

Road to Reentry Video Series

Making Healthy Choices

Instructor's Guide

Overview

Reentry is difficult enough, but for many individuals, staying mentally, physically, and emotionally healthy provides an added challenge. More than half of inmates in state prisons struggle with a mental health disorder,¹ and three quarters of inmates have a drug or alcohol abuse problem.² These issues are often not resolved during incarceration and follow individuals as they reenter society, providing additional obstacles to overcome.

This video focuses on how the formerly incarcerated can cope with the stress of reentry, particularly with regards to mental health and substance abuse. Once released, individuals are responsible for taking care of themselves. Staying mentally and physically healthy—as well as drug- and alcohol-free—is necessary to not only meet the requirements of parole, but to get a job and rebuild one's life. The video will introduce specific strategies for dealing with stress, finding health care, coping with mental health disorders, and staying sober.

Note that mental health and substance abuse are highly sensitive topics, usually requiring the intervention of healthcare specialists. Many participants may be reluctant to share their experience for fear of being stigmatized. It is important to create a safe environment where individuals can freely discuss the barriers they face so that they can learn the best methods to overcome them.

Presentation Suggestions

Ask participants to think about the typical obstacles and difficulties all individuals face upon reentry (the need for housing, the need for employment, and so on). Then ask them what *additional* barriers might apply to individuals with a mental health disorder or substance abuse problem. How does an addiction to drugs or alcohol, for example, impact one's ability to find and keep a steady job? What impact does a mental health disorder have on meeting the requirements for parole? And whose responsibility is it to keep these individuals healthy and sober? On the flip side, how does staying healthy—in mind, body, and spirit—help someone achieve his or her reentry goals?

When you feel participants have a sense of the importance of maintaining strong physical,

¹ “Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates,” Bureau of Justice Statistics. <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=789>, December 14, 2006 (Accessed 8/15/2016).

² “Online only: Report finds most U.S. inmates suffer from substance abuse or addiction,” The Nations Health. <http://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/40/3/E11.full>. April 2010 (Accessed 8/15/2016).

mental, and emotional well-being, give them the **Anticipation Quiz** to complete prior to watching the video. If you wish, allow the participants to state their answers and discuss them.

Show the video. Encourage participants to make changes to the answers they put down for the Anticipation Quiz while watching the video. If you wish, allow time for participants to do update their answers after each section.

At the conclusion of the video, ask participants to discuss any changes they made to the answers on the Anticipation Quiz as a result of information in the video. Follow up the discussion with the **Activities**.

Use the **Discussion Questions** to request oral or written responses from participants, or assign the questions as homework essays.

Give the **Quick Quiz** at the conclusion of class and correct the quizzes as a group.

Assign the **Homework Option**, if desired.

Anticipation Quiz

Directions: Answer the following questions as completely as possible. You may revise your answers as you watch the video.

1. True or false: Half of state and federal prisoners have a history of drug abuse or dependence.
2. What is required for maintaining a healthy lifestyle?
3. What additional barriers do individuals with mental health problems face?
4. What are some examples of healthy coping skills?

Answer Key

1. True
2. (Answers may vary.) Maintaining a healthy lifestyle requires eating right, getting exercise, seeking health care support, avoiding drugs and alcohol, developing strategies for coping with stress.
3. (Answers may vary.) Barriers include difficulty finding or keeping a support system, lack of a structured environment, employer hiring biases, decreased access to mental health care, and discrimination.
4. (Answers may vary.) Healthy coping skills include changing your negative surroundings, finding positive and sober people to support you, understanding the consequences of your actions, going for a workout, taking deep breaths, and staying positive

Activities

Activity #1

Title: Learning to Cope

Format: Individual/Large Group

Time: 15-20 minutes

Materials: Pen and paper

Procedure:

1. Reentry is an extremely stressful process. The challenges faced by the formerly incarcerated trying to rebuild their life can be numerous and daunting and lead to poor mental health and poor decision-making. That's why it is important for individuals to draw on as many coping strategies as possible for coping with that stress.

Using pen and paper, give participants one minute to jot down as many positive coping strategies as they can think of for dealing with stress (such as getting exercise or engaging in a relaxing hobby). Then give them one minute to jot down negative coping strategies (turning to drugs or alcohol).

2. Come back together as a whole group and make a collaborative list of positive and negative coping strategies. Feel free to expand on or deviate from the ones discussed in the video. Try to get a sense of what coping strategies work best in which situations. If possible, practice some of these strategies as a group (such as deep breathing).

Activity #2

Title: A Matter of Will

Format: Individual

Time: 20 minutes

Materials: Pen and paper

Procedure:

1. Individuals who attend support groups are often asked to repeat mantras or credos as a way of reinforcing the positive behaviors they would like to see in themselves (such as the Serenity Prayer in Alcoholics Anonymous). Using "I will" and "I will not" statements, have participants create their own positive, life-affirming credo to help them deal with the challenges of reentry, particularly with regard to staying clean, sober, and healthy. For example, they might write, "Each day, I will forgive myself

and those around me.” Or, “Each day, I will not turn to alcohol to deal with my problems.” This is a very personal activity and participants should not be forced to share if they don’t want to.

Discussion Questions

1. Statistics show that drug use/abuse and criminal activity are linked. In other words, people who use illegal drugs or abuse alcohol are more likely to engage in unlawful activity and risk being sent to prison. Likewise, individuals who continue to use drugs after release are much more likely to violate parole and return to prison. Why do the formerly incarcerated turn to drugs or alcohol, knowing the potentially disastrous consequences? What could they turn to instead?
2. Hopefully, most of the people you encounter upon release will want to see you succeed. You’ve served your time, after all. However, you are bound to encounter some individuals who cannot see past your criminal history. This bias is even more severe for individuals with a history of mental illness or drug abuse. What should you do when you encounter people who are biased against you? What can you do to change their opinion for the better? How far should you go to overcome their bias? What steps can you take if you feel like bias is keeping you from making a successful transition (in the hiring process, for example).

Quick Quiz

Note: You may read these questions out loud, allowing time for participants to respond, or copy and hand this out as a written exercise. If you read the quiz, write or project responses for the group to see.

Directions: Indicate whether each statement is true or false, according to the video.

1. The judicial system is responsible for providing you with continued health care upon your release from prison.
2. The majority of individuals convicted of a crime struggle with some form of substance abuse.
3. You can often qualify for free health insurance if you are unemployed.
4. Your physical and mental health will have a direct impact on your ability to get a job and transition successfully.
5. People with mental disorders have a greater chance of returning to prison if they don’t seek regular treatment.
6. Clinics and community organizations often provide free health services to the formerly incarcerated.

7. Individuals who don't seek help with a drug addiction problem after release are twice as likely to go back to prison.
8. Stress has little impact on your physical health.
9. It is illegal for employers to discriminate against individuals with a mental health disorder or disability.
10. Failing a drug test is not usually a violation of parole.

Answer Key

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| 1. False | 6. True |
| 2. True | 7. True |
| 3. True | 8. False |
| 4. True | 9. True |
| 5. True | 10. False |

Homework Option

Studies have shown that exercise is an effective way to reduce stress. It is also essential to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. While exercise of any kind can be beneficial, many people find it easier and more fun to exercise in a group or as part of a class. Many exercise classes—from yoga to Zumba to kickboxing—offer a free trial class to anyone who is interested. For homework, have participants identify one exercise class or program they think they would be interested in and call to see if they can attend a free class (contact your local YMCA or look online for available programs). You can have participants report back on their findings during your next meeting.