

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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Safe & Sane

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If you ask me what I think are the two most important focus points for effective functioning in corrections, I'd have to say that the two top ones are SAFETY and SANITY. And these two are interdependent. If you don't have safety, there goes your sanity. And if you don't have sanity, you can forget about safety.

The corrections workplace cannot operate effectively without a sufficient degree of staff safety. Safety helps staff survive not only physically, but also psychologically. Lack of safety contributes to psychological distress and even disorders, such as generalized anxiety, panic and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

On the other hand, to perform safely on the job, staff must be "sane enough." By that I mean that staff needs to be reasonably well psychologically. They have to be able to manage their emotions and motivate themselves when the going gets tough. They must also be able to withstand and manage conflict without cowering or becoming aggressive. Additionally, they need to be flexible and resourceful enough to be able to switch from the work mindset to that of the free world when at home, and back to work mode when they report once again to their facilities.

Yes, safety and sanity are vital in corrections. Yet they both are in the crosshairs. How so?

Much of what I'll say you may have thought about already. If so, let's indulge in some repetition and a few reminders.

Undermining safety is always the goal of some inmates. Employee complacency and short-staffing threaten safety further.

Sanity also takes a hit in many ways in the corrections workplace.

Surrounded by felons 24/7, correctional employees are exposed to violence, injury and death much more than the average citizen, perhaps more than law enforcement officers on the street. Security concerns and exposure to traumatic incidents cause staff hypervigilance, anxiety or even terror.

Cooped up during their working hours, staff essentially is doing time alongside the inmates in 8+hour shifts.

Also, there is not much joy, optimism, beauty and compassion in corrections, all key contributors to mental health.

Instead, surrounded by toxic clouds of negativity, fear, anger, hate and grief, staff gradually get increasingly more poisoned. And—Catch 22—seeking help is often seen in corrections as a sign of "weakness."

Corrections staff have to work hard to maintain their health and wellness in every way—physically, psychologically and spiritually. Doing so is like pedaling uphill. If you ignore your well-being—if you only want to coast—you'll be going downhill.

The aim of DWCO is to challenge, inspire and encourage corrections personnel to think about their own and their colleagues' well-being, and their families' welfare also.

I'd like to hear your ideas about improving staff wellness in the corrections workplace and shedding the perilous belief that seeking help from friends, family or professionals is a sign of weakness. Please send your thoughts to caterina@desertwaters.com.

IN MEMORIAM

James Hubbard
Sgt. Major
Shawnee County Jail
Topeka, KS
5/21/09

Joe Nowlin
Chief of Security
Northeast Oklahoma
Correctional Center
Vinita, OK

DWCO MISSION

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

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THE CORRECTIONS VENTLINE™

866-YOU-VENT

youvent@desertwaters.com

Do I Creep You Out?

By Joe Bouchard

You can take the person out of corrections. But can you keep corrections out of the person? Can professionals clock out and leave all deeply ingrained corrections habits behind the walls? Or are we doomed to perpetually monitor and observe even when we are in our relatively safe place away from the institution?

Ideally, our work and home lives should be as distinct from each other as night and day. The health of our work day is in part dependent on how we spend time off the clock. In other words, we perform our stressful corrections jobs better when we alleviate tension with productive and enjoyable avocations.

It is clear that we can largely keep the worlds of work and home separate through intentional actions. However, the firm line of division is blurred into a nebulous frontier when we consider our unintended actions. That is to say, no matter how we try, an unconscious residue of corrections will follow us home. Quite simply, it is inevitable.

At home, we will perform corrections functions quite inadvertently. Think of the surprise and mild distress that our loved ones experience when we execute our vocational imperatives off the job. It is true that our work habits, born of training and experience, are necessary to keep us safe. But are they a necessary part of our home life? Ask your loved ones: "Do my work habits creep you out?"

Here are some of our crossover behaviors that we export from the facility:

- Thoughts of work – We solve problems by dwelling on them. We are mentally at work while our physical being is miles away. It is true that we may revisit work-related problems quite accidentally when we are at home. It is natural for the mind to unravel mysteries when it is not engaged in complex thought. However, this may invade our sleep.
- Don't stand so close to me! – Issues of personal space arise. Often we export an over-defensive stance outside the walls. Our physical distance stan-

dards for inmates should be different from our standards for those we truly care about.

- Don't stand behind me! – Alertness is a life saver in our profession. But, in its heightened form, it could be dangerous. How often do we hate to have loved ones stand behind us because of our professionally acquired caution? I once heard a story of a child greeting her parent after work. The child did not think about the potential hazard of startling her parent from behind. The reward for her sweet salutation was a reactive KI-YA! and a defensive block. Unless you are training a three-year old in hand to hand combat, this is not an appropriate behavior.
- Back to the wall – Whenever you go to a restaurant, it is natural to sit with your back to a wall. When corrections staff gather in an eatery outside of the facility, the perimeter seats fill first. This is very strange and frustrating to non-corrections individuals.
- Computer monitor – I was visiting a friend at work. I kept looking at her desk, and her computer screen, just as I would scope out the area when I am at work. I had to stop myself because I sensed that I was infringing on her privacy. Vigilance compromises relationships.
- Store detective – How many times do corrections professionals find themselves looking for shoplifters when they should be shopping?
- Making security rounds – Many of us engage in phantom key control. We fumble for our large ring of nonexistent keys as we amble around our dwellings. We check doors and locks in an almost compulsive manner. Security is important at home. But there is a difference between your house and the Big House.
- Work-speak – It is inevitable that use of professional jargon will seep into our home lexicon in one manner or another. How often do we say "negative" rather than simply "no?" The official terminology is just part of it. There are so many slang words and

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expletives that become part of our verbal expression long after we leave the facility for the day.

Are these idiosyncratic moves a big deal? What harm do they do? First of all, our loved ones have to adapt to our work habits brought home. The big problem is that we never really get to rest. It is a downward spiral of exhaustion, irritability, and tension. That shortens our professional life and makes us a hazard to safety on the job.

So, what can we do? How can we balance these behaviors? It is all up to the individual. There are many options to employ:

- Actively engage in non-corrections hobbies
- Rethink balance between the two worlds of work and home
- Allow plenty of time to recharge your work batteries
- Find a comfort zone that has nothing to do with work
- Acquire a transition mentality from work to home by mentally preparing for your homecoming every day
- Use any of the many relaxation exercises

- Use your hands to build something unrelated to corrections.

It is not too much to say that we seem to carry the weight of the world on our collective shoulders. We are, after all, the eyes that never close. Clearly, we need downtime to professionally decompress from our vocational burdens. Otherwise, we will become debilitated through cumulative stress.

Though it is not entirely possible to completely take all of the corrections out of a person, one could come close. With some awareness and the willingness to change habits, we can maintain a healthy balance between work and home life.

Joe Bouchard is a Librarian employed at the Baraga Correctional Facility, Michigan Department of Corrections. He also teaches criminal justice and corrections classes for Gogebic Community College. Read more articles by Joe at http://www.corrections.com/joe_bouchard/

"Honoring our Community Protectors"

DWCO Walk/Run, Agency Booths, Food, Festivities
 Saturday October 3, 2009
 River Walk & Vineyard Equipping Center
 Cañon City, CO
 More details soon!

From the Old Screw

It Takes Repetition

Corrections work requires repeated reminders of certain things. These are principles that should be learned by every new employee and brought back to mind regularly by experienced staff.

1. *Beware of friendly and overly helpful inmates.* No inmate is your friend. Yes, some are helpful, but the first thing you need to think is, "What are they really after?"

2. *Pay attention if inmates tell you that you do things better than other staff.* If you're told that, you need to stop and review the way you're doing things. You're very likely doing something wrong, and it is in the inmates' favor.

3. *Know the rules.* Know what you're supposed to

do. Inmates may know the rules better than you do, and they'll test you to see how sure you are about policy. The more uncertain you are, the more they'll be able to set you up for a game. Never take an inmate's word for how things ought to be done. So read and learn the rules and regulations. It can save you a world of problems.

4. *Follow the rules.* Rules are there for a reason. You are hired to do a job as you have been instructed. Follow procedure. A few weeks in training does not make you an expert in handling inmates.

5. *Never discuss personal or family matters within range of inmates' hearing.* They don't need hearing boosters to hear you. They can read lips. They are also experts at reading body talk.

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

Caterina Spinaris Tudor, Ph.D.
Executive Director

**P.O. Box 355
Florence, CO 81226
(719) 784-4727**

DESERTWATERS@DESERTWATERS.COM

WWW.DESERTWATERS.COM

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It Takes Repetition

6. *Never ever complain or tell an inmate that coworkers are picking on you.* If you do, they'll become the kindest person you've ever seen and oh, so helpful. Pretty soon they'll set you up for something.
7. *Ask questions.* Never be afraid to ask a fellow staff for help or information. Yes, there are grouches who won't give you the time of day, but there is more staff that care and will help. Just watch. They are easy to spot.
8. *"The other staff let me do it."* If an inmate tells you that, just say "no" until you can check it out. If they get smart with you, tell them to wait until the other officer gets there.
9. *Don't take work home.* Try not to take your bad day home to your loved ones. Sometimes it is true that this can be very hard to do, but do your best. They do not deserve the moodiness or the abuse.
10. *Make use of downtime.* This is very seriously needed. Take the time and explain this to your families. After work you need time to unwind and to switch from work to home. I know from experience how important this can be. If you don't have ways to have downtime, you will continue to take work home.
11. *Report unusual things.* If you think something is not right, report it to a fellow officer or higher up if needed. It may be nothing, but then again it may be something serious.
12. *At all times be professional and humane.* It's not your job to punish the inmates. They have already been judged and sentenced. You are there to keep them confined in your facility, and to make sure they obey rules and regulations.

Take care,
The Old Screw