

I. LETTERS FROM PRISONERS – LIFE IN A CONTROL UNIT

Sensory Deprivation is Depravity

From within and beyond the one hundred thousand dollar 8 by 14 sq. ft. steel and stone Sensory Deprivation cell that is designed for my mental, physical, and social de-humanization, I bring to you this letter of concern regarding the adverse effects of long-term Sensory Deprivation.

After spending over a year in the Supermax undergoing long-term intensive solitary confinement, denied and deprived of direct human contact, I was transferred back to the Maryland Penitentiary. Upon seeing me for the first time in over a year, a fellow prisoner shook my hand and then proceeded to put both arms around me to embrace me and I became visibly shaken and cringed up as if I had been physically violated. I had not had any physical contact with another human being in so long that I wasn't used to being touched. I had become super-sensitive to one of the basic human senses - the sense of human touch.

Welcome to the "Sensory Deprivation Experience." Definition: self-explanatory - the deliberate and intentional stripping of the cell down to an isolation cell, then the stripping of the individual down to the basic necessities, even down to the personal effects. Then locked within this cell twenty-three hours a day with barely the bare essentials, where even the wall-mounted stainless steel mirror in the segregation cells is removed from the walls so that even the sight of one's own image is denied. This is Sensory Deprivation. And no matter how strong a person is, Sensory Deprivation is depravity at its worst. All five basic human senses — sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste — are severely suppressed — when one is slowly, but surely, and very subtly stripped of all the common sentiments of humanity.

Under these adverse conditions of confinement, one tends to crave a change of scenery, location, atmosphere, and environment just so s/he can see new sights instead of the same ole, everyday, mind-deadening routine and faceless faces ... hear new and different sounds other than the quiet, indescribable silence that seems to speak louder than noise ... smell different scents besides the foul, stale, contemptible odor so common to everyday existence in this bottomless pit ... one seeks to touch base with, feel and embrace another human in an intimate, sensitive, humane, compassionate, personal way as opposed to the impersonal, inhumane, insensitive, degrading manner ... one develops a strong, intense desire to taste various foods besides the same ole, tasteless, non-variety, everyday, recycled meals. One is served just enough food to have a bowel movement, just enough to stay alive. This is Sensory Deprivation where even ones sense of taste, appetite, and taste buds is denied and deprived.

All of the aforementioned increased, heightened senses are common among convicted persons held in prisons, but such senses are magnified one hundred times in Control Unit Sensory Deprivation Prisons. Steel and stone torture chambers where, absent various forms of social stimuli, the human mind can become so debased, so de-humanized, and

sink so low that if one isn't careful, there is a tendency to adjust, conform, and accustom oneself to a standard of living that is lower than that which exists within the animal kingdom. This is the adverse effect of long-term Sensory Deprivation. It is a form of physical, social, and psychological torture, and it pushes many self-respecting, rational thinking, decent-minded men and women to a quest for excitement, acts of desperation, and to the most extreme points of paranoia.

After spending over a year in the Supermax, I was transferred back to the Maryland Penitentiary without any consideration given to the desocialization process I had undergone. Nor was any provision made to resocialize me back into a general population setting. Upon having difficulty adjusting into general population, it became necessary for me to be placed on punitive segregation for refusing to be housed in a cell with another human being. There was a time when I could tolerate double-cell housing on a temporary, short-term, voluntary basis, but after my experience with Sensory Deprivation, I have now become more anti-social than ever before and I now have a zero-degree tolerance level for double-celling and general population settings.

As a result, for the past five years that I have been out of the Supermax, I have spent a total of only seven months in a general population setting.

In addition, on two occasions, I have had official street charges pressed against me. This never before happened to me in the entire history of my imprisonment. I am currently waiting to go to trial for the latest charge. I have not received, encouraged, nor welcomed any outside contact by way of visits from family members, loved ones, or friends in the past five years since leaving Supermax. This entire experience is uncharacteristic of me, but I believe the underlying root cause is the social dislocation I have suffered from my first encounter with Supermax's Sensory Deprivation. I am only now beginning to question and understand what has happened to me.

Now that I am back in the Supermax for a second time, armed with this overstanding of what Sensory Deprivation actually is, I am less likely to leave Supermax no better off for my experience than when I first arrived. My concern now is with controlling and reversing the ill-effects of my first encounter with Sensory Deprivation. Otherwise, I am concerned that my social dislocation will in all likelihood go from bad to worse, and ruin me to the extent that not only would I not be mentally, physically, or socially fit for a general population setting, but society in general.

*Ronald Epps
Maryland*

Psychological Effects and Political Platform

I. Psychological Effects of SHU (security housing unit) on prisoners. Psych. Torture takes form of physical pain (i.e. migraines, stress-related illnesses, suicide, etc.)

The situation (evidence of physical torture) that I am about to present is not an isolated reality, this is a daily ritual which occurs throughout the Pelican Bay SHU.

Three stages to strategy of psychological torture: 1st , 2nd , and 3rd "Watches."

1. The Guard makes noise in early AM hours, every morning. Any complaint results only in the antagonization of the situation.
2. Slamming food ports when guards serve meals. Every day. Deliberate action to antagonize, irritate and exercise and flaunt power dynamic.
3. Excessive noise when doing all four counts: 11:00pm, 1:00am, 2:30am, and 4:00am. Again, deliberate exercise of power, disrespect, and brandish power.

Other forms include: from blasting the P.A. system to intentionally withholding personal mail.

“Those who lack the knowledge and understanding of torture and its different applications may dismiss the significance of the evidence that I have presented, but before you do, allow me to bring your attention to certain facts that will substantiate my evidence. Sound is a well known tactic in both psychological warfare and torture, from the sound of dripping water to the blasting of loud music. The recent Waco massacre is a perfect example. When the U.S. racist, fascist government used loud music and bright lights as a tool of torture against women and children, the results varied, from sleep deprivation to the constant shocking of the nerves.”

II. Political Issues

The constant emotional abuse leads to permanently disturbed ex-cons who then re-enter society with needs for therapy, or without the facilities to adequately re-adjust. Either way, they continue to cost the tax-payers money. The Correction Department is failing at its goals of correction.

“The prison system is now a sanctuary to preserve and proliferate the Criminal Mentality Syndrome. This is the very psychological disposition which guarantees the continuity of the government scheme to financially benefit from the inner city crime. This also explains why there is no genuine effort on part of the CDC (California Department of Corrections) to implement a serious program for criminal rehabilitation, especially here in the security housing unit at Pelican Bay. The CDC fully understands the absence of such programs would only increase the recidivism rate among its prison population. Crime prevention or criminal rehabilitation would in fact undermine the government’s CDC endeavors to economically exploit the New Afrikan and Latino/Mexican communities via poverty and crime!!”

CDC Deliberate Indifference Clause

“The evolution of civilization cannot be discussed without discussing the evolution of human mortality. The control-unit prisons and their proliferation is a perfect example of a society’s immorality. How could any society justify the existence of such a brutal and inhumane place?”

Demands:

- Rehabilitation programs, especially education
- Racially diverse independent review board

- Black community parole board
- Tax-payers allowed to tour Pelican Bay SHU
- Compensation to victims of extortion schemes
- Termination of employees involved in torture of prisoners
- End to the criminalization of Prisoners' Rights Activists
- Release political prisoners and P.O.W.'s

*Abdul O. Shakur
California*

Anger

On April 20th, 1990 former hostage, Dr. Robert Polhill was released by his kidnappers. He stated the following to the media while being interviewed: "I survived by staying angry at my kidnappers, I was able to keep my focus this way. Had I allowed my anger to leave me, and not stayed angry for what was happening to me, I wouldn't have made it."

The news media reported on the release of Dr. Polhill and I watched the three different networks, although each reported on the story from a somewhat different angle, I noticed each anchorperson and each network appeared to praise Dr. Polhill regarding his anger. The general consensus was that he had a right to be angry and I think we all agree that anytime you're held against your will, captive, told what to do, how to do it and when to do it, naturally you will have aggression towards your overseer. Yet the Corrections Department deems it as inappropriate behavior when a prisoner demonstrates anger after being confined for a period of years. Dr. Polhill was held for a little over two years while some men are incarcerated for ten, fifteen, twenty-five years. How can the department and society have the audacity to expect that prisoners remain passive and docile when to do so is against the very nature of a human being?

The anger one feels from being held captive is akin to slavery. It sets off emotions that few will ever know, short of being in a hostage situation or in an American prison.

The Senses

When I first heard of sensory deprivation, it was being associated with the conditions of which I was subjected to, of which I and others similarly situated, were suffering from. But even to this day, I have not been informed or educated as to exactly how sensory deprivation targets and effects the human being. It was only through personal research, and contemplation, that the connection with sensory deprivation and our day to day afflictions by it became profoundly understood. The fundamental principle upon which any of our endeavors may be successful, is to understand the nature of our human make-up, and those elements that either complement it, or harm it.

I humbly believe that first and foremost in our struggle to overcome and survive this cruel and evil practice of sensory deprivation, is to take the two words (sensory,