

Helping Ex-Prisoners Make Decisions

When Pat Nolan got out of prison, some friends took him to lunch at a local deli. What was meant to be a simple, pleasant outing detoured into an excruciating debacle for Pat. As he recounts:

The waiter came over to take our orders. Everyone else told him what they wanted, but I kept poring over the menu. I knew that I was supposed to order, but the number of options overwhelmed me.

My friends sat in embarrassed silence. I was paralyzed. The waiter looked at me impatiently. I began to panic. Finally, in desperation I ordered the next item my eyes landed on — a turkey sandwich. I didn't even want it, but at least it put an end to this embarrassing incident.

For two years I hadn't been allowed to make any choices about what I ate. Now I was having a hard time adjusting to the simple options most people face every day. If I had this much difficulty after only a couple of years in prison, think how hard it is for prisoners who haven't made any choices for 5, 10, or 15 years. Is it any surprise that so many newly-released prisoners make bad choices and end up back in prison?

Before prison, Pat had served as a California assemblyman for 15 years. He had made countless significant decisions affecting legislation and people all across his state. But now he was taken down by a list of sandwich options.

Many other ex-prisoners have echoed Pat's distress over making even simple decisions when they first get out. Here are some ways to help ex-prisoners who struggle with decision making.

1. Lessen the number of choices. Before going to a restaurant, for example, ask the ex-prisoner what kind of food he or she prefers. If the answer is "a good steak" or "Italian," choose a place that suits their preference.
2. Give them time to choose. Patiently encourage the ex-prisoner to try on as many pairs of pants as he wants on a shopping excursion. Plan accordingly so you're not in a rush.
3. Help the ex-prisoner find appropriate professional resources. This might include mental-health counseling to help with anxiety or career counseling to help determine suitable employment options.
4. Don't make choices for the ex-prisoner, but ask questions that will help him or her think through the pros and cons. "What are the benefits of that job? What might be some limitations? Without a car, what are some ways you could get to work?"
5. Encourage proper self-care — nutrition, exercise, rest — to build up internal "self-regulation" resources. Remember, making decisions depletes mental energy.
6. Provide training in decision-making skills to help ex-prisoners understand their thinking patterns, identify erroneous ways of thinking, and learn more effective ways of thinking.
7. Provide a support structure for the ex-prisoner — a mentor, a church family, an accountability group, etc. Ex-prisoners need people to believe in them and to help give them guidance and a base of security in the midst of so many challenges.

8. Encourage their relationship with God — the One who gives wisdom, loves them unconditionally, calms their fears with His perfect love, and transforms them through the renewal of their minds.

The choices ex-offenders make immediately after release are extremely important. During this difficult time, returning prisoners need relationships with loving, moral adults who will help them make wise decisions.

To learn more about reentry ministry, read the book *When Prisoners Return* by Pat Nolan.