



I was in prison for two decades – here's what I learned about isolation

by Jennifer Toon

Mon 13 Apr 2020 06.00 BST

I've been watching the rain outside my bedroom window for several hours. An eerie, familiar feeling haunts me as I observe the outside world from inside four walls. It's starting to feel like this room is all I've ever known. I feel disoriented, like I'm still in prison. I sip my coffee and steady my thoughts.

I'm a 41-year-old woman who has spent almost half her life incarcerated. I sometimes fear there's nothing meaningful I can contribute to society, but with a global pandemic forcing much of the world into lockdown, I have an unexpected opportunity: to share the lessons from my prison experience that might help others to adjust.

When I was released, I unknowingly walked right into another lockup. Parole mandated that I wear a GPS ankle monitor for the first year of my so-called freedom. I would have to make weekly schedules and would only be permitted to go to locations approved for the day. Approved locations consisted of work, church, medical appointments, the grocery store, the bank, the post office and gas station. Essential daily living needs only. At least living under house arrest and two 10-year stints in prison prophetically prepared me for worldwide lockdown.

Stay-at-home orders from world governments range in severity but more than a third of the human population is under some type of lockdown or restriction. Some people might wonder whether I find it irritating that people call this house arrest. I don't. It doesn't matter how either of us got here or what you call it, it's painfully difficult just the same.

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In prison, I found myself believing that walls were all that existed. They stood unsympathetic to my suffering and closed in a little bit more each day. I simply refused to make peace with them. I resisted, pounding and screaming into their flat, cold, cement faces. I often thought that I would lose my mind from the feeling of slowly being entombed and cut off from the world, but then something happened.

As the outside world disappeared, a new one took shape. The inner world within myself surfaced, as if it had always been waiting to do so. The most important lesson I learned during this time was that I had to accept my circumstances as they were, then change my perspective about them. To my surprise when I did this, those once menacing walls, with their obscene graffiti and chipped paint, transformed. They were no longer holding me hostage but offering refuge.

Restrictions and stay-at-home orders are the reality, but if we can shift our perspective, our homes become sanctuaries, not prisons. We are not locked in but rather the threat of disease, and hundreds of other harmful things are locked out, distractions and misaligned priorities among them.

Solitude challenges you to look at things differently. Before prison, my worldview had been rather limited and selfish. I was known to throw terrible tantrums as I tried to bend reality to my will, but peace depended on my bending to reality. Life wasn't all about me. I had to learn what was within my control and what wasn't. I also discovered that time exists in relation to an emotion or experience, and it slowed or sped according to my ability to be present. So, I learned how to flow with it, not rushing nor procrastinating, but fully engaged in whatever was before me.

What did that look like? It was as simple as just paying attention. I read books carefully. I listened to others deeply. I stopped mindlessly flipping through the channels of my mind. I gave my full attention to every activity, no matter how small it might be. Full engagement strengthened my gratitude, and gratitude strengthened my will.

Just a few weeks ago I was told that the parole board had approved the removal of my GPS ankle monitor. After hearing the news, I celebrated by making plans to visit friends in Dallas and Austin. I allowed myself to dream again about better jobs, better places to live and a thriving social life. Freedom was finally within my reach when the walls threatened to close in on me again.

Now I'm staring out the window and dreading another confinement. Earlier in the week I had spoken to my brother about the unfairness of it all. "Why is this happening now?! Just when I'm free of the monitor, just when I got my life back together, the whole world goes on lockdown." He laughed: "Baby sister, the whole world isn't conspiring against you. A pandemic is not happening just to interrupt your plans." I smiled. "You're right, life isn't all about me." After we hung up, I paced the floor as I often would in my cell. I ran my hands over the walls of my small apartment and knew they would either transform into a prison cell or a refuge. I decided that a refuge sounds nice right about now.