

# CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

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A NON-PROFIT FOR THE HEALTH OF CORRECTIONAL & OTHER PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES, STAFF AND FAMILIES

# FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Just under three months after Correctional Officers in New York State beat an incarcerated person, Mr. Robert Brooks, to death, another horrific, heart-rending, and entirely preventable tragedy occurred in a different state correctional facility. In this case, another incarcerated person—Mr. Messiah Nantwi—also died following a brutal beating by Correctional Officers.

No words can fully capture the horror and grief I feel when reflecting on these devastating events.

And yet, after 25 years of learning about the corrections field through listening, training, and research, I remain convinced that the vast majority of correctional employees carry out their duties ethically, with professionalism, and a strong sense of responsibility.

Grievous incidents such as these do not diminish the deep respect and appreciation I hold for the many Correctional Officers and staff who approach this difficult work with integrity. With every passing year, my admiration grows. The more I understand, the more I am struck by the extraordinary commitment, personal sacrifice, and inner strength it takes to do this work amid relentless challenges.

As National Correctional Officer and Employee Appreciation Week approaches (observed this year from May 4th to May 10th), we pause to recognize and honor all those in corrections who continue to show up—and who choose to do the right thing, conducting themselves humanely and professionally.

There are a few things I want to take a moment to publicly thank you—Correctional Officers and other correctional employees—for:

- **Your willingness to show up** — day after day or night after night, in environments that are often dangerous, unpredictable, and deeply exhausting.
- **Your grit** — returning to demanding jobs despite chronic sleep deprivation caused by mandatory overtime, and the serious toll this takes on your physical health, mental well-being, and family life.
- **Your adaptability** — adjusting to new laws, policies, and technologies, even when these changes require major modifications in how you carry out your work duties.
- **Your restraint and self-control** — responding to daily demands and crises with professionalism, composure, and courage that too often go unseen and unacknowledged in one of the most challenging work environments imaginable.

To all hardworking and upright Correctional Officers and correctional employees: THANK YOU for all that you do. You deserve our respect, our recognition, and our gratitude — this week, and every week.

*Caterina Spinaris*



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# REDUCING RECIPROCAL TRIGGERING: STRATEGIES FOR DECREASING CONFLICT IN CORRECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

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This article looks at ways to reduce avoidable conflict—and the stress, and maybe even injuries or psychological trauma—that correctional staff often face. The goal is to help staff skillfully steer around preventable conflicts with incarcerated persons.

To tackle this topic, we discuss how our brains deal with perceived threat, and we explore practical ways that staff may reduce the likelihood of pushing incarcerated persons' "hot buttons" whether inadvertently or intentionally.

At the outset, however, we at Desert Waters acknowledge that not all conflict and violence can be prevented in correctional settings no matter how skilled staff may be at conflict de-escalation and helping calm people down. We recognize and honor the dedicated corrections staff—especially officers—who place themselves at risk to carry out their critical duties in the midst of uncertainty about their physical safety. These officers demonstrate extraordinary courage and self-control, even under extreme stress, on a regular basis.

Additionally, I'd like to acknowledge that maintaining professionalism through self-control and other emotional intelligence skills is especially challenging when correctional officers are burdened with heavy workloads while also being chronically sleep-deprived due to working excessive amounts of mandatory overtime. Such working conditions eventually erode the capacity to control one's impulses and make sound judgments, resulting in reactive behaviors and poor decision-making. In other words, time pressure and fatigue, both physically and psychologically, lead to staff having a "short fuse"—reacting to others with impatience, irritability, harshness, anger, insensitivity, and lack of empathy. Despite these challenges, many officers continue to demonstrate remarkable discipline and resilience in their highly demanding work environments.

## **The Role of the Brain in Perceiving Threats**

To begin, it is important to have a basic understanding of how our brains are hard-wired for survival, and how that influences staff's reactions when feeling threatened in correctional environments.

The human brain constantly scans the environment for signs of danger. It uses sensory information—sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch—and our interpretation of it to detect potential threats.

Detecting a threat in our environment causes us to get "triggered," to mobilize our resources to ensure our survival. A *trigger* is any event, behavior, or situation that signals danger or that reminds us of previous harm or trauma. Even if the current situation is not in fact dangerous, a trigger can activate the brain's survival

responses. That is, when a threat is perceived, the brain triggers the fight, flight, freeze, or faint response. This automatic process, while possibly life-saving in true emergencies, can create unnecessary fear-driven reactions when a perceived threat is not actually a true danger or when its magnitude is overestimated.

### **The Perception of Psychological Threats**

Being triggered due to the perception of threat extends beyond physical danger. Psychological threats, such as ridicule, humiliation, belittlement, or a challenge to one's authority, can be just as inflammatory and offensive. Incarcerated persons or staff may react to a perceived insult or disrespectful look as forcefully as they would to physical aggression. Defending one's honor, particularly after public embarrassment, may feel as urgent and necessary as defending one's physical safety.

### **What Is Reciprocal Triggering?**

If we are not "on our toes," focused on regulating our emotional reactions, interacting with someone who comes across to us as being angry or hostile can trigger a defensive emotional response in us, such as additional anger or hostility. In a destructive loop, this in turn increases the other person's agitation. Both our brains are perceiving threat and are reacting accordingly. This phenomenon has been referred to as **reciprocal triggering**, a term coined by Gregory Morton<sup>1</sup> in 2021. This term describes the escalating dynamic when two people "push each other's buttons" in a snowballing, reactive cycle—each person's knee-jerk reaction further provoking the other. Without interruption or de-escalation, this cycle often leads to conflict and harm that could have otherwise been avoided.

Why is this important to talk about? Both correctional staff and incarcerated persons operate in environments where the threat of danger is constant, leading to a state of hypervigilance and an increased likelihood of being triggered by real or imagined threats. Research shows that correctional staff—particularly custody personnel—experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress at rates significantly higher than the general population, and even higher than other first responders. Likewise, many incarcerated people have extensive histories of trauma. These conditions make both groups more prone to "hair-trigger" reactions when danger is sensed.

This dynamic creates a serious vulnerability in correctional settings: the risk of reciprocal triggering. In such charged environments, it's not a matter of *if* it will happen, but *when*. Left unaddressed, this cycle of mutual reactivity can escalate into avoidable conflict and violence. To use an analogy, it's as if people are walking around with lit matches in a room full of open gasoline containers.

(It is important to remind ourselves at this point that reciprocal triggering can occur in any relationship, such as among staff or among family members. It is not exclusive to staff and incarcerated persons.)

## The "Us Against Them" Mentality

In correctional settings, both parties—staff and incarcerated persons—tend to view one another as “the enemy.” Neither party feels safe in these environments, and for good reason. For staff, this “us against them” mindset is at least in part due to the high-stress correctional settings where even under the best circumstances staff are severely outnumbered, causing the brain to get stuck on signaling danger, leading to hypervigilance and hyper-reactivity. Even in Norway’s prisons where the staff-to-incarcerated persons ratios are dramatically more favorable, staff report feeling anxious and stressed because they still perceive that they are in danger<sup>2</sup>. Prisons and jails are inherently unsafe places for multiple reasons.

Reciprocal triggering creates a “war” mentality, where survival is prioritized over conflict de-escalation, creating a belief that it’s “me or you, and I’m going to eliminate you as a threat before you have the chance to hurt me first.” This mindset often underpins avoidable clashes in correctional settings. For staff, this belief system may encourage a stance of harsh domination designed to inspire fear, and often justifies aggressive behavior and unnecessary use of force as essential for maintaining control. This attitude of course provokes defensiveness, hostility, and hatred in incarcerated persons, resulting in reciprocal triggering that keeps escalating.

## The Paramilitary Influence in Corrections

The term “paramilitary” refers to organizations that are structured similarly to military units. In military operations, the presence of an enemy justifies a “war mindset” focused on overpowering or neutralizing the threat. This framing has deeply influenced correctional culture, shaping operational procedures, uniforms, postures, and staff attitudes.

A Norwegian prison captain once commented that when correctional staff are dressed in uniforms and carry gear designed for battle, that is exactly what they’ll get—a battle. A militarized stance triggers in others a defensive or combative reaction, possibly escalating situations that could have been resolved peacefully. To avoid this dynamic, Norwegian correctional practices include more relaxed officer uniforms made of soft materials, with weapons not being visible, and officers’ pants not being tucked into boots in military fashion. Some staff even cover their keys with leather to avoid symbolizing having control over another person’s freedom. Such practices demonstrate restraint towards incarcerated persons rather than dominance, and acknowledge the inherent dignity of other persons.<sup>2, 3, 4, 5</sup>

These choices reflect a commitment to building rapport, and not reinforcing fear, humiliation, and aggression. Consequently, while violence still happens in Norway’s prisons, it occurs at much lower rates than in the U.S. Once again though we need to point out that the staff-to-incarcerated-persons ratio in Norway is so favorable (1 to 11)<sup>6</sup> that staff feel safer than in the U.S., and have the time (and are expected) to get to know incarcerated persons to some degree, and to talk to them as needed.

## **Practical Strategies for Reducing Reciprocal Triggering**

It is essential that staff avoid asserting authority or superiority in ways that humiliate or demean others. While we cannot eliminate all conflict or we cannot control how others interpret our actions, we can reduce behaviors likely to provoke or escalate tensions. By minimizing conduct that comes across as disrespectful, dismissive, punitive, or needlessly antagonistic, we reduce the chances of triggering unnecessary conflict.

Importantly, this kind of restraint is not a weakness. Rather, it reflects emotional intelligence, professionalism, inner strength, self-control, and ultimately a commitment to the safety for all touched by correctional systems.

Correctional staff can take proactive steps to reduce reciprocal triggering by promoting safer, more respectful interactions. Here are some strategies:

### **1. Avoid Provocation**

Maintain a calm, neutral demeanor.

Unless there is a dire emergency, seek to understand a person's distress rather than react to it.

Avoid escalating situations through dismissive, sarcastic, or aggressive behavior.

### **2. Empathy**

Consider the human side of every interaction. If your favorite family member were incarcerated, how would you want them to be treated by staff?

### **3. Pick Your Battles**

Not every issue requires confrontation. Learning when to take steps to de-escalate a confrontation is a sign of maturity and strength, not weakness.

### **4. Non-Threatening Communication**

Use an open body posture, a calm and firm tone, and respectful eye contact.

### **5. Avoid intimidating gestures or verbal threats.**

### **6. Avoid Cornering**

Don't back someone into a corner where they feel they have no choice but to lash out. Offer dignity and a path toward resolution that allows them to save face.

### **7. Challenge the "Us Against Them" Mentality**

Treat every person as a human being. Even in high-stress environments, dignity, respect, and fairness go a long way toward preventing conflict.

### **8. Communicate Respect**

Maintain a non-threatening posture and facial expressions.

Listen actively and without interruption.

Use language that shows empathy and concern.

### **9. Help Incarcerated Persons Regulate Their Emotions**

Lead by modeling the management of your own emotional responses.

Take deep breaths both to calm yourself down and to reduce tension, indirectly modeling deep breathing as a tool for emotional regulation.

Use calm, measured tones, deliberately lowering the volume of your voice and slowing down your speech rate.

Allow space for incarcerated persons to express frustration.

Pause and listen before responding when emotions are running high.

## Conclusion

Avoidable conflict in correctional settings often stems from a complex web of perceived threats, real danger, and histories of trauma. These conditions result in hypervigilance and fear-driven reactive behaviors, culminating in an “us against them” war mindset. While not all violence can be prevented, as leaders, correctional staff play a vital role in shaping their work environment and reducing unnecessary escalation. By understanding the brain’s response to threat, challenging the “us against them” mentality, and adopting respectful, non-threatening communication strategies, staff can build safer and more effective relationships—ultimately protecting their own well-being as well as the safety of those in their care.

## REFERENCES

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# RITUAL OR RELATIONSHIP? REFLECTIONS FOR SUPERVISORS

BY STEPHANIE RAWLINGS, MSC

Recently I heard a sermon regarding the idea of relationships being more important than rituals in a church setting. It got me thinking about the balance of relationships and rituals at the workplace. As a manager, I am responsible for ensuring adherence to rituals. For the purposes of this article we will define rituals as policies, directives, and mandates. The things that keep facilities operating and people safe...the rule of law, if you will. You see, rituals have a place regardless of the negative connotation sometimes associated with them. Roll call, counting, searching, marching, lines, steps, keys, swipes, shifts, uniforms, use of force... the list goes on.

So where does relationship play into this? How do these two dimensions work together and/or against each other in the daily activities of correctional facilities? I would argue that in corrections and maybe even beyond, these two principles tend to be routinely at war with one another. A constant teeter-totter with the weight of specific circumstances sitting on each side. We know that following policies and directives and all the other things listed above matter. They are tools to reduce liability, maintain order, and rehabilitate the incarcerated. We certainly cannot function without them or anarchy would ensue. Relationship is often downplayed in the hierarchical and high-pressure environments of corrections.

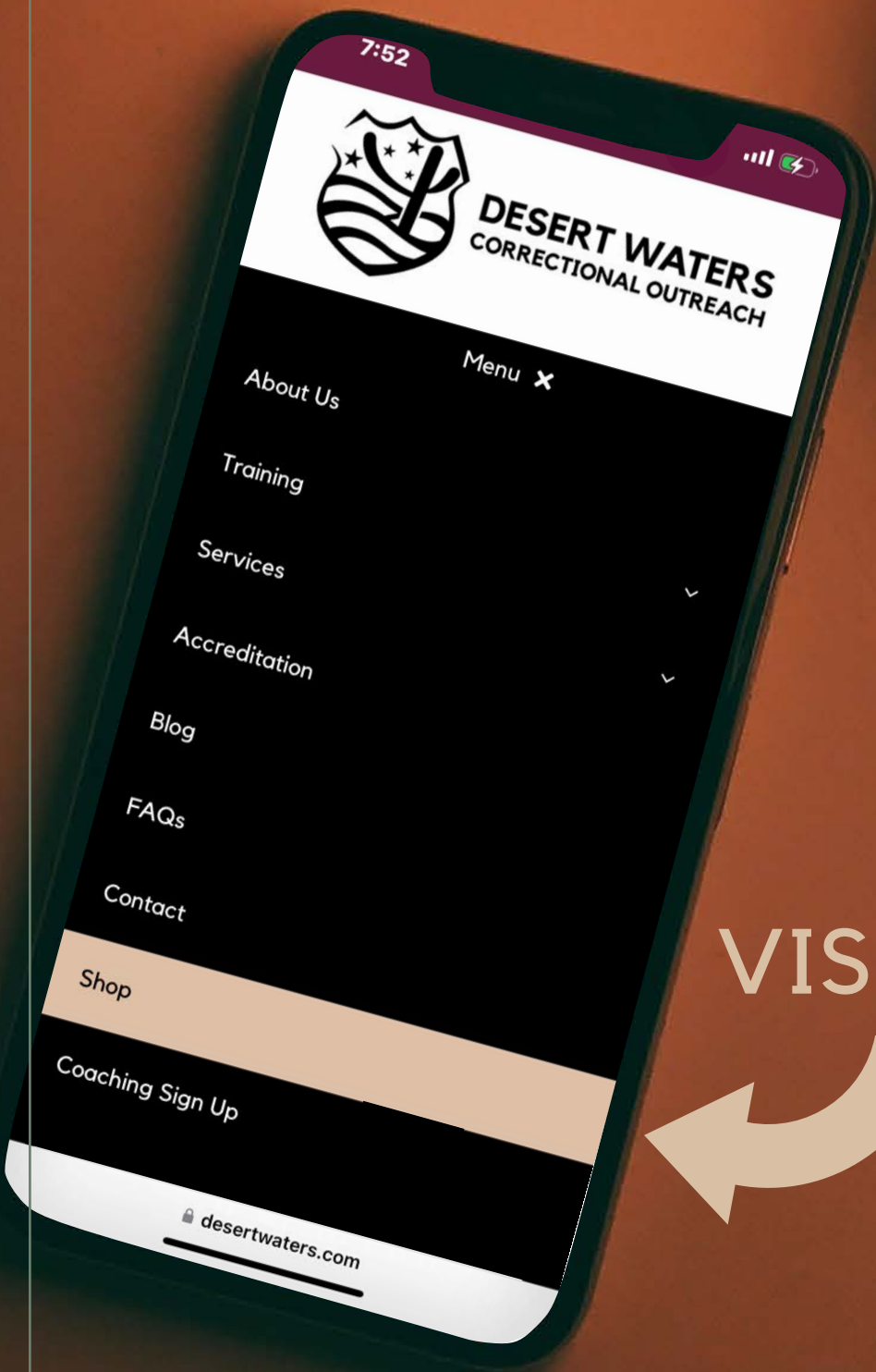
I propose the optimal balance comes with how we motivate people to embrace rituals in a way that promotes healthy workplace culture, reduces toxic culture, and increases resilience and retention of high-quality employees. That is done through relationship. How do I motivate someone to buy into

why it would benefit them to follow directives without cutting corners? Relationship. Knowing who your staff are—as employees and outside the walls, and approaching them while mindful of these facts. What is happening in their lives? Who supports them at home? What life experiences might shape how they handle situations? How many shifts of overtime have they worked? What are their weaknesses, and do they acknowledge them? What is their level of self-awareness?

The only way to answer any of these questions is through relationship. Well, you might be able to through gossip as well, but that isn't the recommended path if you are trying to create the supportive correctional environment that retains the right people....

Supervisors face challenges when they consistently place an emphasis on either relationship over ritual or ritual over relationship. The two of these concepts must move fluidly, and there must be filters and guidelines for when one is needed over the other. When there is a chronic imbalance, the result can damage relationship or ritual, resulting in staff morale being decreased or liability for the agency being increased. Either way, both are negative outcomes.

So, as a supervisor, ask yourself when you encounter challenging situations with your staff: "Which hat do I need to put on at this time? Is this a relationship moment or a ritual moment, or both?" Remember, you can and should always choose both, in different proportions and to differing degrees depending on the situation.



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# SOFTER, KINDER, GENTLER, LOST

BY AN ANONYMOUS CORRECTIONAL PROFESSIONAL

When I began my correctional career during the first decade of this century, correctional culture was nearing the end of "hard" inmate supervision. There were still large areas of prisons lacking security cameras, and use of force by staff against inmates was frequent. The amount of time dedicated to attempting to negotiate a peaceful end to a cell being held "hostage" was short, and cell extractions were common. Disciplinary reports were frequent, and disciplinary sanctions were harsh. While intentionally mistreating inmates was no longer tolerated by the administration, many line staff continued to mistreat inmates because your peers didn't report you, and the investigator never believed the inmate's side of the story.

My, how things have changed! A recent trend in corrections has been the introduction of a series of practices informed by a philosophy of treating inmates with respect, dignity, and humanity. Development of professional relationships with inmates is now highly encouraged. A few of the many softer, kinder, gentler correctional programs out there include Strategic Inmate Management, Core Correctional Practices, and AMEND. Depending on the correctional agency, sometimes there is not a specific program, but instead the change is represented through overhauls of operational policy and new employee training curricula.

Many of my line staff coworkers began their correctional careers in the 1990's. When they interviewed COs at that time, administration was not looking to hire anyone who was all about being softer, kinder, and gentler. We have an entire cohort of veteran security staff who were trained under a fundamentally different correctional philosophy, and each of these staff members has thousands of hours of practice using tried and true methods of effective inmate supervision. Then recently they all took turns attending a 2-day training on the new inmate supervision model, with no additional follow up. To say that the new model failed to take is an understatement. With few exceptions, most veteran staff continue to practice what they know best, with modifications of dropping certain practices that are no longer permitted.

It has been an easier transition for more recently hired staff—I'll count myself among them—who have enough of an exposure to a different philosophy of inmate supervision to be open to learning the new model, but were also brought up under a security-first system. This group has a strong foundation in correctional fundamentals including con games, gang management, and other (in my opinion) critical proficiencies since discontinued from the new employee curriculum.

New hires are the most receptive to the new model, but ironically this is also the group that seems to have the toughest go with it. Corrections attracts a new kind of worker these days; one who expects to be more interactive with inmates. From day one they are taught to get to know the inmates, be present, available, and intentional. There are staff playing basketball and card games with inmates now. The fatal flaw in this set-up is the absence of appropriate safeguards to prevent new employees from succumbing to personal boundary violations. A significant percentage of new hires are leaving work in corrections due to forming inappropriate emotional, personal, and sexual relationships with inmates. It seems that little thought was

given by the administration as to how to mitigate the obviously elevated risk of such relationships forming that comes right along with encouraging staff to rub shoulders with inmates.

Softer, kinder, gentler has transformed prison culture in many positive ways. There is far less violence, fewer critical incidents, less trauma, and the practices allow staff to preserve more of our own self-respect, dignity, and humanity. There's little downside to it if you're an inmate. I'll rate the philosophy itself as an "A." The downside has come almost entirely from the sloppy, poorly-executed implementation, and non-existent top-down staff support. Whether intentional or not, the message this sends from administration is that we line staff are expendable. If you can't adapt, resign. If you can't spot a con game, we'll fire you. I'll rate the implementation as an "F." I have petitioned extensively for top-down staff support regarding our new inmate supervision model, and it is a complete non-starter. Given enough time, the ship will right itself. However, something doesn't seem right about having line staff bear almost the entire brunt of the growing pains.





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# CRAVING A BRIGHTER WORLD

BY RON MASON, CORRECTIONAL OFFICER (RETIRED)

The words I offer here are my attempt to express how I experience the world of working inside a prison — a world that is dirty, harsh, and unforgiving. It's a world I chose to step into in order to provide for myself and my family — the people who make up the other, very different, world I inhabit. Two worlds: one of light, one of shadow. As different as day and night.

The outside world — the world I share with my family — should be filled with love, laughter, and hope for the future.

The inside world — the prison world — is a place defined by frustration, anger, violence, and despair.

When I first began this career, I was rooted firmly in the outside world. But as time passed, I became so wrapped up in the inside world that I began to embrace it. Each day spent within it pulled me in deeper. Slowly, I lost pieces of myself — the parts that once cherished the outside world. I found myself drawn to the chaos, the unpredictability, the adrenaline. It became more thrilling to respond to a crisis than to watch my child perform in a school talent show. The rush was addictive.

The yelling, the rage, the use of force — the illusion of control and power — it all felt so real. But it was an intoxicant, and no one ever warned us of the price. It's like a mental heroin.

And just like with any drug — physical or psychological — the high is always followed by a crash. And then, the craving for more. But at what cost?

The cost of getting wrapped up in the inside world is the slow erosion of who we once were. We begin to lose touch with the joy and peace we used to find in the outside world. We grow distant from those we love. We carry the inside world home with us. We start picking up destructive habits — searching for that same rush, or maybe just trying to numb ourselves to the boredom and stillness of the world we used to hold dear.

This story I share is a blend of my own life and the lives I've witnessed around me. The line between observation and personal experience has blurred. I feel it all.

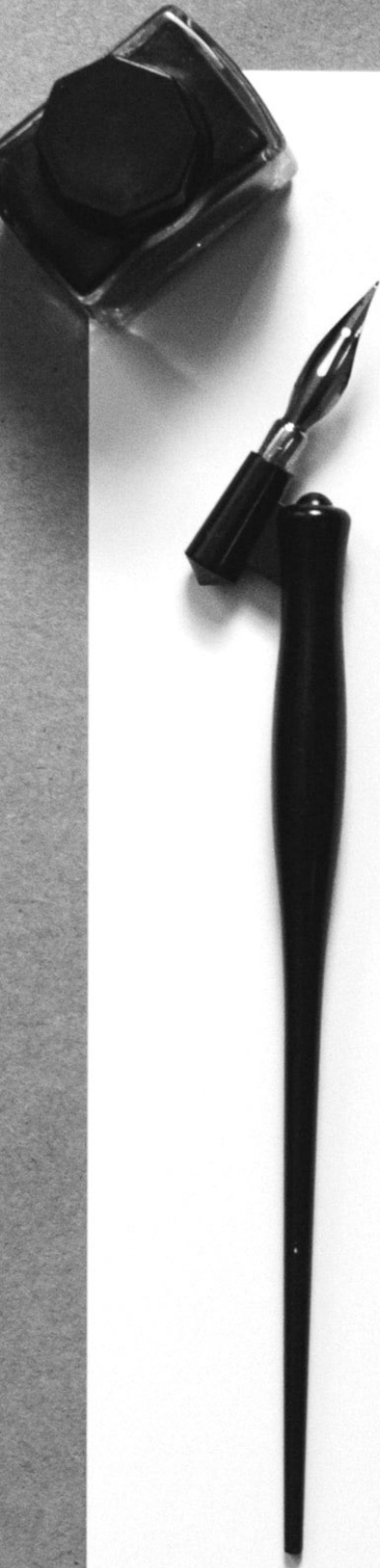
The rabbit hole is deep, dark, and terrifying. And at some point, each of us must face a choice: do we keep chasing that rush, hoping we'll somehow find our way back someday? Or do we turn away from the darkness, and make the hard, deliberate effort to remain anchored in the world of light?



QUOTE  
OF THE MONTH

“The longing for  
connection is embedded  
in our very biology.”

Jaak Pansepp



# IN MEMORIAM

**David Hillburger**

Correctional Officer

New York State Department of Correction  
and Community Supervision

**Santonio Catoe**

Correction Officer

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# MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



**CATERINA SPINARIS, PH.D., LPC**  
Founding Director

CONTENT CURATION, PRODUCTION & EDITING



**STEPHANIE RAWLINGS, M.S.**  
Deputy Director

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT, EDITING



**JUDY MYERS, B.SC.**  
Executive Assistant

EDITING



**STEVEN MAYOTTE, B.DES., LEED AP**  
Operations & Systems Advisor

GRAPHIC DESIGN & LAYOUT

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