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Coming Out of Isolation Stronger

Sean Swain

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The latest concern that folks are expressing during this zombie apocalypse is their inability to cope with isolation and quarantine. We're just a few weeks into this thing and already folks are going a little bonkers. This is strange to me, given that I've spent years at a time in total and complete isolation. It's almost hard for me to fathom that someone *wouldn't* know how to cope in such an environment. So, this week is going to be something of an instructional video – only, without the video, and maybe not very instructive.

OK, first things first. You gotta stay mentally organized, and staying mentally organized means living in a way that's organized. You need a routine. Routine is key to long-term segregation. You want to get up in the morning at the same time. Set an alarm. Get up, get out of bed, make the bed. It doesn't matter that you have nowhere to go. It doesn't matter that you're not leaving that living space. You get up at the same time and you make the bed, because the sleeping period is over. Create for yourself set times for eating your meals, or a small range of times for those meals to happen in. Set a time for showering or

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bathing and personal grooming. It doesn't matter that you're not going anywhere.

Laying in bed all day in the same sweater and underwear from last Tuesday is not mental organization. It's surrender. Yes, I'm talking to you. No, you, there. Yes, the one in the sweater and the underwear. Right.

Break up your day into chunks. Fill those chunks with activity. Maybe you like to read. Designate a period of your day for reading. Designate another part of your day for writing, another part for skyping and twitter and social interaction. Doing this gives you routine, but it also gives you benchmarks as you travel through your day. You can say to yourself "I've gotten this done, at such-and-such a time, it's time to do X." You are now doing your time, your time is not doing you.

Your time will move faster, you'll get more accomplished. Which brings me to my next point: accomplishing. Each day will bring you multiple opportunities to fulfill goals. Get something written. Get something read. Go a certain time on your stationary bike. Dispose of the body of that annoying next-door neighbor... former neighbor. Just kidding. Don't kill your neighbor. There are security cameras everywhere. I digress.

The thing is: each day you meet some small goal, then another, then another. You take in calories, you move from activity to activity. Most importantly: you survive. Each day you end still breathing is a mission accomplished. You're not just writing emails or riding your stationary bike, you're fighting for your very survival, albeit in a mundane kind of way.

Physical exercise. The human body is a machine made for motion. So move. My captivity workout, I do sets of push-ups, crunches and squats, one set after another. It works major muscle groups, gets my heart pumping, gets me sucking oxygen, and helps me to think more clearly. It allows me to release tension. Now more than ever, that's important, not just for your survival, but for the survival of your annoying neighbor. So get exercise and whenever possible, in a way that's safe, try to

get an hour of direct sunlight outdoors. Go outside and breathe deeply and feel sunlight on your face. It matters.

Now, if you're all alone, you can organize your day any way that you want. You can modify your routine at will until it works for you. But if you're not alone, you have to synthesize your routine with the lives of those around you. Urge them to adopt a routine. Socially, it helps keep the peace. You know what other people are doing at given chunks of the day, and they know what you're doing. You want periods of solitude and periods of social interaction, time set aside for your own projects and time for collective and communal activities.

Through the course of this, you're going to experience heightened anxiety. It's easy to dwell on your own situation and let the worry spiral out of control. It's easy. We all do it. So what you do, to get out of that spiral, you focus on the struggle of someone else. Get out of your own head. Contribute to someone else's plight. This isn't just some Mother Theresa kumbaya crap. It's not just some virtuous selflessness. It's a selfish act. It's motivated by your desire to further your own survival. If you get out of your own head and help someone, you're exiting that spiral of anxiety.

Some other tips: While it's good to do some planning for the future, force yourself to stay grounded in the now. Daydreaming about when this is over just makes the now suck worse. A little of that can go a long way. Also, be realistic about how long this is. Don't wake up every day thinking that we're all going to pour out into the streets like some flashmob dance routine. It ain't happening, probably for months. So get yourself into a comfortable routine, for months. This is your reality. It is what it is. Also, when that reality feels overwhelming, remind yourself that this is just temporary. It will pass. Even if it takes months, it doesn't take forever. Nothing is forever.

Don't forget, however bad you've got it, others less capable than you have gotten through longer chunks of time in far worse conditions. I did a year with virtually nothing, on star-

vation rations, with very little soap, locked in a space the size of a bathroom with another poor bastard. We were both idiots, and yet we both survived. You will too.

Resolve to survive this. Walk around your living space. Tell the walls: "You won't defeat me." Tell your couch: "You won't defeat me." Tell all your furnishings: "You won't defeat me." Then look in the mirror and tell yourself: "This won't defeat me." And mean it.

You have two choices, flat-out. You can survive this, or you can sit down on the curb, and sooner or later the dogs and the birds will eat you. It's your choice. I've made my choice. Hope I see you on the other side of this shit.

This is anarchist prisoner Sean Swain in exile from Ohio at Buckingham Correctional in Dillwyn, Virginia. If you're surviving, you are the resistance.