

## PRISON BLUES:

### BATTLING DEPRESSION ON THE INSIDE

By Leo Cardez

America has a mental health problem. Nowhere is this more evident than in America's broken criminal justice system where research reveals up to 40% of all prisoners have a diagnosed mental health condition; 14% are identified as serious mental issues (SMI).

Prisons and jails have become de facto mental health facilities creating a systematic failure by the state to deliver necessary care to mentally ill inmates or detainees. SMI inmates are treated, but those with milder conditions (depression, anxiety, stress, lack of appetite or sleep, et cetera) are relegated to the back of the line or simply fall by the wayside. And it's killing us: suicide rates in prison are at an all-time high. There is already a proven correlation between depression, anxiety, stress and the likeliness of attempting or committing suicide.

My story of battling depression on the inside starts about 5 years ago during my first psychiatric interview at county jail in-processing. A tired counselor with a gentle demeanor and large round glasses asked me if I was depressed or suicidal. I promptly assured him I was neither and, furthermore, was adjusting well. I lied. The truth was, I had fallen into the well and was being consumed by the darkness. I had considered the coward's solution.

I'm a college grad, veteran, and successful communications executive. In prison, I've worked as a tutor and inmate yoga instructor. Every day I see fellow inmates with problems and tell them to speak up, but those many years ago, suffering from a deep depression, I didn't say a word. I was raised by an old-fashioned father; raised to be strong, not to show emotion, never cry. Now, as an inmate living in a concrete jungle, these expectations are amplified. In that meeting, I was afraid of being judged as weak -- a valid fear behind these walls. In prison, more so than in the "real" world, perception is everything and any hint of weakness would surely be exploited by predators seeking prey. So I hid behind my tough guy facade, but inside I felt small, stupid, and under siege.



My depression emerged as an adult. It manifested itself through various bouts with alcoholism and sexual addiction. During that time I functioned. Things were better for awhile and then they weren't. I learned depression can be episodic like that, coming in alternating waves of intense emotion and numbness. Still, through the highs and lows, I never considered asking for help.

That's how ~~powerful~~ stigma is; it erodes our human instinct to call out for help and to survive. Stigma has prevented stories about mental health issues in prison from ever being made public- even though we're all vulnerable to it (even the guards).

After months of silence, I was drowning and couldn't pretend anymore. I felt as if I was locked in a barrel at the bottom of the ocean; helpless and hopeless, there is no worse feeling in the world. I was isolating myself, getting thinner, and not sleeping. My family instinctively knew something was wrong. They begged me to get help and at that moment, I was too weak to resist.

The therapist spent two minutes asking me about my sexual orientation and suicidal thoughts. I don't remember what I said to her. It was artificial and packaged; and apparently not enough to support another visit. I think she recommended I drink more water. I only saw her the one time. Months later, a different psychiatrist goes through their checklist during a video conference. I didn't do that again either.

I needed to talk, but thought I couldn't. Instead, I took my father's advice about staying busy. I rediscovered my faith and began to attend chapel services. I started to play soccer at yard and Scabble in the dayroom. Eventually, something unlocked in me that helped me start talking. I began to share small tidbits of what I was going through with those closest to me and I began to feel better.

Talking about my issues seemed scarier than living with them.



I felt vulnerable and exposed at the thought of divulging such intimate details about my feelings. I feared the conversation wouldn't go well; that I would be judged. My depression was constantly telling me to stay quiet.

I didn't believe I even knew how to talk about it; how to put these feelings into words...but I did, I'd just forgotten. One evening during a night-yard walk with a friend I spoke openly about my depression. We usually spent these walks talking about random gossip or just blowing off steam, but for whatever reason, I felt I could trust him and it felt like the right time to tell him: there was actually a time in here when I was really in a dark place and sometimes I'm afraid I could go back there. He nodded his head and patiently listened. It was like any other conversation we'd ever had and for the first time I understood that my personal battle with mental health didn't have to be a skeleton in my closet. Yet this talk was only the first step toward getting past my own stigma, which I continued to struggle with for years. Now I know that the only way to end this stigma among the inmate community is to have productive discussions about mental health issues in prison. To break the silence. To encourage and prompt conversation -- one at a time.

I didn't know where to start the conversation even when I spoke to a counselor or therapist. I've come to learn, they can start anywhere. The places where I felt safe talking didn't look like a doctor's office. The facility chaplain offered not only an ear, but hope -- which is almost always the first to go in severe depression and important to restore in the healing process. I could ease my way in during therapy groups as they didn't have a requirement for how much I had to engage. Wellness practices, like meditation and yoga, have helped me develop useful ways to adapt, such as breathing techniques. The point is I did something; I stopped hiding. I hope and pray that if you're suffering, you too can find the courage to find someone to talk to. Not every story about depression or mental health issues will end badly, but far too many do. Every time we talk about mental health issues we erode the stigma; yours, mine, and everyone else's.

\*\*\*\*



12. Battling Depression on the inside.

