

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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DWCO's Post-traumatic Symptom Survey

Caterina Spinaris Tudor

We tend to think that it is mostly veterans fighting wars who get Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and other operational stress injuries identified in military personnel, such as major depressive disorder and panic disorder.

The sad truth is that battles are being waged daily in our nation's correctional facilities. Inmate-on-inmate assaults, inmate-on-staff assaults, and large group disturbances take their toll on staff. Yet, due to the *machismo* culture, staff tends to “dump” their distress in imaginary buckets. But how long does it take before such a bucket overflows or gets so heavy that the bottom falls out?

Correctional workers are not made out of steel. They do end up getting affected—quite a bit actually, as my personal experience from treating correctional workers for ten years indicates. My professional experience is now supported on a larger scale by preliminary analyses of our survey's data on post-traumatic symptoms in the corrections ranks. We plan to follow up this study with additional research to see if we can replicate and expand our findings. For those of you who responded, THANK YOU!

As I write this on 5/19/10 we have 774 fully completed, anonymous surveys. Just glancing at the means per item on the questionnaire, we are shocked at the high percentage of staff whose responses fall in the “symptomatic” range. (That is, they are considered to be suffering from that symptom to some degree.)

When we analyze the data further we want to examine how many respondents meet criteria for partial or full-blown PTSD. We intend to present at least some of the survey results in the next *Correctional Oasis*.

If indeed high percentages of correctional workers suffer from such work-related traumatic stressors, this need to be acknowledged and steps need to be taken proactively. This can be done through annual training and also by the provision of ample specialized treatment. Post-traumatic stress impacts people's health and performance in very damaging ways. In addition, substance abuse and suicide often coexist with untreated PTSD. We cannot walk away from these realities without paying a heavy price. Staff's lives are very much on the line in every way--physically, psychologically and spiritually. And so is their work performance.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

WOMEN IN CORRECTIONS	2
WOMEN IN CORRECTIONS	3
BEHIND THE WALL	3
ARE WE AN ISLAND?	3
ARE WE AN ISLAND?	4

Reporting on DWCO's 3rd Annual Conference

On May 6 and 7 we gathered once again for our Correctional Wellness conference, this time at the Abbey in Cañon City. The theme was *Creating a Healthier Culture*. The quality of our speakers' presentations was fantastic! Thank you, Gene Atherton, Barbara Batulis, Heiki Campbell, John Coppedge, Brenda Crawford, John Davis, Anne Gard, Jerry Gasko, Pete Hoppen, Susan Jones, Mike Krauth, Gary Ouillette, Brent Parker, Mike Raneses, and Mark Rosen. Equally valuable were the discussions and comments offered by the attendees. In addition to Coloradans, we had registrants from CA, ID, KS, KY, MA, ME, OR, TN, WI and WY. The richness of the gathering was worth the time and effort it took to pull it all together. Thank you Canyon City Counseling and Credit Union of Colorado for sponsoring the event!

Thoughts on Women in Corrections

This article was sent to us a while ago. In it the writer bluntly shares his perspective about the challenges faced by women working in corrections.

I started in Corrections when Matrons worked in the jail. They were the motherly type that brought in sewing stuff for the girls and who treated the female inmates for the most part like their own daughters.

Then you didn't worry about sexual harassment suits. The jail was a guy thing, and that's all there was to it. You respected the Matrons, because they were women. Newer and younger cops on the streets driven by new laws and lawsuits made arresting women commonplace. With the onslaught of female inmates came more and more female officers.

Men have a concept that women need to be protected. A female is not quite as strong as a male and therefore it's an instinct thing right along with knowing where the TV remote and the beer should be. That filters up to the administration when it comes time for school, promotion, etc. Now, forgive me for there are going to be a few topics I am going to broach that may seem off key, but they are the cold, hard reality as I see it.

A common concept among males is that women are not constant. PMS plays a role here. Some women have a bitchy day and everyone suffers. Administration sees this and is hesitant about placing females in position that are sensitive, whether they are SERT, stripes, brass, etc. We still have some administrators that feel women are not meant for corrections. As time progresses and females are placed on court transports or mixed gender details they have to work as hard as anyone else and harder, since they must deal with their own job and beating down their male counterparts that want to move them out of harm's way. (There's that guy thing again.) Then you have the knuckleheads you have to deal with that feel women are useless, almost. Mostly those are the older guys and newer recruits. Both ends of the spectrum. Again another macho thing.

On occasion you have the woman that does play the game of the poor helpless female, especially if she is good-looking and knows it and plays that angle. Almost everyone with male hormones falls for that one. Hello, leave the hormones at the door! But we are talking about humans here. What may be put out as a simple unassuming gesture, a touch or a joke turns into a come-on (depending on whose eyes you are looking through). What some people may see one way is construed by someone else differently.

And then you have the poor girls that want to come in, do their job and go home. They are at a loss for the most

part. Guys don't find a thrill there, so working with them is boring, and that's how all kinds of rumors start.

Then you have the pressure from the home front and personal life. Attitudes change, boyfriends, husbands or significant others start to feel uncomfortable because of the change in the temperament of the women C.O.s. (Women do get tougher in this job!) Next thing we have is friction and a fight, a department romance or after-work romance or other diversions, or a grouchy time at work that gets them deeper in the mud. Next, rumors abound and a "slut" is born. Add that to the backpack of life and, depending on what she looks like, either she gets hit on, ignored, or she turns to her home life for solace. And that's whether it's her fault or not.

Women in corrections have a doubly hard life, balancing professionalism and femininity. Well, femininity is out the door on the inside. Only you can't get that through some of their heads. There's a saying "Live as you train, train as you live". In high stress situations you react as you're trained. Now you've had 21+ years of femininity and that's hard to lose in a short time behind the wall. You see where this is leading. You can't just shut it off. You also can't make that much of a cognitive effort, since that will take time and attention away from you doing your job. Catch 22. Women are between a rock and a hard place.

Now regarding training. Most of your administration is older and entrenched, and, as I stated earlier, still have the mindset that *a woman can't do a man's job* embedded deep in their psyche. This bleeds over to the newer, younger administrators that have been groomed by these guys. So tucked in the back of their heads is the concept that a woman is good for clerical, but not SERT. Typing, not shooting, and again, God forbid, it's PMS day. DUCK! So training opportunities are limited. Word processing 101 anyone?? Advanced coffee making training??

Advancement is another stumbling block. How many women in corrections do you see in positions of absolute authority? Not very many, even on a percentage basis. Again the mindsets are there. "She's a woman." So what! Can she get the job done?? They don't listen. A reason can be found almost anytime, anywhere, in corrections not to promote someone. That's politics.

Add to this mix the "good ol' boys" group. The guys that bowl together, drink together, party together. How many females do you see in this crowd?? Not very many. I've also seen a lot of guys that work the female officers hard and ruthlessly and yet, when their wives

(Continued on page 3)

Thoughts on Women in Corrections

(Continued from page 2)

are around in another environment, who is the dirt on the floor?? You guessed it—the C.O. So to take out your frustration due to your wife backbiting you, what do you do? You pick on another woman! That sucks, plain and simple. But it happens.

I admit in my beginnings at the jail I had those same mindsets. Then I had a heart attack. When I got back to work months later, things changed. My attitude changed. My work habits changed. I began to notice that there were female C.O.'s doing the job I was doing. And they were doing it great! They were doing it the way I wanted it done. Eventually I had a newfound admiration and curiosity about female C.O.'s. I was with the administration a lot at the time, and learned a lot. Women did not get a fair shake, no way, no how.

When I took command of my shift, the deal for everyone was: "Do the job. You have eight hours to do it. I don't care how. Just don't break the law, follow your rules and regulations, policies and procedures, and everyone go home in one piece so you can fight with the outside world, not each other, not here. We have enough on our plates trying to keep the inmates in check. If you direct all your efforts to the job, we all go home in one piece. And that is my intention. Not to leave anyone or any C.O. body parts behind. At least you can then enjoy your life out there. We will get along whether you like it or not." I would put female officers in positions that guys used to cringe at. But I always maintained I would never have someone do something I wouldn't do. Eventually my shift became the shift to get on. We had a great shift, a tight shift. We had problems on occasion, but it was our shift, and we dealt with them.

Behind The Wall

I walk down halls, of concrete and stares.
Among the monsters, worse than nightmares.
With endless exposure to shanks and disease.
And to all of these felons, I still must say please.
The public is sheltered, kept safe from any harm.
While my heart is racing, I respond to the alarm.
A man is lying, face down on the floor.
Inmates are yelling, cut him some more.
With bare hands, and courage from above.
The disturbance is quelled without raising a glove.

We clear the compound, and lock down the range.
For us inside, this is normal, not strange.
Behind these walls I've seen my share.
To the most horrible acts, I don't seem to care.
Violence and bloodshed are now part of my life.
I pray to God, don't let me take this home to my wife.
We spend our lives working in Hell.
Our stories are secret, we've no one to tell.
We serve in silence, no cheers or parades.
Yet the country is safer, by the service we made.

Are We an Island?

Reprinted from the archives of The Old Screw.

There is a saying that no man or woman is an island. It seems though that when we become Correctional Officers expectations change. It's almost like we are supposed to go from one day being "normal," sensitive people to the next being tough, independent, cold, unfeeling. The unspoken expectation is that we must become *macho* persons that never need support and don't need anything to help keep us sane. Over the years I have watched people struggle with this. Some have managed to cope successfully and some have not.

As a result of the *macho* image they carry around, some Staff come to believe that it is wrong to seek counseling or to take anything prescribed to help deal with the day-to-day stresses.

Problems can start out with just not feeling right. You find yourself getting unusually grumpy with the spouse and kids. As time goes by you feel less and less about anything or anyone. Is this something you can cure yourself? The answer is, "Not very likely." These changes sometimes wind up costing you your marriage, your job and, yes, sometimes even your life.

The problem is that you are scared to talk to anyone about how you're feeling. You don't believe your wife or best friend will understand what you are going through. You don't think you can talk to the brass because you're afraid

(Continued on page 4)

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

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Staying Well: Strategies for Corrections Staff is now available in Spanish! Let us know if you would like to order copies.

Are We an Island?

(Continued from page 3)

they will think less of you and look down on you. The same applies to your fellow staff. And you think it will make you less of a person to talk to a mental health provider or to listen to your doctor who may want to prescribe something that will help keep you less stressed.

There are also stories going around that if you talk to a shrink you won't get out of their office before they call your boss. This is not the way things work, but who are you to argue with all the rumors?

Shrinks are not bad people. They will sit you down and tell you what they can and can't do. They will let you talk and talk and talk. There is no criticism about what you tell them. They're just trying to help you understand what is going on with you. Yes, sometimes they will suggest you see your doctor in case you need to take something to calm you down. Yes, I have talked to a couple and have found on the whole that they can be very helpful. No, I didn't mention it at work and I worked for a number of years afterward.

Some people just have a chemical imbalance and their body needs help. Does this make you a lower-class citizen unfit for the job? I think not. Does taking care of yourself in a healthy way mean you are a smart person? Yes! Sometimes we joke that divorce is a requirement for working at DOC. Only years after corrections work cost me one marriage did I finally start to realize that, **No, I couldn't handle it all by myself.** No, drinking is not the answer, even though I tried that route too after my divorce.

A person may go through their agency's EAP for help or may go through organizations like Desert Waters to find someone they can trust to reach out to for help. If a person wants to only blow off steam they can write or call the Desert Waters' Corrections Ventline. No names given or requested.

Of the many hundreds of staff I have worked with over the years, I have seen very few who could handle the stress and strain on their own. The rest could have used professional help, but unfortunately didn't seek it. Do I think any less of them for it? No. But I am sorry they held back, as it sometimes cost them everything.

Your life matters. And your family deserves to have you happy and healthy. So if you're experiencing the blues, don't be bullheaded. Reach out for help.

Take CARE, *The Old Screw*