

# Physical Attraction and Power in the Prison

*This is a continuation of an excerpt from the AVP/NY Volunteer Handbook, which was in the Transformer Spring issue, pages 9 & 10.*

Expect to be physically attracted to a prisoner some time in your prison work. Almost nobody escapes this experience, regardless of age, marital status, sexual orientation or having foresworn all such relationships and feelings.

If this happens to you, examine yourself to see whether the feeling contains one or more of the following elements:

a) The sexual deprivation of prison life creates an electrical charge in the air when volunteers enter a prison—a charge that no person can fail to feel.  
b) Incarceration changes the balance of power between women and men. One of the few milieus in our society where a woman is more powerful than a man is in a prison situation where the woman is free and the man is a prisoner. As men have long known, the possession of power can be a sexual turn-on. Women have had so little experience of the phenomenon that they may not recognize the sexual overtones of power and may mistake it for genuine attraction.

c) Incarceration makes a normal, everyday relationship inaccessible. It allows both parties to fantasize but commits neither to live with the results of a relationship in the real world. The dark side of this is you may be exploiting another person without being aware you are doing so—by projecting your fantasies and needs on him or her that, in the real world, you cannot or will not follow through on.

What to do...

If you are seized by this strong emotion, whatever it turns out to be, give yourself time and room to find out what it actually is before you act on it. Use the AVP “Queries on Relationships” to help you sort out your feelings.

If you make the decision that the relationship is worth having, you **MUST** remove yourself **IMMEDIATELY** as a volunteer—and **BEFORE** you consider communicating with the person by telephone, mail or a visit.

In the meantime, remember that a sexually deprived environment breeds violent jealousy and other strong emotions, and a person who chooses a prisoner for a lover could elicit the enmity of both prisoners and officers, a situation that could become dangerous for the person she or he has “chosen.”

Remember, also, that many people have to spend long years in this deprived environment and that it is important for them to adjust to the realities of doing time.

Do not be surprised if you become overly preoccupied with an individual prisoner. Romantic attraction is only one of the roots of such preoccupation. Others are compassion, admiration for a strong personality or valuable talent, or a sense of perceived injustice. Try to keep a balance and not invest all of your valuable energy in one person where there is so much need in others also.

Under no circumstances should you give out your telephone number or personal information that might identify where you live.

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