

The CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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Helping correctional agencies become workplaces of choice where everyone wants to be employed!

A publication of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, a non-profit for the well-being of corrections staff and their families.

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DWCO 17 Years 2003-2020

Desert Waters' Statement Regarding COVID-19 Realities

As the spread of COVID-19 has reached pandemic levels, and the rate of contagion continues to increase in the U.S. and elsewhere, public life has come to a virtual standstill. Working from home, closed schools and colleges, cancelled events, and drastically reduced social contact are now a way of life. There are concerns about running out of basic supplies and food items. Salary reductions or layoffs are affecting household incomes, causing financial strain. And, of course, health worries have skyrocketed.

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Desert Waters' Statement Cont.

All these adversities have brought us face to face with a multitude of unknowns, and have decimated our well-established routines and practices, causing us to have to reinvent our lives overnight.

That is in addition to the usual stressors related to working in corrections. And as essential staff, you do not have the luxury of working from home, and the cushion of safety and self-protection that social isolation provides. You are indeed in the front lines in terms of risk.

These new realities can stoke inner tensions and apprehensions that both you and your families have regarding your health, safety, provisions, and finances.

We at Desert Waters have been pondering ways we can continue to serve you, and even ramp up our services to you, during this trying season. We want to be here for you in any way that we can during these times of being stretched to new limits and in new ways.

Regarding our activities at Desert Waters, skeleton staff are working shortened hours at DWCO's office in Florence, CO, but we are working extended hours at our home offices.

Several training events we were part of in March and April have been cancelled or postponed to protect the health of all concerned. Events in the next several

months may also be canceled or postponed, depending on the course of the COVID-19 infection transmission in the U.S.

We will notify you about any future changes through the Trainings Schedule posted on our site. Safety and good health are obviously the true bottom line.

However, all other Desert Waters' activities and tasks continue unchanged at this time. We are very, very grateful for committed and hardy staff.

If you have needs, questions, or prayer requests during this time, email us at desertwaters@desertwaters.com. We will do our best to answer every email and offer you support in any way that we can.

We are also exploring ways of offering our trainings remotely. We want to continue to provide you with tools, resources, and encouragement to deal with the unprecedented psychological stressors related to facing a pandemic in corrections settings and in your personal lives.

We will inform you about updates by posting information on our website, Facebook page, and in the Correctional Oasis.

Most importantly, let us all do the best we know how to stay healthy and well physically, mentally, and

Desert Waters' Statement Cont.

spiritually, and to protect the health and well-being of those around us. Let us follow the medical advice and guidelines provided to us, and keep up with updates.

This is a time for accepting realities we cannot change, improving what we can, and pulling together—loving one another through difficulties and crises.

Peace, mercy, and grace to you all.

We love you, guys!

Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC

Executive Director

Discombobulated — “I Got This!”

By CO Ron Mason

This is a great article about one corrections officer's initial response to the COVID-19 news, followed by his gaining perspective through facts and getting a grip on the fear that is trying to overtake our minds.

Part 1: I work in a prison, I am surrounded by inmates and other staff members. We are all in close proximity. It's the nature of the job. I forgot; I also interact with the public – visitors.

It is a world that I have adapted to. I understand that I work amongst murderers and sex offenders. I know

that I risk my life and sanity every day that I report to work. It is a world that I can sort out in my mind and prepare myself for each day. After over 20 years in this world, I have learned to adapt to the dangers, physical and mental, that I face in my daily duties.

I understand the violence of inmate retribution upon other inmates and staff, and the core causes of it. I understand the manipulation of others in an attempt to get ahead in a walled in and confined life. In a screwed-up way, I have adapted to the world I have chosen to enter daily. It provides for me and mine. I



Discombobulated Cont.

have walked this life for over 20 years. I have been good at adapting and protecting me and mine.

Flash forward to 2020. My life has become discombobulated by the media pressure of a newly discovered virus that has now been declared a pandemic of epic proportions that threatens all of humanity. The stock market has gone crazy, huge swings. Grocery stores with empty shelves. Limited assembly allowed, no more than 250 allowed to congregate. Questions asked prior to be allowed to enter the perimeter.

We now live in a temporary/permanent new world. Chaos, rumors, disinformation and facts continue to spread.

My PTSD has now taken a back seat to a world of uncertainty and is driving me into the ground.

I need to take a step back. Look at those I love and embrace them. Accept that I have no control over this mass hysteria over something that may or may not hit me and mine.

I have to remember to live life each day as it comes to me, and hug those that I love and offer them support.

Part 2: And here are some facts, some numbers to compare, for the sake of perspective:

According to Johns Hopkins University, as of March 28, 2020, worldwide (7.5 billion people), the number of confirmed COVID-19 infections stands at about 663,828, with around 30,822 deaths, and at least 139,451 have recovered.

On the other hand, according to the [CDC](#), the figures for the 10 leading causes of death in the United States in 2017 (326 million people) are as follows (Table C, p. 9):

<i>Diseases of heart:</i>	647,457
<i>Malignant neoplasms (cancer):</i>	599,108
<i>Accidents (unintentional injuries):</i>	169,936
<i>Chronic lower respiratory diseases:</i>	160,201
<i>Cerebrovascular diseases:</i>	146,383
<i>Alzheimer's disease:</i>	121,404
<i>Diabetes mellitus:</i>	83,564
<i>Influenza and pneumonia:</i>	55,672
<i>Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome and nephrosis (kidney diseases):</i>	50,633
<i>Intentional self-harm (suicide):</i>	47,173

Yes this virus is very dangerous and unpredictable, but PERSPECTIVE AND SANITY ARE NEEDED.

Fueled by COVID-19: Hypervigilance on Steroids

2020 ©Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC

One of the outcomes of post-traumatic stress is the symptom of hypervigilance—an excessive and continual state of alertness, anticipating danger and being on the lookout for it to the extreme. By definition, hypervigilance prevents people from letting go and relaxing, as they remain on guard, watching and preparing for danger, ever ready to defend themselves and others. Hypervigilance helps maintain the fight-or-flight stress response active in our brain and in the rest of our body. It may help save lives when an actual threat materializes, but it wears us down and wears us out emotionally and physically if it becomes a chronic state of being.

As CO Mason described so well in the preceding article, corrections staff in general, and corrections officers in particular, have grown accustomed to anticipating and preparing to face dangers related to their profession. They have rehearsed over and over, both mentally and literally, ways to confront and neutralize threats that stem from human manipulation and violence, physical plant failures, fires, and adverse natural events. They know what to do in the face of such threats, and they are good at overcoming them.

Now the landscape has changed in a twinkle of an eye. In addition to these well-understood and familiar threats, corrections staff (and the public) are now told that they have to reckon with an invisible enemy that may be waiting to be inhaled by us, hiding in droplets of sputum in the air, due to an infected person coughing or sneezing. Or this new enemy may be resting on cardboard, wood, plastic or stainless steel surfaces, perhaps for days, waiting for someone to touch that area and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth. Or, we are told by the experts, there may be other, even more obscure methods of transmission of the infection, such as infected people spreading the virus before they begin to experience symptoms themselves. And we keep hearing about how highly damaging and highly lethal this virus is. Of course this type of news can inject massive amounts of fear into people. This invisible kind of threat is a game changer as most people cannot go into total and complete social isolation for any significant length of time.

And, naturally, such information jars the already stressed, and often sleep-deprived and traumatized population of corrections staff across the country and across the world, causing some of you to cross over

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Fueled by COVID-19 Cont.

into a mode of overwhelming anxiety and even panic. You, corrections workers, are used to being protectors and in control. Yet during this season, which is unlike anything we've experienced before in the U.S., events drive home to us how little we really are in control regarding this new and elusive enemy.

While employees of other types of industries can work from home, as essential staff, most corrections personnel cannot do that. They have to show up on the job site—at the jail, the prison, or their parole or probation office, and face whatever they encounter there. And corrections work entails being in enclosed areas, in close proximity with many other people, often with poor ventilation, and sometimes with essential hygiene items, like soap and paper towels, and appropriate protective gear in short supply. Medical facilities in some correctional institutions are not designed to handle this type of threat. So the work environment can quickly become a potent trigger for dread and even paranoia for staff and for the incarcerated population. These understandable health concerns may lead to a sharp increase in staff calling in sick, which means that those who do come in will

have to work overtime, and so double their risk of infection.

And at the end of their workday, corrections staff leave their institutions or offices and return to their communities and to their homes. I can imagine that most are fretting as to how to prevent any unintentional, unknowing transmission from their work sites to their families, neighbors, and friends. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, no, I can't give you a kiss. You must stay away from Daddy/Mommy for a while." "I'm sorry, darling, I'd better stay in the basement, away from you, while I'm home. Or better yet, I'll go stay at my buddy's (coworker's) house. At least we are both exposed to the same workplace." These are truly huge challenges that staff have not dealt with before, challenges that invade their home life and disrupt their personal routine on a daily basis, turning their world upside down, and confronting them with a continual and relentless sense of danger—feeding their already well-established brain circuits of hypervigilance.

I do not know if corrections agencies have ever faced a foe as stealthy and as sneaky and as sly as COVID-19.

Fueled by COVID-19 Cont.

And even if the virus turns out not to be as lethal or as dangerous as feared, just the relentless worry and tension about its presumed perils can exhaust the staff's physical stamina and emotional reserves.

That's why this is a time when genuinely caring and encouraging leadership, team support, and the teaching of anxiety management and anger management skills for staff are of paramount importance—in addition to draconian hygienic practices, and dealing promptly with those who show symptoms of infection according to CDC protocols.

What do I mean by supportive leadership? Here are some examples of what supportive leadership includes:

- Making sure staff have all the equipment and supplies they need to be as safe as possible
- Adopting policy changes to protect staff's and inmates' health
- Connecting with staff (even if only by phone, video or email) regularly, thanking them or otherwise expressing appreciation for what they do and the extra burdens they carry during this season of the COVID-19 threat

- Providing the staff with opportunities to offer their feedback about how the agency's handling the COVID-19 threat is playing out in reality, and provide suggestions for improvement of work conditions in relation to it
- Keeping staff informed about resources, policy developments, or relevant news items, as an expression of respect and to stay connected as a team
- Increasing the number of EAP sessions with behavioral health providers
- Ensuring telehealth-based EAP services are available to staff
- Negotiating for employee health plans that have low deductibles and low co-pays

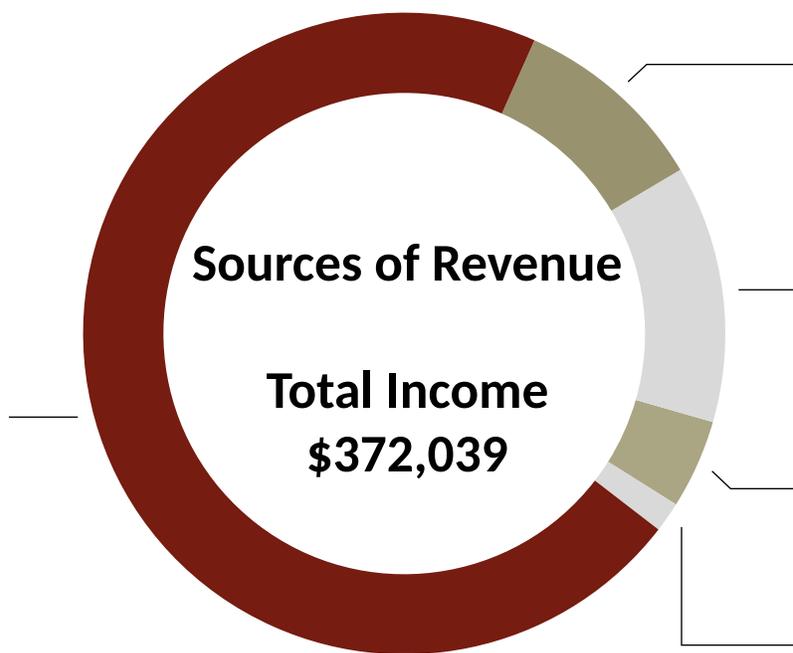
Research has shown that positive staff relationships are critical for staff morale, pride in the job, and job satisfaction, and these in turn have a strong impact on staff mental and physical health and on home life.¹ Many lives and many correctional careers are on the line.

¹Spinaris, C.G., & Brocato, N. (2019). Descriptive study of Michigan Department of Corrections Staff Well-being: Contributing factors, outcomes, and actionable solutions.

DWCO 2019 Annual Report

We are grateful for a busy and productive 2019! We especially thank all our supporters, volunteers and staff for helping make this happen.

Here are some details of Desert Waters' activities and accomplishments in 2019.



- Number of books sold: 9,867
- Complimentary and donated books: 540

Trainings and Conferences

- National and State Conferences: 4
- Instructor Trainings: 9
- From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment (CF2F) instructors trained: 18
- True Grit: Building Resilience in Corrections Professionals (TG) instructors trained: 120
- Towards Corrections Fulfillment (TCF) instructors trained: 5
- CF2F, TG & TCF Training Rehearsals: 6
- CF2F instructors recertified: 21

Accomplishments

- Completed research study: 1 – Spinaris, C.G., & Brocato, N. (2019). Descriptive study of Michigan Department of Corrections Staff Well-being: Contributing factors, outcomes, and actionable solutions.
- Presentations to Michigan State legislators on findings of the above study: 2
- Pro bono CF2F Instructor Training in Cape Town, South Africa: 12 CF2F instructor candidates trained
- The Correctional Oasis, DWCO's monthly ezine, was distributed to correctional agencies and individuals nationwide and in several other countries. Articles for the Correctional Oasis were reprinted with permission in CorrectionsONE.com, corrections.com, and other publications.

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Just Recognize It, Listen to It, and Admit It

By Sgt. Mike Flowerdew

While working with the department of Corrections for 20 plus years, I too was in denial for years. It is what we do as employees of the correctional system. Sit back and pretend everything is okay when in reality it's not, and we silently fall apart.

Let's face it, we see and experience lots of nasty, horrendous trauma that the public knows nothing about. These stories never make the news for the real world to hear, and if a story does make the news it's always something that we as Correctional staff did wrong. If we could all tell our stories it would leave people in disbelief. They just don't understand that this is our profession, and we experience this negative, violent ugliness day in and day out, without processing it in a correct way. After years of this, the mind can only hold so much. Although I now work at a Fire Camp, the years I had spent inside the walls will never leave me.

Ten years ago when transferring to Fire Camp I never thought about the ugliness that I had witnessed the years prior while working inside. I now know that these memories can come back to haunt us in ways that are truly damaging. They can cause us to retreat from things that we used to enjoy, to isolate ourselves, to be angry all the time, to get depressed and to have

our anxiety go off the charts. Some of us consume alcohol all too often and temporarily suppress the negative feelings, but they always come back the next day along with a hangover. Our loved ones begin to distance themselves from us because we are very difficult to get along with, and then the depressed and alone feelings really take a hold. I refer to this as "the dark pit." This was a pit that I was slowly sinking into, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't claw my way out!

It wasn't until 2018 when I was on a Fire assignment in southern California that I started to truly fall apart. We were staged at the top of this ridge watching the fire miles away while our Cal-Fire partners were working the inmate crews out on the fire line. A long story short, we were awakened about 11 at night by a radio call telling us to evacuate the area. The fire was roaring, sounding like a jet engine climbing out of the canyon and heading in our direction. All of us Correction staff were able to get out of the area without injury. However, I knew that I had just left my Cal-Fire partners up on that hill on the other side of those flames that seemed to be 200 feet tall. These are guys that I have worked with for years and I have been on many fires with them, and I have a bond with them that will never go away. That is why I felt like I was

Just Recognize Cont.

abandoning them. Realistically, I could truly do nothing but leave, but I could hear the terror in their voices on the radio as they evacuated to safety zones.

Thankfully they all made it out alive the next day, and we greeted each other with hugs, holding back our tears.

As odd as this sounds, because I was in a safe place, this incident threw me into a spiral. I couldn't even talk about it without crying, and what do we do as Corrections employees? We hold those tears back, stuff them down and move on. Very unhealthy, but it's what we know!

I've struggled with depression from about my five-year mark in the department, but this incident threw me into a whole different territory. I was in bad shape, with horrible thoughts about taking my own life. I retreated from everyone and everything.

My Cal-Fire partners that I was at the incident with recognized my withdrawal from life and started talking to me—specifically, two Fire Captains that I will forever be grateful for. They eventually got me to go and open up and talk about my problems with a therapist. Wow! What a difference it has made in my life!

While talking and working with a wonderful therapist over the past year and a half and addressing things that have happened in my 22-year career, I've realized that all that crap I've witnessed years ago doesn't just disappear. It stays with us and it slowly chips away at our wellness until we can't take anymore. That's when we crash, and we all know many in our career that this has happened to and sadly a lot of them aren't with us anymore.

I was on a fire incident one year later after the burn over. I know everyone is familiar with the horrific Camp Fire. I was part of the initial attack with one of the same fire captains from the burn over. The weather was just like the burn over. It was hot, windy, and smoky, I was in the same pick up and hearing that captain's voice on the radio brought back some terrible memories.

I spoke with a peer support therapist at the fires base camp and cried like a baby, but wasn't sure why. She explained it to me, and what she said I will never forget. She stated that after all the years of witnessing trauma, negativity and ugliness, we had cracked the dam. That's right. Our brains are like a dam holding all that crap behind a wall, because we have never talked about it and discussed how it truly affected us.



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Just Recognize Cont.

Well, my dam was cracking, and I've been working hard to tear it down. It's not easy and it doesn't happen overnight. Please do the same, and keep ripping it down piece by piece. Open up, talk about it, recognize it, and admit that you need help. We all

need you here in this world, and it is a wonderful feeling to enjoy life again. Reach out, and forget about what others may think, because it takes an amazing person to admit you are in need. YOU ARE LOVED MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, PLEASE REACH OUT!

IN MEMORIAM

CO Beatrice Williams
EOW 1 March 2020
Mississippi State
Penitentiary
MSDOC

CO Gabriela Contreras
EOW 8 March 2020
ADCRR

Investigator David Perez
EOW 15 March 2020
NYC DOC

Corrections Professionals + Inmates + Dunk Tank = ???

2020 © Susan Jones, PhD

Do you remember the news story that was published in October 2019 that detailed a "normalization" event held at a Colorado prison earlier in September? The news story included video of four female employees who had allowed themselves to be picked up by inmates and thrown into a water-filled dunk tank.

How in the world can any corrections professional allow themselves to be thrown in a dunk tank by inmates?

When this story broke it was quickly shared through many different Facebook groups for corrections staff and most of the posts included very negative comments that were aimed at the stupidity of the staff involved who allowed this to happen. I have to admit, that was also my first reaction, but as I thought about the story and talked to correctional professionals, I began to think that we were missing the bigger story.

The event where the dunk tanks were used was a fundraising event where inmates could contribute to non-profit organizations. This type of event was only

one held in prisons throughout Colorado in an attempt to achieve "normalization." The normalization effort is linked directly to a theory that this approach may decrease recidivism for releasing inmates. To make this story even a bit more bizarre, the organization that inmates were raising money for was the CPOF (Correctional Peace Officer Foundation), which is an unusual organization for inmates to select to make a contribution.

So back to my question ... how in the world can any corrections professional (let alone four of them) allow themselves to be thrown into a dunk tank by inmates? How did this happen?

The answer is much more complex than to blame it on the individual staff members. One person having a "lapse in judgement" is more likely than four people all having the same "lapse in judgment." I believe the answer is more about unclear boundaries than individual judgements. When a system changes the "rules," in this case - normalization - but doesn't communicate exactly what the new rules are for

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Corrections Professionals Cont.

interacting with inmates, the staff are left to figure it out for themselves.

In the "old" days when inmates were often referred to in a derogatory or "less than human" manner, it was easy to know where the line was; it was easy to treat them as if they didn't deserve any respect or consideration. Some corrections employees long for these good old days because, in part, it was easier to know what was expected of each other. The inmates knew the rules and the employees knew the rules. However, when the policy shifts and staff are now expected to implement motivational interviewing, pro-social role modeling, trauma-informed practices, and now normalization actions, these directives rarely come with a systematic approach to change the corrections culture. Sometimes, these policy shifts don't take into consideration how the culture is affected, so staff have to figure it out on their own.

This story and this state of uncertainty is not just a Colorado story. This same type of incident could have occurred in any state, and possibly did. I have had this discussion with correctional professionals in the Midwest, on the West coast and in the New England

areas of our country. I was even told by an officer in the West that when staff asked about specific boundaries and how these boundaries might be affected by a policy change, they were told, "If you are too stupid to figure it out, then perhaps you should look for a different job." Obviously, the message was clear – the policy makers didn't know the answer, and probably hadn't even thought about the question. The officers were truly on their own to figure it out.

So, whether we call it normalization, or something else, it affects the way staff interact with inmates and it affects where the boundary is placed. This is all about the corrections culture and must be acknowledged and addressed when any type of policy shift is promoted and pushed into corrections facilities.

As I thought about the dunk tanks more, I realized that this was not a surprising event. It was a predictable event. This dunk tank incident showcased the fuzzy boundaries that are creating struggles for corrections professionals as the pendulum moves away from the era of punishment, toward the treatment/rehabilitation end of the spectrum.

C.S. Lewis on Living Even Under the Shadow of Death

About 72 years ago, author and Cambridge University professor, C.S. Lewis, penned the following words to address people's anxieties about living in an atomic age. His musings about fears related to the atomic bomb provide food for thought regarding our health concerns today, as we are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not to minimize these concerns. We should be alert and diligent to do the best we can to avoid spreading infection and avoidable sickness and suffering. Rather, Lewis' words remind us that we all have an "expiration date," as author Ann Voskamp says. That may help refocus us on what we do have control over: pursuing quality in life—love, joy and peace—while we can. C.S.

"In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. 'How are we to live in an atomic age?' I am tempted to reply: 'Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.'

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented; and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors—anaesthetics; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made; and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds."

C.S. Lewis, "On Living in an Atomic Age" (1948) in Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays.

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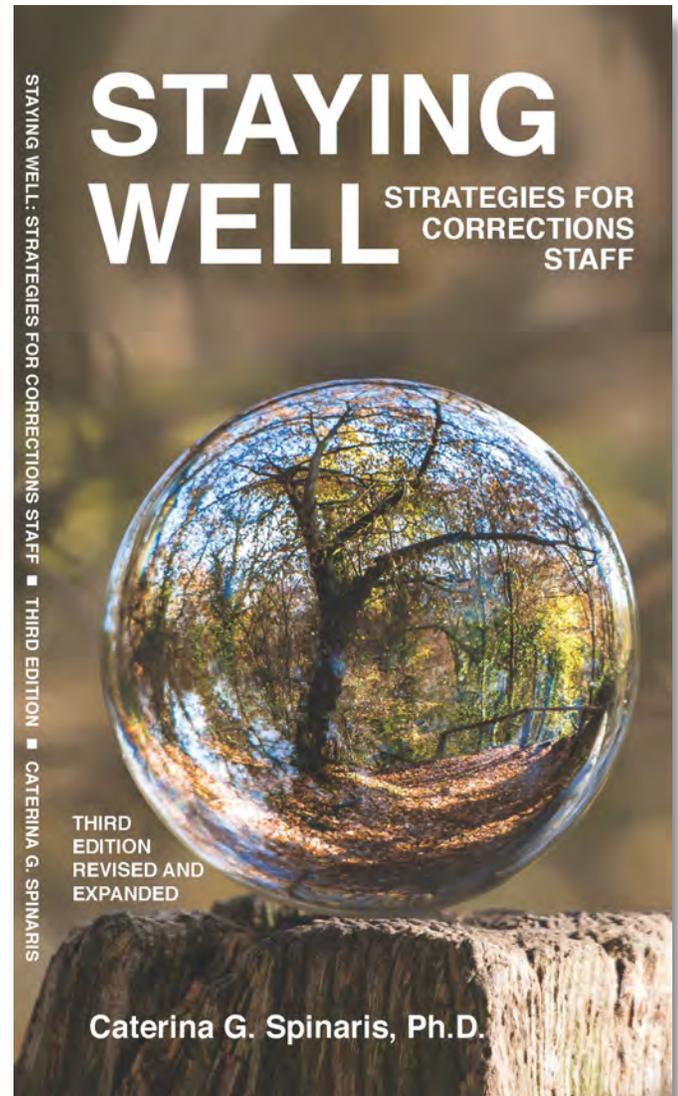
Staying Well: Strategies for Corrections Staff

During these turbulent times, material such as what is offered in Staying Well, a book authored by Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC, can come in handy, even when the stressors of life are not work-related.

This book is the product of Caterina's nearly 20 years of studying, treating and training corrections professionals and their families. It has sold more than 47,000 copies so far, for which we are deeply grateful.

Get it, read it, and share it with your adult family members, your friends, and your coworkers. Use it, and articles like the one by Sgt. Mike Flowerdew in this issue of the Correctional Oasis, to educate those who are important to you, and to start valuable, perhaps even life-saving, conversations.

Chapters: "I Am a Correctional Professional;" The Toll of the Job; Corrections Fatigue; Taking Your Life Back; Professional Boundaries; A Family Affair; To Talk or Not to Talk; Psychological Trauma; Depression; Substance Abuse; Corrections Staff Suicide; A Spiritual Solution; and Moving Forward



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Your donations are tax-deductible.



Quote of the Month

"I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."
~ Abraham Lincoln

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DWCO Mission

To promote the occupational, personal and family well-being of the corrections workforce through the provision of evidence-informed resources, solution, and support.

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, Inc., is a non-profit corporation which helps correctional agencies counter Corrections Fatigue in their staff by cultivating a healthier workplace climate and a more engaged workforce through targeted skill-based training and research.

MANY THANKS

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