

Taking the step to mentor an ex-prisoner could be one of the most rewarding things you ever do. It's also an area where many volunteers find themselves in uncharted waters.

Ex-prisoners must navigate a myriad of new choices and they need a strong friend to help them along the journey. You will need wisdom to help your mentee make positive decisions, as well as discernment to recognize signs he or she is headed down the wrong path.

Prison Fellowship's reentry program counselors have identified three significant pitfalls mentors need to be aware of when coaching mentees.

1. Looking for Love

Most ex-prisoners are not ready to manage a romantic relationship in a positive way if they've never been in a healthy relationship before. Looking for love too soon is likely to cause a lot of chaos — the kind of chaos most were in before they went to prison.

Think about it. A stable person with good judgment would not normally choose to date someone in prison or who just got out of prison. It's definitely a red flag if your mentee suddenly tells you he or she has met someone and fallen in love.

Mentees who were in a significant relationship before going to prison may know what healthy relationships look like. Still, you need to caution them to go slow. Encourage the couple to seek wise counsel from a pastor, pastor's wife, or other church members who can give them sound advice on building a solid relationship.

2. Being Isolated

If an ex-prisoner isolates him or herself, that typically means trouble. In prison, inmates are rarely alone, so many prisoners highly value solitude. But when they get out and are indeed finally alone, they may not know how to manage this newfound freedom.

Isolation can be like a trigger, kicking ex-prisoners back into old habits and addictions. For example, instead of making the effort to find new friends at church or work, the newly-released prisoner may reconnect with the same people he used to hang out with. Once with the old friends again, your mentee will be tempted to return to old, destructive patterns.

Ex-prisoners should be encouraged to find community within local churches, addiction recovery groups, and healthy family relationships. These bonds will steer them away from isolation and propel them toward healing and accountability.

3. Missing Appointments

Most mentees who miss appointments will have lots of excuses, but few are valid. Missed appointments are rarely due to forgetfulness. Instead, they are red flags that other things are taking your mentee's time.

While incarcerated, prisoners learn to be on time for things or pay strict consequences. When an ex-inmate misses an appointment and doesn't call to apologize, it means he or she just blew the meeting off for something else. And that "something else" is usually not part of the mentee's plan for making a good transition back into society.

Most ex-prisoners respect a person with standards, but tend to take advantage of a mentor who has no boundaries. Dealing with a mentee who misses appointments requires a mentor to set clear boundaries with appropriate consequences for no shows.

Always be on the lookout! If any of these three red flags pops up, deal with it immediately. When it comes to prisoner reentry, consistent mentor involvement makes all the difference.