

# CORRECTIONAL OASIS

**A PUBLICATION OF DESERT WATERS CORRECTIONAL OUTREACH  
A NON-PROFIT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF CORRECTIONAL STAFF AND THEIR FAMILIES**

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## I Miss Prison!

*Submitted by former correctional officer. Used with permission.*

It has only been a year since I left corrections work. I still remember the good friends I made there. I remember that there are people in there keeping order and protecting society. I even at times long to make the kind of a difference they do. I didn't realize how valuable correctional and law enforcement people are until I left. They do things and see things that most people don't even think about. Out here I sometimes talk about the things I did and saw in those places and my current coworkers can't even grasp them. Sometimes I long for the old days. It sounds crazy. I have safer job, I make a lot more money, and I have become a kinder, more trusting person who is able to communicate effectively with almost anyone now.

I credit my career in corrections for making me a student of human behavior and for the gift of being able to read a person's character by observing them and talking to them. I didn't realize that I had developed such incredible interpersonal skills until I began to work in another career field. Don't misunderstand me. I enjoy my job, but I can't help but feel a little empty without my badge, without my old purpose of effecting change in my community in the role of protector.

The working conditions could be deplorable, but it is a job that requires heart, integrity, bravery, and focus. I am proud of what I used to do, the people I worked with, and the uniform I wore. There is no doubt that the place had its problems and so did I, but that job, that purpose, that existence is a worthwhile profession. Again, let me be clear that I enjoy my job, but there is a hole in me that my present job does not fill. Believe it or not, I MISS PRISON.

## Who Wins?

*Submitted by former correctional officer. Used with permission.*

The gate slams behind you as you enter the prison. You take a deep breath as you prepare for the day ahead. Let the games begin!

Each day becomes a day of survival spiritually, mentally, physically, and emotionally. The money is good. The job provides "security" (boy, isn't that a play on words!). But for the money and security there is a heavy price to pay for many. Their world becomes no different than that of the prisoners—hopeless, worrisome, painful, fearful. Many officers say "I do my eight and skate" (a reference to only having to serve in prison for an eight hour shift), but is that statement really true? From my experience, the "Darkness" (negativity) that lies within the prison system can attach itself to you like a blood-sucking leech. It can drain you of all hope long after you have walked out at the end of day. This can be proven by the amount of alcoholism, domestic violence assaults, and suicides that occur among prison staff.

To add insult to injury, the mortality rate for correctional officers has remained at 59.5yrs. of age<sup>1</sup>—not even old enough to collect full retirement benefits! So, who's winning this game? Ask yourself! If you drag yourself out of bed to do a job that you find to be spiritually, mentally, physically and emotionally draining every day, and the trade-off is that you abuse yourself and others in order to "get through it" (not to mention dying at a young age!), what is the sense in that? Don't you, and those who care about you, deserve better? Big questions to ponder....

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## From the Old Screw

### DO NOT WASTE

I believe that ways should be found to use retired corrections staff to help mentor and teach new staff. Not tapping into the knowledge and experience of the retired guys is a great loss. Even if they only told war stories, that would give the new people an insight into how certain situations could or should be handled.

Oh yes, I know that some staff will say that they can't wait to get away and never come back to corrections. Oftentimes, however, they are bored out of their skulls within six months. Their spouses are wishing their partners were doing something other than looking over their shoulder all the time. I believe this is something that needs to be addressed.

When I was a young green Officer I listened to everything that the old timers wanted to tell me. Yes, I sometimes needed to take it with 50lbs. of salt, but

even then I could learn something about the Officer who was talking to me.

It is sad when we dedicate a big part of our life to a cause and then walk away and our knowledge is wasted.

I'm glad I found something to do with my experience with prisons. Of course there will always be some retired staff who doesn't want to talk about work. However, I wonder whether they don't also think back on the days they used to walk the line.

The human resource is available. The next step is for decisions to be made whether to make use of it, and if so, how.

Take care,

*The Old Screw*

## Stress Management

*Submitted by correctional employee. Used with permission.*

About twenty-five hundred years ago a Greek named Empedocles took an empty cup and plunged it upside down into a tank of water. He did this to illustrate that air, which seems to be nothing, has substance and the power to prevent water from entering into the cup. He suggested that other elements which appear to be devoid of substance and power might in fact have both.

Empedocles felt that stress was an active force that exerted itself on all of us, and that equally strong forces within us are capable of keeping stress out.

Many ancient philosophers agreed that every person is comprised of a physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual self. These philosophers believed that the well-being of the individual depends upon the balance and development of these components. This suggests a method for actively combating stress.

Each component of a person has its own stress. Illness stresses the body. Ignorance stresses the mind. Anger and hate stress the emotions. Corruption stresses one's spirit, one's conscience.

Thankfully, there are forces that can counteract the harmful effects of stress.

Activities like eating good food, exercising, and resting promote good health. Good health helps the body ward off illness.

Ignorance and facing the unknown cause great stress. Education, training, practice and experience fill the void of uncertainty with knowledge. Knowledge makes living easier.

Strong relationships are safe harbors in stormy times. Strengthening our love for our relatives and friends, and befriending as many people as we can, generate better prospects for the good times and the bad. Love and understanding ward off anger and hate.

When we think we are doing something wrong we experience enormous stress. Staying true to our values clears our conscience and unburdens our minds. Guilt is a tremendous stressor which can be avoided by doing the right thing.

So here is an ancient recipe for stress management. Fill your cup to the brim with **good health, knowledge, love, and doing good deeds**, and either there won't be any room for stress or when stress hits you'll have ways to deal with it.

## Corrections: From Fatigue To Fulfillment—Part III

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This is the third installment in a series on Corrections Fatigue's toxic impact on staff. This article addresses how Corrections Fatigue distorts staff's beliefs about need satisfaction, and how it affects emotional regulation, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills.

### Core Beliefs about Need Satisfaction

As we accumulate life experiences we come to conclusions about how to satisfy our needs and wants. The basic creed of "fatigued" staff becomes very Darwinian: *Survive by remaining the toughest and the fittest*. Given the work environment, staff comes to believe that they must fight to get their needs met. Overpowering opponents "no matter what it takes" becomes the preferred M.O. This approach seems to be the only viable option, given that they have come to believe that they are law enforcers, that the world is full of criminals, and that no one truly has their back.

### Emotional Self-Management

Managing our emotions is one of the competencies we need to function effectively. This involves the ability to be aware of thoughts and feelings, to regulate our anger, and to face anxiety, sadness or shame without becoming overwhelmed. Emotional self-management makes us resilient—able to bounce back after struggles and disappointments.

"Fatigued" staff experience emotional extremes. They either become numb, due to suppression of their emotions, or they act in explosive and excessive ways. Escape of emotional distress through addictions

(substances, gambling, sex) is resorted to frequently.

### Problem-solving Behaviors

Under ideal circumstances, problem-solving involves assessing the nature of a problem and examining ways that it can be tackled, including evaluating the positive and negatives of each possible solution.

For "fatigued" staff, problem-solving gets distilled down to two approaches, both counterproductive:

- a) Aggression—*When you have a problem, attack whoever is associated with it. Either make them go away or force them to give you what you want.*
- b) Avoidance—*As long as you don't acknowledge a problem, you don't have a problem.*

### Interpersonal Skills

These refer to our ability to interact with others effectively. In the "free world" this usually involves a "win-win" approach, working toward the need satisfaction of all involved. In corrections, staff's priority is to maintain safety through maintaining control. People's needs are often secondary. Over time this approach grows on the employees. Thus for staff affected by Corrections Fatigue relating becomes one-sided—imposing their preferences on others and nullifying resistance. Instead of seeking understanding and collaboration, "fatigued" staff aims to get their way at just about any cost. To them the world is divided between winners and losers, and they certainly don't want to be losers. When relationships crumble, staff may become highly distressed or even suicidal.

## Who Wins?

*(Continued from page 1)*

**Know that you do have a choice in how you live your life.** Be as positive as you can with yourself and others. Find outlets (hobbies, volunteering, discussion groups, etc.) that bring you joy, and do them often. The happier you are, the happier everyone around you is. (Unfortunately the opposite is true as well). Be a "bright light" (a positive, optimistic person) both in prison and at home.

To those who are struggling at this point in your lives, or know someone else who is, please don't be "proud." Seek help to get beyond that bend in the road.

YOU deserve to be happy! YOU are worth fighting for.

"You can seemingly have everything, and still have nothing."

*me*

Peace to you all.

<sup>1</sup>Desert Waters assumes no responsibility for the accuracy of the information provided in our guest writers' commentary.

# Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



*a non-profit organization  
for the well-being of correctional  
staff and their families*

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**Thanks to your contributions last month, we were able to cover most of our bills for March. We are grateful to you all.**

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## Doing The Right Thing

*From email by jail employee. Used with permission.*

In our line of work the question often is, do we do what's right or do we say that something is "the right thing to do" given the situation?

In a correctional environment we are charged with carrying out our duties according to the law.

Following my department's rules and regulations and policy and procedures (r/r pnp), if I saw a fight between two inmates and knew it stemmed from a problem on the street (that this was a revenge fight), and the person seeking revenge won, what is my responsibility? Under r/r pnp I should lock both down and write them up. Now, I may know that inmate B did a great injustice to inmate A's family, and this was payback. Do I let it slide like nothing happened or not? In jail the right thing is the write-up and lockdown. That's the rule and law.

Another scenario. I catch a staff member who is also a friend passing off contraband—nothing dangerous—to an inmate. A casual mention to the staff member that he/she shouldn't be doing that should suffice, but the situation persists. Do I do the right thing and move on to my super-

visor, or is it the right thing to ignore it since it is "blue" and it's not my problem, and the coworker will hang him/herself eventually? The right thing is the first one—tell the supervisor. That's the r/r pnp. If I don't, the plot can thicken in many ways. Security is compromised.

Also, what if he/she gets caught, and somehow my name pops up, that I knew about the contraband? Now I just bought into the whole ball of wax with him/her.

Third scenario. An officer gets set up by an inmate. The inmate has been constantly harassed by the officer, and I know it. I can see the C.O. is about to get in some kind of trouble. Do I do the right thing and jump in to help him, or is it the right thing to let him get his "just deserts" since he's a smart aleck anyway, and the inmate deserves to get even? Under r/r pnp, I need to run to my coworker's aid.

The conclusion: **Follow the rules. Don't come up with your own justice.** You may take some guff, but rules are in place to keep us relatively safe. So "doing the right thing" and "it's the right thing to do" hopefully become one and the same.