

The first days inside

Ten things that matter most for someone going to prison for the first time

1 Mind your own business

Don't ask why others are locked up. Don't over-share your own case. Curiosity gets people hurt.

2 Pay your debts, don't make ones you can't cover

Never borrow commissary, food, or favors without knowing exactly how repayment works. Debt is a leading cause of violence.

3 Don't touch anyone else's property

Not their food, their bunk space, or their radio. Boundaries around belongings are taken very seriously inside.

4 Show respect, expect it back

A calm, respectful tone with staff and other incarcerated people goes a long way. Disrespect can escalate fast.

5 Avoid gambling, drugs, and side hustles

Staying out of the underground economy is one of the best predictors of a peaceful sentence.

6 Be a watcher, first and foremost

As a new person, your opinion is rarely welcome yet. Be patient until people get to know you, even when you've done nothing wrong. Prison isn't by design a "fair" place.

7 Never take sides in others' conflicts

Staying neutral in disputes between others is a survival skill. Getting pulled in rarely ends well.

8 Keep your word

Follow through, even on small things. Reliability builds trust and protects reputation.

9 Prison isn't fair, or even logical

Know that, and behave accordingly. Rules are often inconsistently enforced. Compliance still protects against write-ups and loss of privileges, and matters when they need something later.

10 Stay connected to people who care about you

Letters, calls, and visits matter when possible and helpful. Outside relationships help for now, but the deeper goal is to move toward doing what's right because it's the right thing to do, not just for outside reasons.

A note for parents and family

Your steadiness matters too. Regular contact, without panic or pressure, helps them regulate and gives them something solid to hold onto. Let them ask for what they need, and give them room to build resilience. Don't hover, and don't call the prison to complain about anything — talk to us first. And remember: there are no "shoulds" in the world of prisons.