

The survival secrets of solitaries

Ian O'Donnell finds resilience and growth in a most unlikely environment

A White Paper on crime famously described imprisonment as 'an expensive way of making bad people worse' (Home Office, 1990, para. 2.7). The inevitable harms of incarceration include the entrenchment of community disadvantage, the sundering of family ties and the limiting of human potential. And all of this comes at a huge financial cost: almost £34,000 per prisoner per year according to recent figures from the Ministry of Justice (2014, Table 1).

But prison does not destroy all of the people all of the time. Prisoners are resilient, and even in the bleakest environments they find opportunities to mature and, occasionally, to flourish.

Solitary confinement

It is difficult to imagine a more disenchanting and disempowering place than a solitary confinement cell in a high-security prison. When opportunities for meaningful human engagement are stripped away, mental health difficulties arise with disturbing regularity. In the US, where prisoners can be held in isolation for many years for administrative reasons, stories of psychological disintegration are common. A senate judiciary subcommittee on solitary confinement was told of a prisoner whose response to his predicament was to stitch his mouth shut using thread from his pillowcase and a makeshift needle. Another chewed off a finger, removed one of his testicles, and sliced off his ear lobes. A third took apart

the television set in his cell and ate it (see Haney, 2012, pp.9–10).

Hans Toch (1975/1992, p.330) has written about the 'cold, suffocating vacuum' that is the isolation cell and how 'it remains a tragic fact that our ultimate tool for dealing with fear-obsessed persons defies and defeats their regeneration: We

isolate such persons, make them feel trapped, and seal their fate. We place those who are their own worst enemies face to face with themselves, alone, in a void.' Some find the burden of self-examination to be unbearable.

The pathological side-effects of penal isolation have long been recognised (e.g. Nitsche & Wilmanns, 1912). Indeed, there was a vigorous debate in the mid-19th century when prisons designed according to the principle of separation were opened in the US and then, with more enthusiasm, across Europe. In institutions that operated according to this principle, prisoners were kept in single cells where they ate, worked, read their Bibles and reflected on their wrongdoing. They exercised alone in small yards. For the duration of their sentences they never saw the face of another inmate. During a visit to Eastern State Penitentiary



Prisoner of The Mind, HM Prison Winchester, Si Pickard Commended Award

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in Philadelphia, Charles Dickens met men and women who had been separated from their peers for years and who seemed to have unravelled as a result. The great novelist was horrified by what he saw, declaring that:

I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body: and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay. (Dickens, 1842/2000, pp.111–112)

London's Pentonville Prison, which incorporated the principle of separation in every aspect of its design and daily operation, became controversial as soon as it opened in 1842. *The Times* directed particular attention to the men who were transferred from the 'model prison' to Bethlem Hospital on account of their inability to cope with uninterrupted aloneness. In November 1843 the newspaper went so far as to describe Pentonville as a 'maniac-making system'.

The concern with harmful effects was probably exaggerated at the time but continues to reverberate in the psychiatric literature. Some commentators believe the 'symptoms' of solitary confinement – physiological, cognitive, perceptual, emotional and motor – are so consistently found that they constitute a 'solitary confinement psychosis' (Grassian & Friedman, 1986, p.55). But some prisoners show an impressive ability to resist the assault on their identities that accompanies prolonged removal from company. In an effort to make sense of how men and women cope with enforced isolation I examined numerous prisoner narratives written since the mid-19th century as well as hostage autobiographies, newspaper reports, tracts written by prison chaplains

and reformers, official publications, academic critiques and the documents produced by commissions of inquiry. I made field visits to prisons, studied the available statistical data and requested further materials from the relevant authorities. A select group of prisoners, including several on death row, who have endured periods of isolation measured in decades rather than years, were gracious enough to share some of their thoughts with me in person and through the exchange of letters. A series of seminars with prisoners serving life sentences gave me an opportunity to test my ideas against the experiences of those to whom they should relate.

Close engagement with these various sources over a period of several years resulted in my book, *Prisoners, Solitude, and Time* (O'Donnell, 2014).

So what did I find?

The seven Rs

My research revealed a number of ways that prisoners mitigate the harmful effects of time spent alone in a place not of their choosing and to a timetable not of their design. I call these the 'seven Rs of survival'. The emphasis here is not on general patterns of adaptation to imprisonment but on how individuals respond to the specific exigencies of enforced solitude and the passing of long stretches of time. Some prisoners master none of these techniques and their time in solitary confinement results in withdrawal, destructive rumination, cognitive impairment, depression, self-harm and, exceptionally, suicide.

The survival stratagems of successful solitaires are discussed next in ascending order of importance and in descending order of prevalence. Rescheduling, Removal, Reduction, and Reorientation are commonly used and moderately effective.

Meet the author

'I have long been aware of the harms of solitary confinement, but in recent years I became intrigued by the capacity that some prisoners display to cope with conditions that others find unbearable. Curiosity about this aspect of the prison experience resulted in my book *Prisoners, Solitude, and Time*.'



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Resistance is less common but can sustain a prisoner for some time (although belligerence is fatiguing). Raptness, when mastered, is an effective way of truncating perceived duration and investing time with meaning. Reinterpretation is rare but potent.

Turning first to Rescheduling. This involves using different intervals to gauge the passage of time. Sociologists Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor (1972, p.97) described how a recent arrival at Durham Prison who sought advice on how to structure a 20-year sentence was told, 'It's easy, do it five years at a time.' While there is obviously a measure of bravado associated with the idea that there could be anything easy about this process other than verbalising it, there is no doubt that a schedule broken down into meaningful chunks seems more manageable. Few people measure their lives in 20-year blocks, but a five-year term can be grasped. This is the around the length of time spent in secondary school and a little more than the interval between football World Cups.

Removal involves routine work and exercise, busyness as an end in itself; this alleviates the sources of stress and anxiety

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solitary confinement

that can protract duration. For the literate prisoner, reading can serve this purpose by restocking the mind, allowing imaginative engagement with a text and its characters, and making the prisoner part of a community of readers. Others devise exercise regimes that do not require a training partner but that fill time and bring about a satisfying kind of tiredness. When relationships cannot be formed with human beings they are forged with other creatures instead, such as insects, mice and birds. Prisoners personify, and become attached to, animals that might otherwise be an irritating distraction. This offers an outlet for humanity's innate sociability, what neuroscientist John Cacioppo and science editor William Patrick (2008, p.63) characterised as our 'obligatorily gregarious' natures.

One way of lightening the burden of time spent alone is to sleep through as much of it as possible. I term this approach Reduction. Hitler's favourite architect, Albert Speer (1975/2010, p.43), noted in his prison diary: 'Now I have reached twelve hours of sleep daily. If I can keep that up I shall be cutting my imprisonment by a full five years – by comparison with my normal sleeping time of six hours.' An allied approach is to deaden the impact of isolation through drug use. Prisoners are often poly-drug users when at liberty, but during periods of incarceration they are much more discriminating, generally limiting themselves to heroin and cannabis (Edgar & O'Donnell, 1998). These are the drugs of choice because they blunt the pains of captivity; they soothe and cosset, however temporarily. Sometimes, medication prescribed by prison doctors has a similar effect.

Reorientation involves resetting temporal horizons so that the focus is on the present. If prisoners are to survive psychologically it is important that they shift their time orientation. Dwelling on the past and any associated remorse or regret, or obsessing about a future life that is unlikely to arrive in the wished-for format, introduces a degree of fretfulness that is inimical to successful navigation of the temporal landscape. The solitary prisoner who can achieve immersion in the present has stolen an important advantage over his or her environment. Having been wrenched from the world, they find themselves – at no inconsiderable cost – adopting a temporal orientation that is occasionally accompanied by mindfulness (on the implications of mindfulness for prisoner conduct see Shonin et al., 2013; more generally see Tolle, 2005).

Some prisoners survive through Resistance. A simple way of subverting the



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Riches to Rags, HM Prison Dovegate, Anne Peaker First-Time Entrant Award

system of solitary confinement is to undermine its prohibition on social intercourse, something men and women have been adept at doing since the first attempts were made to isolate them. Prisoners communicate by tapping on walls and pipes, leaving written messages for others to find, or prevailing upon a sympathetic staff member to act as their messenger. Fighting staff is another way of resisting but it is seldom chosen. The marked power imbalance that exists between the parties and the relative availability of equipment and reinforcements, mean that the almost certain victor in any such encounter is the member of staff. Some prisoners resist through litigating, and from their isolation cells they use the courts to further their ends.

Raptness is absorption in an activity like creative writing or craftwork. As well as speeding the passage of time, it results in a product that may enhance the self-respect and status of the person who produced it, setting them apart in terms of accomplishment. This distinguishes it from involvement in prison work more generally, in which the individual may invest no particular significance beyond its value as a Removal activity. Raptness is about following pursuits that are meaningful and individuating. As well as helping time to pass, such pursuits invest it with purpose and this further reduces its weight.

Finally, there is Reinterpretation. For prisoners who can re-cast their predicament the potential rewards are substantial. Those who can devise, or adopt, a frame of reference – often political or religious – that puts their pain in

context seem to draw succour from their circumstances. For the fortunate few who can re-imagine their situation, the potential rewards are substantial.

The art of living

Writing about his experiences in Auschwitz, the psychotherapist Viktor Frankl (1946/2004, p.55) described how, 'it is possible to practice the art of living even in a concentration camp, although suffering is omnipresent'. Frankl discovered that when everything appears to have been removed, the freedom to choose one's attitude remains. The miserable conditions, the hopelessness, and the fear of impending death could not obliterate this fundamental freedom. While protecting their physical integrity and prolonging their lives were almost always beyond the prisoners' control, how they made sense of their suffering and with what degree of dignity it was borne fell to each individual to determine.

It was a rare person who could remain composed in the milieu of the concentration camp, but some managed to do so. Through their attitude to unavoidable hardship they demonstrated the existence of the human capacity to make the critical choice that Frankl described. This courageous few showed how sense could be made of suffering and how meaning could be added to a life that was almost certain to be further degraded and then extinguished. Not many men or women have the fortitude to behave like this, but the fact that some do suggests that all might.

It is important not to exaggerate the extent to which prisoners will be able to

triumph over extreme adversity but Frankl's message is that this is not happenstance. Those who win out have decided to do so and those who withdraw, take their own lives, prey on (or pray with) their fellows, or collude with the authorities, have also chosen their courses of action.

A small number of prisoners in solitary confinement manage to reinterpret their situations; they come to realise that the 'art of living' can be practised anywhere, however unpropitious the circumstances. They appreciate Frankl's central insight that life can be meaningful as well as desperately unhappy and subscribe to his view (paraphrasing Nietzsche) that, 'He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*' (Frankl, 1946/2004, p.84).

Post-traumatic growth

The effort to make sense of adversity, to overcome the challenges that follow in its wake, and to create meaning out of altered circumstances, can serve as a platform for personal growth. John Bronsteen, Christopher Buccafusco, and

Jonathan Masur (2009, p.1042) reviewed the effects of serious disability on

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subjective wellbeing and found a general pattern of successful adaptation, leading them to conclude that while the underlying

mechanisms were not well understood, 'it seems as if people have a "psychological immune system" that helps them cope with the effects of many kinds of adverse events'.

Not everyone is affected by trauma in the same way. Some emerge emotionally unscathed, some recover without prolonged distress, some are impaired. It is the group who are changed but in the process move beyond their previous level of functioning that experiences post-traumatic growth (see Joseph, 2012: see also tinyurl.com/mwtugs9). Those who report the most growth are not the individuals who easily slough off the effects of traumatic circumstances, but those who are shaken up (but not overwhelmed) by them. In their efforts to

reduce the dissonance between the world as now revealed to them and their previous assumptions, they come to new understandings and accommodations. They learn more about their psychological boundaries and how they can be redrawn; they identify capacities to cope that had not previously been recognised; they strike new terms of engagement with their life-worlds; they become accomplished reappraisers.

Building better lives

Some men and women, especially those of a reflective bent whose clarity of thought is not too adversely affected by mental illness or addiction, find that incarceration is a catalyst for personal development. For those ready to accept the rewards that sobriety and introspection can bring, the solitary cell can become a transformative place. Returning to the White Paper mentioned at the beginning of this article, imprisonment will always be expensive and those subjected to it will often have committed awful crimes, but we should not underestimate the capacity of even the most apparently recalcitrant offenders to build better lives.





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