

Reach Out to Families in Crisis

When a person goes to prison, the whole family system suffers. It is normal for the family to cycle through a range of emotions and symptoms that include anxiety, depression, guilt, feeling lost or abandoned, anger or irritability, difficulty concentrating, poor attention span, and more.

Children cannot understand why their parent is no longer there for them, no matter how frequent or honest the explanation. Spouses or “significant others” of the incarcerated may have their own set of unhealthy habits such as alcohol and drug addiction that interfere with the family’s ability to cope.

The prisoner often has unrealistic expectations of family members, bringing pressure for constant communication, financial support, legal intervention, or more frequent visits. Fear of unfaithfulness begins to creep into the marriage and accusations of disloyalty soon follow. By some estimates, as many as 80 percent of marriages end in divorce when one partner goes to prison for a significant length of time.

Three Needs of Families

The three areas in which family members of the incarcerated need the greatest support to overcome their crisis are:

1. Practical, physical help with finances or daily household management
2. Non-judgmental companionship, a listening ear, and gentle advice when asked
3. A channel of spiritual strength and support that helps them endure what seem to be insurmountable problems and obstacles

Practical Help

In some cases, providing direct support such as help with child care, food, or housing is the first step in helping a family in crisis. But often the best long-range plan is to locate and link family members to existing social services or relief agencies that can provide ongoing assistance.

Some other practical ways to assist are offering to help with home repairs or seasonal maintenance, providing financial counseling, and arranging transportation for the family to visit their loved one in prison.

Emotional Help

Including family members of the incarcerated in church activities and social activities can help them feel more normal and accepted. Organizing a support group for spouses of the incarcerated is another way of helping them through the crisis.

Ignoring the family or treating them in a demeaning and judgmental way only inflicts greater shame and magnifies the crisis. Instead, reach out to them in love.

Make it your goal to create a welcoming atmosphere of safety for the families of the incarcerated. And be prepared to refer them to other social services and professional assistance when they need help beyond the level your church is qualified to provide.

Spiritual Help

Ongoing spiritual and emotional support by a loving congregation of believers can make the difference in whether the family rises above the crisis or falls deeper into despair. As Romans 12:15 says, “When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrows.”