

Prison and Mental Health

Sterlin Reaves

BEFORE YOU READ: What would it be like to have a mental health challenge while in prison?

Prisons have never made prisoners' mental health much of a priority. In fact, some prison employees feel it's their job to make you suffer as much as they can. They accomplish this by using their authority to limit the few privileges you enjoy or even sabotage your opportunity to get parole.

I've been diagnosed with depression and borderline personality disorder. Although there has been more emphasis placed on prisoners' mental health in recent years, there isn't enough trained staff to meet the needs of everyone in prison. Covid-19 has made the situation worse because social distancing means we are often isolated in our cells, and we can't participate in activities that normally would allow us to relieve some of our stress and get some intellectual stimulation.

Even worse: Covid policies have eliminated in-person family visits. And so it's been months since anyone has seen their families. Zoom visits and phone calls are okay but nothing can replace a good hug or kiss. My family has been hit hard by the pandemic. Many of my loved ones have



"Health and Unity through Diversity," mural in Fresno, CA.

lost their job, and a few have gotten evicted. This affects me because I also depend on my family for financial support. If they can't send me money, I can't afford the few comforts that break up the monotony, like paying for cable or buying commissary items.

Adjusting to this new "normal" has been difficult. I hear experts on TV discussing why it's important to people's mental health to get out of the house and get back to living again. I agree. I hope that now that people have gotten a taste of what it's like to be confined to their homes, they'll be more empathetic to prisoners and push Congress to pass legislation that puts an end to solitary confinement.

Everything that's being discussed about how the pandemic is affecting people also applies to us. Here in prison, we have increased depression and suicides. During this time, I have found myself more anxious and depressed than I normally am. I hope that there will be some good that will come from the pandemic, such as more resources for improving the mental health of everyone in the country and that we prisoners will be included.

AFTER YOU READ: The boxes on pp. 46-54 include summaries of evidence-based strategies for addressing mental health. Which ones are you curious about? Choose a few, research them, and present what you learn in writing or in a slideshow.

Take Care of Everyone?

Yes! Mental health problems are not just individual. According to the journal, *World Psychiatry*, "The most pressing determinants of mental health in all populations are structural: poverty, gender inequality, social exclusion and conflict." We need to address these problems to improve the mental health of everyone.

Source: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4329889/>

Sterlin Reaves is a writer who has been published a number of times in The Change Agent.