

CORRECTIONS: FROM FATIGUE TO FULFILLMENT

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This is the first installment in a series.

In recent years several studies have examined the stress related to corrections work. However, little attention has been paid to a much more enduring and pervasive workplace phenomenon which may well be at the root of much malaise in the profession.

This article presents:

- An overview of a theory for changes that staff undergo in their person over time
- Some factors that contribute to these changes
- The outcome of the frustration of key psychological needs
- An overview of steps for staff to remain psychologically healthy at both the personal and the organizational levels.

Corrections Fatigue

This phenomenon, Corrections Fatigue, concerns the gradual wear-and-tear of the spirit, soul and body of corrections staff as they adapt to demands of the corrections workplace. Think of stretching a rubber band. You stretch it once, twice, even ten times, yet it stays strong and elastic. It resumes its original size when you let go. However, if you keep stretching it, or if you pin it in a stretched position, it eventually loses its elasticity. It hardens, and finally it snaps. Similarly, if you keep bending a piece of metal, it becomes more and more pliable until it finally breaks.

These metaphors capture the toll endured by corrections staff as they try to accommodate job challenges. The changes are imperceptible at first. However, they begin to show after a couple of years in corrections. Rubber bands lose their elasticity. Metal begins to weaken.

Based on the Constructivist Self Development Theory¹, Corrections Fatigue is defined as the cumulative negative transformation of correctional staff's self (beliefs, thoughts, emotions and decision-making) as they adapt to the corrections workplace.

Corrections Fatigue is the result of the cumulative impact of work-related situations interacting with a person's history, current circumstances, and coping style.

Corrections Fatigue is proposed to affect the following areas of a person's self: frame of reference (identity, worldview and spirituality), core beliefs about meeting key needs, self-management, coping behaviors, and interpersonal tactics.

Corrections Fatigue is an unavoidable occupational hazard. No employee is totally immune. Ensuing changes are a gradual, cumulative process, not a sudden event. Unless countered, they become the entrenched "default" way the staff uses to cope both on and off the job. The experience of Corrections Fatigue is emotionally distressing, as it injects negativity and pessimism in a person's life. The good news, however, is that Corrections Fatigue is amenable to change, and it can even be prevented!

Self Changes

Identity: As a result of Corrections Fatigue, staff may experience themselves one-dimensionally as Super cop (law enforcer), hero, rescuer, victim, or wimp.

I'm tough. Nothing gets to me. I'm a glorified waiter and a human doormat.

Worldview: Staff ends up experiencing others as dangerous, dishonest, untrustworthy, “cons,” “bad.” They may dehumanize whoever is perceived as being different from them. They conduct relationships in the power terms of winner-loser, conqueror-conquered, predator-prey, abuser-victim, top dog-underdog.

Watch out, or they'll play you. They'll try to use you. Can't trust anybody. They're all worse than animals.

Spirituality: Over time staff succumbs to cynicism, and a sense of alienation and futility.

No one cares about anything outside of themselves. I'm on my own. True love and honesty only happen in the movies. Kindness is weakness.

¹McCann, I.L., & Pearlman, L.A. (1990). *Psychological trauma and the adult survivor: Theory, therapy, and transformation*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

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