

THE WORST PUNISHMENT THEY GOT

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In my prison cell, the hooks to hang clothes are barely four feet off the ground and they give way if any significant weight is placed upon them. A great inconvenience since there are only two hooks to hang shirt, pants, coat, towel, robe, rain poncho and hat. Too much weight. The single hook in the shower stall is equally useless. The other day I used a different shower than my usual and then turned around to see my boxers on the floor in the puddle of water that collects there. From what I am told, these breakaway hooks are some sort of suicide prevention device. As if one would even try to hang themselves from a hook 4' off the floor. I don't know anyone short enough to make use of it. The top bunk in the cell is nearly a foot higher and sturdy enough to hang any man. Under the top bunk I hang a string which holds all the things that the hooks won't. I wonder if the experts who invented those hooks have ever actually seen a prison cell. There is an air return vent up near the ceiling which is very sturdy. Some guys hang their TV up there. Others run a line from there to the door to hang up wet laundry. Lots of places to hang stuff (or yourself) that are better than the hooks provided.

Suicide prevention is a real concern among prison administrators. Little scrutiny or interest is visited upon their daily treatment of the incarcerated, but deaths have to be explained. Drug overdoses, murders and suicides inside a prison make it appear that officials are not in control. The general public find it inexplicable that these things could even occur in a prison where the inmates are being watched. Truth is, short of having a guard for each prisoner, stuff is going to happen. Many people assume that there are no drugs in jail and so prison will cure addiction. There are a lot of drugs in my prison. Even in restricted housing units where no one gets contact visits. Even during the COVID lockdown when there were no visits at all and only staff came and went. Point is -shit happens.

Suicide prevention posters are all over the prison; encouraging people to share their suicidal thoughts with others. When they were first put up there was a spike in suicides. I guess the posters made people think about the option. There is no confidentiality when someone is thinking about harming themselves or others. The custody staff need to know. Whether you tell a counselor, psychiatrist, or a corrections officer: you have told the prison. The prison's response to attempted suicide, or thoughts thereof, is suicide watch. The individual is placed in what we call a 'hard cell.' No pillow, blanket, sheets, shoelaces or personal property. Only the bare minimum of coverage in clothing. The light will be left on 24/7 so that the staff can check on you every 15 minutes. You will get food but probably not utensils.

The purpose of suicide watch is to remove the means to kill yourself by putting you in a cage with nothing that could conceivably be used to hurt yourself. Cold, lonely nights; naked and afraid in a cell so empty that it echoes. No entertainment, no socialization. Just the realization of how alone you really are. The idea is to remove the means to kill one's self until psychiatric treatment can remove the desire. The reality is that the prison can only temporarily remove the means while it remains the primary reason for the desire. An appointment with a psychologist or psychiatrist will be scheduled so they can evaluate the inmate. Medications to treat depression may be prescribed. A person cannot remain indefinitely on suicide watch. It is certainly no kind of life. I see it as the worst punishment they got. A punishment that people will say anything to avoid. I expect some people have been helped through a difficult time on suicide watch. The shock of a death in the family, receiving divorce papers in jail, parole or commutation rejection and other calamities may create a desire for suicide that soon passes. What I have seen in prison is men who went there multiple times then ultimately killed themselves in general population.

The suicide rate among Pennsylvania prisoners is three times the national average. In 2019, the rate of suicide was the highest in 25 years, (Workers World, 5 March 2020). The DOC is pushing the specious argument that people are less likely to kill themselves when sharing a cell with another. There is a reason why the statistics might support that argument. The mentally ill most likely to kill themselves are also most likely to have a single cell due to the difficulty of living with them. They may talk to themselves, scream all night, experience paranoid delusions, engage in aggressive behavior or just be dirty and incoherent. Being in a cage with a mental patient will not make you less suicidal but I guess one of the occupants may report the suicide attempt of the other. So the DOC is now delegating its observation responsibility to the cellie. Pennsylvania's real reason for trying to double up all inmates is to keep mass incarceration going on a budget. If they genuinely cared about people they wouldn't cage the mentally ill.

My experience with suicide watch occurred on my first night ever in prison. Arriving at the county jail late at night, I was processed in by a guard who could not believe that I was 36 years old and had never been in prison. They normally dealt with previous offenders and gave them the same number as on their last stay. Some guys wanted that old number to show that they been here before and knew the ropes. I said very little to them and did not hear what the police said to them. I stripped down to my underwear and put on the ill-fitting orange jumpsuit. It was after midnight and I was hoping to get some sleep. They led me to a cell in the interior of the jail. The jail has been expanded many times and what was once an outside window was not anymore. It was translucent and flooded the cell with fluorescent light. It was May but cold in the jail. Prisons are often kept cold to slow down bacterial and fungal growth. I think it just promotes the spread of rhino and corona viruses.

A guard came to the cell door and told me to strip naked. I didn't want to. I was afraid. I already had the jail uniform on and was confused as to what they wanted. He said to take off my clothes or he would come in there and do it for me. I complied and pushed my underwear, socks and jumpsuit through the wicket. Then he pushed through this flimsy yellow paper garment. Like a short sleeved robe but so thin that it was virtually transparent. It only just covered my crotch; my legs and feet were bare. I yelled: "What the hell is this?!" No answer.

There was no bedding, just a vinyl mattress. I was angry and didn't understand what was happening. I told them I was cold and demanded a blanket. They didn't care. I easily ripped off the sleeve of the fragile garment to wrap around my freezing feet. Laying on my side with the bare shoulder underneath, I curled up and folded the mattress to cover my legs. I fell asleep for a moment which caused me to let go of the mattress. It flopped down waking me up. I did not sleep that night. A cold and lonely night, naked and afraid. Alone with the realization that nobody would ever care again about my comfort or need for sleep.

They brought cold cereal and milk for breakfast but would not give me a spoon. I went off. I called them pigs who were trying to make me eat like an animal. Sticking my face into the bowl like a dog! An inmate worker slipped me a spoon and then got in trouble for it. I yelled at the Corrections Officer again, told him I had the spoon up my ass the whole time. A lie which could have garnered me an unpleasant search. I believed that they were punishing me and I responded with rudeness. Nothing they were doing seemed like help to me and still doesn't today even though I now know what they were doing. The prison guards told me how lucky I was that the psych doctor was scheduled to be there the next day or I would have spent many nights like the first. I hate to think how angry I would have gotten or what I might have done.

Handcuffed in front, I shuffled out of the cell. Virtually naked in front of staff and other prisoners who gawked at the "crazy, suicidal white boy." I told the Doctor that I was not suicidal, had no intention of harming myself or others and "could I please have my underwear back?"

The only possible way to make your first night in jail more frightening is to be naked, cold and confused. I would have said anything to get clothed. I learned quick not to tell them shit. I know a guy who was on suicide watch under a light that never went off. A CO took pity on him and told him: "You tell the psych that you are not suicidal and that light will go off; otherwise it will break you. I've seen it happen."

Sleep deprivation seems an odd response to suicidal tendencies but suicide watch is only temporary. Psychiatric care is on the way, maybe as soon as the next weekday. Maybe longer. Psychiatric care in prison is stretched thin. Prisons have become the biggest mental health care providers in the nation and do what they can. Prison psychiatrists have hundreds of patients. In some places, thousands. You don't get an hour a week on a couch. You get a few minutes once every few months where they ask you if you intend to harm yourself or others. If the answer is 'No', then you can go; they got bigger problems. Psychiatric care in prison relies on medications to sedate and subdue individuals bent on harming themselves or others. Our entire criminal legal system is focused on the control and punishment of people, not providing therapy for depression. We treat mental illness and the disease of addiction with incarceration. It doesn't cure either one.

They don't really want to die, they just want the pain to end and have no options. I have known a few friends who killed themselves. One was a lifer who told me he was *not* doing life. A few years after he died they released hundreds of juvenile lifers like himself. He might not have had to do life. Another couldn't do his eight year sentence. He'd be out now if he was alive.

Imagine a man on death row, days away from certain death. Racked with guilt, frightened, hopeless. He decides to end it now. Why wait? A Corrections Officer making rounds notices the inmate hanging by a sheet. He opens the cell while calling for a cut down tool. The convict is cut down and rushed to the infirmary where he is revived. He is then placed on suicide watch until the execution. The Department of Corrections will make every effort to prevent the suicide of someone on death row so that *they* can kill them later. Individuals are not allowed to kill themselves, it is illegal. The state, however, can take your life following a criminal conviction.

If the state can kill you but you can't kill yourself, then who owns the body?

In certain places, in extreme circumstances, the state may allow an assisted suicide. There must be a terminal illness including great pain. Life in prison doesn't qualify. The state has the right to end your life but you have no right to end it by your own actions. Unless you use them. Some of the roughly one thousand people shot and killed by police each year in the US are thought to have committed 'suicide by cop.' They find it easier, and legal, to get killed by the state rather than by their own hand. Since the state wishes to reserve that right as part of its monopoly on violence than they should expect that people will use them to do it.

I don't know how people find the will to kill themselves. No matter how awful my situation, I still like myself too much. I don't know why the state does not allow suicide. Perhaps it is morally based or just a control thing. Such questions are for activists and academics to think about. I only know that suicide watch is the worst punishment they got and incarcerated people are going to hide their feelings from their jailers.

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