

# 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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From Caterina's Desk

## **NEEDED: Protocol For Intervening With Suicidal Staff**

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Over the holidays we were told of recent staff suicides where colleagues could see that a coworker was spiraling downward into depression, but they did not know how to respond to their coworker or what to do about the situation.

I can't help but wonder whether these deaths might have been averted had a protocol been in place regarding what action staff can take when they have reason to believe that a colleague is suicidal. Looking the other way while hoping the despondent colleague will bounce back, and the code of silence—"blue never rats on blue"—could cost precious lives. Surely, procedures can be put in place as to how help can be summoned for a suicidal colleague without the fear that the depressed employee would lose coworkers' respect or even their job.

A protocol would mandate training on red flags to look out for and instructions as to how to proceed when concerned about a coworker's safety, both in terms of discreetly notifying appropriate parties and responding to the colleague in distress. A protocol would lessen hesitancy to take action, and would hopefully reduce possible blame of staff who do take steps to get a colleague help. The protocol needs to cover the full spectrum of possible scenarios, all the way from depressed coworkers hinting about their wish to die to them making a good bye call. Staff should be particularly alerted to the fact that correctional employees who face criminal charges, a relationship break-up or a serious health diagnosis are at an extremely high risk of suicide.

From Caterina's Desk

## **An Ounce of Prevention=\$\$\$ (& Lives!) Saved**

We know that working in corrections is stressful. There are many publications which attest to that. However, the subject is still not confronted sufficiently aggressively both at basic training or thereafter.

Over the years we have heard many sad stories of corrections staff who, for example, succumbed to alcoholism, simply because they believed they would "lose face" if they sought help to cope with work-related stressors and their intrusion into their personal lives.

How might stress and its long-term outcome, Corrections Fatigue, affect correctional staff, and, consequently, whole correctional departments adversely?

Here is partial list.

- Absenteeism and sick leave
- Exhaustion
- Poor concentration
- Demoralization
- Ineffective communication
- Negative outlook
- Irritability
- Hostility
- Conflict with other staff or inmates

*(Continued on page 4)*

## From The Old Screw

**FOR MALE STAFF**

In a past issue I wrote about some of the pitfalls of women working in Corrections. Well, guys, now it's your turn. In every State where I've worked I've seen male Staff walked out or stopped at the main gate. Yes, male Officers have their problems too. Staff sexual misconduct sometimes raises its ugly head. I have seen some highly respected Staff walked out the door for playing sex games with inmates.

Inmates will also work on male staff if they feel they have a chance to take advantage and/or get a staff member in trouble.

One Officer was a very kind and religious man. An inmate worked at being friendly toward him. Finally one day the inmate asked the Officer to take out a letter for him. Before the Officer could get to the front gate, the inmate went to the Housing Lt. and told him that the Officer was taking out contraband. When the Lt. asked the inmate how he knew this, the inmate said, "Because I gave it to him." Prisons are one of the few places in the world where kindness sometimes will jump up and bite you in your butt.

Inmates will work on Staff for years to try to set them up. I had an inmate who was extra nice and helpful toward me for three years. I knew he was up to something and so I told my Captain and other Staff what was going on. We thought that, because

he was working so hard, when he finally asked for what he wanted, it would be something big. I was surprised when he finally asked me to bring in instant iced tea. When I told him "NO!" he never again spoke to me if he didn't have to. As you can imagine, there was a reason for this simple request. If I had brought in some instant iced tea, the next thing he would have asked for would have been more serious. You could also bank that there would have been one inmate, if not more, who would have witnessed the transfer. This is done so when you finally try to stop bringing in contraband, you are told, "No, you will continue." They would then tell you that there were witnesses to your kindness. Has such a scenario happened? You'd better believe it. Everyone messes up. No one is perfect. It will be one of the hardest things you will ever do, but if you screw up, tell your Sgt. or Lt. ASAP. Yes, you may be reprimanded, or you may lose some pay or even your job if you mess up badly enough. I promise you, however, that whatever you face will be better than getting fired and prosecuted. It is always a sad day when you see a fellow Officer in handcuffs, still in uniform, walked out and put in a police vehicle.

Take care,  
*The Old Screw*

**Because Of Your Support**

Another year has come and gone. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach is now four years old! Your help and support in a multitude of ways make it possible for us to continue extending our services to corrections and detention staff and their family members. Here is a summary of our activities and accomplishments in 2006.

- *The Corrections Ventline*™ responded to 107 contacts vs. 39 in 2005.
- We assisted five suicidal staff and two staff concerned about potentially suicidal others.
- Our newsletter, the *Correctional Oasis*, was

sent monthly to over 2,500 individuals and correctional facilities in the U.S. and Canada.

- We offered staff and family members a total of 203 counseling sessions at a reduced cost.
- We provided 18 trainings and presentations in five states, with a total of 497 staff attending.
- We were featured numerous times in the e-zine *The Corrections Connection* (<http://corrections.com/>), and five newspapers in Colorado.

Thank you for partnering with Desert Waters!

# Corrections: From Fatigue To Fulfillment—Part 1

© Caterina Spinaris Tudor, Ph.D., LPC, 2006

*This is the first installment in a series. This article was featured as one of the Best of Fall 2006 Guest Author category for the e-zine The Corrections Connection. See <http://corrections.com/news/article.aspx?articleid=14781> and <http://www.corrections.com/news/article.aspx?articleid=14766>.*

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 Theory<sup>1</sup>, 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.*

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

# Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

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### BLOGS

<http://desertwaters.blogspot.com>  
<http://womenincorrections.blogspot.com>

Please let us know if there are any subjects you would like us to address in the newsletter.

**The Corrections Ventline™**  
**1-866-YOU-VENT**  
**(866.968.8368)**  
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## An Ounce of Prevention=\$\$\$ (& Lives!) Saved

(Continued from page 1)

- Excessive use of force
- Sexual misconduct
- Quitting the job (which results in high staff turnover)
- Depression
- Substance abuse (which worsens depression and lowers job performance)
- Other addictive behaviors, such as compulsive gambling, compulsive overeating or compulsive sexual behaviors
- Family violence (when convicted, staff has to resign)
- Separation or divorce (which also worsen depression and affect job performance)
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (which impacts personal and professional functioning negatively)
- Suicide (which ends a life and demoralizes coworkers)

To reduce the impact of stress, the following preventative

steps can be taken at the organizational level:

- Addressing the subject extensively at basic training to equip new recruits with effective coping tools
- Encouragement by administrators and supervisors to implement stress-counteracting tools regularly
- Monthly psychoeducation presentations on related subjects
- Regular distribution of wellness-related materials
- Monthly mandatory counseling for the purpose of processing negative work-related experiences and correcting their impact

Staff needs to be given permission by their administrators to safely admit that they may be struggling to “keep it together.” How many staff could be retained if stress and Corrections Fatigue were tackled consistently and routinely as inescapable occupational hazards? From our conversations with active staff and former employees, we dare say that the number would not be insignificant.