

Relationships – Proceed With Caution

An important step for successful reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals is building relationships. However, the difference between prison relationships and making friends in society is pretty extreme! Fair Shake believes that with greater understanding on both sides we can improve transitions by recognizing and addressing the challenges.

Formerly incarcerated individuals and people who have never been to prison will understandably struggle with offering trust to each other. Some people will want to try to build a relationship with a formerly incarcerated individual and find they just can't. Their fear is too strong, and everyone must respect that. But for most people, starting a relationship with a formerly incarcerated individual - whether socially or at work – is like any other relationship.

We learn about others while we learn about ourselves. As in our other relationships, trust is created little by little as we become more comfortable with ourselves, with the other person, and the environment we share when we meet.

If you don't trust people, people will not trust you. ~ Lao Tzu

You don't see things as they are. You see them as you are. ~ Talmud

We need an encounter with another person – either as model or as challenger.

~ Peter Block and Peter Kastenbaum

Ways to COMBAT the “Ex-Con” Stigma

- Engage in conversation simply to gain knowledge, trust and friends.
- Follow through with plans.
- Make eye contact, smile and use open body language.
- Talk with a positive, solution-oriented perspective.
- Offer authentic trust and work to gain authentic trust.
- Be helpful and courteous.
- Try to avoid using prison slang.

Ways to CONTINUE the “Ex-Con” Stigma

- Carry a chip on your shoulder and play the victim, as if life owes you something.
- Complain; do not resort to positive thinking or problem solving.
- Keep a closed face, arms folded, and roll your eyes when others are talking.
- Participate in conversation just for money or favors.
- Expect people to do things for you.
- Dream unattainable, unrealistic dreams; get frustrated when nobody supports you in pursuing them.

Relationships

re·la·tion·ship Function: noun

a: a state of affairs existing between those having relations or dealings <had a good relationship with his family> (or dog, supervisor, mail carrier) Source: Webster's Online Dictionary (open dictionary)

The word *relationship* does not mean romantic relationship!

Tips for building relationships and learning to trust:

- Be honest yourself. If you are honest with yourself, you can be honest with other people.
- Express your concerns.
- Go slowly! Do not idealize the situation; consider the relationship clearly and thoughtfully.
- Build trust step by step. Start trusting each other in small matters.
- Trust is a perception of honesty; competence and value similarity are essential.
- We creatively build our reality through social interaction using social structure as our guiding behavior.
- Remember: The judgments we make about others depend not only on their behavior but on our interpretation of the social situation.

Love and Relationships

Regardless of how old we are, if we can think, we have thought about love. We know the definition is very broad, but we often allow ourselves to be duped into thinking 'love' means 'romantic relationship'. Love certainly *includes* romantic relationships, but it is really so much more.

Almost everyone wants:

- To feel valued / valuable.
- To love and feel loved.
- To feel safe.
- To make sense of our life.
- To share joys and sorrows with close friends or family.

Why do we lie?

- To look good. We choose to present an image of ourselves as attractive and desirable. We are afraid to share information that may make us look bad.
- To avoid unpleasantness. We conceal information that we believe may cause conflict. We go to great lengths to create false, superficial harmony. We get to know ourselves and each other better as we reveal and negotiate our differences.
- To avoid hurting feelings. We don't want to upset people by saying something that might hurt or make them angry.

Detecting lies can be difficult. Scrutinize three elements: voice, body language, and facial expression. Other possible signs of loss of trust: withholding information, mixed messages, refusing to negotiate.

Basic Sociological and Relationship Concepts

Uncertainty Reduction Theory:

Uncertainty is unpleasant and therefore motivational; people communicate to reduce it.

Strangers, upon meeting, go through certain steps and checkpoints in order to reduce uncertainty about each other and form an idea of whether one likes or dislikes the other. The contents of the exchanges are often demographic and transactional. Where are you from? Do you have any pets? Demographic information is obtained: sex, age, economic, or social status.

When the new acquaintances are ready to get to know each other better, they begin to explore the attitudes and beliefs of the other by asking questions about values, morals, and personal issues. They feel less constrained by rules and norms and tend to communicate more freely with each other.

One factor which reduces uncertainty between communicators is the degree of similarity individuals perceive in each other (in background, attitudes, and appearance).

Three basic ways people seek information about another person:

- Passive – observation only, no contact
- Active – ask others about the person in question
- Interactive – communicate directly with the person

The primary determinant of individual behavior is the social situation in which that behavior occurs. Social roles, competition, or the mere presence of others can profoundly influence how we behave. We usually adapt our behavior to the demands of the social situation, and in ambiguous situation we take our cues from the behavior of others.

Terms

Social Construction of Reality refers to the process by which individuals build reality through social interaction. While statuses and roles structure our lives, we shape our patterns of interaction with others. People build reality from the surrounding culture. Therefore, perceptions of reality vary both within a single society and among societies the world over.

Social Norms: “unwritten rules”. Adjustment to a group typically involves discovering its social norms. Two ways: Noticing uniformities and observing negative consequences.

Social Reality: subjective interpretations of other people and of our relationships. Social Reality determines whom we find attractive, whom we find threatening, whom we seek out and whom we avoid. The judgments we make about others depend not only on their behavior but on our interpretation of the social situation.

Principle of Proximity: Frequent contact best predicts our closest relationships.

Self Disclosure: Sends signals of trust. “Here is a piece of information that I want you to know about me, and I trust you not to hurt me with it.”

Nonverbal Communication: This concept refers to communication using, not speech, but body movements, gestures, and facial expressions. Types of body language-- smiles, eye contact, and hand movements. Most nonverbal communication is cultural-specific. Three ways in which emotional life differs cross-culturally include: (1) what triggers an emotion, (2) how people display emotions according to the norms of their culture, and (3) how people cope with emotions.

Similarity: People usually find it more rewarding to strike up a friendship with someone who shares their attitudes, interests, values, and experiences. If we have just discovered that we share tastes in music, politics, and attitudes toward education, we will probably hit it if off because we have, in effect, exchanged compliments that reward each other for our tastes and attitudes. Most people find marriage partners of the same age, race, social status, attitudes, and values.

Terms Continued...

Expectancy-Value Theory: People usually decide whether to pursue a relationship by weighing the value they see in another person against their expectation of success in the relationship (Will the other person be attracted to me?). People with low opinions of themselves tend to establish relationships with people who share their views, that is, with people who devalue them. On the other hand, individuals who appear to be extremely competent can be intimidating; we fear they will reject our approaches. When highly competent individuals commit minor blunders, however, we like them better.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory: Mental adjustments that account for people who voluntarily undergo unpleasant experiences. When people's cognitions and actions are in conflict (dissonance) they often reduce the conflict by changing their thinking (cognition) to fit their behavior. This explains why smokers rationalize their habit.

Becoming an Ex: This experience is common to most people in modern society. Unlike individuals in earlier cultures who usually spent their entire lives in one marriage, one career, one religion, one geographic locality, people living in today's world tend to move in and out of many roles in the course of a lifetime. It's hard to shake former roles, however, and the 'ex' must repeatedly demonstrate the behaviors of the roles they are now in.

Cooperation can change people: Working with diverse people we learn all people are just people, not objects to be hated and/or loved for their perceived and distant media or culture-derived social value. We share a small country and a small planet! We are mutually interdependent on each other. Whether we recognize this or not, we have a working relationship based on shared goals.

Power of the Situation can have a strong influence! What happens when you put good people in an evil place? A Simulation Study of the Psychology of Imprisonment Conducted at Stanford University:
<http://www.prisonexp.org/>

Discrimination is a negative behavior, an action taken against an individual as a result of her or his group membership.

The source of discrimination and prejudice that is perhaps the most pervasive is an unthinking tendency to maintain conditions the way they are:

- Even when those conditions involve unfair assumptions prejudices and customs. If similarity breeds liking, then dissimilarity can breed disdain
- Find commonalities! Social distance can make it easier to treat members of an 'out-group' with contempt.

Fundamental Attribution Error: We tend to attribute other people's actions and misfortunes to their personal traits rather than to situational forces. This helps explain why we often hear attribution of laziness or low intelligence to the poor or homeless, rather than an externally imposed lack of opportunity. For ourselves, however, we attribute our success to internal factors, such as motivation, talent or skill. We attribute our failures to external factors beyond our control, called a self-serving bias; probably rooted in the need for self-esteem due to social pressures to excel.

Prejudice is a negative attitude toward an individual based solely on his or her membership in a particular group. Prejudiced attitudes serve as filters that influence the way others are perceived and treated. Discrimination is a negative behavior, an action taken against an individual as a result of her or his group membership.