

## To Talk or Not to Talk

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The following is a typical query we get from spouses of corrections staff:

*"I wonder what has happened to my husband since he has become a corrections officer. He used to be so easygoing. He'd laugh and joke and didn't complain much. After five years in the system, he's somber and can't find joy in anything. He's also become paranoid. We don't go out together much, but when we do, he insists on sitting with his back against the wall. And he's so negative! He finds fault with everything and everyone and tears me down all the time. I'm tired of walking on eggshells around him, yet I can tell he's miserable and I feel for him. Please help me understand!"*

Family members are usually in the dark about what corrections work entails and how it may affect others. Educating them on the subject facilitates communication and strengthens the staff member's support system at home.

### **When Work Starts to Affect Your Family Life**

If you are experiencing increasing emotional distance and bickering with your significant other at home, the following illustration might be of help to you and your partner:

You've dragged yourself through another shift. As you crawl into your vehicle, you say to yourself, "I made it another day." As you peel away from the gate, images of hateful looks and violence replay in your mind. You head down the road, screaming inside at offenders and other staff. You wonder if taking a swing at someone or kicking something would help. You know you will be home in thirty minutes. Just the thought of having to deal with one more person makes you tense up even more. You're not looking forward to any "Hi, honey. How're you doing?" chatter. How will you handle it this time?

Once again, you review your options. When you make it out of the prison gate, you want to leave work behind. You wish you could step in the shower and wash yourself clean from the crud of the workday. At home you want to focus on getting on with life. Not too long from now you will have to climb into that uniform again and head back to the gate. You don't want to contaminate your "free" time with thoughts about the ugliness of work. You don't want to upset your partner with your anxieties, frustrations, or fears. You don't even want to put your feelings and thoughts into words. Perhaps a couple of beers would drown them and keep them out of sight.

Trying to forget what you've just been through at work gives you short-term relief, temporary reprieve from the bombardment of work pressures. Not talking about work allows you to engage in normal, free-world activities. Perhaps you can do something with the kids or watch television. Your family can continue their regular routine without worrying about you and your work life.

"What good would it do to talk, anyway?" you wonder to yourself. You want to protect your loved ones, to spare them knowing about the toxic work environment you find yourself in daily. Burdening your partner with your workday's struggles would only cause him or her needlessly worry. Your partner cannot do anything to fix the situation, anyway.

Besides, you don't want your partner Monday-morning quarterbacking you. You don't want to get beat up by comments like: "You shouldn't have said that," "You're going to get yourself fired, and then what?" "I want to talk to that guy myself," or "This is what you need to do next time!" You have enough criticism at work. You don't need to bring more upon yourself at home. You've already got one boss. So, if you don't talk, you won't get lectured or yelled at again at home—at least not for your work performance.

And even if your partner is understanding and supportive, he or she still has no way of helping you and really doesn't understand the correctional culture and its politics. Also, you don't talk because you don't want rumors flying through the community. There are issues of confidentiality. What happens inside the prison needs to stay inside the prison.

And yet you cannot deny the fact that as a couple you are drifting apart. You can't even remember the last time you had a heart-to-heart talk. There are many empty spaces between the two of you. This scares you whenever you acknowledge it to yourself. Your job is changing you, and your partner is blind as to who you are becoming. To him or her, you are a stranger.

Besides, when you get honest with yourself, you can't help admitting that you do bring your troubles home. You don't talk about what happens at work; instead, you blow up over unrelated, usually insignificant, "stuff." You complain, pick fights, and order people around. Or you hang out at the bar with your buddies after work, and get home numb and artificially cheerful.

The truth is that there is no simple solution to your dilemma. You need to let your partner into your heart if you are to stay emotionally connected. And you need to do it in ways that do not violate confidentiality and do not send your partner into orbit. You need to be able to receive comfort and give it in return.

A friend in corrections told me about the best way he and his wife dealt with this issue. They attended a couples' Bible study with other correctional officers and their spouses. They listened to other couples and shared their own struggles. In the supportive atmosphere of the group they learned a new language to talk to each other and new ways to comfort one another. They learned to pray together and for one another. They learned how to ask for others' counsel.

This may or may not work for you. What needs to happen, however, no matter how you get there, is to gradually develop a common language about how work impacts you. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Educate your partner** slowly and patiently. Give him or her this booklet as a way to jumpstart a conversation. Go to Desert Waters ([www.desertwaters.com](http://www.desertwaters.com)) and download additional articles.

2. **Talk about the workplace, focusing on your feelings about situations rather than factual technicalities.** Share enough to have meaningful conversations about how *you* are doing.

3. **Ask your partner how he or she is impacted by your sharing.** Listen attentively to the answer. Comfort him or her if he or she expresses concern about your welfare.

4. If you come from a faith perspective, **pray together** about both your work and home environments.

5. After you share with your partner, **deliberately choose to focus on the present at home.** Laugh, play, and relax together. Do something engaging with the kids.

Below are a few questions spouses and significant others can ask corrections professionals to increase closeness:

- *How does your usual day unfold? What are the routine procedures you go through, tasks you have to get done, exchanges you have with other staff and offenders?*
- *What are you expected to do in an emergency?*
- *What would constitute an emergency in your workplace?*
- *What are some of the challenges you face at work?*
- *What are some of your areas of concern?*
- *What emotions get stirred up at work?*
- *How can I help you leave work behind when you get home?*
- *How would you like me to support you around work-related issues?*
- *What do you like about your job?*
- *What do you feel you do well at work?*
- *What are some of the disturbing things you deal with at work?*
- *How can we talk about your work experiences enough so I stay close to you, but not too much so you don't feel like you cannot get away from work when you get home?*

It is wise to listen to your partner without trying to fix his or her situation. Validate his or her emotions without necessarily taking sides. Let your partner know it is okay to feel very strongly about certain situations. Seek ways to be supportive and comforting without being too “syrupy.” Express your thanks and appreciation to your partner for taking care of you and your family. Pray for your spouse.

Learn to listen respectfully and compassionately to your spouse’s apprehensions and concerns for your safety. Don’t cut him or her off. Your spouse cares about you and loves you. Hear him

or her out and offer reassurance, especially after a disturbance in a prison or another such incident makes the news.