

# Prisoners have to deal with extreme isolation in confinement: Here's how they cope

April 22 2020, by Jan Lodge

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Isolation and confinement during the unprecedented coronavirus lockdowns around the world are a first time experience for most people. Under these circumstances we all have a lot to learn from

prisoners—many of whom have had to find certain strategies to deal with the numerous mental upheavals that seclusion during incarceration entails.

It goes without saying that being cooped up at home is of course far more manageable than being locked up behind bars. But people isolating due to COVID-19 are still forced to deal with a lack of freedom, loss of normality and a loneliness they may have never encountered before. As with prisoners, this can lead to challenges of mental wellbeing, an erosion of self-esteem, and an inability to thrive and sometimes function.

In my current research looking at how individuals with a criminal conviction move back into employment, interviewees often described their time in prison as a major emotional challenge. As a result, many prisoners developed a range of coping strategies to navigate the consequences of being confined to their cells for many hours a day.

Through my conversations with people who have spent extensive time incarcerated in prison, three main strategies emerged on how to keep an optimistic outlook on life.

## **Battle the mundane**

While life in prison is often mundane and defined by repetition, it is also characterised by high levels of insecurity and volatility: guards search prison cells, inmates are transferred unannounced to other prisons, fights break out, people take drugs or even commit suicide. For many, developing a routine that starts and ends each day on a positive note is therefore crucial. Such structures function as important milestones for people in prison to keep mentally focused.

Jacob Hill, a former prisoner and now a successful social entrepreneur, told me that it was "vital to get up way early so you're tired by the

evening ... I used to wake up at 5.30am and read my book for two, maybe three hours until we were unlocked at 8am."

Jacob also told me that work in prison was structured into relatively short periods: "We worked three hours, then had a two-hour break and were locked up, then another three hours. And actually we got more work done that way." Following his release from prison, he carried this experience over into working at home in "bursts" of only a couple of hours to keep focused and motivated.

## **Understand what you can control**

Entering prison for the first time can be a shock. In the first few weeks, many people with convictions told me that they very much tried to continue to "live in the outside world"—thinking about what bills had to be paid, what repairs had to be undertaken on their houses, or how their former co-workers were getting on—because they did not want to accept their new surroundings and circumstances. So to ease oneself into prison life, they told me it can be helpful to understand what one can and cannot control. Those struggling under lockdown might find this offers a useful lesson for their lives too.

Richard Strauss, another former [prisoner](#), who now supports people coming out of prison into employment, told me: "It's really important to realise what you can control, which, especially during the early days, is actually very little aside from your mind. And purely focusing on things that will make a positive difference to you—phone calls, letters from home, visits, going to the canteen, getting a job—can go a long way."

Similarly, Noah (not his real name), who was in prison for many years and wants to remain anonymous, told me: "We may be powerless over the external situation of being in prison but we do have power over our internal world. This power can be of great solace." Noah has boosted his

self-esteem by helping others, such as teaching inmates to play a [musical instrument](#): "In prison, if you are helping someone in any shape or form, by seeing their sparkle of joy you feel much better about yourself. You are lifting yourself up through small acts of kindness."

## Going on mental excursions

The lack of variety of prison life combined with the confined nature of one's existence can be emotionally challenging. To counter this, some prisoners deliberately go on "virtual walks" to escape the here and now. This involves sitting down in a quiet space, closing one's eyes, and reliving routes, locations, or experiences of the past, re-creating positive memories and experiences. Noah told me: "You just sit there in your cell and think about a sunny day, and you are walking from your home to the shops or to a friend's house. And now the trick is to do it step by step, take in the smells, feel the wind, hear the neighbour's dog barking. You can really bring back all those positive emotions with that."

This might be extended to include virtual walks to places that one aims to visit once the sentence has been served. Doing this helps provide an emotional safe space and an escape as well as something to look forward to on the outside.

These coping experiences of prisoners—keeping a strict structure to one's days, helping others to provide a new sense of purpose and engaging in virtual walks to a happier past or future—can surely be useful to the far more fortunate people around the world now struggling with their temporary coronavirus confinement.

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