

# Keep Your Head Above Water in Prison

***“Survival in prison is a matter of weighing ones personal beliefs against their need to walk back out alive.”***

*Someone once asked me, “What do I do if I end up in prison?” My response was flippant, if not somewhat true, “Keep your back to the wall and don't make eye contact”. My concern at the time was not for this person's welfare, it was an attempt to lighten the mood. Fortunately for me I had the ability to be flippant. It was not my life that was going to be changed forever. I would be going home at the end of the day. It was not the same for the poor soul I was talking to. He was going to have to actually find out how to survive in prison.*

*Prison is the most base of all hierarchical systems that currently exist in the world. There are the “haves” and the “have-nots”, the governors and the slaves, and the predators and the prey. Each “person” in this society has a role and a responsibility. The stake of failure to deliver on responsibilities is often violence in the form of mutilation, humiliation and even death.*

*In a perfectly managed environment, surviving in prison would be simple. All one would have to do is obey the rules and do their time. Separation from loved ones and society would be the only punishment imposed. Unfortunately, that is a far cry from the real world. In the real world, the brutalization that comes along with that separation is the true punishment and deterrence against future criminal behavior.*

*Most important to surviving prison, as is true with any survival situation, is to keep one's “head in the game”. A strong mindset will allow one to deal with the tragedy of the situation and better adapt to the constantly changing atmosphere. Unless a person is doing a life sentence, and knows they are going to die in prison, it is important to keep in mind that this is a temporary situation. At some point one will need to be able to reacclimatize to society. It is necessary to be able to separate “prison life” from “real life”. What happens in prison often stays in prison.*

*Another survival strategy for prison is to find a niche. Being able to do something or provide a service that few if any others can lead to a positive end. In such a caste system, one who is valued is less likely to be subjected to violence and may even find themselves protected. It is worth having a skill or a trait that keeps one slightly above the rest, without making a major show of it.*

*Moving onto the baser strategies for surviving prison, the most common is to join a gang. Prison gangs offer a high level of protection and the means for retaliation against others. Most prison gang members do not continue their affiliation after their term is up, but it must be stated that others do. Those “left behind” in prison are going to expect a certain level of loyalty even after a fellow gang member is released. This can radically change one's life after prison and the risk versus reward of this survival strategy should be thoroughly examined.*

*On down the line of survival strategies for surviving prison is the exchanging of vices. It is often stated that cigarettes are currency in prison, but the same can be said for illicit drugs and sexual favors. Getting into one of these trades may be the easiest way to walk back out of prison with one's life, but perhaps not their dignity. This is, however, a survival situation after all. One needs to determine what is best for them. If one has a knack for a particular vice, then it may be the simplest way to avoid conflict and violence.*

*Prison is not civilized society. No matter how many sociologists attempt to change life “behind bars”, the fact remains that this is a primitive and cruel environment. One cannot expect to take the worst aspects of society, put them all together, and expect them to play nice. Prison is the modern equivalent of Darwin's Theory of natural Selection. It truly is survival of the fittest.*

**by Steven Hanks - © 2002 Pagewise**