

Relationships



Maintaining relationships in a healthy way can already be challenging without the added stressors that come with incarceration. While there hasn't been extensive research, there is overwhelming information that the stronger your support system is when you're released, the better your transition and reentry experience will be. 70% of AICs with three or more visitors throughout their sentencing were arrest free in the first year of their release. The average rearrest rate within the first year is 50%, so the stronger and healthier your relationships are, the smoother your transition may be. Within this part of the guidebook, healthy relationship tips, as well as red flags in intimate relationships will be described. Suggestions on rebuilding relationships with your children will also be provided, based on the writings of a formerly incarcerated father named Delonso Barnes.



A photograph of a man and a woman embracing from behind at sunset. The man is wearing a striped shirt, and the woman is wearing a white top. The background is a warm, golden glow from the setting sun.

Healthy Partnerships

Communication:

The first sign of a healthy relationship is strong communication. Practicing healthy communication includes speaking up when something is on your mind, listening and being respectful during difficult conversations you may be having with your partner, working towards compromise that meets both your needs to the best of your ability, and giving one another time, space, and privacy to process whatever exchanges you may have had.

It can be hard to open up or be vulnerable, especially after being released from prison - an environment where most people have to harden themselves to push through. Know that it's okay to break down those walls with someone you love, and practice reassuring them that it's not their fault if you're struggling to open up - this isn't your fault either. Vocalize what you need, and hold space for them to vocalize their needs as well. Try to start these challenging discussions before it leads to an argument, or a more serious problem than what it needs to be. Even if you're struggling to fully express your feelings, doing as much as you can to open up at least shows your partner where you're at, and how they can help you.

Trust:

In order to communicate effectively, you have to have trust. Building trust can be done by actively listening to each other and making the other person feel heard and ensuring that you're emotionally available in those moments. It also means being sensitive when handling your partner's feelings, and doing your best to validate their emotions or concerns. Establishing trust can also be accomplished by handling arguments in a respectful and non-threatening way, and showing that you care for this person regardless of the disagreement. Lastly, it's important to ensure that your words and actions align, and that you're keeping promises you've made to one another.

Healthy Partnerships



Mutual Respect:

Ensuring that your partner feels respected is definitely important in maintaining a healthy and loving relationship. Giving them compliments that are specific and genuine, sticking up for them and standing by them, supporting them in their goals, passions, and ambitions, as well as respecting their boundaries and wishes are all examples of giving your partner the respect that they deserve.

Independence:

Having independent interests and activities outside of your relationship is important to allow your partner to have space for their hobbies and alone time. It's also important to allow and encourage them to spend time with friends and family alone when they may need to, and for you to do the same.

Shared Interests:

On the flip side, it's important to have shared interests with your partner as well. Finding activities you enjoy doing together is also valuable, as well as carving out quality time together. It's important to make each other feel prioritized.

Equality:

Equally participating in sustaining and improving your relationship is one way to practice equality. Equality also means giving each other privacy, mutual respect and compromising, and of course communicating equally as well.

A hand holding a pen over an open book with a heart sticker. The book has the word 'FOREVER' visible on the page. The title 'Healthy Partnerships' is overlaid in a large, stylized font.

Healthy Partnerships

Compassion:

Compassion can be displayed by showing concern and care, being kind, understanding, supportive at all times - but especially when your partner needs it most.

Financial Partnership:

It's important to communicate finances ahead of time so that you have a plan and are on the same page. Dividing up how things are paid for and by who is important to discuss, as well as being honest about the finances and financial responsibilities you share with your partner. It is also crucial to not be controlling over one another's finances, especially independent finances, bank accounts, credit cards, etc..

Responsibility & Accountability:

Practicing accountability and responsibility includes providing thoughtful and genuine apologies when you've done something to hurt your partner's feelings. It also means doing your best to avoid taking out your negative emotions on them when you're upset, stressed, tired, angry, etc.. It also means bettering the relationship by owning your mistakes, and being constructive in improving them.

Red Flags in Relationships



Physical Abuse:

Physical abuse is any intentional unwanted physical contact with someone's body. Any form of contact such as: strangling, punching, kicking, scratching, hitting, biting, pushing, grabbing, pulling hair, throwing things, using weapons, or restraining the person is considered physical abuse. Sleep deprivation is another form of physical abuse, and it can be an indirect side effect of physical abuse since people experiencing physical abuse have a harder time with sleeping, or it could mean actively preventing one's partner from sleeping. Sleep deprivation can make it hard to think or concentrate, cause memory issues, weaken one's immune system, cause an increased risk for high blood pressure, weight gain, poor balance and coordination, as well as an increased risk for heart disease.

How to Change Physically Abusive Behavior:

Some people who abuse their partners were themselves abused at some point in their life. While there isn't an excuse for these actions, it may be necessary for you to get help in coping with your own experiences with abuse. Alternatively, you may struggle with anger management, or a mental health issue (such as a personality, mood or behavioral disorder) that could be related or unrelated to your experiences as a child, or even your experiences in prison. A list of different mental health issues and symptoms begins on page 19 of the guidebook. The National Hotline for Domestic Abuse encourages someone acting in an abusive manner to identify what's causing them to harm their partner, and work to address the root cause of it. For more information you can visit thehotline.org

National Hotline for Domestic Abuse Hotline Number: 1-800-799-7233

Red Flags in Relationships



Financial Abuse:

Financial abuse can include concealing financial information, limiting one's partner's access to assets or reducing their ability to access finances, or making it difficult for them to leave the relationship due to financial dependency caused by the abusive partner. This usually is done by interfering in their access to school, housing, ability to go to work, etc.. Specific examples of financial abuse include: giving one's partner an expensive gift and expecting it to be reciprocated when the other person can't afford to do so, giving one's partner an allowance, not allowing one's partner to spend money on themselves (but the perpetrator is allowed to spend money on themselves), purposefully not paying bills, lying about bills, or intentionally paying them late, using money from various savings accounts without the other person's knowledge or consent, denying one's partner access to joint accounts, credit cards, etc., preventing one's partner from going to work or sabotaging their work in hoping that they lose employment, hiding or stealing disability checks, maxing out credit cards without knowledge or permission from one's partner, refusing one's partner money for basic needs, and using their social security card number to ruin their credit score, open credit cards, etc.. It is important to not be controlling over finances, but instead to maintain open communication. Otherwise, the person being impacted by financial abuse will have to face lifelong consequences, such as setbacks in their career, a ruined credit score, and more.

How to Change Financially Abusive Behavior:

With any form of abuse, typically the person behaving in an abusive manner struggles with a lack of power and control. If you're doing these things to your partner because you're stressed or feel out of control of your finances, seeking counseling or treatment to alleviate you of those burdens could be one way to better your relationship and improve the way you're treating your loved ones. You could also research your questions and concerns surrounding finances in order to feel more in control and knowledgeable of your financial situation. Most importantly, working to undo whatever damage you may have done to someone's career or financial standing is extremely important. Regardless of if the relationship lasts, they deserve to have financial freedom and be successful in their life in spite of whatever harm may have already been done.

Red Flags in Relationships



Sexual Abuse:

Sexual abuse can be unwanted touching or kissing, rough or violent sexual activity that one party is uncomfortable with or not consenting to, rape or attempted rape, sexual contact with someone who is drunk, drugged, or too unconscious to give verbal, enthusiastic consent. Sexual abuse can also be threatening someone into sexual activity, or pressuring someone to engage in sexual acts. Reproductive abuse is also apart of sexual abuse and it can include prohibiting partners from using condoms or birth control, intentionally damaging one's method of birth control, or removing a sexual barrier such as a condom without someone's knowledge or consent. An example of this is "stealthling" which is a form of sexual abuse where someone removes the condom before having sex with someone, in spite of them being unaware, and not consenting to sex without a condom. This is a form of rape, since one party only consented to sex if a certain form of protection was used.

How to Change Sexually Abusive Behavior:

If you notice that your partner is uncomfortable, hesitant, or unexpressive when you engage in any intimate acts, you may be pressuring them into sexual acts that they're uncomfortable with engaging in. In order for someone to give consent, they must be fully conscious, not impaired by substances, and giving consistent signals (verbally or physically) that they are present and comfortable with you. You can ask for reinforcement that your partner is comfortable, simply by asking them if they're okay and feel safe with what's going on. You should discuss birth control methods as well as methods to prevent transmitting STDs (such as getting tested and/or using condoms), so that there is no miscommunication during or after sex. Maintaining healthy and consistent communication with someone you have a sexual relationship with is the best way to prevent someone from feeling uncomfortable with you. If you experienced sexual abuse in prior relationships or as a child, it's important to get help since at times, people who have been sexually abused go on to harm their partners in the same ways. But ultimately, the best way to be a safe partner engaging in healthy sex and practicing consent is constant communication, and checking in on your partner.

National Sexual Abuse Hotline Number: 1-800-656-4673

Red Flags in Relationships



Emotional Abuse:

Emotional abuse is one of the most challenging forms of abuse to notice, even if you have experienced emotional abuse. The way that emotional abuse can be carried out is through verbal aggression, intimidation, as well as manipulation and humiliation. Manipulation and humiliation often unfold in a pattern of behavior over time that aims to diminish another person's sense of self, identity, dignity, self worth, and often results in anxiety, PTSD, depression, or suicidal thoughts and behaviors. This method of abuse is used to control someone, but it's often much more subtle. Some specific examples can include: being jealous of platonic relationships, telling someone what to do, always demanding to know what the other person is doing/where they are, preventing one's partner from seeing their friends or family, keeping them from going to work, class, etc., controlling where they go, what they wear, who they see, threatening to harm them or other people/pets/objects that they care about, threatening to expose their secrets, accusing them of cheating for no reason, yelling or screaming, gaslighting, threatening to have their children taken away, hiding keys, medicine, or important objects, intentionally embarrassing one's partner publicly, using social media to intimidate them, damaging their property, hitting objects to scare them, lying about where they go/what they do, stalking their partner, threatening suicide if their partner leaves them, verbally degrading one's partner, making them feel guilty or immature when they deny sex/sexual acts, saying no one else will love them, and sabotaging their work, education, other relationships, etc..

How to Change Emotionally Abusive Behavior:

A psychologist named Dr. Stonsy writes that emotionally abusive individuals feel that they have been harmed or victimized, which drives them to harm others. While most of his work is focused on the side of the person being harmed by emotional abuse, the key points he brings up are that often times the things that someone says or does who is being emotionally abusive is due to their own insecurities, fears, or anxieties within themselves or the relationship. Again, getting help from a therapist or behavioral specialist could be the best idea here as it prevents you from continuing to emotionally harm your partner.

Red Flags in Relationships



Stalking:

Stalking is a pattern of behavior directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear. Stalking is considered a pattern once the stalker has engaged in at least two instances of threatening, harassing, or unwanted behaviors against their ex, current romantic interest, or whoever they may be following. Something may be threatening to the individual that isn't threatening to just anybody, because it has a specific meaning between both parties. Some stalking tactics and examples can include: sending unwanted emails, texts, etc., leaving strange or threatening "gifts" or items, leaving unwanted gifts or presents, sneaking into the individual's house or car, watching/following/spying on them, making unwanted phone calls/calling then hanging up, approaching them or hanging around specific locations that they regularly visit, non-consensual contact including by phone, text, email, social media, letters, or a third party person, tracking the individual electronically, tracking their movements or schedules, waiting for them outside of their place of work, their house, their school, etc., threatening them, committing other crimes to scare them such as breaking and entering, assault, burglary, criminal mischief, theft, or other interpersonal violence.

What to do if You Find Yourself Engaging or Planning to Engage in these Practices:

3/4 people who are stalked know the person who is stalking them, and typically it is someone that they were or are in an intimate relationship with. If you are stalking someone, or have the desire to stalk your current or ex partner, it's important to identify the causes. If you are together, are you jealous, untrusting, or concerned about something they may be doing behind your back? Rather than violating them and their privacy, having an open discussion with them about your insecurities would be a much healthier and safer way of handling this type of conflict. You could also consider couples counseling. If they have betrayed your trust, and this is how you've decided to ensure it doesn't happen again, this most likely isn't a relationship worth salvaging, and it's probably best for you both to move on. If the person you are planning to or have already begun to follow is an ex, focus your energy on healing and moving past the relationship rather than following them. Going to therapy, spending more time with friends or family, developing new hobbies, and creating a life for yourself outside of your ex partner are all much better ways to move on.

Red Flags in Relationships



Stalking, Continued:

Stalking someone could lead to criminal charges, restraining orders, and is most definitely a violation of your parole. Breakups and relationships that are approaching their end are incredibly sad, and it's normal to feel grief or to be mournful over your relationship. But if you have a chance of working things out in the future after you've had time apart, stalking them is a quick way to close any doors that may have led to a second chance. Being followed and feeling afraid that someone is watching you is an incredibly traumatizing experience, and one that you shouldn't want to inflict on someone you truly love; especially if there is potential for reconciliation in the future. The best thing you can do for you and your partner is to work on yourself, and your relationship if you are still together - rather than violating their privacy, and permanently losing whatever feelings of trust, safety, and comfort that they feel with you.

Gaslighting:

Gaslighting is a form of abuse used to make one person in a relationship feel crazy after the other party has done something to harm or abuse them in any way, shape, or form. This can include trying to convince one's partner that they are wrong, forgetful, or unstable when recalling both important and unimportant events. The abuser may also pretend to not listen or not understand their partner, and question their memory of the events being discussed or argued. They might also change the subject, or challenge and question their partner's feelings. They make their partner's needs or feelings seem unimportant, wrong, and invalidated. They also pretend to forget certain events that have taken place, and often go back on promises they have made to their partner.

How to Avoid Gaslighting Your Partner:

Like other forms of abuse previously discussed, gaslighting is one of the most common forms of abuse that someone may use to gain power or control over someone. You should never want to gaslight your partner, since it leaves psychological damages that can make someone feel like they are going crazy or losing their mind. This form of abuse toys with one's memory, recollection of events, and their entitlement to their emotions.

Red Flags in Relationships



Gaslighting, Continued:

Identifying what makes you want to have control over your partners emotions or memories is an important first step, do you lack trust in your partner or have trust issues in your relationships as a whole? Do you have a hard time apologizing, so you result to trying to pretend like nothing ever happened? Trust issues and struggling with being apologetic due to fear of rejection or being vulnerable are very natural and common emotions. However, letting these emotions turn you into an abusive partner and hurting people that you love is not worth it. Going to therapy alone and/or with your partner, and opening up to them about fears or reservations you may have that cause this behavior are much healthier alternatives, rather than causing them severe and long term emotional damage.

Academic Abuse:

Academic abuse is purposeful usage of abusive tactics to control, impair, or sabotage someone's academic/scholastic success. This can be done by: preventing someone from working on papers or studying for tests, calling/harassing them before tests or important assignments, getting mad at them for doing their homework, blaming them for bad grades, belittling their academic focus, or making fun of them for studying too much.

How to Change Behavior that is Academically Abusive:

Academically abusive behavior is typically attributed to either jealousy over how much time one's partner devotes to their studies rather than spending time with them, or due to jealousy caused by their partner's academic success. It could also be a control issue as the other forms of abuse described above are. If you're finding yourself to be jealous or missing your partner due to how time consuming school is, understand that school is incredibly demanding and odds are they much rather be able to relax with you, their family, and friends. Supporting them is the best way to make school easier, smoother, and potentially faster. Stifling them and their education could make it more challenging for them to graduate on time, so encouraging them to take their time and do things right the first time is the best way to ensure you'll get to enjoy more time together later.

Red Flags in Relationships



Academic Abuse, Continued:

If you simply want to advance your education as well, talk to your partner about when it's financially feasible, and surely they'll support you in continuing your education. Or if you have the financial means to, you could start school as well. If finances are a concern, read more about education later in the guidebook for information on appropriately financing your education so that this doesn't have to be a barrier for you. Counseling and therapy is of course always another option if you are struggling with self-esteem issues related to the amount of education you have completed.

Social Abuse:

Social abuse is when someone is prevented from spending time with their friends, family or socializing in any manner. It is done to gain more control or power in the relationship. It's done by isolating one's partner which allows the abuser to escalate their behavior by leaving their partner with no one left to talk to. Examples include: monitoring their partner's phone calls, texts, emails, etc., continuously criticizing their partner's friends/family, moving the person far away so that they can't see their loved ones, spreading rumors about their partner so that people don't want to be around them, deciding which friends and family they can/can't be with, limiting their contact with others, verbally/physically abusing them in front of others, making them ask permission before socializing with other people, not allowing their partner to have social media or controlling who they follow, posting degrading comments/photos online of their partner, taking away their partner's phone or laptop, creating a scene in front of people so that they don't want to be around their partner, telling their partner things like "you can only rely on/trust me" and encouraging them to engage with toxic people.

How to Change Behavior that is Socially Abusive:

Similar to academic abuse, the cause of this form of abuse could be due to jealousy. If you are struggling with feeling jealous of your partner's relationships with their friends or family, try building relationships with them too so that you feel more included. You could also try making new friends of your own so that you have support separate from your partner and relationship. If you've struggled with toxic familial relationships or friendships, then it could be best to get counseling for that. If this is an issue of control or jealousy for you, then therapy is also always a good option as well to prevent the continuation of this abuse.

Red Flags in Relationships



Other Red Flags:

1. Forcing your partner to do things that they don't want to do
2. Constantly checking up on your partner to the point of being intrusive
3. Picking fights often, seemingly for no reason
4. Being physically violent in front of your partner or others
5. Having a bad temper and not working to soothe it
6. Being controlling
7. Humiliating your partner
8. Guilt tripping your partner
9. Forcing your partner to take responsibility for your feelings that are not their fault and/or unrelated to them
10. Giving your partner ultimatums

Alternative Behaviors:

1. Allowing your partner to have a fair and equal say in the relationship
2. Showing care and concern, but respecting boundaries & personal space
3. Letting your partner know when you're having a bad/off day
4. Working on anger management, refraining from violence
5. Not taking anger out on your partner
6. Being trusting
7. Supporting your partner
8. Expressing your feelings of sadness, but letting them make their own decisions (if their decision(s) hurt you, decide what that means for you and the relationship)
9. Owning your emotions as your own, not blaming people who did not cause them
10. Setting up boundaries together & holding one another accountable to those promises/set boundaries

Healthy Relationships with Children

If you have children, rebuilding your relationship with them is going to be especially important to you once you're released. The book: "Fresh Start for Dads: Reconnecting After Prison and Absenteeism" by Delonso Barnes will be referenced throughout this section. Barnes is a formerly incarcerated father who has written multiple other books on parenting, and also runs a nonprofit called Daddy Everyday Inc..

Here are some of the main takeaways from his book on parenting while incarcerated and/or after incarceration:

- Acknowledge the negative impact that your incarceration has had on their life
- Maintain strong and open communication with your child
- Try to have a positive and healthy relationship with your child's other parent, regardless of your relationship status
- Be honest with your child about why you are/were in prison, share whatever you believe is necessary for them to know based on their age
- Make them feel loved and special
- Ask them questions about their life
- Make visitation time/quality time a positive experience
- Start conversations - prompt them with questions about schoolwork, their day or week, their friends/relationships at school, what they've been doing for fun lately, or anything that you think they'd be enthusiastic to discuss with you
- Reflect on what you did and didn't like about your relationships with your parents/parental figures, be sure to not follow the same parenting styles that harmed you or left a negative impact on you
- Reinforce to your child that your time in prison was not their fault, children who have experienced having an incarcerated parent may suffer from unnecessary guilt or abandonment issues
- Encourage them to remain childlike, behave their age, and remind them that there is no rush to grow up