

Making ‘Friends’ at the Ottawa Carleton Detention Centre

Adam Dufresne

Relationships are the key to unlocking a meaningful and successful life. Being able to build those relationships is a critically significant factor in this journey. This impacts everything from the job you get, money you make, entertainment you enjoy, who you spend your time with, how you eat, what you wear, as well as how your family functions. Relationships also fundamentally shape your views on politics, religion and community. If people who have committed a criminalized act have any hope of successfully reintegrating into society, it relies largely on being able to build healthy relationships, whether this means through creating new connections, deepening existing connections or rekindling past connections. This will be the single most important thing anyone will need to be able to do upon being released from jail.

In the remand system of Ontario, not only are people attempting to return to society after incarceration disadvantaged, the deck is actually stacked against them because they have experienced life in an environment that destroys their very understanding of healthy relationships. This creates a wake of confusion and negative emotions that leads to numerous mental health issues (see Lindquist, 2000). My personal experience with living in the remand system for so long (forty-two months at the time of writing), echoes this in numerous ways. I have seen thousands of men at all stages of incarceration, providing me with unique insights into the damaging effects of the system, both first-hand and through observing many others.

When I first walked into a “range” (living area) with thirty-one other men from all walks of life, it was clear that I was the outsider. If you are not already part of or familiar with jail culture and composition (Irwin, 2013), this realization hits you like a ton of bricks. Although you have next to no information about the people you live with, you come to understand that you will have to pick a “best friend” and make allies fast, otherwise you will be subject to taunting, verbal abuse, and physical assault. The stakes are extremely high and you have to choose – without delay.

I have always been very good at making acquaintances, but it is hard for me to make real friends or build close relationships. The term “best friend” has never been a part of my vocabulary. Walking into the range, I felt like a deer caught in the headlights, handcuffed and afraid, and I had to deal with the pressure of deciding who was potentially going to be my friend and ally.

I had to speak to people without knowing whether they would greet me with hostility or offer friendship. As the tension gradually subsided and I made alliances, I began to feel a bit better and even got somewhat comfortable. The pressure seemed to give a little and I started to feel like, “Phew I can relax”, or so I thought.

One of the hardest parts of making friends in the remand system is that they leave. When I make a friend and begin to care about a person, I naturally want what is best for them. In the outside world, that is perfectly normal and healthy. However, in here, wanting what is best for my friend ultimately means he will leave here for either a better institution or to rejoin society. It does not matter which of the two it is because, either way, there goes my best friend, out the door and, with him, a small part of my identity. I am back at square one and I need to find a new “best friend”. My stresses and worries start all over again.

In my experience, this pattern happens every two to four months. This means after being here for forty-two months, I have had to re-make best friends give or take a dozen times. How many close friends do you make each year? Probably not anywhere near four or five. This pattern of experience is an extremely hard on me, mentally and emotionally, because I have always found it challenging to say goodbye to friends and family. You might think, “Great, this will teach you social skills and help you learn to make new friends”. However, the truth is that it does not help. What actually ends up happening is two-fold: not only does this damaging pattern skew my perception of a healthy relationship, it also forces me to integrate with the social rules of prison culture to survive (Clemmer, 1958).

In these conditions, people are taught to mindlessly conform to the crowd and bend our own ethics if necessary. Most people lose their value system or at least alter it so they can fit in with the crowd. I have been personally fortunate because I have managed to stick to my moral code and hold onto my values. I have not adopted the “socially acceptable behaviour of inmates” and I have even been strong enough to stick up for those who are weaker than myself. This has not come without a cost – I have been in five physical altercations as a result. I have been knocked unconscious once and received numerous lumps, bruises, and black eyes. It has not been easy. That being said, sometimes I have looked the other way when someone was being physically abused or bullied. I have let things slide that I would not otherwise because it was not “my business” and I did not want to make

myself a target. The pressure to adopt the prison social rules is so intense that more often than not I have given into that pressure over time. These circumstances have ultimately changed who I am or who I saw myself to be, and confused my understanding of what is a healthy peer relationship. Either way, this pattern of experience has stacked the deck against me for my eventual return to society and further impaired my ability to build healthy relationships (also see Clear, 2009).

My coping strategy throughout my incarceration has been to hide in the crowd. Some people have referred to me as a social butterfly which is the perfect cover because I was able to blend in by speaking with most individuals. I learned to share enough about myself that people liked me or at least did not hate me. However, I rarely give away very much. Although I have five to ten people approaching me daily to talk or “pick my brain” I have never been lonelier in my entire life because none of them are my real friends. Being surrounded by thirty-one men every day and feeling alone is an odd emotional experience, but it has nevertheless been my life for some time.

I made the choice to be a loner amidst the crowd because I have never been very comfortable with goodbyes. When my first few friends left, I was stuck between feelings of joy for them being released and the sorrow of being all alone again. Losing so many of my friends in the beginning led to periods of depression. I started seeking out advice from the doctor and asking about antidepressant medication, something I had never done before.

The lack of stability in my life in here has taken a heavy toll on me. I have been on suicide watch twice now. Although my incarceration has taught me many valuable lessons, I hope I am strong enough to leave here without mental scars and only carry with me lessons, rather than negative habits. I have met hundreds of men who are not that lucky or strong and they keep running back to the things that block out or cover up their ugly mental scars. I see them come in and out of this jail time and time again.

As if all these barriers to building new relationships were not enough, we also struggle to maintain or deepen our relationships back in our communities. When I look back on my life at the time of being arrested, I had about a dozen personal relationships I would classify as close: three family members, one girlfriend and a handful of friends. Over the time of my incarceration, that number has plummeted to three people: my mom and dad, as well as one friend. This number has fluctuated over the years. At first, a few of my cousins, aunts, and uncles reached out and tried to bridge

the gap that being in jail creates. Armed with nothing but pencil and paper to communicate, those relationships quickly dissolved. Calling was not a viable option because the weekly call I make to my mom is 20 minutes long and costs \$25 a call, which is a heavy bill for her to carry (see Benslimane et al., 2020).

Today, I do not have the first clue how to start, build or maintain any type of relationship with anything other than a pencil and paper. I have tried; I have put myself out there often, trying to express my deepest feelings and emotions, my fears and anxieties, but these efforts all fell short. Family and friends forgot about me. My girlfriend moved on to a new relationship, leaving me hurt, confused and feeling rejected by everyone (see Lindquist, 2000). Those mental cuts have scarred me from even trying to reach out anymore because I do not want to open myself up to more mental anguish.

As difficult as all this has been, I am actually one of the fortunate ones. I know how to read and write, which not all prisoners do. I have a family that can afford a high monthly phone bill so we can stay in touch whereas many men in here do not have the financial means to stay in touch with family, let alone friends. I have watched countless times as men (myself included) set out determined to maintain their relationships with their girlfriend or partner, only to have it fall apart in a violent clash of emotions. I have watched as people slowly become more and more isolated as their circle of influence shifts from those they know “on the road” to those that they are incarcerated with. I have watched their moods alter and behaviours change. Fighting becomes their way of dealing with even small problems that arise.

As their relationships with those outside dwindle, I have seen these men become dependent on the social culture in the jail. When that happens, they are almost certainly doomed to reoffend after being released. Most come back with an attitude of “When I’m here, I’m somebody and out there, I’m nobody”. We lose our ability to create healthy relationships with people outside the prison walls. We never seem to “fit in” with those we interact with on the outside. Mostly our contacts are “people who work in the system” and we feel inferior to those people. As well-intentioned as the parole officers, disability workers and social workers are, they cannot offer the relationships we need. Most of the time, we are seen as just files to be worked on, so we are never able to develop deep relationships with these people. It is just another relationship that I do not quite understand.

In most scenarios, prisoners' relationships are broken, unhealthy and sometimes even abusive. Many men here do not really know what a healthy relationship is, even if they pass the "creating healthy relationships" course offered by the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General. All this floating about trying to develop, keep or strengthen relationships leaves lasting mental scars. To put it simply, we are hurting and we do not know how to fix it. The only way we have a chance on the outside is to tackle this problem head on. Most people do not have the courage or strength to do it alone. We do not need to be taught about healthy relationships, but we do need to be shown how to build them. For example, my ex-girlfriend and I could have been offered something like relationship counselling or maybe shown how to cultivate a deep relationship. We could have built a foundation that we could grow upon, instead of having our relationship just crumble into a mess of emotions. When my relationship ended, I needed to talk to someone. However, no one was there to listen me, leaving me confused and scared.

With the deck stacked against you, it is hard to win a hand with so many negatives and very few positives. It is next to impossible to keep our hopes up. Without hope for a better future, we are left with nothing. This ensures that the revolving door of the criminal justice system will continue going around in a vicious circle, trapping countless individuals with little hope of getting out. What we really need is just someone to lean on. We need someone to help us learn how to help ourselves to build healthy relationships so that we can have a foundation to continue to build upon release.

REFERENCES

- Clear, Todd (2009) *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clemmer, Donald (1958) *The Prison Community*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Irwin, John (2013) *The Jail: Managing the Underclass in American Society*, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Lindquist, Christine H. (2000) "Social Integration and Mental Well-Being among Jail Inmates", *Sociological Forum*, 15(3): 431-455.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Dufresne is a passionate learner and lover of life. He is also a hopeful scholar and student. He can be reached at the following address:

Adam Dufresne
Joyceville Institution (medium)
Highway 15
PO Box 880
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
K7L 4X9