

## Cellmate

*Victor Becerra*

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Getting a new cellmate is one of the most stressful situations a prisoner goes through. I know that law-abiding citizens who have never been in trouble may not understand why that two people living in a six-by-nine-foot cell should have any problems, since, after all, they are both criminals.

One of the fallacies of that point of view lies in the fact that many free people think of a prison cell as if it were a room inside the prison where criminals live, when in reality the prison is like the town, the community in which convicted criminals live. The cell is actually the prisoner's whole house. The cell is your living room, your kitchen, your closet, your shower, your bathroom and of course, your bedroom, which you must share with a stranger – too often, a violent stranger.

Conflicts invariably arise with the arrival of a new cellmate. If free people living with roommates fight over rent, parking space, noise late at night or early in the morning, or over bills, can you imagine living with a violent stranger in the same room, a stranger with different morals, beliefs, habits, even a completely different culture? In prison, it does not take much to start a conflict under these circumstances because the great majority of people in prisons have a bad temper and many have violent tendencies. Have you ever made the mistake of pouring salt instead of sugar into your coffee? We can expect that something bad will happen when you put things together that do not belong together. That is what happens when you get a new cellmate.

Not all convicted criminals are created equal, including prisoners convicted of the same crimes. For instance, if a 20-year-old gang member convicted of the murder of a fellow gang member in a house party is placed in a cell with a 55-year-old man convicted of the murder of his wife of thirty years over a domestic dispute, there will be immediate culture clash. Even the most naïve gang members know that sooner or later they will face prison time, unless they are killed first. They know it and accept it. For the gang member, prison life becomes second nature. On the other hand, the older man enters a new environment in which he never expected to be and with no prior experience. It would be like taking a kangaroo to live in the North Pole. What does the 20-year-old gang member have in common with a 55-year-old cellmate? Nothing but a murder conviction.

If a drug trafficker, a man with plenty of money who lived his life giving orders and is accustomed to doing whatever he pleases, is convicted of

the murder of an associate and placed in a cell with an ex-homeless man serving a twenty-five-to-life sentence for smoking crack cocaine under a bridge, their lifestyles are so different that conflict will inevitable arise. The drug trafficker is a stubborn individual unwilling to change or be flexible. He is used to buying anything he needs or wants, and since he ran a powerful enterprise, he feels it is an honour for anyone to know such an important person. Therefore, in his mind, the homeless man should be proud to be allowed to live in 'his' cell. The homeless man, on the other hand, accustomed to not owning anything of value, may go Dumpster diving, looking for anything he may deem usable for something at some time in the future. Hoarding is natural for someone used to having nothing. Both men lived a criminal life but on opposite sides of the food chain – one as a provider, the other as a consumer. The man with money sees the ex-homeless person as a filthy old man who collects trash, things that the trafficker would not even consider having brand new.

If a 20-year-old college student, selling prescription medication drugs to fellow college students in order to pay his tuition, is arrested and thrown into prison, then placed in a cell with a 45-year-old heroin addict who has been in and out of prison for the last twenty years, their social and educational differences will clash and create tension in the cell. The youngster made a terrible decision in his young life, unaware of the heavy consequences he would end up paying. The older man is simply living day-by-day looking to find a way to get his daily dose of heroin. When he gets it, he will be happy. When he does not get it, the student would be better off sleeping on a bed of snakes and having a rabid dog for a cellmate.

Furthermore, the younger man had better hope that the addict has a way to pay for his drug habit, (in prison the cost is from \$10 to \$20 per day). If not, he will do whatever it takes to get it. So his cellmate had better check his locker because he will steal from him. Needless to say, the youngster will have a hard time dealing with the addict's behaviour, perhaps a lesson in life that not only the drug abusers suffer the consequences of addiction. For his role, the addict now has the time to think about the harm he caused to the families of the individuals to whom he sold drugs, a lesson he did not learn that while selling drugs to others.

Getting a new cellmate is therefore very stressful. Anyone entering prison should be prepared to encounter some of the most peculiar individuals he or she could ever imagine. They should not rush to get into a fight every time

their cellmate does something unreasonable. Prison is not like the movies, fighting will only get you into deeper trouble. Instead, my advice is to be patient, be humble, treat others the way you want to be treated, and most important, be friendly and respectful in and out of your cell. Prisoners will always need a friend willing to allow them to live in the same cell when they are having problems with their current cellmate.

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