support can seem like support groups and tend to be most effective, especially when talking with others who, like you, are struggling with a similar situation.

- c. Local churches, too, can be of help. Reach out to your pastors, those who might also be involved in a prison ministry in the church or read materials, books and the like (3d below). Every source can be helpful!
- d. Attend lectures at universities or colleges that offer instruction in criminal justice. You can also glean from the professors who teach criminal justice or are involved with it (like author of this article is!).

**4. *What is contraband? How do we learn this new prison language?*<sup>iii</sup>**

- a. This question is one that every family member should ask but do not always about such information sufficiently to even ask the question. Contraband is anything considered an illegal substance in prison, such as gum, a cell phone, drugs, weapons (even pocket knives), alcohol and the like that enters a prison without permission. Check the local prison's website for what constitutes contraband.
- b. Believe it or not, the greatest amount of contraband comes from visitors! Once, for example, a woman brought drugs to her husband in a baby's diaper. Yes, the people do get that sinister when it comes to getting drugs to an inmate.
- c. As far as understanding the language, read books from former prisoners. One of my favorites is K.C. Carceral's, *Behind a Convict's Eyes*. Another favorite is Ralph Reagan's *Fallen, Felon, and Finally Faith*. There are dozens more, where former inmates explain how they were involved in crime, why and what prison is/was like, and how they stopped going back again and again. K.C. Carceral, for example, digs into the language. Ralph Reagan talks all about his salvation experience behind bars!
- d. You can also acquire prisoner writings. For instance, Prisoner to Prisoner (<https://kohlbrand.wordpress.com/2012/08/05/prisoner-to-prisoner-daily-devotional/>) and other devotional sources, such as supplied by The Daily Bread (<http://www.ourdailybreadmissions.org/Prison%20Resources.htm>). These sources are great ways to see the growth and encouragement that often emerges in prisoners with long-term treatment and group support. Still, in some cases, be prepared: such materials can get very graphic or difficult to read given some of the tragic stories and strong language. Regardless, what is absolutely profound about each of these books is that they are filled with incredible stories of prisoners fighting insurmountable societal norms that are not always so great. Specifically, the individuals have become layered<sup>iv</sup> and are in need of long-term care. Given the system (which the inmate does not trust) makes administering that care very challenging.

**5. *I cannot even locate my Loved One or know how to go about it.***

- a. First, you can start with calling the local prison's inmate locator. Some even have rosters online.
- b. Given that you might already have a visitor's application in process, some prisons will provide further information to you, such as how to go about filling out the application, pitfalls to avoid and lists of contraband items that are not acceptable in the prison.

**6. *They won't let me in to see my Loved One. What is going on?***

- a. There are a variety of reasons you may not be able to get it in, and the following list is not exhaustive:
  - i. During intake, your Loved One is not always eligible for visits because s/he is in segregation. The Loved One must be processed for general population (GP) and that can take time. Often, the early days of incarceration require s/he earning points for privileges, including visits, too.
  - ii. There might be a problem with clearances, too. Ensure that you have no records, even traffic violations, or prior arrests. If you do have an arrest that is drug related, you may need to consult with an attorney or friend of the court. You can contact your local court clerk for information. Or, if the clerk does not know, contact the Chaplain for assistance.
  - iii. The Loved One, depending on the severity of the crime and his or her classification, may not be entitled to contact visits. These visits, called non-contact visits, require more process time.
  - iv. Conjugal visits are allowed in some prisons; however, your Loved One will need to earn privileges for them. You can always check the prison website for the Visitor's Handbook, or even call the prison and ask how to get one for more information.
  - v. If your Loved One has earned sufficient privilege points, they can be revoked. The revocation most often occurs because of disciplinary action, thus affecting your ability to visit.
  - vi. Certain prisons allow for family visits that can last up to and even over 40 hours. Still, certain prisoners, such as Death Row, those with life or sex offenses or under disciplinary action are not always eligible.
  - vii. Visits are not always allowed (a) if a prisoner has medical restrictions, (b) occurs during work/school hours or lock downs (when the prison does not allow anyone, including visitors, in or out), (c) because of crimes that involve minors, and so on. When in doubt, call the authority at the prison in charge of visitation. You can also ask the Chaplain to guide you to the right place.

You may have even more questions and the second or third document might be more helpful. Still, take comfort in knowing that these ones constitute a good beginning. They, at least, might move you closer to visitation with your Loved One while also providing deeper understanding of the issues. A final word: keep a patient heart about you. Dealing with prison rhetoric and rubric is both challenging and frustrating at times. Keep in mind that is also true for not only you and your Loved One, but also the prison staff.

*For further information, consult the Appendix with additional materials, below, Part II and III of Your Loved One Is Incarcerated, or Rev. Dr. Sandra S. Jenkins, CPC directly:*

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## Appendix: Materials to Investigate for further Help

### Devotionals, Books and Websites

1. KPMI (as noted in the discussion above): <http://kpmifoundation.org/contact-us/contact-kpmi/> You can contact them directly with your questions and a person should be able to guide you in your local area.
2. Devotionals – Prisoner to Prisoner <https://kohlbrand.wordpress.com/2012/08/05/prisoner-to-prisoner-daily-devotional/> or The Daily Bread Devotional (often available at local churches everywhere) <http://www.ourdailybreadmissions.org/Prison%20Resources.htm>
3. Readings of those with experience in prison, families who have inmate children or those who work in prison and write about the issues. Here are a few examples:
  - a. K.C. Carceral – *Behind a Convict's Eyes*
  - b. Rev. Dr. Ralph Reagan – *Fallen, Felon, and Finally Faith*
  - c. Maya Schenwar – *Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better*
  - d. Rev. Dr. Sandra S. Jenkins – *Life After Hell: Reflections of a Bag Lady*
4. These resources constitute a few with which to start. Please consult Part II and III for a more comprehensive list.

### General Rules for Entering Prisons

There are several restrictions to pay close attention to regarding proper security and protocol. For example, prisons restrictions can include a number of limitations on what you may wear. The list below comprises a fairly common number of them. Regardless, consult the prison's list for which you plan to visit for more accurate information. For example, uniforms and colors (both for staff and inmate) are different from prison to prison. For example:

1. Do not wear clothing that resembles the clothing that prisoners wear (colors are specific to each prison, so double check or read the specific prison's Visitor's Handbook)
2. Dresses that resemble prisoner muumuu (female institutions only)
3. Do not wear clothing that resembles what custodial staff wear
4. Dress conservatively and modestly
5. Do not wear any item that cannot be taken off or will not clear a metal detector (such as an underwire bra or clothing with metal buttons).
6. In general, do not wear orange as it seems to be fairly universal across states.
7. Do not wear camouflage unless identification shows active or reserve military personnel
8. The following are not allowed in almost every prison across the US:
  - a. Strapless, halter, bare midriff, sheer, or transparent clothing;
  - b. Skirts, dresses, or shorts that expose more than two inches above the knee
  - c. Clothing that exposes the breast, genitalia, or buttocks area
  - d. Very tight, form-fitting attire (this "very tight" can vary between officers)
  - e. Wigs, hairpieces, extensions, or other headpieces except for medical reasons and with prior approval
  - f. Hats or gloves, except with prior approval or in inclement weather
  - g. Open toe or shower shoes
9. Although minors must clear the metal detector, children under 36 inches (typically) are not subject to the restrictions related to colors of clothing or types of material.

10. In most prisons, all children under the age of 18 must be accompanied by an adult.

### Final Thoughts

Prisons sometimes have their own local rules regarding attire that is deemed unacceptable, such as excess jewelry (it trips alarms), layered outfits, shoes without straps around the heel, and so on. Always check with the institution that you will visit, and if necessary, call ahead. Calling ahead will avoid your being refused the visit.

Most prisons have a Visitor Center that will lend you used but clean clothing if the clothing you wore is rejected by staff; however, do not count on that. It is better to phone ahead if you are in doubt. Or, a good practice is to bring an extra set of clothing in the car in case you need to change. If the CO (correctional officer) tells you that your clothing is unacceptable, it is best to comply. But, if you really believe you are complying with the rules, you may ask to speak with the Volunteer Coordinator or Lieutenant/Captain for Security. That person will make the final decision about your clothing.

Finally, Part II of *My Loved One Is Incarcerated* follows with additional information and support for professionals, such as helping leaders (e.g., clergy, therapists, counselors, social workers) and Part III provides a compilation and discussion of sources, articles, statistics and materials.

### References

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<sup>i</sup> Loved One is capitalized here to indicate that s/he is the one incarcerated.

<sup>ii</sup> The system is often viewed as what is known as the prison industrial complex. It is a rather complicated mix of prisons trying to manage large numbers securely with providing adequate counseling. Often the two do not connect, thus making the Loved One suspicious. The lack of trust between inmate and prison staff/COs (correctional officers) is commonplace, making access to visits or even treatment difficult to determine.

<sup>iii</sup> See the Appendix (p. 5) for some items that are acceptable and unacceptable. Remember: this list is generic. Be sure to check with prison that you will be visiting to be sure.

<sup>iv</sup> Layering is a term often used synonymously with the diatheses-stress model. Diathesis-stress, in simple terms, describes how a person, over a long stretch of time, has become layered (much like a cake) with an abundance of dysfunctional issues, such as long-term sexual abuse, years of drug and alcohol use, physical violence and the like. The layering is difficult to penetrate and remove sufficiently to allow the person to get back to a more normal and mentally healthy life.