

CONVICT CHRONICLES: there's a name for how we feel

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I read an article in Men's Health that really struck me. It wasn't specifically written for the inmate community, but it should have been. In the piece, Dr. Gregory Scott Brown, a Psychiatrist, is discussing something called 'Adjustment Disorder.' (AD)¹

In laymen's terms, AD means hypersensitivity to things that in the past may have seemed more manageable. AD may make one feel worried, hopeless, or a general sense of unease. Sound familiar? Post-COVID, inmate issues are pretty similar across the United States: anger over job/program/assignment loss, despair about the difficulty in staying in touch with loved ones, sensitivity over race relations, and general malaise over extended lockdown brought upon from anything from quarantine protocols to staff shortages.

In prison, these micro-aggressions are a part of life. These mini hostile attacks can come from anywhere; from the guards, nurses, counselors, teachers, and fellow inmates, based on everything from general dislike to race (mostly race).

For the most part, you learn how to let them slide off your back, but combine these micro-aggressions with COVID-19 related stressors and now we can be looking at mental, emotional and physical distress. Research shows that those who feel they are being treated differently because of their race often feel stressed (duh.) and that can lead to problems in the future, both seen and unseen, like feeling isolated and angry.

In prison, we're told to be tough and that if we are disrespected, the correct response is anger and, if necessary, violence. The rules of the facility, though, tell us that such a response can get us in serious trouble, even more time. So we push down our feelings and let the indignities build up inside of us. What's worse is, we are not getting or seeking help. A 2018 study estimated that up to 74% of Black men in America who have experienced trauma (like prison life) have an unmet need for mental health services. I would argue that those percentages are much higher today, and for the inmate community.

According to the article, AD can come on strong and fast, but doesn't typically last that long and we can usually pinpoint how it started, like divorce, death, and job loss. (Other, more serious mental health issues can keep you keyed-up for months with no idea why.) It was clear that COVID-19 related social side-effects had messed with some of us and our ability to be our best.

Now that we know that AD is possible, even common, when our life is temporarily upended (like going to prison or being stuck in prison during a pandemic), we can start to recognize the effects in our lives. Listen, in prison or not, life will throw us some curveballs or even hit us with a couple of pitches (to complete the cliché), therefore, it would benefit all of us to know how to deal with them.

¹ <https://www.menshealth.com/health/a34198962/adjustment-disorder>

Dr. Brown recommends:

1. Re-connect with the world, in any way possible. Call friends and family (video visit, in-person visit, letters, text messages, whatever), get a work-out buddy, a chess nemesis, the point is to spend time with others in a space where you are focused on something other than your problems. Find something to get excited about and then share it with others in your life.
2. Re-engage in life by creating new goals and hopes to aspire to, then create a plan to achieve them—even in this constrained new environment. Sure, everything you have planned may have been blown to bits by COVID-19; get over it. Focus on what you can do now. Get creative, we inmates are nothing if not inventive. The goal is to fight against the feelings of helplessness, loneliness, and stagnation.
3. Get help. Talk to a counselor, nurse, someone. They may recommend yoga or meditation or maybe you may even temporarily need medication (to help you sleep, for example). The point is, do something before you fall into a death spiral you can't pull yourself out of.

The reality is we are constantly being asked to make hard life adjustments while serving any lengthy prison sentence and whether we know it or not, we are in a constant state of flux, dealing with a litany of unknowns, which are out of our control. That's just prison.

The most important point, is you start somewhere; start a journal, start a talk group, start a game group, sports, theater, start somewhere.