

# INCARCERATED

## Prison's Emotional Impact

By Antwann Johnson

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Thursday, July 22, 2021 started out as any other day for me. But it was around 10:00 A.M. that something struck me as odd. As I stared out of my window, which was facing the back of the prison compound, I watched as an ambulance, fire truck, and sheriff's car trailed one another onto the prison premises. I didn't pay it too much attention at first, and drifted off into thought until I began to hear a commotion outside of my cell in the wing of the housing unit I reside in. It was the sound of several inmates returning back to the housing unit from their respective work sites. Suddenly, a chill overcame me and my intuition told me that something was amiss, but I wasn't exactly sure what it was yet. At that time, no one was aware of what had just taken place a few housing units down from ours.

Time continued to pass, and again I found myself lost in thought. Our official count time came and went, but we still had not been released yet from our cells. As usual, I figured that the count had gotten messed up somehow. It wasn't until a little after three P.M. when I finally found out the reason why we hadn't been allowed to leave our cells. Another worker had returned to the H.U. from his work site; and as he entered the wing, he yelled out, ***"Hey ya'll, we're on lockdown because somebody just hung himself in 3-House!"*** It was at that moment when I remembered the three emergency vehicles entering the prison grounds earlier. With each passing moment, my curiosity grew as to the identity of the man who had decided to take his own life. As I lay in my bunk staring up at the ceiling, the question that seemed to run laps through my brain again and again was *"Why did he do it?"*

As all of the cells opened and things resumed to normal, I jumped out of my bunk, slipped into my state-issued boots, and headed towards the cell door. As I exited my cell, I nodded at my cousin, Johnny [REDACTED] or "Sleepy" as we all call him, who resides a few cells down from me. What he said to me was a short statement, but quite profound. He said, *"Antwann, prison has caused many of us to become emotionally desensitized"* and walked away. As those words resonated in my head, I cautiously scanned the wing from the top walk as everyone continued on as though nothing had ever happened.

Eventually, we found out the true reason of why he committed suicide. It was because the emotional impact that incarceration has on prisoners had become too much for him and he felt that a permanent solution was the only way to solve the problems he was facing. I found myself disputing my thoughts and beliefs regarding taking one's own life, but eventually came to realize that he was now at peace because the war that had been raging inside of him was finally over. This time, the tears that fell from my face were because I didn't have to watch him suffer and fight with himself any longer. Some encounters have just become too unbearable to watch. You begin to appreciate life when you see it slip away from someone else. I felt the need to have a sit-down with a few individuals that I considered to be conscious so that I could make sense of this act. One of them said, *"When we are going through a mental and/or emotional crisis it appears that there is no solution to them but to refer us to mental health only to be placed on psychiatric medication, which is often either experimental or generic, and usually just compounds the problem."* I found this statement to be true, but I still didn't feel any sense of peace about the matter. I've seen firsthand how prison robs you of your soul, just as I watched the COVID-19 virus rob inmates of their lives, but to witness someone hang themselves takes your breath away. It's an image that will be imbedded in your mind for life.

While reflecting on California prison systems and how solitary confinement can drive prisoners to harm themselves, you can't ignore what this kind of mental torture does to the mind. As I was writing this, there was a knock at my cell door. It was my cousin Johnny again. He said, *"What's up? Let's go outside and get some air"*. As we stood on our housing unit's recreation court in front of the barren prison yard, we noticed an unfamiliar face approach us both. The individual said, *"Excuse me Antwann, can I talk to you?"* Curious as to what he wanted, I told my cousin to hold on. The guy said he



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remembered me from being a facilitator in the I.T.C prison drug and alcohol program and liked the way that I taught my classes. He said that he needed someone to talk to; and as he began to speak, I listened with a sound ear. He confided in me that his father had just died, and that this was his only source of income to survive. He also told me that for some reason unknown to him, the institution had removed him from his honor status and placed him in a lockdown wing as punishment. He was not used to all of the noise and not being able to moving around freely and experience the privileges that he worked so hard to achieve by having good behavior was taking its toll on him.

As he continued to talk, it was as if time had stopped and I was overcome by pure silence as flashes of my own past experiences with death while in prison floated through my mind. When I came back to reality, he was mentioning how rough it was for him to endure the fact that even though he had been staying out of trouble, avoiding confrontation, and trying his best to maintain a consistent pattern of responsible behavior, it was still all stripped away from him without any justification or warning. Then he said, *"What should I do, Antwann?"* These are the words that sent chills through my body because I knew that here standing before me was someone crying out for help. I gave him what little advice I could to explore responsible options and tried my best to console him; but I knew that despite my words, he still felt like he was dying on the inside. This situation is not as uncommon as one on the outside looking in may think. There are many of those in control who have the power and authority to actually help rehabilitate individuals who are incarcerated by granting them rewards for good behavior and instituting more programs that will aid in us getting out and staying out who would rather either find the smallest reasons to take things away from us or just punish everyone as a collective whole for the actions of a few due to their personal feelings and misgivings regarding people who are locked up. Going through this day after day, year after year, you begin to lose hope, feel unworthy, and tell yourself, *"Maybe I have no place on Earth, anyway."* After this, I found myself reflecting on conversations I'd had with my brother of newfound values, Rashad. Rashad is often the voice or reason; because with having been locked up for over a decade himself while serving a life sentence, he fully knows the emotional impact prison has on us who strive so hard to do right in the midst of so much chaos.

As I write this, I think about being faced with one of man's greatest fears, passing on from this physical form. I had come face-to-face with this many times as a hospice worker in the facility that I reside in and you never truly recover from the experience of looking death straight in the eye, and the death of two inmates in particular will live with me forever. The emptiness that lies within the cold stare makes it clear that there lies a shell with no soul within it. There would be times when I would just stand in the unoccupied hospice cells and allow the silence to envelop me, knowing that recently someone had just died in this room. Sometimes I would even touch the bed or run my hand along the top of empty locker, hoping I could still feel the remnants of the energy of whoever had recently passed on; remembering the conversations, laughs, and memories that I had shared with that person. So many thoughts would pass through my mind during these times alone, but the biggest one would always be wondering what it felt like being in their shoes; knowing that I would die in a cold prison cell and never experience freedom in the outside world ever again and doing whatever I could to make peace with God and settle my mind before I departed from this earth.

Just recently, on a Sunday, I went out to the big yard recreation to discuss this story with Rashad; and as I stood at the gate of the housing unit Rashad is in to wait for him, a sudden rain forcefully descended down from the heavens. Everyone on the yard scattered to try to find shelter, and I could see the medical cart leaving from the housing unit that I leave in. At first I thought it was just



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another Code 16 (medical emergency), which was common for my housing unit because of all the sickly and elderly patients housed there, but I soon found out just how wrong I was. As most people went into the gym to get out of the rain, I decided to make my way all the way back to the housing unit. I entered the house drenched in rain, and several inmates ran up to me telling me that my cousin Ron-Ron had just fallen out in the sally port. Confused and trying to process what was just said to me, I continued on to get my shower and change out of my soaking wet clothes. As the whispering and gossiping continued to grow as to the cause of Ron-Ron's situation, it would take three days for the final conclusion to become clear. On Wednesday at 7:30 AM, I noticed Johnny ("Sleepy") on the phone with his head down. When he finally looked up at me, the pain that I saw in his eyes told me all that I needed to know. I turned and went back into my cell, lifted my head to the sky and yelled, ***"God, WHY!? What do you want from us!? Why are you allowing us to die in prison this way!?"*** As the tears flowed down my face, I knew that Sleepy was hurting as well, and there was nothing I could do. Ron-Ron had suffered a massive stroke, which left him brain dead, so a loved one was left with the choice of making the heart-wrenching decision to pull the plug on him. I'd just sat with COVID-19 inmate patients and watched them fight for their life only to succumb to the deadly disease, and now I also had to endure yet another person close to me lose their life behind these prison walls. This left me to wonder, *"What does God have in store for ME?"*

Prison becomes a day-to-day internal assault on the mind and soul; because along with being stuck in such a chaotic environment, some officials feel that it is part of their job to add to the suffering that we already endure being separated from society and our loved ones. There are those who use being in a position of power to take out the frustrations that they deal with in their personal lives on us, or who are already biased against all individuals who are locked up because of past experiences in their lives. Then you also have the ones who are racists, and let their viewpoints regarding skin color be known through their words and actions when dealing with us. You would have to experience this life and be immersed in it to fully understand its impact. The feeling of helplessness that comes with being incarcerated builds up to almost an intolerable level over time because if you lash out and retaliate to the animosity, then you run the risk of getting even more time added to your sentence so you just get used to the feeling of being worthless because that's how you are treated regardless of how much change or rehabilitation you experience while being incarcerated.

Injustice when it comes to the judicial system is not new; this has been going on for a very long time...so why isn't it resonating with society? What has really changed since the "shackles and chains" era? Why did an inmate have to sacrifice his life to try to gain some semblance of peace for himself? To whomever is reading this story, I wish that for a brief moment you could tap into my mind and my heart and experience the overwhelming anguish that I have carried for so long as I fight to reclaim the freedom that was taken from me over two decades ago. Tears flow from my face onto this paper simply because no one knows the pain that comes along with being in prison. The grotesque picture that is painted of this place and those housed within these walls only goes to further the agenda of amassing profit off of those who have been lost and forgotten. It seems as if the focus only goes onto those with the worse crimes and attitudes, and not on those who are either innocent or are truly remorseful for their past actions and have changed their lives for the better. It all amounts to a scare tactics used to frighten society into continuing to shell out tax dollars towards keeping us behind bars instead of giving a chance to those who deserve it. This is the main reason why the 85% law for those with violent crimes has not been changed even though it has shown to be highly ineffective and has ultimately created more problems than solutions for the prison industry. It is even worst for those like me who are serving life without the possibility of parole because it creates a pit of misery within a person that causes them



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to eventually self-destruct if they are not mentally and emotionally strong enough to continue to endure.

Everything in here has a price tag, from the canteen items that have taxes on them, to calls and e-mails to loved ones, to the music and games that we purchase for our tablets, court costs, lawyer fees, etc. We are walking dollar signs, and the actual rehabilitation that takes place is only the bare minimum because the money made off of the revolving door aspect of recidivism in terms of individuals who get out and come right back because they don't have the healthy emotional and mental foundation to make it in society far outweighs the efforts being made to actually help these people. If everyone who got out of prison actually received real rehabilitation to where they got out and stayed out instead of being warehoused with outrageous amounts of time that reflect the notion that we don't deserve a second chance, then how would the prison industry continue to thrive? I'm tired of asking for help only to continue being ignored. I'm tired of pleading for my life just for it to fall on deaf ears. I'm tired of being placed in Administrative Segregation because of my concerns due to complaining about conditions being frowned upon in the eyes of the institution. Where is the conflict resolution? Where is the true care and concern? Where is the real justice? Who will be the next individual to give up hope behind these prison gates and die without being given a second chance or decide to end their own life just to gain peace?

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No body's listening! why!?