What I Learned in Prison and How It Applies to COVID-19 Isolation

There is no easy way to navigate life when you have mental health issues and complex traumas in your past.

April 14, 2020 By Glenna McCarthy

Strange as it might sound, isolation for me can have a calming effect—no more racing mind, no more fight-or-flight response affecting my digestive system and fewer aches and pains attributed to stress.

I have had a strange and somewhat sad life; I gave up a long time ago and turned to drugs as an attempt to be comfortably numb. Eventually, the ride was over, and I had no true escape from reality and consequences.

I went to jail in 1999 for a crime that happened during a blackout on drugs—I didn’t even know if I did what they say I did. To add to the struggle, I was told that I had AIDS and hepatitis C, and I was kicking methadone and benzos.

When I was told I was dying, I didn’t care because life had felt so hard for so long and I hadn’t connected to anyone for decades as far as to touch or enjoy a gentle connection. I hated the world and my life, but a part of me refused to die.

I fought with nervous energy and “learned to jail,” which is not something I am proud of, but it was all about surviving one minute to the next. I learned to embrace my negative labels and enjoy negative attention because that is the only way I felt empowered.

While in prison, I was sent to SHU (security housing units, which means solitary confinement) for a year due to getting in a fight and pushing an officer during the chaos; originally, I was sentenced six months, but at the hearing, I got angry talked a lot of crap and got six months more for making threats.

I was a child having tantrums due to being overwhelmed (by everything). As I sat in a cell staring at a toilet bowl for months waiting for it to conversate, I realized that I felt safe for the first time in decades. I only had to fight my own demons and my imaginary monsters. I had a toothbrush with no handle and a Bible and a piece of metal on the wall they called a mirror.

There is no easy way to navigate your life when you have mental health issues and complex traumas in your past, but I slowly found what works for me. I have seen women have breakdowns in prison and jail when they are moving to a cell from a dorm because they feel claustrophobic, and I would have a nervous breakdown knowing I was going to a dorm where the noise and emotional stimuli are overwhelming.

When I came home, I volunteered in an animal shelter and got the unconditional love I had craved my whole life.

I went to school and got my bachelor’s degree and am currently working on my master of social work at Hunter College in New York. I have a home, a bed, a tub and a 50-inch screen TV—which are luxuries to someone who has been incarcerated. I am drug-free for 10 years, and for once don’t want negative attention anymore. I want peace of mind and spirit.

This coronavirus stay-at-home policy is just a reminder to me of the uncertainties and challenges of life—and that I can now handle them.

We all have our own demons and challenges. This is how we learn to face them.

(Maybe I will write another book) LOL

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/learned-prison-applies-covid19-isolation