



## Surviving in prison

By Daniel McDonald, 36 years old, 11 years in prison in Texas

Isolated confinement is one of the most abusive forms of incarceration known to man. It strips away all that makes us human: we are a communal race. Without contact, a person must deal with themselves. Doing so over a long period of time quite simply warps the mind.

Or it can, if you let it. I have been in isolated confinement - known as Administrative Segregation (AD-Seg) for six years; which sounds like a short duration, but consider what the average person can achieve in that time to gain perspective. Sadly, 6 years is nothing compared to other men here. Many have been in AD-Seg for 10, 20, or more years, with no prospect of release. Which is comparable to death row, minus an execution date. In short, we are continually punished by the isolation - the sensory deprivations.

That isn't to say we don't engineer ways to be "sociable", because we do. Commonalities are found, though rarely is a true confidant embraced. The typical conversations cover sports, politics, religion, news, or anything randomly original. It gets redundant, though, so it's easy to grow disillusioned.

What is left, or always there, is self. My incarceration began in population. Fear led me to take part in an escape attempt, so I'm here. But before I was transferred to this Unit, I was placed on a death row section for three days while the investigation took place. Yes, I had been in population on Polunsky Unit. It was in 12 building, on the same Unit, where my eyes opened to this world.

And contrary to popular belief, men on death row have compassion. I showed up in their section with nothing. But that didn't last long. My neighbor gave me coffee and tacos. Another guy gave me writing supplies and hygiene items. They didn't know me, but they stepped out of their shells to alleviate my suffering. To ease my transition into the isolated environment they'd adapted to.

I've been treated far worse by people who've never committed a crime, including being ignored by them. What those three days taught me, became the seed to help me begin adapting. Because you can and will be alone in a cell. I live a lonely existence, but in softening my heart, I am able to alleviate the suffering of others at times. Being able to help and give in that way keeps me grounded.

Overall, surviving in this environment (AD-Seg) is all about letting go of cravings, attachments, controlling my temper, and limiting expectations. At the same time, a quality routine moves my day along. Projects like writing keep me engaged. Keeping me focused on other realities not locked inside these walls. That is why letters and visits are crown jewels of each day, when I receive them. Someone takes the time to include me in their life, much like perfect strangers on death row helped me in a dark time of need.

I will never forget those acts of kindness. And because they so profoundly affected me, I'm always looking for ways to "pay it forward" - planting seeds to help other men transition into this harsh, isolated world that I am now adapted to.

The most difficult day I ever experienced in AD-Seg, was when my Aunt died on December 20, 2014. It was so sudden and shocking. Five days earlier she'd sent a jpay noting how she planned

to come see me. So, when my Mother wrote me with the news, my heart broke. My Aunt had been so kind and inspirational over the years. Losing her hurt bad. But it was important that I could still feel - still hurt. That told me my mind wasn't warped. I cried, then moved on. But I carry her legacy of surviving with kindness forward, which keeps her close in my mind. My life might be simple, and it is, but it is full of meaning.

I survive with the mantra of lovingkindness.

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