

New Life Anxiety

By Daniel Labbe

In September, 2016, I will be released from prison. After thirteen years of incarceration I will enter a whole new life, a life far different than what I have grown accustomed to behind the wall. The world has changed a lot in the last thirteen years. I have never seen Facebook or Twitter, nor have I ever held a smart phone, but as world altering as these technological changes are they are not what concern me. My anxiety is much closer to home: have I made the necessary changes to live a healthy, responsible life? I wasn't able to live a life I could be proud of before prison. Drug and alcohol addiction combined with mental health issues and my refusal to take responsibility for my life led to a lot of dysfunction and, ultimately, to the selfish choices that hurt so many people and landed me with a fourteen and a half year prison sentence. What makes me think I can live a healthy life now?

Before coming to prison I realized the rough shape of my life, and I tried my hardest to change so I could live a good life. I went to rehabs, to AA, to counseling, to day programs, and even to religion, but none of that helped for long. I would do well for a bit then cycle back into dysfunction. In my heart I deeply wanted to live a good, healthy life but my issues were stronger.

Shame, anger, and grief over the life I led and the choices I made filled the first five years of my incarceration. I spiraled in and out of black depressions until I eventually realized it was a useless and self-centered cycle. Something had to change. It was then that I threw myself into doing whatever I could to heal, learn, and grow so I had a chance at living a good, healthy life, a life that reflected the best of who I am. I couldn't do anything about the pain I caused but I could change myself so I would never cause such pain again and maybe even have something positive to share with others.

Since then I have been doing everything I can to

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heal, learn, and grow. I read every self-help book I could find and experimented ~~to~~ putting what I read to use. I participated in all the prison programs I could, and I worked with therapists. Since this journey began in 2009 I've grown a lot and made changes I never before dreamed possible. Family members, officers, therapists, and other inmates have all noticed the changes I made and this felt great. I feel more like my true self today than I ever have before.

All this is great, but it also makes for one scary thought that just won't leave me alone: what if it isn't enough? What if, despite all these changes, I still fail? I've learned to be healthier and more successful in prison with all the structure and routine that prison provides, but will I be able to transfer this ~~relative~~ relative health and success to the street? Because I have made a lot of improvements my family expects a lot from me, will I let them down? On top of all this there's the anxiety of worrying about what opportunities will be available to a middle aged ex-convict with a criminal record like mine (it's pretty bad).

I do my best to challenge these thoughts when they arise. I know they aren't helpful, ~~and~~ and I also know that they are perfectly natural. Who wouldn't be nervous about life on the outside after thirteen years of prison? Luckily, I have a lot of family support and a good reentry plan. I also have a lot more skills now than I did before, and I've done a lot of healing. My chances at living a healthy, functional life that is both meaningful and rewarding are better now than ever before. Yet, despite all this, anxiety still winds through my gut like a snake on Ritalin.

I guess this anxiety is perfectly natural and reflects how much I hope to succeed. Rather than let it be something that weakens me, I can use it as motivation for giving this new life everything I've got.

I'm glad I wrote about this. I feel stronger and clearer about who I am and what I am capable of.

Thanks for listening.