5 Creative Ways to Connect During the COVID-19 Holidays

by Stacia Ray

As the world is now fast approaching the one-year mark of the COVID-19 pandemic, many prisons are still on some sort of lockdown or restricted visitation. And most of the free world is dealing with a “new normal” of some kind.

Even in a regular non-pandemic year, the separation from family and from the outside world can impact the mental health of men and women behind bars during the holidays. This is especially rough on people with seasonal depression. And those who are normally positive around the holidays may experience more sadness and loneliness than usual this year because of all the changes the pandemic has brought.

How can you keep away the holiday depression and stay connected to your friends and family?

Inside Journal researched some easy and affordable ways to connect with loved ones during the holidays in these unusual times:

1) If you have younger children, start a “connection coloring project” with them, taking turns coloring something together and mailing it back and forth. You can even mail them the coloring activity from page 2 of this Inside Journal and ask them to color it and mail it back. Or you can color half of it and ask them to finish the other half.

2) Create a memory book of your favorite family memories from your holidays before or during prison and share it with them. Or if your memories were mostly negative, create a “vision board”-style notebook that describes what you think an ideal holiday would look like, using drawings or magazine cutouts, and share that instead.

3) Bond over the same Christmas music or other media. Based on what’s available in your prison library, choose one song, movie, or Bible verse to be your special “family bond” selection. Then, agree to listen to, watch, or read it at the same time every day or week (coordinate this

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Letters to the Editor

Kayla in Georgia
I have given my life to Jesus Christ and in desperate need of a Bible that I can understand. The [Inside Journal] Life Recovery Bible y’all have is amazing, and I am a recovering addict also so I love how it incorporates the 12 steps. I am asking and praying that y’all could send me one for free please. I am currently incarcerated. I truly enjoy your ministry. I pray the Father for blessing your work and guide your daily life. God bless you both!

Tiara in Florida
I recently read a summer 2019 Inside Journal, and I found it beautiful. The stories were heartwarming, and the tips on better sleeping were helpful. I would like if you could send me a newer Journal.

Dear Kayla and Michelle:
We’re so glad you’re enjoying Inside Journal! As for information on how to receive a free Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible in large print, please see the ad below. We pray this Bible will bring you peace and guide your daily life. God bless you both!

Dear Tiara:
We at Prison Fellowship are so glad you’re enjoying Inside Journal. If you aren’t receiving copies of Inside Journal in March, June, September, and December, you may want to ask your chaplain if your facility has a regular subscription to this quarterly newspaper (for more information, see the gray box to the right).

Subscription Info
At Inside Journal® (IJ), we receive many letters each week from prisoners asking for subscriptions to our newspaper. Because of limitations on our staff and budget, IJ is only available in bulk shipments to your chaplain, programming coordinator, or a volunteer who visits your facility. Chaplains, to set up these shipments for free, please contact our editorial staff at: P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790 or insidejournal@pfm.org.

Need a Bible?
To get a FREE Inside Journal NLT Life Recovery Bible, write to: Tyndale House Publishers, Attn: Inside Journal Bible, 351 Executive Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188. Please include your name and prison ID number, your facility name, your facility address, and whether you want English or Spanish. Limit one Bible per person.

5 Creative Ways to Connect
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time/day with your loved ones. Just knowing you’re all doing something at the same time, even from miles apart, will make you feel closer together.

4) Start a book club with your loved one and a book in your prison library and ask your loved ones to check it out from their library. Choose a few chapters at a time and discuss them in your next phone call or email (or in-person visit, if your facility has returned to those).

5) Collaborate on a social distancing story. Choose the topic or genre. Then write the opening sentence or paragraph and mail (or email) it to your loved ones, asking them to reply with the next paragraph. Go back and forth a pre-chosen number of times or until a certain date. When the story is finished, it’ll be a great memento to always remember this crazy pandemic year.

General tips for connecting:
If you’re planning to call around the holidays, it might be helpful to write a letter or email in advance, letting the loved one know when you plan to call. “I know you normally go to Grandma’s the evening of New Year’s Eve, but I’ll try calling you that morning at 10.”

Whenever you talk to your loved ones, whether in an email, phone call, or in-person visit, be sure to keep things positive, rather than venting or complaining.

If you’re struggling with depression, carve out time for prayer and/or journaling, and if possible, speak to a mental health counselor in your facility.

Find the 10 differences between the two pictures.

“It Had Me at Hello” Continued from page 1
encouragement and pray with me. . . . I felt accepted.” The Academy had her at “hello.” The Academy staff and volunteers made Amber feel like she could be herself. “They make a very dark place very bright.”

Amber learned she didn’t have to change overnight. “I’m a totally different person than I was, but I’m not who I want to be yet,” she explains. After her release, Amber stayed busy volunteering at her church and working as a concrete finisher for up to 70 hours a week. She also reunited with her husband, who was also once incarcerated. They went to marriage counseling and stayed sober. They’re about to celebrate eight years of marriage together.

One of Amber’s greatest joys is knowing her teenage stepdaughter, whom she calls “amazing.” And Amber prays that someday she can reunite with her biological daughter.

But she says she has to trust God’s timing on that. “If God can restore my marriage with all the damage that’s been done,” Amber notes, “restoration and reconciliation are possible. There is hope for me, and there’s hope for anybody that’s in a dark place.”

Answers on p.4.
2021 CALENDAR

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. –Proverbs 3:5–6 (NLT)

**HOLIDAYS**

**JANUARY**
- January 1 – New Year’s Day
- January 18 – Martin Luther King Jr. Day
- February 14 – Valentine’s Day
- February 15 – Presidents Day
- April 4 – Easter
- May 9 – Mother’s Day
- May 31 – Memorial Day
- June – Ask your chaplain for an Angel Tree prisoner participation form.

**FEBRUARY**
- February 14 – Valentine’s Day
- February 15 – Presidents Day
- April 4 – Easter
- May 9 – Mother’s Day
- May 31 – Memorial Day
- June – Ask your chaplain for an Angel Tree prisoner participation form.

**MARCH**
- March 15 – Women’s Day
- March 17 – St. Patrick’s Day
- May 1 – Labor Day
- May 31 – Memorial Day
- June – Ask your chaplain for an Angel Tree prisoner participation form.

**APRIL**
- April 19 – Good Friday
- April 21 – Easter
- May 9 – Mother’s Day
- May 31 – Memorial Day
- June – Ask your chaplain for an Angel Tree prisoner participation form.

**MAY**
- May 9 – Mother’s Day
- May 31 – Memorial Day
- June – Ask your chaplain for an Angel Tree prisoner participation form.

**JUNE**
- June 1 – National Flag Day
- June 2 – National Police Week
- June 8 – Father’s Day
- June 20 – Father’s Day
- August 2 – Independence Day
- August 3 – National Night Out
- August 5 – Back to School
- August 21 – Independence Day
- September 6 – Labor Day
- September 21 – Independence Day
- October 4 – Columbus Day
- October 31 – Halloween
- November 11 – Veterans Day
- November 25 – Thanksgiving Day
- December 25 – Christmas Day

**JULY**
- July 4 – Independence Day
- August 2 – Independence Day
- August 3 – National Night Out
- August 5 – Back to School
- August 21 – Independence Day
- September 6 – Labor Day
- September 21 – Independence Day
- October 4 – Columbus Day
- October 31 – Halloween
- November 11 – Veterans Day
- November 25 – Thanksgiving Day
- December 25 – Christmas Day

**AUGUST**
- August 2 – Independence Day
- August 3 – National Night Out
- August 5 – Back to School
- August 21 – Independence Day
- September 6 – Labor Day
- September 21 – Independence Day
- October 4 – Columbus Day
- October 31 – Halloween
- November 11 – Veterans Day
- November 25 – Thanksgiving Day
- December 25 – Christmas Day

**SEPTEMBER**
- September 6 – Labor Day
- September 21 – Independence Day
- October 4 – Columbus Day
- October 31 – Halloween
- November 11 – Veterans Day
- November 25 – Thanksgiving Day
- December 25 – Christmas Day

**OCTOBER**
- October 4 – Columbus Day
- October 31 – Halloween
- November 11 – Veterans Day
- November 25 – Thanksgiving Day
- December 25 – Christmas Day

**NOVEMBER**
- November 11 – Veterans Day
- November 25 – Thanksgiving Day
- December 25 – Christmas Day

**DECEMBER**
- December 25 – Christmas Day
Turning Bad Things to Good

by Chaplin John Cherico

It was born and raised in the New York City area. As an adult, I got offered a job as a church pastor in Minnesota. I felt guilty about leaving my mom, since she had serious health issues. My mom died unexpectedly on Monday, September 10, 2001.

I made plans to fly out Wednesday, September 12, since the funeral was scheduled for Thursday. But then, the unthinkable happened. On Tuesday, September 11, the World Trade Center was attacked by airplanes that caused the twin towers to collapse. This sent shock waves throughout the nation. The New York City airports were closed for many days, preventing me from attending my mom’s funeral. The 9/11 tragedy and missing my mom’s funeral became connected in my mind and filled me with guilt and anger. They made no sense and seemed to serve no purpose, except to cause me emotional pain and spiritual confusion.

However, decades later, I became a chaplain. I now frequently sit down with inmates who are grieving the loss of a loved one whose funeral they’re not allowed to attend. My experience with these situations has become connected in my mind and made me more aware of how God can use even the most painful events to serve a greater purpose.

The Lord has taken an empathy I never would have thought of. My experience with my mom’s funeral has helped me better serve the inmates in my care. As a chaplain, I now attend funerals they’re not allowed to attend. They made me more aware of how God can use even the most painful events to serve a greater purpose.

I become a chaplain. I now attend funerals they’re not allowed to attend. They made me more aware of how God can use even the most painful events to serve a greater purpose.

When something difficult or overwhelmingly painful happens—like the loss of a loved one, or a rough parole hearing, or even a global pandemic—people might ask, “Is this proof there is no God?” And even faithful Christians might have moments where they wonder, “Is God still in control? Is there a silver lining in all this?”

Thankfully, God is not only in control, but God is literally the only One who has the full power and wisdom to turn something tragic into something positive. Perhaps the best example of Him turning “bad” to “good” is what Jesus did on the cross for us. He suffered horrific torture and ridicule, even death (the “bad”) to pay for all our sins, so that whoever believes in Him could have eternal life in perfect, pain-free heaven (the “best”).

Someone being sent to prison is often another example of God turning bad to good. On a regular basis, inmates will tell me, “I now know that God brought me in here to get my attention.”

Research shows that people who have never turned to God before may suddenly turn to God in a crisis or in suffering. In those cases, a “bad” thing can inspire someone to accept Jesus as Savior, resulting in an eternity in heaven instead of hell—talk about turning a negative into a positive!

And while it’s true that people might turn to God when things are bad, they then might turn back away from God once everything seems good again. But 1 Samuel 12:24 reminds us to faithfully serve the Lord, in good times and in bad, and remember all the wonderful things He has done for us.

Recently, an incarcerated woman named Trina sent me a message in the form of a question: “Does God really care?” As an only child, Trina was neglected and abused by her alcoholic parents, who often locked her in a closet for hours as punishment. If she cried or rebelled, her parents would burn her with a lit cigarette. A practice called “Crawford” turned her into adulthood as a self-harm coping mechanism. Trina came to me one day, and said, “I told her about God’s love.

Trina was just released in August of 2020. The world is dark and overwhelming, but if she continues to seek God in the darkness, He will promise to be with her. If she seeks Him whollyheartedly, you will find Me.” (Jeremiah 29:13)

There are so many broken and hurt human beings looking for hope. People in pain question their self-worth. They wonder if anyone cares enough to confirm their worth. They wonder, “Can good things happen even in bad situations?” They ask, “Does God really care?”

Yes, He does. The Lord God is in the business of changing things. He can use your bad situations for good. Philippians 4:13 says, “For I can do everything through Christ, Who gives me strength.”

To learn more about a relationship with God, sign up for a free email Bible study through one of our trusted partner organizations. Just write to “Bad to Good,” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

John Cherico is a jail and prison ministry chaplain in the Minneapolis area.