

OPINION ([HTTPS://WWW.IDSNEWS.COM/SECTION/OPINION](https://www.idsnews.com/section/opinion))

COLUMN: Surviving solitary confinement

BY HUSSAIN ATHER ([HTTPS://WWW.IDSNEWS.COM/STAFF/HUSSAIN-ATHER](https://www.idsnews.com/staff/hussain-ather))

Published Feb 15, 2016 4:28 am

Share ▼

In our nation of second chances, the punishment should fit the crime. The overuse of solitary confinement in prisons punishes criminals too severely for their good.

“Research suggests that solitary confinement has the potential to lead to devastating, lasting psychological consequences,” President Obama wrote in the Washington Post. Obama recommends banning solitary confinement for juveniles as a response to low-level infractions.

In light of this push to reform the prison system, it’s clear we need better mental health treatment for prisoners in solitary confinement. But we also need to understand how the prisoners’ struggles are unique in order to address these issues.

Susie Nelson, editorial intern at Nautilus, writes, “Confinement-induced stress can shrink parts of the brain, including the hippocampus, which is responsible for memory, spatial orientation and control of emotions.”

In addition, 55 percent of male and 73 percent of female prisoners suffer from mental illness, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Prisoners who undergo such punishment also often have trouble functioning in society when they are released.

Those behind bars are isolated from the world. Everything about them, including their family, friends, clothes, hobbies and lifestyle, is gone from them. Lack of access to physical comfort, essential food and other necessities takes its toll on prisoners.

But solitary confinement can be something else. When you aren’t distracted by reality, you enter the world of abstraction. And the isolated mind is a breeding ground for creativity.

Hussain Al-Shahristani, Iraq’s minister of higher education and scientific research, survived a decade in the Abu Ghraib prison by solving mathematical problems.

After serving three years in solitary confinement, Johnny Perez of the Urban Justice Center recounted, "In a sense, you are confined, and in other senses, you're free." He kept a diary in which he reflected upon historical quotes and the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius.

In this sense, the way those in solitary confinement exercise their imagination allows them to understand the world better. As prisoners reflect on the past, they create worlds in which they can reflect on the reality. They can imagine narratives of their past by asking questions such as, "What if I had done this instead?" or "What if things were different?"

This allows prisoners to develop resilience and autonomy for dealing with reality.

While this imagination is necessary, prisoners must deliberately control these thoughts or they'll succumb to anxiety, intrusive thoughts and unhealthy fixation on the past.

Hip hop group N.W.A. understood how to shape the soul in prison. On the subject of living in correctional facilities, Dr. Dre wrote, "I get straight, meditate like a Buddhist."

Though he's not a real doctor, Dre offers insight psychiatrists and professionals need to understand to help prisoners fight their struggles.

Our mental health treatment for prisoners should incorporate these methods of dealing with struggles of the mind.

These changes will help criminals address their psychological issues and readjust to society. It will, in turn, fight crime rate more effectively and make everyone safer.

sather@indiana.edu

@SHussainAther

Like what you're reading? Support independent, award-winning college journalism on this site. Donate here.
(<https://www.idsnews.com/page/donate>)

More in Opinion (<https://www.idsnews.com/section/opinion>)