

Mapping Your Future:

A GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL REENTRY

2022 Edition



A PUBLICATION OF THE
EDUCATION JUSTICE PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS



Welcome Home!



.....

We're glad you picked up *Mapping Your Future: A Guide for Successful Reentry*. Whether you spent many years in prison or just a few, it can help you start your life on the outside. This guide gives you information about employment, housing, education, healthcare, and more. If you are the family member, friend, or service provider for someone who is coming home, this book can help you, too. We hope you will find resources in this book that will help you.

There Are Five Main Sections in *Mapping Your Future*:

- **Before You Leave** gives advice about getting ready for release.
 - **Once You're Out** helps you set up your life once you're out.
 - **Healing and Moving Forward** is about getting used to life after prison.
 - **Our Reentry Directory** contains contact information for useful resources.
 - **Our Forms** section includes helpful forms, and some you can tear out and use.
-

Getting used to life on the outside is hard. In prison you were separated from your loved ones, and it was expensive to stay connected. Prison life changes you. You may face a lot of challenges because of your criminal record. You may have trouble finding a job. People might treat you differently. Your parole may feel unfair. Sometimes you might feel like there are too many challenges in your path! How can you succeed?

Mapping Your Future will help you meet the challenges. Maybe it will even make you want to work for change. We believe in YOU and your ability to make a difference in the world. Don't stop believing in yourself.

In this book, you'll find helpful words from people like you who went through reentry. Many of them are graduates of the Education Justice Project, a college-in-prison program at Danville Correctional Center. It was their idea to write *Mapping Your Future*. They, and so many others, have successfully reentered the outside world. You can, too.

If you can, try to read the entire guide. You can also skip around to the parts that are most important to you. If you are reading this guide in prison, we hope you'll take it home with you. If you need a copy of your own, you can ask for one by writing to the address on the next page.

Please keep in touch. We'd love to know how you're doing and how we can make *Mapping Your Future*

better. Your comments can help those who follow in your footsteps. Again, welcome home. We're glad you're back.

In solidarity, The Education Justice Project.

About *Mapping Your Future*

Mapping Your Future was made by members of the Education Justice Project (EJP). EJP is part of the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Since 2008, EJP has taught college courses to people incarcerated at Danville Correctional Center in Central Illinois.

We created *Mapping Your Future* because we care about people like you who are being released from prison. The guide is made by a group of committed EJP members called the Reentry Guide Initiative.

This guide is also available in Spanish. To request a copy, write to the address on the next page and ask for *Construyendo tu futuro: Una guía para la reintegración exitosa*.

Copyright by the Board of Trustees, University of Illinois, 2022
The world is changing all the time. That means we can't be sure everything in this guide is right. We've tried to use the best, most up-to-date information from trusted sources.

Table of Contents

.....

1. BEFORE YOU LEAVE

- Preparing Mentally for Release 8
- Gather Your Documents 11
- Prepare for Your Job Search 14
- Finding Housing 16
- Health Before Release 17
- Preparing for Reunification 20
- Parole 24
 - *Preparing For Mandatory Supervised Release*
 - *Parole After Release*
 - *Electronic Monitoring*
 - *BI SmartLINK*
 - *Parole Rules & Violations*
 - *Registries*
 - *Transferring Registries*

2. AFTER YOU GET OUT

- Getting Your ID 30
 - *State ID or Driver’s License*
 - *Chicago CitiKey Card*
 - *Selective Service*
- Resources to Meet Your Basic Needs 34
 - *Apply for Benefits*
 - *Social Security Programs*
 - *Places to Go for Help*
- Housing After Release 37
 - *Transitional Housing*
 - *Emergency Shelters*
 - *Subsidized and Public Housing*
 - *Private Housing*
 - *Renting an Apartment*
 - *Help With Rent*
 - *Your Lega Rights*
 - *Housing for People on the Sex Offender Registry*
- Employment 43
 - *Employment Resources*
 - *Make a Plan*
 - *Popular Jobs*
 - *Self Employment*
 - *Women and Employment*
 - *Look Ffr Jobs*
 - *Advice From an Employer*
 - *Your Legal Rights*
 - *Conflicts & Safety*
 - *Unemployment Benefits*
- Education 60
 - *ABE and GED Programs*
 - *Vocational Training & Apprenticeships*
 - *College*
 - *Paying for Your Education*

Health.....	64
– <i>Staying Healthy During COVID-19</i>	
– <i>Health Insurance</i>	
– <i>Dental and Vision Care</i>	
– <i>Doctor Visits</i>	
– <i>Pharmacy</i>	
– <i>HIV and Other Disease</i>	
Trauma and Mental Health	70
– <i>Recovering From Trauma</i>	
– <i>Caring for Your Mental Health</i>	
– <i>Seeking Treatment</i>	
– <i>Types of Treatment</i>	
– <i>Attitudes About Mental Health</i>	
– <i>Common Mental Health Disorders</i>	
Substance Use Disorder.....	78
– <i>Where to Get Help</i>	
– <i>Safer Drug Use</i>	
– <i>Treatment Programs</i>	
– <i>Peer Support Groups</i>	
– <i>The Road to Recovery</i>	
– <i>New Cannabis Laws</i>	
Transportation.....	85
– <i>Transportation Options</i>	
– <i>Buying a Car</i>	
– <i>Driving Legally</i>	
Technology	88
– <i>Getting a Phone</i>	
– <i>Technology Basics</i>	
– <i>Using the Internet</i>	
– <i>Email, Passwords, & Security</i>	
– <i>Smartphone Apps</i>	
– <i>Social Media</i>	
– <i>Video Conferencing</i>	
Legal Matters	93
– <i>Getting Legal Help</i>	
– <i>Child Custody</i>	
– <i>Child Support</i>	
– <i>Fees & Fines</i>	
– <i>Sealing Records</i>	
– <i>Certificates of Rehabilitation</i>	
– <i>Executive Clemency</i>	
Finances, Credit, and Taxes.....	98
– <i>Banking</i>	
– <i>Using Cards For Purchases</i>	
– <i>Financial Resources</i>	
– <i>Avoiding Scams</i>	
– <i>Credit</i>	
– <i>Taxes</i>	
Voting.....	104
Veterans.....	106

3. HEALING AND MOVING FORWARD

Beginning to Heal	109
Building Healthy Relationships	111
– <i>Sharing</i>	
– <i>Asking For Help and Setting Boundaries</i>	
– <i>Parenting After Releases</i>	
– <i>Dealing With Difficult Emotions</i>	
– <i>Institutionalization</i>	
– <i>Domestic Violence</i>	
Mindfulness.....	120
– <i>What is Mindfulness?</i>	
– <i>How Do I Meditate?</i>	
– <i>Meditation Scripts</i>	
– <i>Meditation Resources</i>	
Connecting With Your Community	126
– <i>Community Organizing and Advocacy</i>	
– <i>Getting Involved in Your Community</i>	
– <i>Your Community</i>	

4. RESOURCE DIRECTORIES

ID Resources.....	129
1. Housing Resources.....	131
2. Getting Your ID Resources.....	141
3. Parole, Reentry and Advocacy Resources.....	147
4. Health Resources.....	154
5. Resources to Meet Basic Need.....	157
6. Employment Resources.....	159
7. Legal Resources.....	160
8. Family and Children Resources.....	165

FORMS

Application for Illinois Birth Record.....	170
Birth Certificate Request Forms.....	172
Social Security Card Form.....	174
Sample Resumes.....	179
Veteran’s Beneficiary Apportionment Form.....	182

Gather Your Documents



You will need your **birth certificate, Social Security card, and ID** on the outside.

As your release date gets closer, you should start the process of getting them. It is harder to get them on the outside. Try to begin this process at least **one year** before you are released.

Field services (part of clinical services) can help you get your documents. You will need to reach out to them and ask.



“Work with clinical services as much as possible. As early as possible. Find out what programs, classes, or resources are available to prepare for release. Sometimes that stuff is hidden. Make inquiries into what necessary steps you must take to secure documents that would assist you with housing, identification, mental health services, as well as food and clothes shelters in your area.”

—Kilroy

“Take responsibility and look for as much information as you can. Go talk to the law clerks, everybody that you can to get information.”

—Anonymous



STEP 1 Verification of Incarceration and Other

To get started, ask clinical services for a verification of incarceration. You’ll need this to get your other documents. It’s also a good idea to gather any transcripts or certificates from classes you’ve taken in prison. You can use those documents to get your birth certificate, Social Security card and ID.



STEP 2 Birth Certificate

Next, you will need a certified copy of your birth certificate. This means a birth certificate that has a state seal and is signed and dated by the county registrar.

You can request a birth certificate at any time.

You will need to mail in a form to get your birth certificate. See **our Forms section** for Cook County and Illinois Birth Certificate Request forms (for anyone born in Illinois). You can also ask clinical services, your prison library or counselor for a form. Fill out the form and mail it to the address on the form. You will need:

- Your verification of incarceration.
- Another document that shows your name and current address, such as a GED certificate, a transcript from prison education programs, or medical records.
- \$15 fee.

When you get your birth certificate, put it in your master file to keep it safe.

If you cannot get your birth certificate before you get out, you can request it at a county clerk’s office after you are released. If you were born in Illinois, you can find the nearest county clerk’s office in the directory. Call them before you visit to get instructions.

☆ OUTSIDE ILLINOIS

If you were born in another state, ask a friend or family member to help you get a birth certificate from that state.



STEP 3 Social Security Card

All US citizens and permanent residents have a Social Security number (SSN). This number is used by the government to keep track of your taxes and Social Security benefits. You will need your Social Security card when you get a job or open a bank account. If you have lost your card, you can apply for a new one. There is no fee for requesting your Social Security card.

To get your Social Security card while you are in prison use the form at the back of this guide to request a card by mail. You can also request a form from field services, your prison library or your counselor. To get a social security card you will need:

- Your birth certificate.
- Your verification of incarceration.
- A second document with your name and current address, such as HIV test results, a GED certificate, a transcript from prison education programs, or medical records.



“I needed a second form of identification to get my social security card. If you are in this sort of dilemma you can retrieve a copy of your medical record as a second ID. If you do not have your medical record you can go to a free clinic, take an H.I.V. test and request a copy of the record; you can use this document along with your birth certificate to get your Social Security card.”

— Antonio



Make sure your Social Security card stays in your master file until you are released. Be aware that sharing it with another person could put you at risk for fraud.



STEP 4 State ID

At some Illinois prisons a Mobile Secretary of State Unit can help you get a state ID or driver’s license before you leave. Ask clinical services if this is an option for you. More information about getting your State ID or driver’s license after release can be found in our Getting your ID chapter. To get a state ID you will need:

- Your birth certificate.
- Your Social Security card.
- Your verification of incarceration or other document that shows your name and current address.
- \$20 fee (you won’t have to pay this if you are in prison or if you get your ID within 30 days of your release).

If you can’t get your ID before you leave, ask for an **Identification Card Verification Form** issued by IDOC. You can use this form to get a State ID. You can

also ask for a **90-day temporary ID card** from field services. You will need to go to a Secretary of State facility during that 90-day period to get a State ID. The temporary ID card doesn’t count as a real ID most of the time, but it can help you get your State ID.

If you are under an alias: If you are locked up under an alias, it is really important that you start gathering your documents early. First, write to the county where you are convicted or the state’s attorney office. Ask them to change the charging document to reflect your real name. The court probably will not change all of the court documents to fix this problem. You may need to talk to a lawyer to see if there are any legal steps you can take.

Item	Taken care of	Need to tackle	Not applicable
Social Security Card			
Birth Certificate			
Temporary ID			
State ID or Driver’s License			
Marriage License			
Divorce Decree			
Passport or Green Card			
Military Discharge			

Trauma and Mental Health



Just about everyone who has been to prison has experienced trauma. Trauma is a mental health issue that many people face.

What is trauma?

Trauma is the emotional response you have during a stressful and possibly life-changing event. It can also be the result of toxic stress that builds up over time. Trauma is more common than people think, and its effects can be very serious. Traumatic events that you had as a child can have effects throughout your life.



"Trauma is something that all of us go through. You have to get to the point that you realize that what you've been going through is trauma. Nothing you went through is normal. It's not normal to be secluded. Even before prison, we were on the streets, experiencing trauma and violence to the point that it became a natural thing. We became desensitized to those things. We didn't think, 'Oh wow, this is abnormal.'"

—Anonymous

"The residue of prison stays with you. Keys rattling means it's a guard coming. You wake up with a heightened sense of alertness. You are late and you worry you have missed your chance. You can't calm down. You have a pattern of sleeplessness. You are easily annoyed. Tense situations escalate into violence."

—Kilroy

Trauma can come from lots of things, such as:

- Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Witnessing violence
- Having a loved one with substance use or mental health issues
- Parent separation or divorce
- Poverty
- Being incarcerated or having a family member who is incarcerated
- Living in unsafe neighborhoods

People in prison, especially women, are more likely to have experienced trauma. There are strong connections between trauma, poor mental health, and incarceration.

Where to get help. If you have experienced trauma, you may benefit from treatment or counseling. Counselors can help you understand the effects of trauma on your well-being, your emotions, and your behaviors.

Trauma-focused treatments provide you with skills to better understand what happened to you. You can learn to cope with the emotions and memories connected to these scary experiences. The goal is to help you reach a healthier new meaning of what took place in your life.

Here are a few places you can go for help:

- Go to this directory to find a mental health provider: <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=43695>. When calling to set up an appointment, ask if they provide trauma-focused treatment.
- Your primary care provider may be able to connect you to a mental health consultant located in your clinic, so ask if one is available.
- Many reentry programs provide trauma-informed care. Ask what services they provide.

Bouncing Back

When you face trauma or stress and overcome it, you can strengthen your ability to bounce back from hard things. Being able to bounce back instead of getting stuck is called resilience.

Being resilient does not mean that stress is not hard for you. It means you have taught yourself to better cope with hard things. Resilience can be learned. It is not a trait that only some people have. It is something that everyone has the ability to strengthen, like when you build muscle. It takes time and work but it can be done. There is hope!

If you feel stuck or are not making progress, seek help from a mental health professional. Seeking help is an important part of building resilience.

According to the American Psychological Association, there are four main areas of resilience. Work to improve your resilience in these four areas.

1. Build connections

Connect with people you trust and who understand you. Remind yourself that you are not alone. If you have experienced trauma, it is common to want to isolate yourself. Fight that urge. Find a group to join and get active in the community.

2. Foster wellness

Take care of your body. Your body needs good food, sleep, water, and exercise to fight off stress. When you take care of your body, you will feel better. There is a big connection between your physical and mental health.

Practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is being in the present moment without judgment. It can be practiced in many different ways. See our mindfulness chapter. To learn more about mindfulness.

Avoid negative outlets. When things are stressful it is tempting to want to turn to drugs, alcohol, or other negative ways of coping. This is like putting a bandaid on a large wound. Instead, try to focus on healthy things you can give your body to help you cope.



“In prison I had ways to cope with trauma. I would exercise, draw. This allowed me to escape that mental state for a little while.”

— Anonymous

“Having a support group provides you with a reminder that there are other ways to cope.”

— Kilroy

3. Find purpose

Help others. Find meaning and purpose by helping others. Get involved with a community organization or help a friend who is struggling.

Be proactive. Ask yourself, “What can I do about this problem?” Set achievable goals and break them down into smaller steps. Start working on these steps.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. Self-awareness can help you grow. Think about how you have grown as a result of a struggle, like being locked up. How have you become a better person? You may find that it helps you increase self-worth and appreciate your path in life.

4. Embrace healthy thoughts

Keep things in perspective. You do not always have control of events in your life. But you do have control of how you make sense of things and respond to them. How you think about your situation impacts how you feel, so move those negative thoughts aside.

Accept change. Being able to accept change is a part of life. There may be some things that get in the way of your goals. It is ok to accept some things. Focus instead on the things that are in your power to change and control.

Maintain a hopeful outlook. It is not realistic to be positive all the time. Allow yourself to feel upset for a little bit, but then focus on what gives you hope. What do you want and how can you make that happen?

Learn from your past. Look back at what has helped you in the past during hard times. Remind yourself of what has helped you find strength before. What have you learned about yourself from your past experiences?



“Advice for socializing outside? Learning coping skills and anger management. Being less abrasive and open-minded.”

—Earl W., EJP Alumnus



Reflect

1. What has helped you “bounce back” from hard things in the past?
2. What are some things you would like to try to strengthen your resilience muscles?



Caring for Your Mental Health

Know that if you are struggling with mental health problems, you are not alone. Most people who are incarcerated have a mental health disorder or have had one in the past. Being in prison can trigger mental health problems or make them worse. Your time in prison may cause trauma that affects your mental health long after you leave.

If you have mental health issues, seek treatment as soon as you are released. Reentry is hard. Mental health problems can make reentry much harder. Sadly, people who do not get treatment are more likely to return to prison.

There are mental health professionals who can help you. They can provide talk therapy and medication, if needed. They can help you learn to better handle stress and life problems.

You matter! Make your mental health a priority. When you do, you will experience deep personal growth and be able to better help others. You can learn to become stronger so that you can bounce back from hard things.

This section covers the following topics:

- Seeking treatment
- Types of treatment
- Attitudes about mental health
- Common mental health disorders

Seeking Treatment

Everyone can benefit from mental health support during reentry. Reentry is stressful. Even if you do not have a mental health disorder, you may benefit from talking to someone to help you adjust.

It is a good idea to schedule an appointment with a mental health provider before your release.

Many community mental health centers have long waiting lists, so set up an appointment ahead of time. This will help you have the support you need when things are tough.

There are several different options for care, depending on what your needs are.

Crisis Care

Are you in a crisis? Are you worried about hurting yourself or others? Do you have suicidal thoughts? Are you seeing and hearing things that aren't there? Are your symptoms so bad that you are having trouble functioning? Get help right away.

If you are in crisis, you may need an emergency evaluation to see if you need to be hospitalized. The types of treatments you get during a crisis are very brief. They are meant to keep you safe and get you stable. You'll get connected to on-going treatment for when you leave the hospital. Be sure to follow up with a mental health professional in your community after a crisis.

Here are a few places you can turn to:

- **National Suicide Helpline:** Call (800) 273-TALK (8255); En español (888) 628-9454 National Suicide Prevention Lifeline <http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> available 24/7
- **National Online Chat:** <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/> Lifeline Chat open 24/7
- **Crisis Text Line:** Text "HELLO" to 741741, available 24/7
- **Illinois Crisis Respite Directory:** <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=126349>
- **Crisis/emergency mental health partners/providers Illinois directory:** <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=30893>

- **Illinois Crisis and Referral Entry Service (CARES) line:** Call (800) 345-9049 (some restrictions apply for adults)
- **Call 911 and ask for a C.I.T. (Crisis Intervention Trained) officer** if you or someone you know is in immediate danger or go to the nearest emergency room.

Non-Crisis Care

If you need help, but it's not an emergency, find a community provider for treatment. When you call, ask for a mental health assessment or intake with a therapist or counselor (for talk therapy) or psychiatrist (for medication).

These resources will help you find a community provider near you:

- **Director of mental health care providers in Illinois:** <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=43695>
- **Your primary care provider** may be able to connect you to a mental health consultant located in your clinic so ask if one is available
- **Treatment Referral Helpline:** Call (800) 662-HELP (4357) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- **Illinois Warm Line:** Call (866) 359-7953 for mental health and substance use support by phone Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm
- **Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator:** <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

Who Provides Services?

There are different mental health professionals who can make a diagnosis and provide treatment.

- **Counselors, Social Workers, and Family Therapists** offer assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of mental health problems through talk therapy or counseling.
- **Clinical Psychologists** diagnose and treat mental health problems through talk therapy. They also can also offer testing of behaviors, emotions, and thoughts. This testing can be helpful for making a diagnosis.

- **Psychiatrists** also assess, diagnose, and treat mental health problems, but they take a medical approach and can prescribe medications.

Most mental health professionals have different specialties. If you are able, find someone who has training and experience working with the problems you face.



Types of Treatment

Mental health professionals offer many types of treatment. Often, it's helpful to combine different types of treatment, like therapy and medication.

The most important part of treatment is not the type of treatment you choose but the relationship you have with your mental health provider. Make sure that you feel safe and connected to your provider so that you can benefit from treatment.

Individual therapy or counseling. Talk therapy involves working one-on-one with a mental health professional. Therapy can help you heal, grow, and move toward a more productive and healthy life. A therapist will help you learn to live your best life with a mental health disorder. Sometimes you will be able to overcome your mental health disorder.

Group therapy or counseling. This is similar to individual treatment, but you will do therapy with other people. These are not self-help groups. A mental health professional will lead the group. You will likely attend weekly sessions. The power of group treatment comes from the group members. It can be really helpful to have a support network of others who have similar challenges. Many groups target a specific problem, but some may be more general.

Family therapy or counseling. The goal of family therapy is to improve relationships and resolve conflicts. It can include your romantic partner, children, and other family members. It is often used with other types of treatments.



"I benefited a lot from [my support group]. Everybody in those meetings had a similar experience. We are at a place now where we can reflect on some of the things we went through. Maturity comes with age. They have been part of my unofficial therapy."

— Anonymous

"Many conflicts arise because your family has no idea what you've gone through in prison. Or they don't understand your diagnosis. Families need a guide for what it's like for those of us who have been through prison, who have experienced trauma."

— Kilroy

Medication. Just as medication can treat heart disease and diabetes, medication can treat mental health problems. Medications are not always needed, but most people with severe mental health problems benefit from medication.

Some mental health disorders require medication because they are so serious. Bipolar disorder and schizophrenia symptoms cannot be managed without the help of medication. If you have these disorders, make sure you take your medication every day. Don't skip doses. If you have severe anxiety or depression, you will also likely benefit from medication. Taking medication can help relieve symptoms so that you feel better. Combined with talk therapy, medication can help you lead a healthy and productive life.

Medications are prescribed by a psychiatrist after an evaluation. The evaluation will last between 30 and 60 minutes. After that, appointments will be brief (about 15 minutes). Your psychiatrist will monitor your medications and side effects. It takes time for your body to adjust to medications. It also takes time for your provider to find what works best for you. Many medications have side effects, especially when you first take them.

☆ **Warning:** Don't quit taking medication once you start feeling better. Feeling good may be a sign that the medication is working, not that you don't need it anymore! Always consult with a psychiatric practitioner before stopping your medications. Stopping medications all at once can be very dangerous. Your psychiatrist can help you decide if it's ok to stop. They can help you stop gradually and safely.

Paying for Treatment. Medicaid will cover mental health treatment. If you need to apply for Medicaid, the Health chapter tells you how you can apply for Medicaid. Not all mental health treatment programs accept Medicaid. Make sure to ask if the program accepts Medicaid when you call to make your first appointment. Some programs will also offer services on a "sliding fee scale" so you can pay what you can afford if you do not have insurance. Keep in mind that most programs that do accept Medicaid may have long waiting lists, so plan ahead. If possible, make your appointments before your release.

If you are enrolling in private insurance, make sure to select a plan that includes mental health treatment. When you make an appointment, ask if they accept your insurance. You may be able to see a mental health professional in private practice. This may decrease your waiting time for an appointment.

Attitudes about Mental Health

Some people feel embarrassed or ashamed of having a mental health disorder. These attitudes may have come from your family, your community, or from the media. These attitudes can make it hard for you to get better.



"In prison, people tend to mock those who go through a mental health episode. Everyone knows who's taking pills. You condition yourself to not talk. You don't want to express your feelings or admit something is wrong."

—Kilroy

Everyone has a role to fight against these negative attitudes! The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) offers some suggestions about what you can do to help:

- Compare physical and mental illness. Lots of people have mental health disorders, just as lots of people have physical health disorders like diabetes and heart disease. Getting treatment is a positive thing.
- Talk openly about mental health. Share your experience with people you trust.
- Educate yourself and others. Respond to negative comments by sharing facts and experiences.
- Be conscious of language. Remind people that words matter. Try to avoid words like crazy, or maddening that are all too common in our daily language.
- Show compassion for those with mental health problems, including yourself.
- Be honest about treatment. Getting mental health treatment is normal, just like other health care treatment.
- Choose empowerment over shame.



"When I first met with the group, guys would just sit there. They wouldn't open up. So I opened myself up. I'd tell them, this is what's been bothering me. Break the ice. Then someone else would talk about their experience."

—Kilroy

"It's all right to show your emotions. It's a natural thing to vent, to cry."

—Anonymous

Common Mental Health Disorders

Several mental health disorders are common in people who spend time in prison. We describe them here so that you can know what they are and when you may need to get help. If you think you might have one of these health disorders, talk to a health professional who can evaluate you and provide a diagnosis.



Reflect

1. What negative attitudes do you have about mental health disorders and treatment?
2. Where do these negative attitudes come from?

Major depressive disorder. Everyone feels sad once in a while, but not everyone feels depressed. Symptoms include:

- Feeling sad or uninterested in things most of the time.
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits.
- Feeling low energy and having a hard time focusing.
- Feeling tearful, empty, hopeless, or angry and irritable.
- Feeling pretty miserable but not understanding why.
- Some people have chronic pain or digestive issues.

Do these symptoms last for at least two weeks? Do they get in the way of your everyday life? You may be depressed. Talk therapy or medicine can help.

If you are severely depressed, you may also have thoughts of wanting to hurt yourself or die (this is a big concern for women who are recently released). Severe depression may also cause you to hear or see things that are not there. If you have these severe symptoms, go to the nearest emergency room right away or call the suicide hotline: (800) 273-TALK (8255)

Bipolar disorder. Most people have changes in mood at times. If you're stressed, you might feel angry or scared. If you lost someone you love, you might feel sad. Hormone changes can also affect moods.

If you have intense mood swings that last for several days, you may have bipolar disorder. People with bipolar disorder have extreme shifts in mood, energy, and ability to function. These mood shifts include episodes of depression (above) and mania. Signs of mania are:

1. Increased self-esteem and feeling like you are on top of the world.
2. Less need for sleep.
3. Talking a lot and often fast.
4. Having so many thoughts that you cannot keep up with them.
5. Being distracted easily.
6. Feeling restless. You might pace the room or bounce your leg.
7. Doing things that are risky and can cause harm: spending a

lot of money, having unprotected sex with various partners, and using drugs or alcohol.

For some people, manic and depressive episodes can be very extreme. Symptoms can include seeing and hearing things that are not there. This can really impact your ability to function. If your symptoms are severe, get help right away. Less severe episodes of mania (known as hypomania) and depression may not impact your life as much.

Managing bipolar disorder requires help from medicine and talk therapy. Keep a record of your mood changes so that you know if you need to seek help.

Generalized anxiety disorder. Feeling anxious or stressed once in a while is a normal part of life. If your anxiety feels out of control, you might have an anxiety disorder. Generalized anxiety disorder is when you worry a lot and are nervous about everyday things, even things that you have no control over, for no apparent reason. You might feel like something really bad is going to happen. Anxiety leaves you feeling restless, tired, irritable, and tense. It can impact your ability to focus and sleep.

If these problems do not go away and begin to impact your relationships and responsibilities, get help. Talk therapy can help. Medication can help when symptoms are severe.

- Problems with thinking. (having a hard time organizing your thoughts, forgetting things, not being able to focus, struggling to make decisions).
- Delusions (false beliefs that are not based in reality).
- Hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren't really there).
- Disorganized speech (not being able to put words or sentences together).
- Lacking skills that people usually have (the ability to express emotion, be part of activities, and engage with others)

These symptoms can have a big impact on your life. If these symptoms are present for at least a month, get help.

Schizophrenia. Some people can have a distorted sense of reality. This is known as schizophrenia. It is a severe mental health condition that requires medication to manage. Talk therapy can help you build life skills to cope. Schizophrenia involves a range of problems with thinking, behavior, and emotions. Signs of schizophrenia can vary, but it usually involves:

- Problems with thinking. (having a hard time organizing your thoughts, forgetting things, not being able to focus, struggling to make decisions).
- Delusions (false beliefs that are not based in reality).
- Hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren't really there).
- Disorganized speech (not being able to put words or sentences together).
- Lacking skills that people usually have (the ability to express emotion, be part of activities, and engage with others)

These symptoms can have a big impact on your life. If these symptoms are present for at least a month, get help.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some traumatic events are so shocking, scary, or dangerous that they can change the way we think and feel long after the event has passed. It's natural to feel scared, nervous, or depressed after something bad has happened. If these feelings last for over a month, you may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Common symptoms of PTSD include:

- Having nightmares or flashbacks.
- Avoiding people or situations that remind you of the event.
- Feeling on edge and anxious a lot.
- Feeling depressed.
- Trouble remembering things.
- Feeling emotionally detached.

Medications and talk therapy can be useful in working through these symptoms.

- **Personality disorders.** Your personality is who you are: the thoughts, patterns, feelings, and behaviors that define you. Sometimes people can develop personality disorders—patterns and traits that are harmful to themselves and others. For people in prison, the two most common personality disorders are:
 - **Borderline personality disorder:** Having unstable moods, behavior, and relationships. Feeling emotionally unstable, worthless, insecure, or impulsive. These feelings or behaviors can hurt your relationships with others.
 - **Antisocial personality disorder:** Acting in ways that show a lack of care about other people. For example, lying, breaking laws, or acting impulsively. Not caring about their own safety or the safety of others.

Since personality traits are pretty stable over our lifetime, these disorders can be hard to treat. Despite that, it is not impossible. Often treatment includes long-term therapy. Medications tend to not work as well for these disorders.

Multiple disorders: Mental health, substance use, and personality disorders

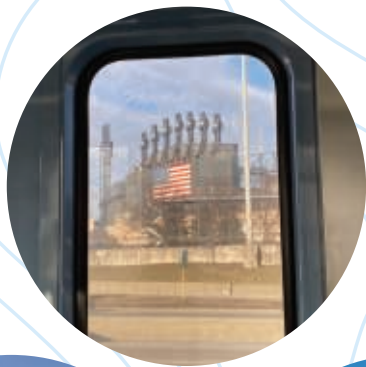
Many people who are in prison have more than one mental health disorder. People who have depression are more likely to have anxiety, too. Many people who have a mental health disorder also have a substance use problem. Some people have a mental health disorder, a personality disorder, and a substance use disorder.

If you have more than one of these disorders, let your providers know about everything you are struggling with. If you address one problem and not the other, you may find it difficult to fully recover.



“What I felt was most difficult when I first got out is figuring out how to relate to other people. You have both the lack of ‘normal’ experiences that most people have as late-teenagers and young adults. Plus you have the negative effects of long-term imprisonment.”

— Greg A.



A PUBLICATION OF THE
EDUCATION JUSTICE PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS