

I Am Not Okay, by Sabir Shahbaz

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Yesterday I participated in a much-needed decompression with a psychologist. When I returned to the cell, a question that occurred to me was whether psych staff ever move beyond the superficial consideration of the wellbeing of prisoners who they don't speak to, ones who are not² talking, suffering in their own muted worlds. Outward silence alone is not an indicator of sound mental health. On the contrary, solitary confinement actually alters the integrity of some vital biological processes. Because of the stigma, prisoners avoid psych therapy and the appearance of mental illness. To those of us living in solitary confinement, and perhaps to outside observers (staff members) with proper training or just a keen eye, the signs are obvious. We are NOT okay.

A neuroscience paper by Dana G. Smith titled, "Neuroscientist make a case against solitary confinement," shares that: "Robert King spent 29 years living alone in a six by nine-foot prison cell..." "Even in less extreme cases than that of the Angola Three, prolonged social isolation - feeling lonely, not just being alone - can exact severe physical, emotional and cognitive consequences. It is associated with a 26 percent increased risk of premature death, largely stemming from an ongoing, out of control stress response that results in higher cortisol levels, increased blood pressure and inflammation."

"Feeling socially isolated also increases the risk of suicide. We see solitary confinement as nothing less than a death penalty by social deprivation," said Stephanie Cacioppo, an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral neuroscience at the University of Chicago, who was on the panel with King.

I admit when I initially read this paper, it gave me a scare. Particularly because when I wake up in the morning my cortisol levels feel cranked up. Prior to reading the research, I'd associated my anxiousness and excess energy with being a 29 year old morning person. Since my metabolism seemed robust at this time of day I found it ideal for exercise. Plus, exercise flooded my body with endorphins and dopamine, quelling my anxiousness.

Other aspects involve the changes that inhibit the brain from marshalling an effective stress response. Research shows that solitary confinement can disrupt the brain's ability to direct proper signals for a corresponding chemical reaction. The uncontrolled stress response is not some isolated mishap but rather the effect of altered brain structure and chemistry.

The sad irony is that prisoners in solitary confinement perpetuate a stigma related to seeking mental health

counseling. If that isn't a clear indicator we are not okay then I don't know what is.

It amuses me when the prisoners who pretend they have impeccable mental stability, who present this "Captain America" visage (a Marvel superhero), openly express their ideas and beliefs. Their rambling is often ridiculously foolish, but I realized sometimes people just need to stand at the front of the cell and yell out the door, sometimes people just need to feel acknowledged, no matter how offending their words may be or the fact that you may be their target. They will eventually go sit or lay back down and resume what they'd been doing before that impulse arose. I also realized it's equally as foolish to try and reason with people who teeter more perilously on the cliff of *compes mentis* than anyone else.

Most laughable are the people who bombard other prisoners with criticism or harassment for seeking psychology services. Those same people will attend every incentivized psych-based class which wouldn't even exist if a couple mentally ill prisoners hadn't somehow managed to file a lawsuit in pursuit of protection from staff abuse.¹ I didn't mean

laughable in the LMAO or LOL sense either but the type of tragedy you laugh at only because it is so crazy.

The coup de grace however, comes from Correction Officers (CO's). I've seen and heard CO's around here deride and poke fun at prisoners who speak to the psych or file administrative grievances. The instances I've observed were not discrete or quiet and the CO's were clearly culpable of creating division between prisoners and deterring some of them from seeking the help they needed. "The behavior isn't confined to any specific prison, but from the many accounts I've read about other prisoners' experiences in solitary confinement, it is prevalent in these particular settings."

I used to wonder why one individual would wear his headphones most of the time he was in the cell and would only holler out to people in other cells at the times his headphones were off (this is what he gave as an explanation anyway). I would later learn at least one possible reason as prolonged sensory deprivation made my hearing sensitive, and I frequently found myself putting headphones on. The usual noises would disturb me: doors opening and slamming shut,

people yelling to each other from cell to cell, the sounds of people exercising in the cells around me.

So I can grasp why some prisoners turn the tv volume up to one-hundred before 6am. Perhaps they haven't embraced silence or don't desire to be left alone with their thoughts. Perhaps even the silence is not silence, but a piercing, abysmal screech and the tv noise a soothing ointment keeping them grounded in reality or what appears to be reality.

I can see why prisoners punch rolled up mattresses for 2-4 hours straight until their pain and blood spills from disfigured and hurting hands, or why prisoners watch 16 hours of television daily, riding the wave of... the wave.

But I especially understand when prisoners exercise daily beyond exhaustion, their bodies awash in endorphins and dopamine; Dope I mean; Do I mean...

What I do mean, what I do know is that despite what I know, and what others may assume, as a prisoner in prolonged solitary confinement I am okay only in the sense I recognize I am not okay. Okay?

Footnote:

1. Harold Cunningham et al. v. United States Bureau of Prisons, Case 1:12-cv-01570-RPM-MEH (This case was filed in 2012 and settled in 2017. Go read some of the things inmates alleged for yourself). (Specifically, **See** Second Amended Complaint).