

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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Two Sheets of Music

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Recently two correctional workers and I were discussing what helps staff stay “sane.” Without hesitation both said, “Correctional workers must be able to switch their mindset from work to home.” One added, “I learned how to live in two very different worlds and still not lose ‘me’.”

Indeed, corrections personnel live in two worlds. These worlds are like two sheets of music. Daily staff is asked to switch from one tune to the other. These two worlds involve very different assumptions about what is expected, how people must behave, and what constitutes a “good day.”

At work corrections staff knows that danger is always lurking in the background. They get trained to be always on their guard and to have their psychological shield up. Safety and security are top priorities. The general expectation is that people will lie, manipulate, steal or kill to get what they want. Staff learns to assume that what they witness may be a game. To avoid getting “conned,” staff learns to suppress natural tendencies toward caring or being helpful. So corrections staff becomes overly cautious (the term *paranoid* may not be far off), mistrusting and “hard.” And a good day is when all staff goes home alive and intact.

At home though, corrections staff are confronted with a very different set of assumptions and requirements. Loved ones expect them to be trusting, compassionate and forgiving, willing to share both power and responsibilities. In the “free” world most people assume others to be law-abiding, peace-

loving, and caring. A good day on the outside is when people enjoy life, and love and support one another.

Problems ensue when corrections personnel cannot quite make the switch from work to home, when the staff’s negative outlook and cynicism come home with them, often with heartbreaking results.

How can staff learn to switch their tune, to transition between the inside and outside worlds more effectively? Here are some ideas on this.

1. It is crucial to remember that the two sheets of music are to be played by the same musician. The same person goes to work and returns home. Their core remains the same—their values and principles. That core needs to be the foundation of their operating in both worlds. What does that core need to be like to make the transition successful?

In my opinion what it takes is embracing worthy, positive values to guide one’s choices and actions consistently, no matter what the setting. That makes switching between sheets of music easier. Examples of such values and principles are honesty, respect, fairness, self-control, trustworthiness, willingness to acknowledge one’s errors and to make amends, caring for the common good, and the ability to forgive/let go and not succumb to hatred. Such values make it possible for staff to behave wisely and constructively both at work and at home.

IN MEMORIAM
Sgt. Julia Dillard
Winfield Corr. Facility
Kansas DOC
7/15/09

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DWCO MISSION

To increase the occupational, personal and family well-being of staff of all disciplines within the corrections profession.

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And The Enemy Is "Us"

By Sergeant Jon Jones

We all feel it, the nudge at the base of the neck, the clenched jaw line, the angry feeling that cannot be explained and will not go away.

Stress. Webster's defines stress as: *A. Constraining force or influence... C. A physical, chemical or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and maybe a factor in disease causation.*

That's great, we all know it, but how does that clinical definition apply to us? We are one of the few professions where stress is not just that thing that happens when we miss a deadline or when a round of layoffs come down. Sure, we feel that too, but for us, stress is different. It's palpable, it's constant, it causes the new officers to quit after a week. It creates a home life that is less than harmonious, and drives us into alcoholism, divorce or worse. Before we figure out ways to deal with it, let's examine its causes.

Every one will tell you it's the inmates, you know the people that we are supposed to be managing. We make up excuses to justify the stress like, "He's max, that guy's a killer, I'm surrounded by crooks," or my favorite, "We're locked in here with these guys for the whole shift." All I have to say about this endless drone is we signed up for this, this is our job, this is what we all expected. Sure, dealing with felons, being confined in a small area with dangerous people is stressful, but it's not the kind of stress that causes veteran officers to cheat on their wives. This is normal stress that comes with a dangerous profession such as ours. We accept it or we quit within the first year. Plain and simple.

The stress that causes veterans to drink or cheat is caused by, get ready this is going to stress you out... US. We cause it. We do it to each other. We make our environment more stressful than it has to be. But why? Based on what I have seen trolling the hallways of a couple of facilities, it comes down to; *because we can*. Either it's the grizzled old bear that is miserable and wants the rest of us to be that way, or it's the company guy that is looking for the next promotion and will step on whomever they see as the threat of the day. Or boredom or one clique against

another. The point is that reasons are many, most of them ridiculous.

So you're reading this and thinking, that's great, Sarg, but what do we do about it? Here is how I keep this stuff from bothering me.

1. *Don't take it personally.* Try to let the comments, backstabbing and undermining roll off your back.
2. *Take action.* When the problem gets too big, see a supervisor/ administrator, but don't just complain. Take evidence of the problem and take a solution with you to the meeting.
3. *Take it home.* Yes, take it home. Tell your spouse or significant other what's going on. Don't spend all day on it, but talk. My wife and I have a 3 minute rule. We each spend 3 minutes complaining to the other about what happened that day. Then we're done and we deal with our home stuff.
4. *Work it off.* You don't have to be like me and hit the gym every day, but anything helps.
5. *Take a vacation.* Your admin is going to hate this part, but take some time off throughout the year. Do something you like, even if you stay home. A day away from the stresses of work is great for your attitude, although you may not notice it right away.
6. *Get help.* This one is the most important. When you get to the point where you're cheating on your spouse, or drinking a lot, or thinking about killing yourself, it's getting critical. Get help, professional help. Choke that pride and see someone. It's much better to have that confidential help and save your life, than to throw it all away over something that would not be a problem in the "real world."

These things are not the be all and end all to dealing with stress. I am by no means perfect and I work in the same place you do and catch the same stressors. The important part is to keep driving forward and keep your mission in focus.

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Two Sheets of Music

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2. Staff needs to also have concrete markers to remind them that indeed they have switched from one sheet of music—one world—to the other. To help them come out of their corrections role when they get home, staff can use routines and rituals. They may take a shower and change into casual clothes. They may talk with loved ones about each other's day or vent for a time before focusing on their home life. They may work out, spend time with their children, tinker in the garage, garden, feed their animals, volunteer somewhere, or take the dog for a walk.

3. Staff need to frequently correct their thinking and remember that what may be common on the inside often does not apply as much, if at all, on the outside. For example, they need to remind themselves that, "I'm not just a cop. I'm also a parent, spouse, friend." "There ARE decent, kind people out there." "Kindness is not weakness." "I can keep an open mind and give people a chance to earn my trust."

4. Letting loved ones in on this tune-switching process can make it much easier overall. Staff can share with family and friends about struggles and successes regarding adapting from the inside world to outside realities. They can ask for help (yes, you can), patience, understanding and reminders that the free world is very different on the average than the corrections world.

5. On the other hand, when one is ready to go back to work, it is important to remind oneself of certain basic corrections-related principles. Safety first. Be on the lookout for trouble. Complacency can kill. Have each other's back. Weigh the legitimacy of offenders' requests. LISTEN. Leave personal needs at home.

Yes, this all takes intention and effort. On particularly tough days when work incidents are branded in your mind, heart and brain, it takes extra time and energy to switch between the two sheets of music.

However, this switch can and needs to be made if you are to maintain your sanity and your quality of life in both worlds.

The Path to Self-care

By Alice Domann

I have been asked how I have managed to maintain all these years in a male institution with such apparent ease. My answer is that I was old enough when I started out to know who I was and nobody was going to shake that. **Know who you are, know how you want to be known, know what you want and how you are going to get it.** Maybe that's the start of a path for the pursuit of self-care.

We rarely initiate anything in corrections without a planned form of action. Why should our lives not get the same considered reflection? Whether we make the right choices or the wrong choices, we are responsible for those choices. So, what ARE the most important things in your life? Kids? Relationships? School? Sports? Music? Work? Choose what these are for you. List them in order of importance to you and how much time you plan on devoting to them each week. What will be your strategies to deal with interruptions like changes in work schedule, working overtime, bringing a rough day home with you? With

many of us, work is NOT anywhere near the most important part of our lives, so don't let it overshadow the life you really want to build. Corrections is very intense. It can take over your life if you are not vigilant. The comradeship you feel at work is great, but, that's part-time life. You want to build a whole, full-time life.

Do what you can to leave work at work. Put a picture of your kids, bike, spouse, whatever is important to you, in the car and look at it to visually remove your brain from where it has been, so that by the time you get home you are ready to make the switchover. Find something that works for you. You hear about problems corrections people deal with at home. I sometimes wonder if that is because we take the work adrenaline with us and invite chaotic behavior in our personal lives. If we want to change people's reactions to us, we need to change our actions toward them. Once you are at home, you are not on a

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Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

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http://www.corrections.com/caterina_tudor/.

The Path to Self-care

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response team, you are not expected to react to violations of 44-12-10 or whatever else. You're HOME! That's the good place. Relax and enjoy those around you. It's OK.

Consider, choose and plan what you want. Write the plan out, refer to it daily and you will be less likely to lose track of what is important to you. Let those around you in on what you are doing and ask for help when you need it.

You also have to make decisions about relationships at work. We have married couples at work and others in relationships. It seems to work for those who can leave romance at home and not bring it to work. I decided a long time ago that my personal life and work life were separate. I've seen too many complications from failed or inappropriate relationships and, in a prison, that puts you in a weakened position as far as both staff and inmates are concerned. The job is hard enough without that complication. When you meet the employee who can't respect your decision, stand your ground. They will flit off to someone else soon enough. And you can thank

God you missed that sorry boat. The women and men who are Corrections Professionals will appreciate your steadfastness and reliability.

There's more to the path. Since corrections can be so consuming, let's make sure we control it before it controls us. Why did you get into corrections? Did you get into it as a longtime interest or did you need a job and benefits to make a living for your family, or both? Where does it fit into your life plans? Do you plan on advancing in rank or to another section of corrections? If so, what is your timeline? How do you plan to accomplish this? Do you want to advance in seniority just enough so you can pick the shift that is most advantageous for your family? Who do you see as a mentor? Will they accept you as someone to teach? What do you need to learn? Have you decided you don't intend to stay in corrections? What else do you want to do? How will you accomplish your new goal?

So consider, choose and make a plan. Nobody can or should tell you how your life is to be lived. That's your job. If you do it, it will express self-love, you will pay proper attention to the important things in your life, and everyone in it will get a much better YOU.