

SAVING YOUR MIND: Mental Health in the Age of Corona

By Leo Cardez

*No real names or places were used

"This is some crazy ass shit; and I thought I'd seen it all after twenty years in the joint." Murder, my COVID wing co-worker, lamented while shaking his head. We were dragging yet another fellow inmate to the hospital wing of our prison. Murder is a seasoned con from the streets of Chicago's South side, but I swear I saw a tear in his eye.

There were four of us glorified janitors working in the makeshift quarantine wing of our prison. Besides cleaning, we were tasked with moving and caring for sick (even dead) inmates. At the peak of our Corona Virus break-out, we worked seven days a week double shifts, sweating through our full PPE-- too busy to even stop and eat. It was only at the end of the day, during my shower, that I would finally have a moment to catch my breath. Sometimes I would break down, hiding my tears as the warm water washed over me. My co-workers and I suffered everything from nightmares to migraines. We lost and gained weight at an alarming rate. We slept sporadically and were often depressed or angry. Double D, my morning co-worker said it best, "We are never going to be the same after this...you can not unsee or undo this type of damage."

I often wondered when things would get back to normal; when I would fully recover? Was I somehow permanently changed? Experts claim, our brain is like a computer, it reacts to whatever is programmed into it. They call it "neuro-plasticity" and the crux is we are what we spend time doing. What we do changes our brain. We become the information we digest. We are constantly

morphing into the next version of ourselves...good or bad.

As an inmate, I feel this is especially true. I am certainly not the same person I was upon my initial incarceration almost a decade ago. Some of that is just maturity, but there is also something else. Prison walls have a dark magic capable of changing any one. Studies show that prison's high-octane, violent, mind-dulling routine can cause permanent psychological damage. But you do not have to be a research scientist to see how the negative elevated levels of anxiety, stress, and fear wreck havoc in our shadow community. Almost everyone suffers from some level of depression or begin to develop O.C.D.; most of us will have difficulty readjusting to social norms like touch and personal space upon release.

There was already a serious mental health crisis in American prisons- the defacto mental health facilities. The COVID related lockdowns, social unrest, and political upheaval of the past year have only compounded the problem on an already strained prison health system struggling and failing to keep up. But the news is not all bad...

Although most of us have been affected by our incarceration compounded with the challenges of the past eighteen months, most of us can and will rebound. History has shown our extraordinary capacity to overcome extreme circumstances. That being said, some will not recover so easily, some may suffer long-term consequences that sadly may not surface until it is too late.

As inmates, this is not our first experience with emotional, mental, and physical trauma. - any stint behind bars comes with some drama. Only time will tell if our being incarcerated in some way prepared or protected us or merely exacerbated the symptoms.

Let me be clear: This year has been awful, the worst of my incarceration. COVID-related protocols have meant even less social connectivity among the inmate population. All "movement" was cancelled. We were disconnected from our loved ones. This increased loneliness is brutal on the psyche. There is a reason the U.N. considers solitary confinement torture. Over the past year my cell turned into my crypt--I felt buried, but not yet dead. Just when I had found a sense of normalcy to my life in the concrete jungle, COVID turned the world on its head. Research on resilience shows that it will take as much time to rebound to where we want to be then it took to get there in the first place. By that math, it won't be until late 2026 before I am back to a sense of relative comfort. That's too long to be miserable.

There is plenty of research supporting the incredible self-healing powers of the mind. There's a litany of suggestions from positive mantras, visualization techniques, practicing gratitude to the more common, exercise, sleep, healthy diet, water, and meditation. All of these share two common goals one, increase theta waves--the good brain energy--which tell our body to relax and feel good; and two, they breakup negative thinking; not allowing them a foothold to hijack our happiness.

There are also those who believe that these types of difficult experiences, once endured, can change us for the better. It is what some might call the "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." theory. It has merit. I have seen many convicts change throughout the years. They have renewed relationships, deepened spiritual lives, and a greater appreciation for life in general.

As for me and my co-workers, one thing is certain, our perspective is forever changed--we live more mindfully. And I suppose that is a good thing.

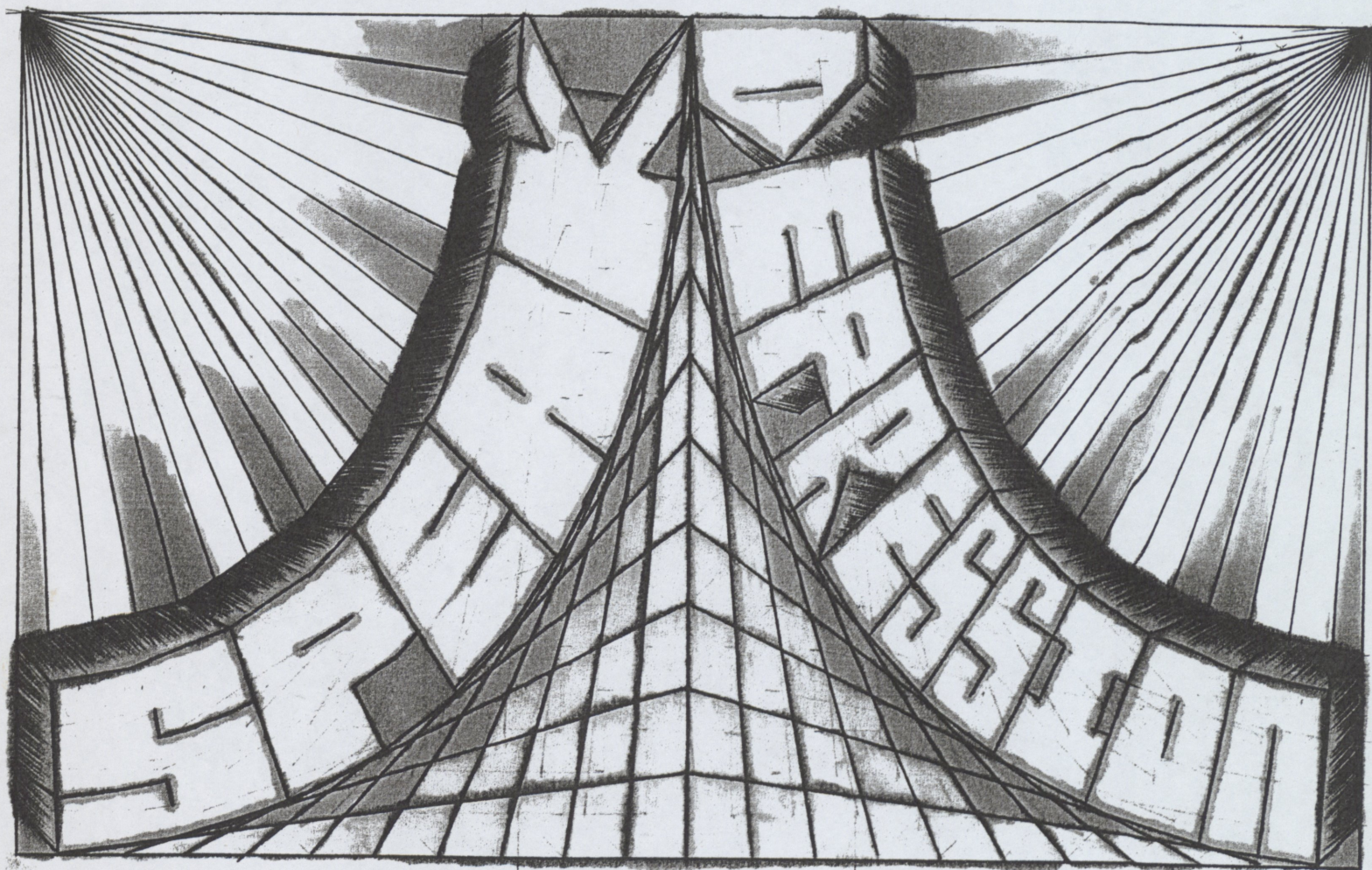
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