

Reader Question: "What are friendships like in prison?"

(Asked in a letter from Greensboro, NC.)

Friendship in prison is a very powerful experience, but also can be a complicated one as well. Doing your time without a friend can be very lonely, difficult or flat out depressing. Basic psychology will tell you about the human need to feel a sense of significance. Prison is structured in a way that makes the prisoner feel insignificant. It separates you from everyone you know, from the people you love and the people that love you.

Prison does a great job at making someone question their self-worth, especially early on in your bid. You arrive not knowing anyone. There's a deep loneliness that your mind, heart and spirit must confront. It's unlike any sense of loneliness I experienced before coming to prison. It's odd to be so closely confined with lots of people at every moment, yet feel more alone and isolated than you have ever felt before in your entire life.

When I arrived to prison, two other men had also arrived that same day. An older doctor who was a Black Panther in his youth, and older man from India who made millions in NY offering risk management to banks. For purely logistical reasons, we became friends as we navigated the beginnings of our sentences together. So there we were, a black man, a brown man and a white man, together every day in federal prison.

I'm in a Federal Prison Camp, the lowest level of custody. Although race plays a big role in here, you are not forced to avoid people outside your own race, as you would be in a higher custody level. Nonetheless, I seemed to be a bit of a mystery to the whites and the blacks, as they both watched how I "moved" and who I "moved" with.

For the most part, people seek out their own race before reaching out to others. As time went on, and the three of us became accustomed to prison life and were moved to other areas of the prison, we all found new friends and we would occasionally talk briefly in passing. We were mainly friends with the goal of helping each other move through those early stages of imprisonment.

I dealt with feelings of loneliness until I came across a few people I now consider my good friends in prison. Every friendship in prison offers mental capital against the architecture of isolation. But having a person you consider a close friend can help dramatically with providing a sense of meaning to your new life in prison. We all want our lives to count for something, and in prison that can be a difficult feeling to achieve. Having a close friend on the "inside" allows you to think "if someone feels me worth of friendship, I must have significance."

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Now, no one is walking around consciously thinking this as they make friends in here, but there's no denying that it is something that helps give meaning to one's life in a place that tries to strip it away. Something that a close friend told me about friendship in prison made a lot of sense. He told me to "befriend people who have a similar out-date as you." This is a very useful way to make your bid much easier.

My close friend and I have release dates just months apart from each other. This saves us both from a lot of mental anguish and loneliness. If they were set to get out a year or two before me, I would be happy for them. But I would also be left to complete several years of prison time in a much more lonely state.

In here, when your close friend goes home before you, there's such a mix of emotions: joy, sadness, excitement, loneliness, anticipation, anxiety. So when I am considering befriending someone, I ask in a polite way: "What's your out-date?" If it is too far apart from my own, I put serious thought into how close of a friendship I am willing to form with that person.

With covid, things with friendship are basically the same. The main difference is we are more separated, and we don't get to see many of the new guys coming in. The prison camp is now separated by unit. There are three units, and we used to co-mingle, but now we do everything separately. We eat in the chow hall one unit at a time. In the past, I used to be able to sit and eat with someone from a different unit. Now the only new guys I meet are the ones sent to my unit. The friendship options have become much more limited since covid.

One other thing I can think of is how most friendships completely fall off after release. Guys all talk like that's not going to happen, but in most cases it does. I can say, in all honesty, there are only a few people I plan to stay in touch with after prison.

The prison system is designed to stop this though. We will be on probation for several years after release, and part of the terms of probation are that you can't associate with any known felons. Obviously, anyone in here is a felon. But true friendships will endure years in prison, and find ways to maintain themselves after release as well.