

The CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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

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

Inside this Issue

- “Us Against Them” = Corrections Fatigue
- How Tires Became Meals
- PTSD and Climbing Out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death – Part 2
- In Memoriam
- Many Thanks
- Quote of the Month

“Us Against Them” = Corrections Fatigue

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Let's look at two possible scenarios. Correctional Worker 1 looks forward to going to work. He has a supervisor that he can approach to get questions answered and to get support as needed, and he has coworkers that pull their own weight and get along with each other reasonably well. He is strongly driven to impact offenders positively, even if in small ways that may seem insignificant to some. He views his work as a way to earn an income, and as an opportunity to keep people safe, and role model to incarcerated offenders some life skills. He follows policy, consistently

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“Us Against Them” = Corrections Fatigue *cont.*

holding the line with offenders, keeping them accountable, and treating them firmly, fairly, and respectfully. He also consistently tells offenders that he believes they can do better than where they're at, if they apply themselves and take advantage of opportunities offered to them during their incarceration.

Correctional Worker 2 dreads going to work even though he has a supervisor that he can approach to get questions answered and to get support as needed, and even though he has coworkers that pull their own weight and get along with each other reasonably well. Quite simply, he hates his job and despises offenders. He's even said that he feels like a prostitute, because he works in corrections just for the money. He feels like he is wasting his life watching people all day long, and trying to get them to comply with orders that they do not want to follow. He sees no point in what he is doing. His attitude is reinforced by coworkers who hold the same views, and by the revolving door of recidivism—learning of yet another released offender who is convicted of yet another crime.

My interactions with correctional staff across the nation during the past 20 years lead me to conclude that corrections as a profession is in dire need of an increase in the number of staff who fall in the first of the two categories described above – those who find positive meaning and purpose in their work.

Imagine what it would be like if the majority of correctional staff looked forward to going to work, not only for the paycheck and benefits, but also because they knew that once in a while they would have the opportunity to make a difference for the better there, both by keeping others safe and by influencing offenders positively within policy— even if only occasionally and even if only in small ways. Imagine if they did not view their job as walking into a war zone for 8 or 12 or 16 hours per day, where they are essentially warehousing people who hate being there, and where they are constantly in harm's way, sometimes witnessing unspeakable horrors, only to return the next day to do the same thing all over again.

Viktor Frankl, MD, who survived four Nazi concentration camps, after his liberation, wrote a book entitled, *Man's Search for Meaning*. In it he proposed that striving to create positive meaning in response to life's events is human beings' most powerful motivating force. Frankl suggested that finding positive meaning makes possible for people to endure even unimaginable adversity, suffering, and loss.

One way for us to create positive meaning is by doing something that makes a positive difference in other people's lives, something that impacts them for the better. Prosocial people derive a sense of joy and satisfaction from knowing that they are investing their time, energy, and money in something that can make the world a better place, even if this effect is limited to a very small corner of the world.

“Us Against Them” = Corrections Fatigue *cont.*

For two decades I've addressed the realities of Corrections Fatigue in correctional staff's lives. By Corrections Fatigue I am referring to negative changes in staff's personality, health, functioning, core beliefs and behaviors, and in the workforce culture, due to cumulative and interacting effects of work-related stressors.

And for years we've taught in our course, "From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™," that lack of positive meaning about the job contributes to the build-up of Corrections Fatigue in staff, and that finding positive meaning in the job helps Corrections Fatigue to diminish and a sense of fulfillment to flourish.

Lately I've been thinking about the essence of corrections work – what is done, why, and how. It seems to me that, at least in the U.S., corrections work sets correctional workers up for job dissatisfaction, for Corrections Fatigue, right from the start. This is the case particularly for custody staff who are tasked primarily with maintaining institutional safety.

One reason for this is that, simply by virtue of their respective uniforms, correctional workers usually enter a workplace dominated by an "us against them" mentality in relation to staff's relationship to offenders. Staff are asked to control and gain the compliance of individuals who are automatically viewed as their enemy, as liars, "con artist" manipulators, and a threat to their lives.

In order to survive such an environment and not be assaulted or deceived, staff may adopt an adversarial, confrontational posture with those they manage, and erect high psychological walls to avoid getting manipulated. Staff learn to "lump" all offenders together as "bad people," as dangerous criminals without a conscience who have committed horrific crimes.

This "us against them" mindset becomes staff's default setting when they interact with offenders, resulting in staff getting "stuck" in a confrontational mode, even when that is not necessary. Their fundamental goal becomes enforcing their will over the offenders', while staying safe. The job becomes about who is going to win this power struggle, this battle of the wills, about who is going to outwit whom. This can lead to escalation of

“Us Against Them” = Corrections Fatigue *cont.*

conflict and possibly violence that could have been avoided. Of course, these negative exchanges add to staff's Corrections Fatigue and job dissatisfaction, and reinforce the belief that all offenders are always dangerous and always up to no good.

Sooner or later, staff may lose sight of the humanity of the individuals in front of them. Disrespect of the offenders is not far behind. Offender communication is dismissed as most likely fabrication or deception. When people are treated with contempt, they are very likely to respond in kind, and live down to our expectations. (And conversely, if we treat them with in ways that safeguard their basic human dignity, some of them may surprise us by rising to the level of our expectations.)

Associated with the “us against them” mindset is the belief that all offenders are “lost causes,” hopeless, irredeemable, too “broken” to be “fixable.” This dramatically lessens the probability they will interact with offenders in constructive ways, since they have come to believe that this will be a waste of time and effort. Or, if offenders seem to be making progress, staff may regard that as a temporary, fake, or manipulative “con,” perhaps as a way to earn “good time” or to increase their chances of parole. Yes, some offenders have embraced a life of crime, and will not want to change. Others though may be distressed enough by the consequences of their criminal actions that they are seeking ways out of the pit they got themselves in. Some of those may be dealing with addictions or other mental health struggles. Others may have difficulty making wise decisions or controlling their impulses. Or they may come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, or limited educational or employment opportunities.

In war zones, military personnel must maintain an attitude of readiness to combat their enemies, and a clear “us against them” distinction. However, that stance is usually adopted for a relatively short time – months or a few years. Correctional staff, however, may maintain this hostile posture (at least while at work) for literally decades. It becomes exhausting to maintain such a warrior stance long-term, as it involves generating the stress response in their bodies over and over again, eventually possibly leading to inflammation, which has been associated with physical illnesses. It takes a lot of energy to keep up a combative, hostile mindset, hypervigilance, and readiness to react. It is no surprise that sooner or later staff get worn down due to the build-up of Corrections Fatigue.

“Us Against Them” = Corrections Fatigue *cont.*

It is understandable that staff may take a mental shortcut and “lump” all of the offenders together as “evil.” Especially in institutions where there are high rates of violence, it is easier and faster to categorize all incarcerated individuals as being one step away from major manipulation or homicide than to try to assess each person’s status on an ongoing basis. It is easier to write people off and remain disengaged, than to engage with them as human beings. These are natural reactions, part of our survival mechanism, based on the maxim, “Better safe than sorry.” To keep us physically safe, the brain in post-traumatic mode is dedicated to our survival by remaining “ON,” hypervigilant, seeing threat and danger “behind every bush,” and being ready to go to battle in a heartbeat, at the least provocation.

It takes tremendous amounts of interpersonal skill and self-control to balance setting sound professional limits and prioritizing physical safety considerations on one hand, with attempts to be a positive and supportive role model on the other. It takes effort, skill, and wisdom to develop professional boundaries that are not bunkers, and that are not Swiss cheese either. And it takes much more time and energy to evaluate people on an ongoing basis, judging each person on their own merit, than to assume that all offenders are “bad news.” It is especially challenging to do all that when dealing with people who may be habitually trying to push or even collapse other people’s boundaries, or who may be continually looking for ways to manipulate and exploit others’ weaknesses.

And when staff are exhausted physically and emotionally due to being understaffed or due to other demands and complexities of the job, they may simply have no desire, energy, or time to engage offenders in positive ways.

Yet, if these views of “us against them” are left unchallenged and unchecked, and if the effects of psychological trauma remain untreated and unresolved, corrections staff end up with two negatives. Firstly, they get locked in a mindset that impairs their ability to skillfully prevent or de-escalate conflict with offenders. Hostility is almost guaranteed to beget hostility, with violence being not far behind, reinforcing the destructive cycle and the “us against them” mindset. Secondly, staff are robbed of opportunities to satisfy the primary driving force for

“Us Against Them” = Corrections Fatigue *cont.*

deriving satisfaction at work – the creation of positive meaning. This leads to ever-increasing despair and a sense of futility – Corrections Fatigue.

In the last several years several correctional departments have moved towards promoting more in-depth communication with offenders, including treatment and rehabilitation efforts.

From speaking with staff of various ranks and job descriptions across the country, my impression is that some do not “buy” into this approach, because they feel unsafe following the new protocols. They may even regard the new approach of their agency as sacrificing staff safety for political correctness. Hardwired for survival, staff are driven by a strong urge to keep their psychological shields up, to not engage the offenders in significant conversations, to not relate to them as people. (For more on this subject, see the article [The Burden of Job Role Complexities.](#))

What can then be done for correctional staff to achieve more of a balance between safety and helping within policy, vigilance and meaning, without embracing a possibly perilous Pollyanna perspective?

Here are some suggestions.

1. Try not to view offenders as if they are all the same, cut out with the same cookie cutter. The reality is that they all have different histories, abilities, skill sets, soul injuries, motivations, and genetic makeup. Staff need to study the offenders in their care and, as much as they can, identify their strengths and weaknesses, their assets and liabilities, and their ways of operating. And these observations need to be ongoing, and focused on looking for patterns and consistency (or the absence thereof).
2. It may help to remind oneself that no matter what their history or pathology, incarcerated people are still human beings. And because of that they should be treated with a fundamental respect, to honor their basic dignity, a dignity that does not have to be earned; it is simply there from the start. Those who come from a spiritual/faith perspective may find it helpful to remember the saying that humans are created in God’s image and likeness. That little phrase can help them hold onto the possibility that underneath all the horror, hopelessness, or violence, a divine flame is burning, even if it is only flickering.

“Us Against Them” = Corrections Fatigue *cont.*

3. Realize that you have the opportunity to be a positive role model to offenders. Conduct yourself with dignity and quiet strength. Focus on staying calm and civil, firm and fair. Do not react in anger when frustrated. At the end of the workday, review your behavior and note where you did not take the bait of provocation, where you confronted as needed (instead of coping by looking the other way), where you provided assistance. Let these moments be sources of satisfaction for you.
4. Look for ways to influence offenders positively, and remember that you can help different offenders in different ways and to different degrees. Some may be helped to never come back. Others may be helped to the point that they come back after four years instead of after 6 months. Some may be helped to complete their GED, others to learn to not explode whenever they get angry. Some may be helped to learn how to keep their cell tidy, others to communicate with family members in civil ways. Some may be helped to learn to knit, others may be ready to be taught parenting skills. Some may be helped to learn to admit when they do something wrong, others may be helped to learn that they can legitimately ask for something they need.
5. When offenders seem to be making progress and you wonder if they are faking, give them time. Sit back and observe their behavior. Ask other staff from your shift or from other shifts how these offenders behave around them. Watch, ask questions, and give them opportunities to make choices, and see how they behave long-term. Very few people can fake positive changes for months or years on end.
6. Correctional agencies should offer staff in-depth training in communication, and other interpersonal offender management skills.
7. Correctional agencies should offer resources for staff to deal with occupational stressors, including exposure to trauma, such as EAP and other mental health services that specialize in trauma resolution for public safety personnel, and peer support based on best practices.
8. It is imperative that supervisors treat subordinates with respect and consideration, modeling to them the behaviors they want their subordinates to implement with offenders.

“Us Against Them” = Corrections Fatigue *cont.*

9. What if the “us against them” was replaced by “us and them” mindset? Not in the sense that staff and offenders are one team (they are not!), but in the sense that they are two teams that affect one another profoundly, two teams that co-exist in the same environment – the same pressure cooker – for a season. If so, maintaining their professionalism can make staff’s experience as safe, constructive, and meaningful as possible.

And yes, there’ll be times when staff will be tricked and taken advantage of due to their giving an offender the benefit of the doubt. In fact, a friend of mine—a retired correctional professional – told me that everybody who works in corrections gets “taken” at least once during their correctional career. However, the key is what one does with that experience. Will they determine to never ever again extend themselves to be helpful to offenders? Or will they analyze the situation, and try to identify what they missed, and what they can do differently next time?

Some of the healthiest and most satisfied correctional professionals I met combined being humane towards offenders (respectful and caring, as the situation required), with focusing on maintaining safety and security (following policy, setting limits and holding offenders and staff accountable). They never used degrading terms with offenders, and they treated all offenders with courtesy and civility. And at the same time, they never befriended offenders, they did not try to meet their own needs through offenders, and they never forgot the heart of their agency’s mission – to keep offenders, staff, and surrounding communities safe.

A retired correctional administrator who came up through the ranks told me that he still has a shoebox full of “thank you” letters that he received from offenders throughout his 30+ years career in corrections. He told me that it felt good to know that he had influenced some people positively to some degree during the course of his career, and that these notes reminded him that his work had value. Yes, someone may say that these letters were manipulative attempts to earn favor or trust in order to trick and exploit. That is always a possibility. But all of them? That is highly unlikely. And even if only one was genuine, it would be grounds for deep satisfaction and mission success.

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- > Mon-Thu 19-22 Jul & Mon-Wed 26-28 Jul

Times

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- > **Independent Study:** 12 hours
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How Tires Became Meals

By Anonymous Corrections Professional

It's been snowing here. We have a set of tire chains that fits the Camry but we had two others that came from Prius days and don't fit our Rav4. We had bought them from XX years and years ago, and remembered that XX had a deal at one time where you could trade unused chains for new ones. So, without knowing whether that was still true, but knowing that XX has a great reputation for customer service, we took the two that didn't fit anymore to our local store to see what we could do.

"Do you have the receipts?"

"Nope, it's been so long ago."

"What phone numbers should I check on our system?" Miryam gives hers, I give mine. No invoice histories appear.

"Andrew, what do I do with chain exchanges when there is no invoice?"

Andrew takes over, I show him the size we need, he does some calculation. Turns out, not only do they still do that program, if you trade in two and get one (free) they also give you a refund on the other set. Andrew hands us \$55.10. We're shocked.

We get in the car, new chains and a refund we did not expect, and Miryam says, "What are we going to do with this? We have to donate this. Where should we go?"

"I don't know, let's drive down the street until we find something."

Miryam pulls up YY on her phone. Mile and a half away. I tell Miryam she should go in because she is better at figuring out the right kind of donation than I am.

We pull into the parking lot the same time as another woman is getting out of a car. Miryam follows her into the office. She is holding a utility bill, which is one of the things YY uses for ID for their food bank. Unfortunately, the YY person says the food bank is closed for the next two weeks. The

How Tires Became Meals *cont.*

woman doesn't speak English very well. Their masks make it that much harder for her to understand. So it takes them a minute of going back and forth before she realizes she is not going to receive any food.

I really don't have to tell you what Miryam did next. Yes, she gave the lady the \$55.10 directly rather than donate it to the YY. It is what you all would have done so that's not really the point of the story.

The point of the story is that if we step back far enough and look, life for all of us is one link in a chain leading to one more link and one more after that, and on and on. Andrew at XX didn't know that their customer service practices were going to lead to the reduction of hunger in the community for a family none of us knew.

The thing about our daily actions is that we don't often see what they link to after they leave our immediate presence. We were just lucky enough today to be able to see the connections in the chain. And yes, when we got home I called Andrew at XX and told him what his customer service led to. There are no guarantees, but if we do what is right when it is our turn, the potential for the impact of the next right thing by the next person is multiplied.

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- > **Independent Reading Assignment:** Booklets Passing It Along: Wisdom from Corrections Staff, Volumes 1 & 2; and When Home Becomes a Housing Unit
- > **Class size range:** 9-12 supervisors

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- > **Training 1:** 10-14 May & 07-11 Jun 2021
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Register early!
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Goal

This highly interactive course is designed to **EQUIP** supervisors with **research-based skills** and **knowledge** to manage subordinates constructively, thus **benefitting the entire agency.**

Reason

Research suggests that the quality of corrections staff's professional relationship with their supervisors affects staff's morale, job satisfaction, energy level (physically and emotionally), and also their mental health, physical health, and family health. Additionally, a supportive supervisory style can reduce staff's use of work-related sick days.

Target Audience

Federal, state, county and city correctional supervisors who work in institutions, probation, or parole, and who supervise staff who manage justice-involved adults or juveniles. Participants can be from the same correctional agency or from different agencies.

Fee: \$1,990.00 per supervisor, which includes the Participant Manual and three booklets for independent study.



PTSD and Climbing Out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death – Part 2

By Shirley Porter

Reprinted with permission from *Counseling Today*, a publication of the American Counseling Association.

Phase 2: Stabilization and gathering tools for the journey
Throughout the course of trauma work with Max, I provided him with information on how trauma, and specifically complex trauma, can affect the mind and body. He was familiar with the fight-or-flight trauma responses but had not realized that his capacity to respond so effectively in high-risk situations was a result of conditioning through his military training. His experiences and symptoms started to make sense to him, and thus his shame receded.

Max had learned to ignore his physical needs at an early age, which is common with children who suffer from chronic childhood abuse. The first homework assignment that I gave him had three parts to it: 1) to notice when he was hungry and to eat; 2) to notice when he had to go to the bathroom and to do so; and 3) to notice when he was tired and to go to sleep. He smiled when I gave him this assignment and asked how I knew.

Max related to the image of the warrior spirit. Although it had meant something else in his military life, we redirected the energies of his warrior spirit to focus on protecting his healing and well-being.

After assessing and attending to injuries and addressing any crises that clients might be facing, it is time to help them get their bearings in the valley and gather the tools they will need for their stabilization and containment – both for use now and on their trauma processing journey (should they choose to take this path).

Some clients will need time to rest and heal before moving on to the next phase of trauma work. We would not expect someone who has just been injured to begin what could quickly become a treacherous climb. Likewise, our clients will need to be stabilized before moving forward in trauma work. They need to be at a point at which they can successfully tolerate or reduce their distress without moving into crisis.

PTSD and Climbing Out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death – Part 2 cont.

Education is an important component of this phase. Our clients need to know what is normal and what kinds of challenges they might encounter on their journey in the valley. Knowledge about how trauma affects the mind and body can provide our clients with footholds in the valley. We want to help them better understand trauma – specifically, what types of experiences can lead to traumatic stress responses, how people tend to react during traumatic events and the range of normal reactions following such events.

Our clients need to be aware that normal reactions following trauma might include difficulties in the physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual aspects of their lives. During this part of the work, we are normalizing their reactions during and following their trauma experiences while empathizing with their current distress. It is important that we use easy-to-understand language and concepts in recognition that when our clients are in the throes of severe PTSD symptoms, they can handle only small, personally meaningful pieces of information.

This part of the work also involves helping our clients identify and become comfortable using the tools and resources that will assist them in better tolerating or reducing the distress that they might encounter on their healing journeys. In my work, I have come to recognize 10 such resources or tools to support clients in their journeys.

Within the clients themselves

1) Recognizing their “warrior spirit” within. This involves giving a name to the persona we want to encourage clients to connect with in terms of dual awareness – the strongest, wisest part of who they are that has allowed them to survive the trauma and brought them to this place.

2) Reducing commitments to reduce distress and give clients the time and space to heal.

3) Confronting or advocating with the people, systems, etc., that were involved in causing the trauma in an attempt to address these wrongs or to achieve a sense of justice (when it is safe to do so).

4) Using distraction strategies. These are actions that clients can take to remove themselves from spirals of nonproductive, stress-elevating thinking. Examples: going for a walk, texting a friend, cleaning, drawing.

5) Using mindfulness strategies. This involves moving clients’ awareness from their distressing reliving of past negative events or their distressing fears of what might happen in the future to the present moment via the

PTSD and Climbing Out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death – Part 2 cont.

five senses. Examples: noticing a favorite color in the room; feeling the chair one is sitting on; picking up a stone and noticing its texture, color and shape.

6) Using self-soothing strategies. This involves using the senses to calm, soothe or reenergize. Examples: sipping a hot drink, listening to music, inhaling the scents of nature, wearing soft and comfortable clothes, looking at a picture of a loved one.

Through connection with others

7) Seeking counseling support with a mental health professional who specializes in trauma work.

8) Seeking medical support to address physical or psychological pain resulting from injuries or symptoms that are causing distress.

9) Seeking spiritual support from a religious/spiritual leader or peer.

10) Accepting offers of support from caring friends, family members or peers to do household tasks, help with children or take on other responsibilities.

To be continued in the February 2021 issue of the Correctional Oasis.

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INSTRUCTOR TRAINING

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- > Mon-Thu 19-22 Apr & Mon-Wed 26-28 Apr
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Times

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profound impact on all
correctional staff both
at home and at work."**

The CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A publication of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach

IN MEMORIAM

Steven Crook, Correction Officer,
Norman Daye, Master Corporal Deputy Sheriff,
Michael Robert Flagg, Sergeant,
Russell Freeman, Lieutenant,
Michael Harper, Maintenance Supervisor,
Edwin Jensen, Warden,
Mark Jones, Correction Officer,
David Keith, Correction Officer,
Craig King, Lieutenant,
Benny Napoleon, Sheriff,
Joseph Quillen, Jr., Detention Officer,
M. Wayne Rhodes, Deputy Constable,
Kenneth Russel, Maintenance Supervisor,
Harold Smith, Correctional Officer IV,
Name withheld, Correctional Officer,

Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction
Guilford County Sheriff's Office, North Carolina
North Carolina Department of Public Safety
Rhode Island Department of Corrections
Texas Department of Criminal Justice
Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry
Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction
Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction
Tarrant County Sheriff's Office, Texas
Wayne County, Michigan
Collin County Sheriff's Office, Texas
Denton County, Texas
Texas Department of Criminal Justice
Texas Department of Criminal Justice
Iowa Department of Corrections

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Quote of the Month

"The greater our sense of awe, the greater our sense of connection.

When we are in awe, we move beyond ourselves, into something greater than self."

~ Ann Voskamp

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A publication of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach

DWCO Mission

"Advancing the well-being of correctional staff and their families, and the health of correctional agencies, through data-driven, skill-based training."

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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