

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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Stages of Change

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As the result of talking to hundreds of corrections employees over the years, I have observed a pattern of changes that stems from their adapting over time to the impact of the corrections workplace. This suggested pattern involves the following series of phases and associated personal change.

- **“Honeymoon:”** New recruits are on a “high,” excited, motivated, committed, ready to make a difference. Their self-esteem soars as they start their new career.
- **Work Obsession:** Rookies begin to climb a steep learning curve as they encounter the job’s situational complexity and interpersonal dynamics with other staff and offenders. They become consumed by the job, working hard and wanting to earn co-workers’ and supervisors’ approval and acceptance. They volunteer for just about every team at every opportunity. They long to do something exceptional, even heroic. They feel like they belong to something solid, a family.
- **Bubble Bursting:** After a while unexpected things begin to happen. These frequently involve adverse interactions with coworkers or supervisors. Actions of other employees are seen as personal attacks. Staff may end up feeling mistreated, betrayed, humiliated, abandoned, scapegoated. Disappointment, confusion and bewilderment ensue. Some of the passion about the profession begins to evaporate. Given that trust is hard to come by in corrections, once it is damaged, it becomes very difficult to get it back. Ambivalence sets in and morale ends up on shaky ground. Staff is no longer sure that working in corrections is such a great idea after all, or that they even understand the rules to play by. Yet they keep their misgivings to themselves, put on a brave face, and keep on charging ahead.
- **Wall Building:** Negative experiences continue to accumulate, and the accompanying emotions remain unprocessed, “stuffed.” Disillusionment, fear, anger, and resentment mount. Morale sags. Staff is no longer as engaged or focused on the job. They start believing

that they are entitled to breaks and exceptions to the rules. They no longer aim to excel. They cut corners. Errors begin to occur. Instead of accepting constructive criticism, they react negatively to feedback. Distance from coworkers increases or they only hang out with other disgruntled employees.

- **Corrections Fatigue:** This stage is characterized by cynicism, negativity and hopelessness. Staff settles for career survival—hanging on till retirement or till they can find another job.

(Please see list of articles at www.desertwaters.com/corrections_fatigue.htm)

- **Fatigue or Fulfillment:** As time passes, staff either sinks deeper into Corrections Fatigue OR becomes compelled to find solutions to regain their passion for their profession. This requires learning to process the emotional impact of the job; balancing work with self-renewing activities; and building and utilizing an effective support system. It also requires developing conflict management and other interpersonal skills. Additionally, Corrections Fulfillment requires finding positive meaning in one’s work, either through personal growth or through being of help to others—offenders or other staff. If this stage is not negotiated successfully, staff remains stuck in Corrections Fatigue, with

IN MEMORIAM

CO Kenneth Duncan
April 22, 2008
Manhattan Detention
Center, NY

Officer Mary Lou Vigil
April 22, 2008
Court Detail
DAJD Seattle, WA

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THE CORRECTIONS VENTLINE™

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For Better or For Worse

We often say that corrections work changes people. A while back we asked veteran correctional staff to list their observations of how they have changed since they began working in corrections, negatively *and* positively. Here are their responses, clustered by themes we identified. They are published with permission. These high-functioning correctional workers display pronounced changes both in positive and negative ways. They are experts at their job, yet also wounded in their souls.

Negative Changes

Safety Concerns

Feel less safe at times.

I see personal safety issues in even the safest environments.

Fear for safety of family.

How I raise my kids—very overprotective, educating them about “clients,” sheltering them in public.

I change my behavior and attitude when out in public.

Cynical Worldview

Worldview has become jaded.

“Loss of innocence.”

I suspect criminal behavior from people in community—child in man’s lap, scout master, woman with black eye.

Increased awareness of “ills” of our society.

Less trusting of people. Always question people’s motives.

Paranoid—feel like most people are “bad,” feel like if someone doesn’t talk to me they are “mad” at me.

Skeptical of people I do not know well.

I have negative feelings about people, except for my friends.

Less likely to open up in groups.

Hard not to view others as inmates or former inmates.

Adopting “clinical” vs. “personal” perspective.

Expecting staff victimization. I hate it when I walk in the facility. I wonder which staff member is under investiga-

tion this time because an inmate said someone did something to him. And it’s always the same inmate making these statements.

Desensitization/Numbing

Desensitized, “abnormal” reactions towards tragic events. No longer shocked by shocking behavior.

Loss of emotional awareness.

Finding humor in things which really are not funny.

Stress Signs

Feeling increasingly stressed.

Poor sleep patterns.

Difficulty getting a good night’s sleep.

Everyday is Wednesday. Difficult to get away from job. I do some work everyday.

Waking up in the middle of the night and thinking of what you need to do the next morning.

Always thinking about work and working seven days per week.

Harder to relax. Lots of stress related health problems.

Require more time to decompress.

Not as positive. Too critical/judgmental.

I love my job, but I get sick when I get ready for work.

Reduced Self-care

More likely to ignore my discomforts.

Inconsistent with self care/balance.

Toll on Family

Less tolerant of family.

Short temper with family.

Easier to set my temper off over little things at home.

Some distrust of family, such as of teen son.

Social isolation—socialize with corrections staff only.

Sacrificing time with family for job.

Harder to enjoy time in public when I’m with my family.

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Stages of Change

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disastrous outcomes to themselves, their families and their workplace. Sadly, for some this is the end of their professional development in corrections.

- **Riding the Waves:** Those who discover ways to enjoy Corrections Fulfillment also find out that even the most skilled staff experience ups and downs. The key at this stage is accepting that such fluctuations occur to the best in the profession, and figuring effective ways to get back on track. This involves the development of resilience, the capacity to bounce back after disappointments or traumatic experiences. One way to

achieve this is remembering to create positive meaning out of negative life situations—learning to find silver linings in every cloud.

The following ingredients would help corrections staff maximize their chances for a healthy career and life:

1. A workplace culture that gives staff permission and means to effectively process and manage their emotions
2. In-depth self-care skills training backed by supervisors
3. Interpersonal skills training, such as conflict management, especially for dealing with other staff
4. Ways to seek advice about complex work situations or to report workplace concerns anonymously
5. Mentoring and peer support programs.

“Reaching Behind the Walls” Conference

by Caterina Spinaris Tudor

On May 8 and 9 we gathered together for our first annual conference on workplace wellness and mental health issues of corrections staff. Corrections and EAP staff and other clinicians came from ten states—CA, CO, KS, KY, MA, MD, MT, NM, OR and WY.

We thank all who attended and the administrators and other decision-makers who made attending this conference possible. Some of you came entirely at your own expense. Now *that's* eagerness and motivation! We tip our hats to you!

We also thank you for participating in discussions, and for your words of encouragement and your constructive feedback. Your comments and suggestions will help us offer an even better conference next year.

I especially want to acknowledge the speakers who shared the training load with me: Gary Cornelius, Anne Gard, Jerry Gasko, Dan Matsche and Gary Ouillette. I also thank our “Ask a CO” panel: Barb Batulis, Wes Connett, Anne Gard, & Gary Ouillette.

I am deeply grateful to our Board members and other volunteers for helping make this event possible, manageable and a memorable experience.

And many thanks go to the Credit Union of Colorado for their donated lanyards, and to the staff at Glen Eyrie for their professionalism, help and guidance.

Here are some of the comments we received.

This profession changes us, and the Desert Waters organization has some great services to provide to our valuable employees. The training was professional and interesting. I loved that mental health professionals and Correctional professionals came together to learn from, and with each other, in a setting that was designed for growth and reflection. I will be developing a training course based on the information that I learned while at this conference. Thank you again for the opportunity to attend this conference. It has been life changing for me.

Having worked corrections for the past 18 ½ years, I know that the stress level can cause many unique problems not only at work, but it can cause havoc on your home life as well. Having a well-trained peer support team in place (and a good working relationship with your local EAP) can do wonders for corrections professionals. We heard many stories while at the conference from all over the nation. The common thread from all was how the stress of the job continues to build and how

we need peer support teams! We were able to network with many at the conference that were there trying to put together a peer support team, and share information and help. My hope is that as corrections / law enforcement organizations talk with each other, we can help one another build healthy employees! Your outreach as well as this conference goes a long way to helping this process! Once again thank you for all you do! We gained so much from this conference.

I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to come to your conference. It really made me think about myself, my family and my job. It opened my eyes that I'm not going crazy, and that I'm not the only one that experiences what I do. I learned a lot. I learned I have to keep myself healthy or I am no good for my family. I have been taking an hour to myself since I have gotten back and my husband understands when I need it. He has finally realized that I am no good to him if I don't. I met a lot of people from different states and had a great time. I want to thank you for the experience. I will be back next year.

Even The Old Screw weighed in with this comment:

Desert Waters had their first conference and I, for one, think it went beautifully. I met a lot of nice people there. Everyone seemed to learn something new and most chose to participate. Also, most seemed to enjoy it. Some were even asking when the next conference was going to be. There did not seem to be the old “us versus them” concept. I hope that I will get to attend the next conference and meet even more great people.

Mark Your Calendars!

DWCO's Fund-raising Banquet

October 23, 2008

The Abbey, Cañon City

DWCO's 2nd Annual Conference

May 7 & 8, 2009

Glen Eyrie, Colorado Springs

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

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For Better or For Worse

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Positive Changes

Increased Self-confidence & Self-esteem

- Self-confidence to do a difficult job, and do it well.
- Confidence in my ability to handle difficult situations.
- Confidence about decisions I make.
- More self-esteem. Better judge of character.
- More attuned to how people are. More objective.
- Feel capable of doing hard work.
- Learned to be successful at something important, to be able to make a difference.

Improved Problem-solving

- Developed the ability to problem-solve.
- Learned to look at problems to seek solutions instead of dwelling on the problems themselves.
- Learned to remain positive and see long-term benefits during times of stress.

Learned coping skills that I can share with others.

Improved Interpersonal Skills

- Learned how to relate to all kinds of people.
- Learned to listen better to my staff.
- Developed better communication skills.
- Developed more effective verbal skills.
- Learned and improved techniques for helping offenders.
- Able to mentor staff.

Increased Tolerance

- More tolerant of irate or obnoxious people.
- More in touch with humanity. More accepting of people.
- More patient and forgiving. More open-minded.
- More accepting of diversity.
- More sensitive to others' feelings, more empathetic.
- More open to getting the whole story.

Increased Job Satisfaction

- Contribute to helping the organization grow.
- See the positive changes people can make.
- Met some good people who are very positive, which makes me want to be positive.
- Worked with some truly amazing people.
- Established great friends, great co-workers.
- Hopefully influence other employees in positive ways.
- Able to meet long-term goals.

Increased Life Appreciation

- Appreciate my life more.
- Realized that my life is pretty good compared to others'.
- Thankful for my life compared to histories of offenders.

Improved Self-care/Self-management

- Able to move on after an incident and function.
- Learned to calm down before I go home.
- More flexible. Better sense of humor.
- Now I engage in community activities.