

CONVICT CHRONICLES:

TIP #17

Managing Uncertainty

By Leo Cardez

From the new Department of Corrections leadership to politics and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, inmates live in particularly volatile times. In prison, all we (inmates) know for sure is that we don't know shit -- we live off of rumor and conjecture. And that's not good for us. The damage caused by our inconstant unpredictable circumstances causes havoc on every aspect of our being.

* Activity increases in brain areas associated with fear and hypervigilance. Persistent uncertainty can alter the brain's architecture and increase the long-term risk of depression and cognitive impairment.

* It affects our body through a cascade of stress hormones released as part of the fight-or flight response making us sweaty, dialating our pupils, quickening our breathing, and tensing our muscles. When uncertainty is highest, our stress measures max out.

* It affects our thinking as we become more reluctant to take risks and less likely to focus on future rewards. Also, our perception of time changes: The present seems endless, and we feel cut off from the past and future.

* It affects our feelings creating worry and unease. In fact, research shows that waiting for sentencing generates more anxiety than the sentencing itself, which actually often brings a sense of relief. (I can attest, the year I spent waiting to be sentenced was the longest and hardest of my bit.)

Incarceration during this historic epidemic seems to hold more questions than answers.

answers: Will I or someone I love get sick? Are my job, school, and cell assignment secure? What do the election results mean to our shadow community - is there any criminal reform initiatives on the horizon? And when will my facility go back to normal -- if at all?

Not knowing what tomorrow will bring creates physical and emotional stress.

The good news? There is a proven way to cope: Make a plan. "Failing to plan is like planning to fail," says Prison Counselor Brooks. "Planning does something to you, it gives you a sense of control in your otherwise uncontrollable circumstances. Control what you can."

Above my desk/pseudo kitchen of my cell I have a calendar. In early April 2020 it was full for the next two months with school assignments, planned visits from family and friends, work and volunteer schedules.

The pandemic quarantine lock-downs blew all of that out of the water -- leaving everything blank. I would write my TV schedule just for fun. But it meant nothing...I had no way of knowing how long the lock-down would last.

Like many others I found myself in unexpected territory -- marooned with my celly, no job, and feeling anxious as COVID-19 turned my world upside down.

Then two fellow inmates and friends died from COVID and my mother was fighting for her life in the ICU. That really messed with my head. It was like, is this really happening? This is a nightmare come to life.

That reaction is not unique. Humans are biologically wired to dislike uncertainty.

In psychological experiments, people prefer suffering a strong electric shock

immediately

immediately versus waiting up to 15 minutes for a milder jolt. (Could this

also be why detainees will often accept a higher offer from the State's Attorney

office versus waiting an undetermined amount of time for a possible -- and probable -- lower plea deal offer?)"

"We have this very complex system of emotions because they do things for us," says Kate Sweeny, a psychology professor at UC Riverside. "They motivate us to act in ways that are beneficial for our well-being and survival. If you're too comfortable with uncertainty, then you won't work to resolve it and many more bad things could happen."

How to cope? It may seem silly to plan when everything is up in the air, but that's exactly when we should start.

The key, experts say, is setting small, achievable goals with realistic expectations for what you can accomplish in the long and short term -- all of which may help you manage the stress and anxiety of the constant unknowns of prison life.

"Inmates can push past fear and feel more empowered in their lives when they feel they have a say in their future," says Counselor Brooks. "Prison is a mindfuck and these walls have dark magic capable of taking so much from a man; inmates must exercise some type of future-thinking in order to survive, otherwise, they just feel like they're stuck in a barrel at the bottom of the ocean with no options. I can't imagine a worst feeling in the world."

I can relate. At the height of my worries, I had a long conversation with my family. We talked through all the what-ifs: What if I got sick and died? What if they did? We talked through our fears and by doing so took back their power over us. It wasn't easy at first, but the longer we spoke the better we all felt. And we all left feeling as if a heavy weight had been lifted.

Since that conversation I have continued to focus on the future and plan what I can. Though the pandemic continues, the restrictions are slowly lifting giving way to new job opportunities, yard outtings, and the like. My calendar is filling up again, each haircut and dental appointment a step closer to a more certain future.

As inmates we already know all too well that many things are out of our hands, so we can't stress about every little thing. Hopefully, this pandemic is teaching us to take things as they come and affect our future through small acts of constant planning.

MAKE A PLAN.

Sources: Atlantic Magazine; EQUITABLE

- L. C. -

#34 the "Dark-Magic" walls of prison

