

HOW TO AVOID VISITING ROOM SABOTAGE

BY LENNIE SPITALE

From Inside Journal®, a publication of Prison Fellowship®

Men and women in prison often express to me that they know how hard it is for their loved ones to visit them. Distances can be great and gas prices high. Some of their visitors have very little extra money and have to rely on public transportation or the kindness of friends to get there. Maybe they had to arrange for a babysitter or take time off work. Responsibilities had to be postponed in order to get to the prison. And then there is the whole humiliating experience of the entry process! The lines and the lockers, the searches and the metal detectors. By the time visitors finally sit down, they feel like they've been caught up in an exhausting whirlwind of experiences. They know the prisoner had only to wash up, comb his or her hair, and bounce off to the visiting room when his or her name was called. But the prisoner lives in a crude and negative world, and it's not always easy to shake it off when it comes time for the meeting. And for the visitor, especially if it is a spouse, the demands and difficulties of life on the outside have become twice as hard.

10 GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

Here are 10 guidelines I would suggest after observing these visits for nearly 30 years in Christian prison ministry. Maybe one or two will be helpful to you.

1. Verbally acknowledge that the other person's stress is real. You are temporarily living in two different worlds. Acknowledge that the differences can create misunderstandings. Empathize, but don't pretend to fully understand the other's stress factors.
2. Give each other adequate time to express your feelings. I recommend that the one doing time allow the visitor to be the one who talks about his or her life first. The prison world is a small one; by listening to your loved one's experiences first, it'll help to pull you out of it a little bit.
3. Give each other the freedom to be honest about your feelings. (If you can't handle the truth, don't ask for it.)
4. There is a time for everything. Agree together whether or not the timing is right to bring up certain issues. If one (or both) of you is not emotionally ready to handle something, you must mutually agree to put it on a back burner until the time is right.
5. Listen with your heart as well as your ears. For the men, keep in mind that if the visitor is a wife or girlfriend, she doesn't necessarily want you to fix the problem; she just wants you to know how she feels. (Since you are already feeling frustrated at your inability to fix outside problems, this should actually be a help to you.)
6. Identify the real issues. But do this with gentleness and respect. Most of the time, the surface issues aren't the real problem. Sometimes the anger is rooted in unresolved conflicts. For example, family members may be hiding their anger over all the pain and turmoil the incarcerated one has caused, but be afraid to express it.
7. The conversation shouldn't be dominated by one person. Agree to give each other equal time to talk about what has been going on in your lives.
8. Be kind. It's not all about you. I once heard someone say: "Be kind to each other. Everyone is fighting big battles." The shrink-wrapped world of prison life can cause one to become very self-focused. And, just as easily, the demands and responsibilities of outside life can cause visitors to become the same way.
9. Make a commitment at the beginning of each visit that you will make no unreasonable demands upon the other person. Stick by it.
10. Ask for practical ways in which you can be of help to each other.

Lennie Spitalo is an author, prison ministry leader, and former "career criminal" who was once pardoned by the governor of New Hampshire.