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DEPRESSION ON LOCKDOWN:

PRISONERS EMPATHIZE

Depression is debilitating. Depression saps one's energy, induces whole-body numbness, and stimulates streams of negative thoughts. In the extreme, those negative thoughts can provoke suicidal ideation.

As a prisoner serving a sentence of life without the possibility of parole, I know about depression from first-hand experience and observation. Fortunately, I've learned to utilize a number of resilience practices; I bounce back from adversity fairly quickly. Yet I've witnessed too many successful suicides to count. Sadly, many of us prisoners have. Again, depression is extremely debilitating. California's prison population has the highest suicide rate in the nation (CDCR, 2016). And consistent with this contagion era, depression in the free world has sky rocketed as well.

The World Health Organization (WHO), using informal surveys, estimates that 45% of the U.S. population is depressed in the COVID age; Iran self-reports a 60% depression rate, and China reports a 35% rate of depression (Goodman, 2020). Yet we will get through this; we must get through this!

There are many triggers of depression. As with those in larger society, prisoners wrestle with long-term loss of autonomy and uncertainty. Prisoners are arrested by thick bouts of anxiety and isolation. And while it may seem ironic that persons thrust into overcrowded conditions would suffer from loneliness, the paradox holds firm. Human beings -- whether confined in a home of luxury for a few months or in a barren cell of concrete and steel for decades -- tend to withdraw when depressed. We self-isolate.

Free Americans are largely depressed because they understandably desire to get back to work, visit their families, and have some control over their lives. There's no question that prisoners can relate to those needs. The one disconnect from prisoners and the larger world is that for most free persons, abiding in their homes offers both physical and biological safety. Not so for the average prisoner. Prisoners have no control over with whom they are forced to share a cell (i.e., a serial killer, a severely mentally challenged person, or a violent and unreasonable person).

Some readers may retort that prisoners are criminals, therefore they do not deserve such considerations. Yet rarely is any human phenomenon so simple. In recent years DNA has proven that there are innocent people behind bars; and we now know that race plays a huge part in who goes to prison and who gets probation. Likewise, what of those who suffer from substance abuse disorder and would be better served in treatment centers? And what of those who have reformed themselves after years or decades of self-help? After all, isn't that what we want and expect from the department of "corrections"?

Of course, all human beings are susceptible to COVID, depression, isolation, and other vulnerabilities. The difference is context. Some