

Getting Back to You

Part of independent living is dealing with yourself.

By Xavier

I remember when it was almost my turn to leave the system I had come to know and love. I was excited, grateful and joyful. Ah, to be free of the social workers who hounded me, the staff who controlled me, and the peers who annoyed me! What more could I ask for?

The thing I knew I'd miss (and I do), is the free food and rent. So, a few months before I aged out, I did my best to make sure that I would be ready to provide for myself. I had an apartment ready and a job to pay for it. But while I had taken care of everything on the outside, things were different on the inside of me.

Mostly, I started to realize I had become dependent on the very system I was sick of. I wasn't just financially dependent on the foster care system, I was also emotionally dependent. Yes! Emotionally! In the system, any time I had a problem, I could count on my social worker or staff or other residents to talk to about it. Who would I talk to when I was on my own? I knew that if I was going to make it, I needed to learn how to help myself and check in with me instead of me checking in with someone else—not just for the practical stuff, but for the emotional things, too. I needed to set my own goals and deal with my own issues.

Get to Know Yourself

Some people never learn how to deal with themselves and the difficult parts of their lives, and that can hurt them later on. I know a few people who used to live in foster care who never learned to hold down a job, partly because they let their personal problems interfere with their work. Now they rely on welfare. I also know people who have so much anger that they can't form healthy relationships. All the time they were in the system, they were angry at other people for holding them back. But now the main thing holding them back is their own anger.

One important lesson I learned is that part of learning to live independently is being able to put some closure on that experience called foster care. It's over now, and I have to put it behind me. People who don't do that use the system as an excuse. You'll hear them say, "The system made me this way," or, "If I had lived at home, things would be different today."

But how do you put closure on such a big and difficult experience in your life, such as being in foster care? For me, I had to allow myself to reflect on all that I'd been through and feel the emotions of it all.

I had to let go of the anger, the pain, and the blame as much as I could. As I did that, it was easier to move on and look for things that I'd learned from the experience. And it's easier to avoid making the same mistakes or getting into the same difficult situations. In order to do that, you may need to take time to focus on yourself.

Thoughts of My Past

Before I left the system, I spent a lot of time alone in the Supervised Independent Living Program. I lived in an apartment by myself for a few months. I used this time alone to work on some of my problems and to set goals for myself.

My apartment was located by Riverside Park in New York City. Several times during the week, I would wake up really early and go walking along the river. When I first started walking, I really didn't think about much. I was too caught up in the views—watching the sunrise over the city. But eventually, thoughts of my past just flowed through me. I was able to step back and review what had happened in my life.

Some of what I remembered was painful. I remembered being abused when I was younger and I remembered the day I knew that my drug use had become excessive. I recalled how I felt at those moments, and accepted responsibility for my part in all that had happened.

Eventually I started thinking about the future. I thought about the goals I wanted to achieve. I wanted, one day, to move to Florida, and buy a home. I knew that to get that I needed an education and a well-paying job, so I decided to go back to school. When I aged out, I was going to be crossing a major bridge in my life and I wanted to be ready for it.

It Pays Off Tenfold

After my walks, I'd feel full of energy, like I was ready to take on anything. I'd feel relieved and rejuvenated, like a football team after a power session with the coach.

I still remember those walks. Taking that time out to face my emotions and figure out my goals has paid off. I have a sense of direction in my life, and I've been following many of the plans that I first made while walking along Riverside Park.

I now work as the director of administration for a community foundation. I went back to school and completed two semesters of college. I still want to move to Florida and buy a house, and I want to adopt a kid when I get older.

Leaving care wasn't easy for me. But taking the last year to get to know myself and figure out what I wanted from life helped to make it smoother.

Facing the Future Strong

So I urge everyone who is getting close to aging out to get a job, save money, and learn to cook...but also don't forget to take time out for yourself, too. Take time to plan your future and think about your dreams. Take time to reflect on the things you have experienced and how they have affected you. It can be scary, but don't let that stop you.

Do a self-assessment of your needs: What have you learned from your experience in foster care? How have you grown? What areas in your life do you need to work on? What are your goals and how are you going to achieve them?

It's so easy for us to lose our sense of self after spending time in a system where we have to deal with so many different personalities on a daily basis. In care, we can spend most of our time reacting to other people's rules and moods. But when we're on our own, we have to take action. We have to make decisions for ourselves.

Being able to live independently means being able to think independently, and to think independently you have to take time out for you. Turn off the TV and the phone. Put down the blunt and the beer. Go for a walk by yourself. Pick up a pen and your journal if that suits you. Look hard at yourself, where you come from, where you want to go, and what you need to get there. Getting back to you will help give you a clearer vision of where you are going and where you have been.

As Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet, "Know thyself and to thy own self be true." Being independent is more than what you do for yourself on the outside; it is also what you do for yourself on the inside.