

HOW TO SURVIVE A LOCKDOWN
(without losing your mind)
April 24, 2020

Over the course of the last few weeks, I've heard a lot of people offering advice on how to deal with the impact of "lockdown" related isolation. While they no doubt mean well, their advice is offered, not from the perspective of someone who's personally experienced any form of lockdown related isolation, but from a course offered at college or a book. This doesn't mean the advice is worthless, just that it's . . . lacking a certain understanding and appreciation that can only be gained from personal experience. As someone who **has** experienced the devastating effects of isolation, I thought I'd use my blog as a platform to begin offering my own advice and insight, but before I do, let me set the record straight on a few things.

First and foremost, we're using the wrong terminology. So long as we're free to go to the store for groceries, stop by the restaurant for some take-out, visit the doctor or go for a jog around the block, we're not in a lockdown. Instead, what we're in is a "modified program," a highly restrictive program, to be sure, but still far from a lockdown. This might seem like a petty distinction, but by the time you finish reading this entry, you'll have a better understanding of what a lockdown truly consists of.

To put this into a context more suitable for someone who's not serving time behind bars, think about what it means for one of your children to be locked down at school. When that order's given, for whatever reason, the doors physically shut and lock, and no one comes or goes until the lockdown's been lifted by the appropriate authorities. There are no breaks for the bathroom, no going to the gym to get a quick workout, and no stopping by the cafeteria for a quick bite to eat.

My first couple of years were in a perpetual state of lockdown. If you truly want to experience what it means to be in lockdown as a prisoner, then go to the smallest bathroom you can find that has a tub. Once there, remove **everything** except a bar of soap, some shampoo and a towel. Throw a blanket into the tub, that's where you'll sleep, and cover yourself with a sheet. If you're lucky, you'll have a book, and if you're really lucky, you'll have a radio or a TV, but no cable, only free, over-the-air broadcasting. Go inside and shut the door, and then, have your kids stand outside of the door, yelling, screaming and arguing with each other nonstop for days on end. Then, for good measure, get some crazy, homeless guys to stand under your window arguing with the sky all night long. You only get a shower once every 3-days, but don't worry. You've got a sink you can use to take a bird bath in-between. This is what it means to be on lockdown, and as someone who survived conditions such as this for several years, perhaps you can understand why I feel more qualified to give advice than someone who's never been in jail, let alone experienced an actual lockdown.

So, how did I get through such lengthy lockdowns? For starters, and I can't emphasize this enough, I set goals for myself, both short term and long term. For the most part, the short term goals were relatively simple. The first goal was to establish a routine I could follow. I'd get up at the same time every day, brush my teeth, wash my face, clean the cell floor, it didn't matter, so long as it was a daily routine, and that simple little routine, as the military will tell you, goes a long ways towards building, and maintaining, a positive moral, which is why you're required to shave every day in the Army.

Another goal I had was to make sure that each day, I did something, anything, to improve my situation. It could be something as simple as scrubbing the years of filth off one section of the wall, or doing one more pushup than I did the day before. So long as I did something to improve myself, I accomplished my goal, and as silly as it sounds, that little sense of accomplishment went a long ways towards improving my moral, and a positive moral goes a long ways towards retaining your sanity.

My neighbors and I had a little game we liked to play to make things just a little easier. The rules were really simple. The night before, we'd all send a Top Ramen soup to someone to bank for us, and that night, we'd all learn a new word. The next day, without telling anyone what the word was, we'd use it in a sentence every chance we got. Throughout the day, each person would get three chances to figure out what the word was. The first person to guess right won the whole kitty, and if no one won, then the kitty just grew and grew with each passing day, until someone did guess right. It was a silly game, but it kept the mind active, which is the most important thing you can do. Remember, we're in prison, so we don't have things like computers and the Internet. We didn't even have any phones to call home, so our only entertainment came from what we invented.

In addition to the short term goals, we also had long term goals of various lengths. Some were measured in mere days, while others were measured in years. We shared our goals, and when one of us reached a milestone, we all celebrated. Again, this was critical to maintaining moral, and it worked far more often than not. For most, the longer they were on lockdown, the more challenging their goals would become. I've seen guys without any talent whatsoever teach themselves to draw some of the most realistic animals you'd ever imagine. Once he learned how to draw, he'd spend months working on something, trying to capture it perfectly. I remember one time, he drew the fur of a wolf so perfectly that I couldn't help but reach out to make sure it wasn't real. Meaningless goals anywhere else in life, but back there in the hole, they were major accomplishments, and celebrated as such.

One thing I've learned from the Japanese is that it's not always about the destination, sometimes, it's about the journey. If you've ever watched a real professional from Japan doing something traditional, than you probably know what I mean. Where we take pride manufacturing something by the millions in a fraction of a minute, the Japanese take pride in going out of their way to perfect each and every single step of the process, no matter how much time it adds to the process. Take the Japanese tea ceremony, for instance. You might not have been aware of this, but a properly executed tea ceremony actually takes several hours to complete. Every preparation, every movement, they all have meaning, from when the tea is picked to how it's cured, from how it's whisked to how it's sipped. The lesson is that, sometimes, you just need to take our time and try to enjoy the actual experience, not just the fruits of your labor. One of my favorite times to do this in here is when I'm cooking. Getting the ingredients is a major obstacle, and preparing them without actual utensils can often be just as difficult, not to mention frying a burrito without access to a stove or pan, but I always manage to find a way, and I've found that I actually enjoy the experience itself as much as the results. I've also found that, when you spend this much time making something, you feel a certain sense of pride, of accomplishment, and it's wasted if you simply wolf it down without savoring every bite. This lesson is equally valid out there, especially right now. The next time you go to make dinner, don't just take your time, take your time to enjoy yourself. Make an adventure out of it, and then, when you're done, take your time to enjoy what you made. Victories, small and large, are meant to be savored, to be enjoyed, not to be shoveled down your throat as fast as possible, so you can go back to worrying about how you're going to pay your bills.

People out there have access to things I can only dream about; computers, Internet, Zoom, Facebook, cell phones (ironic, that cell phones are banned in actual cells), and so much more. Many of you live in homes that have pools, air conditioning, full kitchens, bathtubs and things I've yet to see, let alone describe, but at the end of the day, we're all suffering from the same thing. We're physically isolated from those we love and care about. We can't see or touch them, and for a society that associates humanity with physicality, this is probably the most difficult thing of all to deal with, but I can't help but feel that there's a forgotten relic we're overlooking, something that can bring us, perhaps not as close as we want to be, but certainly something that can bring a smile to our face. I'm referring, of course, to good old fashioned snail mail. For those of us that are old enough to remember what it was like to communicate with each other in actual sentences, or to complete a train of thought, we know the joy we used to get when we'd open our mailbox to see an actual letter from a friend or family member hidden between all of the bills. Our grins would spread from ear-to-ear, and we'd rush inside to devour every word, and if it contained a greeting card, it would be proudly displayed before the end of the night for all the world to see. Afterwards, we'd spend an hour, or more, trying to draft the perfect reply, knowing that our response would be treasured just as much. But somehow, we've gotten away from the written word, and instead transferred it to the digital thought, spread at the speed of light, sent without thinking of the damage our words would cause. Just as bad is the fact that many of our thoughts are some form of code decipherable by no one else but us, and yet, we expect everyone to instantly know from our emojis exactly what we meant to say.

So, here's my suggestion. Continue to use the Internet, the cell phone and everything in-between, but take a moment and find someone to send an actual letter to. Don't let them know it's coming, just mail it. Make it a thoughtful expression, one intended to invoke a thoughtful response, and like shampooing your hair, use and repeat over and over again until you get the desired effect. If you're at a loss for who to write, then might I suggest reaching out to someone in prison? Trust me when I tell you that there are, quite literally, hundreds of thousands of people in here who'd love to get a letter from someone, to begin a new friendship with someone.

I could go on and on with different ideas about what to do to get through these trying times, but it all comes down to a few, very simple things. First, create a routine for yourself. It doesn't matter when you get up, so long as you get up at the same time every day. When you do, do a simple stretch and exercise before doing anything else. It doesn't matter if it's only bending over one time to touch your toes and doing a single push-up, just so long as you do it every day. After all, one toe-touch and one push-up is still one more than none. After that, get your 3 S's out of the way (shit, shower and shave). Each day, do something to improve your situation, be it updating your resume, e-Mailing potential employers or thoroughly cleaning a room in the house. Set some long term goals, and each day, do something towards accomplishing one of those goals. When you do so, celebrate your accomplishment, just as you should celebrate the accomplishments of anyone in your home who accomplished one of their long term goals. Above all, never forget that "a mind is a terrible thing to waste" so don't waste it. Get the people you interact with on a daily basis, be it online or in person, to make a game out of learning a new word and trying to guess what that person's word was. Learn a new math skill, anything, so long as you're doing something mentally stimulating. You might also want to think about using your technology to its full potential. Hook your computer up to the largest TV you have, turn off all the lights, turn the sound up to the maximum level you can go (without disturbing your neighbors), and then use your computer to make a virtual visit to a historical site, to go on a safari or an underwater adventure. And when you watch a movie, as you undoubtedly will, don't just watch the movie, make an adventure out of it. Get everyone in your household together, make some snacks, turn the lights down low and watch it as a family unit.

At the end of the day, we may be living in a new world, but we're only limited by our imagination. It's time to start thinking outside of the box.

Before closing, I just want to point out that, no matter how bad it is out there, it's infinitely worse in here. In fact, it's so bad that I genuinely believe I'm not going to live long enough to see the light of day, which is really sad, given the fact that I've only got 6-months and 1-week left to serve on a 21-year sentence. What scares me even worse, however, is knowing that, if I do die in here, not only will I die alone, struggling to breathe, but I'll also be buried in a prison cemetery, or worse, cremated, both of which are, to me, fates worse than death, and yet, each day I try to find something to smile about, something to laugh at, something to learn. Each day, I try to plan for tomorrow because, without hope, life simply isn't worth living.

I'm always interested in hearing what my readers have to say, and as always, questions, comments and other feedback, good or bad, can be left here or sent to me at the address listed below. I would, however, like to point out that it helps now, more than ever, to know that someone's out there reading and pondering what I have to say, so I encourage you, more than ever, to take a moment and write, even if it's just by posting a reply to the site.

Shawn L. Perrot CDCR# V-42461
CIM C-Del Norte Upper: 246L
P O Box 500
Chino, CA 91708