

Notes from the Home Front

By Anonymous Corrections Wife

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Any outsider having regular contact with correctional staff picks up quickly on some peculiar habits of workers in this profession. For instance, you agree to meet at a restaurant and arrive to find them sequestered at a back table in a seat that strategically provides an unobstructed view of the entire facility. Or, unless you really enjoy the view from the floor, you promise yourself to never again surprise them by sneaking up from behind and yelling, "BOO!"

Corrections is not a profession which instills trust, and the challenge of getting staff to open up about what actually occurs "behind the walls" can be frustrating and seemingly impossible. As the spouse of a corrections professional, I've discovered some ways that help to increase that trust, improve our communication and give me the ability to enjoy my life in this unique and constantly challenging role.

First, provide a listening ear. I hear stories from the frontlines that both curl my hair and bore me silly. No matter which, be willing to listen calmly and quietly while letting your spouse know they have your full attention. Minimize distractions. If you're home when your spouse returns from work, turn down the burner, hang up the phone, turn off the TV, whatever you need to do to show them you care about their day and are available to listen, even if they are not immediately forthcoming.

Be patient, not demanding. Patience is not just a virtue...in a correctional family it's a means of survival! Wait until your spouse is ready to open up. "Talk to me, d*mmmit!" is generally not a good conversation starter. If you demonstrate that you are willing to wait for however long it takes, without prodding or pressure, then they'll appreciate your steadfastness and communicate faster and with more openness next time.

Be compassionate, not judgmental. Resist the temptation of giving your opinion, no matter how justified. Respond with phrases such as, "that must have been difficult for you" or "you must feel angry/disappointed/happy" etc. Just let them vent their feelings without overreacting to their intensity or the details described.

Give praise and encouragement. Stand by your man...or woman. There's a reason that title was a hit song other than just being a catchy phrase. Let them know how important their job is to society and how much you appreciate and admire the work they do under such difficult circumstances.

Allow your spouse downtime. Make an effort not to schedule family activities immediately after work hours. Give them the opportunity to relax and unwind. Dinner can wait! Let them go to the gym, work in the garden, read the paper, soak in the tub, kick back in the easy chair...whatever gives them a chance to disconnect from the prison environment and transition to life at home.

Make your home a refuge. Provide soft music, pleasant smells, the gift of a massage...any little gesture you can think of to soothe the senses and make your home feel like an oasis--a place of peace, calm, and safety.

Be a partner. Let your spouse know that his or her career is also part of your life and you want to share in both the good and bad times of their professional life in corrections.

Pamper yourself. Being a correctional spouse is a tough job! Don't neglect your own needs. Make time to do the uplifting activities that give you joy and satisfaction.

Finally, pray for your spouse and their coworkers. Be thankful that you have been given the very special ministry of being a correctional spouse. Make it a habit to just say a little prayer when they leave for work or when you think about them during the day. Ask for safety and wisdom for your spouse and everyone around them. Pray that the facility where they work be filled with peace and calmness. Request that you be shown how to be a source of comfort and unconditional love to them as they strive to protect and defend our community while working in such a hostile environment.

I understand that, depending on your particular family situation or your own work schedule, some of these suggestions might seem close to impossible or even ridiculous. I'm not saying you should be waiting at the door clad in sexy lingerie or silk boxers, your spouse's favorite meal in the oven, anxiously waiting to fulfill their every need and acknowledge every syllable they may utter. That's smothering. (Though frankly, I myself wouldn't object to the food and the boxers.) But any attempt, no matter how small or frequent, to just be there with compassionate understanding can make a world of difference for your spouse, their career, your family and home life and the success of your marriage.