

Researchers estimate that, on average, at least 38% of all U.S. prisoners held in solitary confinement are mentally ill.¹ Jail and prison correctional officers aren't medically trained to handle these individuals; so when they display problematic behavior, the officers' first reaction is usually to place them in solitary confinement, either as a means of punishment or simply so that they won't have to deal with them. I learned this first-hand the first time I was put in Segregation.

This incident occurred in 2008 while I was in jail being adjudicated. After my trial, which resulted in me being convicted on all thirteen of my charges, the Commonwealth's Attorney explicitly promised me that she was going to recommend a LIFE sentence, further adding that the judge always went with her recommendations. At the time, I had already been in jail for about six months, and the mere thought of spending the rest of my life in such an awful environment was more than I could handle. I'd been previously diagnosed with poor mental health upon my discharge from the military, and the anxiety and stress I was under in jail likely triggered my disorder. I began rationalizing that my life was over anyway, so it would be best if I just ended it. Suicide seemed to be the obvious solution to my problems.

Razors were passed out every evening so that we could shave. On this particular day, I signed out a razor, then went to my bunk, removed the blade and sliced both of my wrists several times. Then I laid under my blanket so that everyone would think I was asleep while I bled out. I figured I'd pass out and die peacefully while I was unconscious. Fortunately, the officer who'd handed out the razors returned to collect them quicker than he normally did. After collecting everyone else's razors, he noticed that I had not returned mine and came into the cellblock to look for me. There he found me, in my bunk, underneath my blanket with blood everywhere. He immediately called a medical emergency, and within minutes, medical staff came rushing in to save me. I was taken to the jailhouse medical triage and kept there until the bleeding stopped and my vital signs improved. However, after having my wrists stitched and wrapped in gauze, I was told that I was being placed on suicide watch for two weeks while my mental health was monitored. Boy o' boy was I in for a surprise.

In jail and prison, suicide watch is nothing more than an especially cruel form of solitary confinement. I was placed in a single cell that was MUCH colder than the rest of the jail. It was freezing! All of my clothes and shoes were taken from me, as well as my sheets, blanket and mattress.

The only item I was given was a green kevlar vest which served absolutely no purpose. I wasn't allowed to get visits from my family; there were no other inmates around for me to talk to; it was impossible to get adequate sleep lying with my bare skin on the cold, metal bed frame; and I had no books, TV or music to stimulate my mind. Living under those conditions and being alone with nothing but my miserable thoughts drove me mad to a degree that I could never adequately convey. It was obvious that I wasn't put in that cell to be treated or helped in any way; I was being PUNISHED for being a "burden" on the jail staff by attempting to harm myself. I quickly realized that the point of suicide watch - in the eyes of corrections - is to make inmates so uncomfortable and downright miserable that we'll fear attempting suicide again and ending up back in there.

The ACLU has reported that solitary confinement causes and exacerbates mental illness, leading prisoners in solitary to attempt suicide at significantly higher rates than those in general population.² This couldn't have been more true for me! While I was on suicide watch, not one minute passed without me contemplating more ways of killing myself. All I wanted was to escape the insufferable conditions of that cell, even if my only escape was death.

Once my two weeks were over, the jail's mental health specialist brought my mattress, clothing, and the rest of my belongings to the front of the cell where I could see them. She told me she'd release me back into general population only if I agreed to sign some papers stating that I was okay, and that I would not attempt suicide again.

Truthfully, I wasn't okay. The root of my suicidal ideations had yet to be addressed. But the sight of my belongings sitting outside that door and the prospect of being warm again, being able to see my family, watch TV, eat a hot meal, get a good night's sleep, and actually talk to other people made me all too eager to sign those papers and get out of that cell.

My punishment for attempting suicide was essentially a punishment for having poor mental health. Maybe this is why mentally ill prisoners are far more likely to spend time in solitary confinement than other prisoners³. Correctional staff don't want to deal with us - nor are they adequately trained to - so for them, isolating us away in a cell away from everyone is the solution. But for us, solitary confinement isn't a solution at all. It only serves to make the underlying cause(s) of our behavior - poor mental health - exponentially worse.

Sources:

- 1) The New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty & The ACLU of New Mexico, "Inside the Box: The Real Costs of Solitary Confinement in New Mexico's Jails and Prisons," p. 5, October 2013
- 2) ACLU, "End the Use of Solitary Confinement," p. 1
- 3) Treatment Advocacy Center and National Sheriff's Association, "The Treatment of Persons with Mental Illness in Prisons and Jails: A State Survey," p. 1, April 8, 2014