

Emotions Are Ours as Humans: The No Apology, Apology

Cathee

The moment I saw the look on my caseworker's face, after just hours ago she sat in front of me beaming with pride of knowledge, unrequited, brand-new gossip about another client in my halfway house, I knew something was wrong. Having to read the energy in my space was a survival technique I learned in prison and now... it was useful to prepare to protect myself from a breach of parole. I will refer to her as "Staff" for the remainder of my story.

Earlier in the day, this sunny, gossipy, news spreading staff member was joyfully engaging in a storytelling session with me. As I took my medication, Staff launched into an emotionally charged diatribe regarding how one of my cohorts on parole had missed several call-ins and that person's parole officer (P.O.) had yelled at her. I said as little as possible as again. My anxiety about being the person Staff was regaling this tale to, meant that I had to look interested and grateful for the information. As she confided in me, while taking and signing for my medication, I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could. I needed her not to notice that I was rushing, which may alert her to possible dissension in her ranks, a disapproval of her breach of privacy. Staff was also my caseworker. She had the power and flexed it constantly.

My emotions were weaponized in this environment, by those who hold the power to abjectly affect my parole. They were used to control me, keep me wondering what would happen next and had me fearing the possibility of being sent back to prison. The surveillance is such that I am constantly watched so as, like a competition, the winner could report my alleged wrongdoings and use it against me. If I was angry, it was inappropriate with the promise of the sacred phrase "what could you have done differently?" produced with a veiled threat of calling my P.O. If I was sad, staff needed to know why and assessed my stability as varying from "baseline". Being excited is suspicious as I could be over-inflating the experience only to be let down. Staff intervention was warranted, in their opinion, in these instances as they do not want to "set me up for a fall"... any joy quelled and paranoia, front and centre. It is a complicated game of compartmentalization and manipulation, used to seem "stable" in the eyes of the halfway house and by proxy, Correctional Service Canada (CSC). I could feel the anxiety vomit rising in my diaphragm and it hurt. It still hurts. After all those years in prison and assuming that the burning of fear would stop when I was

released, was a delusion of the Nth degree. Halfway houses continue the party line. That was a bummer.

The office in the halfway house sits directly off the living room and kitchen. There is no privacy. We take meds in that office, our names and curfews are posted in that office, people's real names are announced constantly, even after a legal name change has been purchased. There is a sense of walking on eggshells and every conversation is personally surveilled. You cannot say "trigger" or staff will call you in for wanting to use drugs. You cannot talk about your plans, dreams and hopes as they will be recorded, scrutinized, and recategorized into something never said. Going to the office, kitchen or living room is a place where I am on guard. I feel like I am in the prison yard on a bad day, where the energy is off, the laughter is tight and sporadic, and the talking heads are listening – always listening.

In the kitchen on the day I am highlighting, I was talking to one of my friends. She told me that one of the girls we were on parole with, was on TV. She had gone on the run and they had shown her mugshot on the news. I remember it was close to Valentine's Day, 2022. The news had showcased several parolees that were on the run and flashed their mugshots under the heading *Least Wanted Valentines of 2022*, or something of that nature. I said my piece about how disgusting the media can be with their sensationalism of pain and desperation, and went to my room.

Sometime later, Staff entered my room. I was behind the door hanging my clothing and she scrunched my toe with the door. This person did not knock. She never knocked. I was instantly upset. I had not had a place to belong in such a long time and this was not it either. This room was theirs, not mine, to the point of Staff feeling entitled enough to walk in without a knock. I used to cry about this. I am no one and have nowhere. I still cry about this. I am crying about this now. I am wondering how long it will be before I can go to the bathroom and use the toilet or have a shower without someone knocking, yelling "doing checks". My heart physically tightens because the thought of that answer being "forever" is a suicidal ideation inducing prospect.

This time, when Staff came into my room, I knew something serious was happening by the look on her face and her semi-lethal, toxic energy wafting about her person. I took several steps away from her and became very aware of my body. My brain instantly bolted into action. Neutral expression on

my face. OK. Check. No balled-up hands. OK. Check. Even breathing and relaxed looking shoulders. OK. Check. Am I a threat? I do not think so. OK. Check. Emotional and physical regulation are crucial. I have been called aggressive for leaning in during a conversation. Cue internal rage and external nothingness of personal presence available for scrutiny. OK. I was ready.

Staff entered my room and closed my door. We were alone. OK. Not ready. Panic set in and I kept doing my internal checklist of my external impression over and over while she talked. She stood in front of my closed door giving me no way out of my room, while seeming to fill the space with her power and authority. She could say I did anything, said anything and “they” would believe her. My brain was scanning the room mourning the loss of the things I had acquired and the smell of my perfume, the tint of my soft green light. My heart felt the devastating thud of having to tell my mom I was breached and I am back inside for whatever Staff was going to make up about me, if I did not handle the following conversation in a manner becoming of a contrite parolee. I could feel the back of my tongue starting to twitch and concentrated on not having that movement betray the steadiness of my jaw. I was so scared.

She proceeded to tell me there was a zero-tolerance policy for gossiping as gossiping leads to a toxic environment in the house. OK. I had no idea what she was talking about. I thought she was trying to ask me not to repeat what she said about the parolee and her parole officer. I was so confused. The confusion turned into disbelief and disgust when Staff said that my conversation regarding the Valentine’s Day news story was inappropriate. She said “We don’t act like that here. I’d advise you to scrape the prison off of you, now”. I was devastated. The irony was massive and obvious, yet Staff still came into my room, shut the door, and spoke those words with authority and conviction. Do you know what I said?

“I’m sorry”.

She carried on for a bit longer as I tried to control my tears. It felt like the biggest gaslighting experience I have had in a while was taking place in a room I could not get out of. I had a powerful person who could send me back to jail in a snap of her beautifully manicured fingers after having a casual conversation in the kitchen of the halfway house and I was imploding

inside. My throat was eating my heart which was sliding into my tummy, and it all was a mess and why did I get out anyway and how stupid was I to think that I would matter and speak freely sometimes, and the world is a lie, and I hate it here and I'm going to jump in front of the SkyTrain now. She left. She left and I cried. I cried and I cried, and I had a shower, did my makeup (in case I survived), got dressed and signed-out to ride the SkyTrain. Earlier in the year, I got permission to ride the train from end to end because it was the only place that I was anonymous. It calmed me. It still does. Luckily. Because that day, I was not going to ride the SkyTrain. I was going to die by the SkyTrain.

I did not die that day. I did not have the courage to end my life. I am grateful now as I am wiser to the ways of the house and limit my engagement as much as possible. I see the new women come to reside and I see some of them go back. I do not voice my opinions and I keep my existence as quiet as possible. There is no safe way to live there, only strategies to mitigate the damage that emotions can cause to my wellbeing and freedom. Nausea reigns supreme as the mental, emotional and physical stress of hiding is excruciating and makes me physically ill. I must tell myself there may be an end to this someday. I do not believe that, but I tell myself anyway.

I have trouble writing these things sometimes because I am convinced that I am sensitive or dramatic or the plethora of other things that prison and halfway house people use to discredit and abuse me through my natural human emotions. I would like to not apologize for my emotions, while saying sorry to everyone that has experienced our emotions being weaponized. Brilliant tactic really. Sometimes people do not make it and the government saves some money. Huzzah.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cathee is a researcher, public speaker, facilitator and a solution-oriented thinker. She is passionate about guiding attitudes away from long standing stigmas regarding marginalized people through education. Cathee has over two decades of lived experience with the Canadian prison system. She uses this experience to knowledge share and advocate in her work.