

A CURE FOR BOREDOM

By Leo Cardez

I've said it before and I'll say it again: prison is a mind-fuck. Excuse my language, but there's really no other way to describe it.

At first, prison is just horrible. I don't have all the right words to describe it; it is beyond awful. Then, after your first year, you find you have gotten used to it; after about 2 years, amazingly, you find yourself enjoying life again: smiling, joking and carrying-on. But, then sometime between years 3 and 5 you start to notice the mind-numbing tediousness of your existence.

If bored is defined as, "weary with tedious dullness," then prison is surely the most boring place on the planet. All we have is routine. Our lives are dictated by a strict schedule where every aspect of our day is closely controlled...and every day is the same. There are no real aspects of our lives that we direct completely. But, as horrible and boring as prison can be -- we all seem to get used to it.

This ability to adapt over time to almost any circumstances is called, "hedonic adaptation." It's a vital survival mechanism, otherwise, we'd surely be driven to madness or worse: leaving prison out of the back door. Research shows 63% of people suffer from boredom regularly (extrapolate for the inmate community)



and that chronically bored people are more prone to depression, substance abuse, and anxiety. And yet, to our dismay, most prisons have few, if any, inmate programming available, but that's a bigger discussion for another time.

To be fair, there's an argument to be made, and it has been in various books on the subject, that routine and consistency is healthy -- especially for developing infants and sleep habits e.g.. And that may be true, but because something is true in one aspect does not necessarily mean it is true across the board. In fact, studies reveal that spending too much time in the same environment can keep us from achieving "FLOW" -- that state of joyful productivity we tap into when our full focus is immersed in an activity.

(I knew it! I've been saying prison is making me dumber for years.) Also, boredom creates an immunity to negative and positive events; in essence, it is weakening our emotional reactions. In prison, that could translate to overlooking cues signaling us to make important decisions about our relationships and safety. But, fear not, there is a cure.

Firstly, we must recognize these feelings then we must decide to take action to combat them. Changes don't have to be big to make an impact. We can find plenty of quirky new ways to engage familiar people, places, and things. For example, yesterday, I simply changed the direction I usually walk around the prison yard; suddenly I was noticing things I had overlooked. Things that had always been there, but had become immune to my consciousness. I enjoyed that walk in a novel way and that's the point.



There's a thousand things we can do to slightly shift our routine into a new direction. Do you typically play a certain game, at the same time, with the same people, at the same table? Change any one aspect of that activity and you may notice you're enjoying yourself more. Do you typically make burritos on Sundays? Try making some nachos this week instead. Start a pot-luck with your friends. The key is to shake up a familiar habit.

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