

Correctional Oasis

a publication of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach
a non-profit for the well-being of correctional staff & their families

Mission

*To increase the professional, personal, and family well-being
of corrections and detention staff.*

Colorado Combined Campaign—Agency #3908

Pikes Peak Combined Federal Campaign—Agency #6022

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CORRECTIONS: FROM FATIGUE TO FULFILLMENT—Part II

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FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO CORRECTIONS FATIGUE

Nature of the Job

Corrections work, especially custody, tends to be routine and monotonous, even boring at times. Employees may feel as if they are incarcerated alongside the offenders. When a fight breaks out however, staff is transformed from glorified “sitters” and “waiters,” to use the words of a Correctional Officer, to warriors in the front lines. The intensity of the stress response can be exhausting, even though it may feel exhilarating at the time.

Role Conflict

Corrections officers are faced with the dilemma of dual roles—custody and rehabilitation. They are expected to confront insubordination and administer consequences to inmates. At the same time they are supposed to be helpful, de-escalate tensions, and teach inmates how to behave in more socially appropriate ways. These requirements are often experienced as contradictory by staff.

Nature of the Organization

Like any large bureaucracy, corrections systems tend to be impersonal. Given the paramilitary structure of corrections, it is easy for staff to feel that they are regarded by administration as numbers, not persons. The chain of command does not encourage two-way communication or input from lower ranks to higher ones, increasing the line staff’s sense of alienation and lack of significance or participation.

In addition, the corrections work culture, like law enforcement, is one of toughness. Due to that, it is considered unacceptable weakness to admit to emotional struggles, or to own up to not knowing something or to having made a mistake.

Socio-cultural and Political Contexts

Not being respected by the general public as a branch of criminal justice, not having the

negative impact of the workplace acknowledged, being stigmatized by association (as people who deal with criminals), and being under-funded, all add to the staff's disgruntlement and sense of victimization.

Nature of Some of the Inmates

Staff is managing increasingly defiant, violent and/or mentally ill offenders who, naturally, resent their loss of freedom. Inmates begrudge and may attempt to attack their "keepers," the staff. Prisons are intrinsically unsafe places to work in.

Negative Workplace Environment

The prevailing undercurrents of the prison environment are anger, hate, aggression and fear, coupled with the scarceness of tenderness and compassion. Lack of natural beauty adds to the oppressive ambiance.

Frustrating Work Situations

Staff gets irate when they perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of unfair treatment, bullying, or provocation either by inmates or by other staff. They may get equally upset if they witness unfair or disrespectful treatment of their coworkers.

Overload

Understaffing and inmate overcrowding do not need further explanation as sources of Corrections Fatigue. Greater acknowledgment is needed of the extreme demands placed on staff at times.

Exposure to Traumatic Material

Corrections staff witness injuries and death, and suffer assaults themselves. Exposure to brutality and fatalities leave staff traumatized. Staff often ends up experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, such as physiological arousal, memory intrusions, emotional numbing and avoidance. They may also experience symptoms of generalized anxiety, panic disorder, and depression. Given the culture of toughness, these conditions frequently remain undiagnosed and untreated, eroding staff's mental health, judgment and performance.

Sexual Harassment

Staff may be sexually harassed by coworkers through jokes, comments or suggestions for sexual involvement. Targeted individuals may be threatened with retaliation if they do not comply with sexual requests. This is an extreme source of distress for employees preyed upon by coworkers.

On the flip side, staff falsely accused of sexual harassment may undergo stressful lengthy investigations. As a result they may be stigmatized as perpetrators, even when cleared by the investigators.

Witnessing Policy Violations

Staff may become aware of "bad apples," employees who egregiously violate department policies. This is an extremely difficult position to be in, especially for new or low-ranking staff if they are alone in their observations, if they see that the code of silence is in operation, or if they do not have the support of their team.

Lack of Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity

Lack of awareness of the significance of cultural issues leads to misunderstandings and mistakes, increasing staff's stress and even resulting in their getting penalized.

Insufficient Training

When one considers the complex interpersonal exchanges and life or death split-second decisions that corrections staff make, a few weeks at the Training Academy and a few additional hours of annual training are clearly not enough. Training needs to be continual and systematic if staff is to be equipped to cope effectively and professionally.

Co-workers Personality Styles

Some employees exhibit dysfunctional personality styles, making people around them miserable. The end result is a workplace where staff is walking on eggshells. Even if inmate-related stressors were entirely absent, the drain of these personality styles renders the work environment toxic.

“Head in the Sand” Defensive Coping Styles

Problems are exacerbated when people try to avoid distressing emotions or circumstances instead of engaging in effective problem-solving. Common means of avoidance are addictive behaviors, denial of the existence of problems, and aggression against those perceived to be the source of problems.

Past Personal History

The more unhealed abusive or traumatic circumstances employees have in their past, the greater the likelihood that their personal boundaries and coping tools will be compromised. Work-related pressures and stressful episodes could readily cause such employees to feel overwhelmed.

Current Personal Stressors

Staff may be experiencing severe stressors at home, such as mounting debt, sickness, separation or divorce. These result in staff arriving at the gate already “running on empty,” emotionally depleted and irritable even before they start their shifts.

Lack of Effective Support Systems

Expecting to be “Supermen” and “Wonder Women,” staff tends to keep others at arms' length, denying their need for assistance and rejecting help. This leaves them highly vulnerable to stressors.

A STITCH IN TIME

A proactive stress reduction program can save correctional administrators funds through **reduction of overtime costs** incurred when officers take sick time, and through **decrease of turnover** caused by staff quitting due to work-related stressors.

The following quotes are from *Addressing Correctional Officer Stress: Programs & Strategies* by Peter Finn, December 2000, NCJ 183474, pages 7 & 8.

(<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183474.pdf>)

A former Peer Stress Program officer, now retired but still volunteering, drove me to a jail and dragged out the scheduling sheet for all five of our jails and all 700 employees and showed me that only 2 were on stress leave—the first time the number had been that low in years.

—Dan Noelle, Multnomah County (Oregon) sheriff

After inmates killed a civilian employee, 17 officers took disability leave. Seven never returned. Of the five who went for individual counseling, four returned. (The one who did not was the officer who found the body.) The officers who returned told me that the counseling helped them to come back.

—Cathy Carlson, Safety Office return-to-work coordinator, California Youth Authority

...we compared the number of stress-related retirements officers and deputies took after critical incidents for a 10-year period before the contract [with The Counseling Team to provide stress reduction services] and found they cost the county \$20 million. Six years after the program was in place, there were none. We estimated that the program saved the department \$13 million by avoiding increases in its unfunded liability to the county retirement system.

—James Nunn, deputy chief, San Bernardino Sheriff's Department

From Caterina's Desk

TAKING STEPS TO CURB STAFF SUICIDE

On February 8, 2007, USA TODAY printed an article on the elevated suicide rates among the California Highway Patrol and police, including sheriff's departments. (http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-02-08-police-suicides_x.htm). According to the article, the National Police Suicide Foundation reports that annually there are about three times as many law enforcement suicides as there are officers killed in the line of duty. Yet only about 2% of our nation's law enforcement agencies have suicide prevention programs for their staff. The article also states that the International Association of Chiefs of Police is circulating a proposal to equip all of the nation's nearly 18,000 state and local police agencies with suicide prevention tools. Similarly, the California Highway Patrol is beginning to develop a staff suicide awareness and prevention program. Given that the only available study on the subject of staff suicide reported a 39% higher suicide risk for correctional officers than other professions¹, it is only reasonable to expect that Corrections Departments across the nation will follow suit and mandate a similar staff suicide awareness and prevention training. Suicide is oftentimes regarded as the ultimate sign of weakness among corrections and other law enforcement staff. According to the National Center for Health Statistics however, ninety percent of all people who die by suicide have a

diagnosable psychiatric disorder at the time of their death. It is vital therefore that staff suicide be addressed explicitly, and that the use of mental health services continues to be de-stigmatized in corrections.

To bring the subject to the fore, the numbers of staff suicides for every Department of Corrections (for both state and private institutions) and for the Federal Bureau of Prisons need to be reported annually, in the same manner that inmate suicides are reported to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

¹Stack, S.J., & Tsoudis, O. (1997). Suicide risk among correctional officers: A logistical regression analysis. *Archives of Suicide Research*, 3(3), 183-186

Training for Trainers

Staff Suicide: Prevention, Intervention & Postvention

Reason: Correctional workers, like other law enforcement personnel, have high rates of suicide. The tragic loss of life and the demoralizing impact on coworkers can no longer be ignored. Increasingly, various corrections departments are considering a mandatory training to address suicide in the ranks.

Purpose: To equip trainers with the material to train staff on the subject of correctional worker suicide with the aim to (a) intervene effectively and thus help prevent staff suicides, and (b) to know how to collectively work through the impact of a staff suicide.

Outline:

What is known about the rates of completed suicides among correctional staff

Possible contributing factors

Signs of suicidal thinking among correctional staff

Means of effective intervention by coworkers and supervisors

Dealing with the aftermath of a staff suicide

Setting up a protocol for dealing with suicidal staff

Date: Friday June 8, 2007

Location: Desert Waters' offices, 431 E. Main St., Florence, CO.

Fee: \$500 per trainer

Time: 8am to 5pm

PLEASE HELP

We raise our funds through individual donations, grants, special fundraising events, and training and counseling fees. The Corrections Ventline, one telephone counseling / consultation / crisis intervention session, and the newsletter are offered free of charge to corrections staff and their immediate family members.

Recently a sizeable grant did not come through for us. We are at a critically low financial point. Amongst other expenses, new Ventline brochures need to be printed, for which we need \$2,000. Various facilities and Departments of

Corrections across the country have requested Ventline brochures for their staff, but we cannot send them these materials until we print a new batch.

If everyone on our mailing list made a \$10 contribution this month, we would cover our expenses for the next three months. If Desert Waters' services seem worthwhile to you, please send us your tax-deductible donation ASAP by mail or through our website at <http://www.desertwaters.com/a-donations.htm>. **Thank you.**

MANY THANKS

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In memory of Judge Wallace Lundquist, 1923-2007,
Founder of Corrections Officer Fellowship, Cañon City, Colorado

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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For more information, please go to www.desertwaters.com.

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