

## Thoughts on relationships during incarceration and the 5 things that helped us maintain ours

I'm sitting in a prison as I write this. I'm also on a 24-day lockdown as well. In addition to this, I was told I was getting, "immediate release" (because of a law that came into effect) and called my fiance to have her pack me a bag and get ready to make the long drive out here to bring me home the next day. It's been over a week since then and when I asked what's going on, I was told, "immediate release does not mean immediate." As inmates often say in prison, "Hurry up and wait."

But it's exhausting. The prison, the lockdowns, the "immediate release" that is not immediate, it's an emotional roller coaster and you want to get off this ride and forget about everything. But you can't do that. You have a relationship that needs to be maintained. Prison will poke at, jab at, and do all it can to wound your relationship, but you must push that all aside the most you can, and muster all the strength and courage you have, and ask yourself, "What can I do to make sure our relationship survives this?"

None of this is easy. My imprisonment hurt like hell for my fiancé and I. Prison and the forced separation it entails will bring overwhelming strain into even the healthiest of relationships. But it doesn't have to mean the end of the relationship. If you are an honest, committed couple, willing to stay open, forgive, and embrace a level of creativity, your relationship can survive incarceration. In fact, it can even thrive in certain areas during your time apart.

I've reached out to my fiance for her thoughts about being in a relationship with someone who is serving time. Together, we are offering an intimate look into our thoughts and emotions as we try our best to maintain our relationship through this difficult season in our lives.

It's worth mentioning that the United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country on the planet and we are just one of the millions of couples trying to figure out how to make this work. If you know someone in a relationship with an incarcerated individual, please share this with them. This is a lonely path, no matter what side of the bars you find yourself on, but it doesn't have to be so lonely. We don't have to isolate ourselves further. Instead, we can talk about our relationships, learn from others, embrace vulnerability, and share our experiences (the bad and the good). We can take a moment to help each other.

Looking back over the past few years of my incarceration, I've realized how much we accomplished as a couple. It certainly was difficult though. My fiance makes this clear when she says, "Where our lives were together before - I had to cope with the shift of you living your bid inside and my life moving on without you by my side...I wasn't ready when the time actually came and it did honestly take months of adjusting and readjusting to find my own

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footing in our relationship. I was so fearful that we would just grow apart and that would be it.”

Then she goes on to acknowledge, “That was completely wrong and I feel we’ve worked very hard with each other to overcome obstacles, remain close (if not closer), and still enjoy aspects of our relationship.”

I couldn’t agree with her more. If you simply accept the separation as it is, you will inevitably grow further apart. But there is an alternative. You can take responsibility for the relationship, actively engage the separation, and create conditions that encourage you to grow closer together during your time apart. Below are some things that helped us accomplish this. It is not an extensive list of ways to grow closer during your time apart, it is just a few of the ideas that have worked well for us as a couple.

- Letter Writing

Recently, my fiance said, “I sorted through all of your letters and instantly was filled with gratitude. There are so many...” Originally, I started writing her every week. But between writing my children, the people that reach out through this blog (or my record label), getting a prison job, and taking various courses, I switched to every other week. I think this is a good schedule to strive for. You might feel the urge to do it weekly at first, but as things change (like in my case), you might find it more difficult to keep up the pace. It is better to start with less and eventually add more if you can, rather than starting with more and having to subtract what you’re offering because you can’t keep up.

For those of us on the inside, mail call is a highlight of our day. Receiving a letter lets us know we are not forgotten and that someone values us enough to take the time out of their day to actually write us. I cannot stress how important letters have been to my time and relationship during incarceration. There’s so much to share through writing each other and you can also develop your craft of writing love letters too. Additionally my fiancé points out, “It can also be an opportunity to ask each other questions you haven’t thought of asking before incarceration.”

The last thing regarding letters is that for us on the inside, I think it is only fair for us not to expect our partner to write as frequently as we can. Though a day can easily be filled with activities while in prison, we certainly have access to more free time than our partners.

- Daily Meditation

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This is something my fiancée and I learned together before my incarceration. But this practice can be learned any time through a book (or a free app for those on the outside). We set an agreed-upon time to both do a 10 minute (or more) meditation every day. Not only is there plenty of benefits to regular meditation, but my fiancée also points out, "This has kept me meditating every day and there's something really powerful about being able to do something together at the same time despite not being near one another."

Meditation has also allowed me to better handle all the frustrations that come with living in prison. In turn, this has made it easier for me to show up and be present in our relationship.

- Reading Together

We did this several ways. Some books had questions at the end of each chapter and we would answer them and then respond to each other's answers. For books that didn't have questions, we'd make up our own or my fiancée would look up questions online, or we'd simply write out thoughts on what we had read. Again, those of us on the inside are likely to have more free time to read, so be patient with your partner who is handling a much more time-consuming life on the outside. You can read any kind of book together but some wonderful books for couples interested in maintaining a long-term, committed relationship are, *The 5 Love Languages* by Gary Chapman and *Mating In Captivity* by Esther Perel.

It's not enough to simply read books together if you want to enhance your relationship. It is key to also write about what you read. Sharing each other's personal thoughts and feelings on what you read will help you both to explore even deeper into your partner and the relationship as a whole. Overall, this activity was a lot of fun for both of us.

- Song Of The Month

Every month, one of us picks a song to share. Here's what my fiancée said about this, "Every Saturday, my alarm goes off at 10:05 AM and I play a song we've chosen for our monthly pick. It's another thing that makes me feel close to you because we get to do it at the same time. And like letters - music is a way of expressing emotions and vulnerability."

At first, I wasn't planning to buy an mp3 player, but it was worth it for this relationship activity alone. I have access to a decent variety of songs that cost about \$1.50 a track. It's a bond within our relationship and music has been a big part of both our lives for a long time now. (In case anyone was wondering, inmates do not get internet access - we get songs through an offline program called Corrlinks.) It's always exciting to see what song your partner will pick when it's their turn!

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- Communication

This one encompasses everything I already listed, but it is so important to have open and honest communication in a relationship, especially when you are separated by incarceration. It takes more than good communication skills to have a great relationship but for people in our situation (where physical closeness is not an option), this is where much of our attention and energy is channeled into.

My fiance notes, "Some of the things we faced were, being told when we could talk and for how long, visits being denied, hundreds of miles between us, lack of privacy, and constantly readjusting to the ever-changing disruptions of prison life. It can be daunting and it can hang over and surely interrupt relationships. It thrusts a very large wedge between you and the other person."

As painful as it might be, this stuff needs to be talked about in a way that will help each individual in the relationship feel heard and validated. Without physical closeness, communication becomes key to expressing emotional closeness. Our relationship has blossomed so much in this area, even reaching heights it never has before.

When you part from someone, that which you love most about them becomes even more clear in their absence. You must learn to express and communicate this to your partner. They need to hear it.

I will say that for anyone on this journey of relationship and incarceration, it will not be comfortable. At times, you will ache for your life to be different. But that's the thing, we don't have to settle for the stereotypes or status quo. We can figure out ways to grow and show up for each other. Yes, some areas of the relationship will have to stop, but if you take initiative, others will be enhanced and otherwise dormant aspects will start to bloom. This is not the end, it is an opportunity to take the time and separation to create even more connection between you and your partner. The things you choose to do will not replace what is on pause in the relationship. But my partner makes it clear how important it is to show up for each other in these ways when she says, "It does not replace a hug after a hard day at work, but it feels wonderful to hold my heart open to really appreciate letters, extra phone calls, emails, the songs we pick for each other, and the books we've discussed."

In closing, I will encourage you to stay open, explore your heart, and put in the effort. If you truly value your relationship, you will find ways to express love for each other and keep it intact. Your separation can be the beginning of a new intimate connection. You can still love through the bars and the distance until you find yourselves together, completely, again.