



## The Correctional Oasis

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DWCO 17 Years—2003-2020

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We send you and to your loved ones Thanksgiving blessings!

During this trying season, can you think of what YOU are THANKFUL for?

Email us your thoughts at [desertwaters@desertwaters.com](mailto:desertwaters@desertwaters.com).

If I Could Turn Back Time.....

By Lt. John Mendiboure

The other day I worked a 16-hour shift, and I was on the same yard I started as a Lieutenant on in 2008.

As I sat at my desk reminiscing about all the things I have experienced over the last 12 years, one thing always stands out when I work that yard—January 22, 2010—one of the worst days in my career.

We did not have some huge riot that day. In fact, the whole 16 hours was relatively quiet, a good day to catch up on reports. I was working my second watch shift, spending most of it in the office tied up with paperwork. As I was working on a package, my Captain walked through my office on the way to his, and casually said, “Jack will not be in tonight.” I remember thinking it was weird that my Captain knew my Sergeant had called in, but I did not give it much thought.

A while later my Captain walked back through my office and told me that Jack was going to be fired when he reported to work. I remember thinking why would you tell me that? I had worked for Jack as an Officer, then we were partners for a while, and now he was my 5-day a week Sergeant. I was in a sullen mood for the rest of second watch knowing what was coming.

Sure enough, third watch started and Jack was not here, so I requested an overtime Sergeant. I was aware of the investigation Jack had been going through, and had no doubt that he would get his job back.

At this time, I had been on our Peer Support Team for 10 years. I told myself to call Jack and check on him, each time telling myself I would call him after I got off duty and we could talk uninterrupted. All night I kept thinking I should reach out, but I’d find a reason not to—like, too many reports to work on, I can do it after work.

Well before my shift ended I was notified Jack had taken his own life. I worked hard to keep my composure as I supported my staff. When my shift ended, I stopped by the Watch Sergeants office and told him to put me out. He asked, “For tomorrow?” I told him I would call when I was ready to come back.

I was married at the time, but fortunately my wife was living at her parents ranch as it was over an hour away and close to her job. I say fortunately because I could not have told her the torment I was going through. I love her and

she is a great support system, but I had no words for my emotions. When I got home, I threw my uniform shirt and vest on a chair, walked to my bar, and I grabbed an unopened 1.75-liter bottle of Jack Daniel and some cigars. I then went out to the back patio.

I tried my best to drink the guilt and hurt away. I woke up the next morning sitting in my camp chair with my dog lying next to me. I did not get my stuff together, rather I reached for that bottle and proceeded to live in it and a couple more for the next few days.

This was one of the darkest times I have gone through. I had lost partners to suicide over the years, and talked with many who were suicidal, including a couple who had attempted suicide. I did not see any of the indicators in Jack and felt I could wait till my shift was over, yet something in my subconscious was telling me to reach out to him, and to this day I live with the regret of not following that prompting.

Oftentimes we see more of our partners than we do our own families and we get to know them well, all the intricacies in their personalities, behaviors and the subtle changes. If you feel your partner may be going through a tough time, reach out to them. I understand it is not an easy or comfortable conversation to have with someone you care about. It will be one of the hardest things you do to sit down with a Brother or Sister, and ask them if they are thinking of ending their life. Trust me when I say it is nothing compared to the pain of not asking and having them die by or attempt suicide.

That day proved a valuable life lesson. I will never again hesitate to reach out to someone who is going through a rough time. I will not put off checking in with someone. The possible awkwardness or discomfort of talking about a situation is much easier to deal with than the devastation that can come if you don't.

I have also come to realize that the way I dealt with the grief was not healthy. I now have people to whom I can reach out to, other outlets for my emotions, as well as resources I use instead of turning to a bottle of booze.

## Recovering from Years of Depression

By Sgt. Mike Flowerdew

This article follows two prior articles in which Sgt. Mike Flowerdew courageously shares his journey through dark depression and suicidal thinking, and the treatment approaches that he found to be helpful. His first article is entitled "The 21 Years of My Life I Wish I Could Change" appeared in the June 2019 issue of the Correctional Oasis, and the second, "Just Recognize It, Listen to It, and Admit It!" appeared in the April 2020 issue of the Correctional Oasis. Check them out! They're very good!

It's been a long road! Two and a half years ago I was headed for the bottom at an alarming rate. I was in dire need of help and answers. My depression was off the charts, and the overwhelming thoughts of taking my own life were a daily occurrence.

I finally did reach out to get help, and it was the best move I have ever made.

I did not know what was going on in my life, other than I felt miserable all the time. I was tired, felt alone, depressed, sad, drank too much, and the list goes on and on.

The seed of recovery was planted when my department started the yearly training of its staff on the effects of Correctional Fatigue. Hearing stories from other staff members about their struggles was another revelation. It was really heartfelt to listen to a well-known staff member that everyone looked up to share intimate details of their struggles, as no one even knew they were struggling. This choked me up, and it really helped me understand that I was not alone, and that Correctional Fatigue was real.

I promoted in 2017, and was required to attend the Sergeants' Academy. One of our class days included the benefits of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The class was full of information about how to use it, who was eligible, and what it covered. Not being new to the department, but a new supervisor, I was now responsible for recognizing change in personnel, and possible issues with our employees and offering them EAP as a resource. This training opened my eyes, and that seed really started to grow.

For years, everyone, including myself, joked about EAP, not knowing that one day I would use it, and it would save my marriage and my life. You see, after the training on EAP and the Correctional Fatigue classes, I started to evaluate myself, knowing that I had issues, but I didn't know which way to go. For years I was miserable, and my

thoughts were that it was just a phase. But because of a sequence of events that happened in my career, I couldn't take anymore, and I was in a downward spiral. I finally stepped up and made that call for help.

I've been seeing a therapist for over two years now, and will continue until I feel the time is right to stop. I've been to a PTSD retreat, I've done acupuncture, group therapy, and tried different kinds of medication. All were very helpful and have helped improve my health and stability, but it wasn't until recently in my journey that I have found peace. Peace, because I finally feel like I can breathe, without the overwhelming weight of myself crushing me. It's not perfect, because I still have my days of sadness, but they are usually short-lived, and I'm able to recover quickly. That's a BIG change from where I was three years ago!

I feel like I have a new beginning, and it doesn't come without trials, but I will keep seeking for what it is I need and push for it.

You see, I was in a very bad place, and although since the beginning of my therapy there were changes, it was frustrating, because we all want that quick fix. After years of living and working like this, change just doesn't happen overnight. It's a long process to create closure, tap into things we don't want to talk about, and rewire our brains. The positive and happy thoughts just don't come back that fast. At least they did not for me.

I've learned to be present, and in the moment, instead of being overwhelmed with sadness about the past or the future. This process is not easy for me, and I really have to work hard at it, but it DOES work. I try to change the way I've thought for years by stopping those thoughts and thinking of the present. I recognize where I feel uncomfortable, whether it's my head, stomach or whole body, and I think about why.

Now, thinking about the present, recognizing things around me, and of course thinking happy thoughts are all part of the process, and IT REALLY WORKS! I'm a 48-year old male with 23 plus years in the department, stubborn, with a type A personality, and I can testify it DOES work! You just have to seek the guidance to get there.

In the past two years, I have met and talked with some amazing, wonderful people that are there to help. This is what they do, and they live it. They specialize in this kind of stuff and they will guide you back into your functioning life.

If you are stuck and confused, make that call, reach out and GET YOUR LIFE BACK. Don't be ashamed, embarrassed or worried about what others think.

We've all worked with someone that isn't with us anymore, because of the pressure and the overwhelming feelings. Reach out, speak up. No one is there to judge, and there IS help!

Sincerely,

Sergeant Mike Flowerdew

#### 2021 Online CF2F & TG Instructor Trainings

Both our Instructor Trainings for the courses "From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™" (CF2F; [https://desertwaters.com/?page\\_id=5996](https://desertwaters.com/?page_id=5996)) and "True Grit: Building Resilience in Corrections Professionals™" (TG; [https://desertwaters.com/?page\\_id=8717](https://desertwaters.com/?page_id=8717)) will be offered in 2021 as a combination of online meetings and independent study, followed by individual 1-on-1 phone coaching with a DWCO Master Instructor.

The CF2F Instructor Training will be offered as a 42-hour training, and the TG Instructor Training will be offered as a 43-hour training. Training dates and other details can be found [HERE](#) for CF2F and [HERE](#) for TG.

We can also come to you in 2021 (pandemic permitting) if you want to train 12 or more instructors to offer either one of these courses.

#### On Unloading

By Susan Jones, PhD, and Gregory Morton, MSc

Have you ever been so worried about something in your life that you didn't know who to turn to for help, yet you knew that you needed guidance as to how to cope with the situation, but were totally clueless about whose advice to seek or what to do?

Or have you ever been on the receiving end of people coming to you at work to "dump" their problems at your feet, while asking you for help with them?

Both these types of situations have probably happened to just about everyone, even though the seriousness and types of issues may differ dramatically from one person to the next.

For the best positive outcome, both sides of this coin—choosing who to “dump on” and deciding what to do after being “dumped on”—must be handled wisely.

Susan: “As a supervisor in a correctional facility, I have been the person called upon when an employee or co-worker was struggling. I remember more than one occasion when the person approached me in an urgent manner and just started unloading their issue. I use the term unloading here because that was what it felt like to me, and probably to the person that was trying to ‘dump’ this problem, so that they could feel some relief or so that they could get some help with their ‘load.’

When I think about unloading, in my mind’s eye I often see an image from my childhood. I was born in farm country – wheat county. As such, I remember being assigned to help move wheat trucks around to handle the freshly harvested grain. My job was merely to move the trucks around in the field and position them to wait for a more experienced driver to take them to the Co-op. (The Co-op was the grain elevator where we took the grain after harvest to be stored and sold.) I was very young, but I was not happy that I had not been entrusted to drive this fully loaded wheat truck into town to deliver it to the grain elevator. I envied the drivers of the trucks going to town, because their job seemed more important and more interesting than mine.

What I didn’t know about the responsibility of that next job (taking the wheat to town) was that the driver and the Co-op, assumed the consequences for making mistakes in that process.

To most people (if they ever think about the elevator system that holds grain for the farmers), a grain elevator may seem like just a place to hold on to the grain until it is sold. However, that Co-op elevator is not just a holding bin, it must also protect the grain. You see, the grain is vulnerable to bugs and mold, so actions must be taken to ensure that the moisture is maintained at the right level, and that bugs are prevented from accessing the grain. The employees at the elevator are not just receivers of the grain. By accepting the grain, they accept the responsibility for its care. They accept the responsibility to ensure that the farmer and the buyer are given the best deal for their product.”

So, what does this have to do with corrections? Actually, quite a lot. You see, employees must be vigilant to ensure that they pick a spot (a person) to “dump” their issue that can handle the issue effectively. It does no good for an employee to dump their load on someone that has no interest or ability to help them with their need.

Back to the farm, it would be unthinkable for a driver to dump a load of wheat at the elementary school. While there may be people on duty at the school when the wheat arrives, these people probably do not have the knowledge to deal with the grain nor do they have the equipment or physical structures to hold the wheat, even in the short term. The best they could do to help the situation would be to call someone to move the wheat to some other place.

Consider the meaning of the word “Co-op.” If we live in a rural area, but don’t do farming ourselves, we may think of it as a farm supply store or just a place with a bunch of tall cylindrical buildings. But the word “Co-op” comes from the longer word “Co-operative,” which more accurately describes the interactions that take place there, as well as the relationships that result. In other words, without cooperation, the Co-op would not be successful. The Co-op managers keep the seller’s grain healthy, so that the buyer can be assured of a wholesome product for their use.

Dumping your load of wheat at a noxious Co-op does more harm than good. This is relevant to us in corrections as well.

Once the issue is “dumped,” the supervisor must take some type of action. Sometimes, the employee just needs to be heard. If that is the case, the supervisor has an important responsibility to ensure that they hold on to this issue and keep it in confidence, if that is appropriate.

Sometimes, the employee just wants to talk about their issue and have nothing done, even when that type of inaction may not make sense to the supervisor. Or agency policies regarding potential liability may dictate that the supervisor must act to protect the employee or others who may be at risk due to the situation.

At other times, employees reveal a problem that requires immediate action that could include many others in the organization and could even affect public safety.

Just like the Co-op, the supervisor must look at the bigger picture. In this instance, the supervisor is much like that grain elevator employee who must look at the long-term responsibilities of accepting the grain into storage, and then passing the grain into the marketplace. Even the actions taken right at the beginning can be a help or hindrance to the entire process. For example, once grain product that is too moist is placed into the grain storage system, the probability of spreading mold to other grain is very real. Once that occurs, the actions that have to be taken almost always result in the loss of some of the grain.

A supervisor who does not take the right action at the right time can also be responsible for some loss. This type of loss may be a reduction of trust between the supervisor and the employee. Sometimes this loss of trust may extend to all of “management” and an entire group of employees. The loss can also be seen as an employee chooses to leave the organization, or the employee chooses to stay but their commitment to the organization is dramatically reduced.

Many of us are very careful about where we unload, and that is why the person that we select to finally reach out to for help is usually a person with whom we have developed a relationship based on trust. Just like that farmer who chooses carefully in advance which grain storage system to rely upon, the corrections employee often chooses in advance the person they may turn to for help. Employees make their decision by watching how their supervisor handles the issues presented by other people. They watch what they do, what they don't do, and who they talk to about such issues. These types of observations will hopefully serve to direct employees toward the right place to “dump their load” during their time of need.

Susan: “I wish I could say that I always had the right answers, and immediately. However, on more than one occasion I stood there speechless. The gravity of the issue the employee had just dumped at my feet was of great seriousness, and the consequences for all likely actions were severe and, in many instances, very long-lasting.

I was not always prepared to help the employee, so I had to figure out how to act in a way that, first of all, did no harm, and secondly, helped the employee move towards a solution. That is when having a professional source for assistance is of value to the supervisor.

Over the years I think I called our Employee Assistance Program for help with co-workers' and subordinates' issues more than I did for my own. In fact, I'm sure of it. Sometimes we only think of the EAP as place for personal advice, but I found that they were very eager to help me do my supervisory duties more diligently. This was successful for three reasons: (1) I was able to pass on useful advice to the employee who had come to me, (2) the EAP became more knowledgeable about corrections staff's issues, and (3) I developed the reputation of being a good 'Co-op' for employees to unload to.”

#### Wanted: Your Fulfillment Stories

As we teach in our award-winning course, “From Corrections fatigue to Fulfillment™” (CF2F), a key challenge of corrections work is that staff have difficulty identifying ways in which they are making a positive difference. Making a difference for the better—either through interactions with offenders or with staff—gives corrections employees a sense of satisfaction. It can also give their self-esteem a boost, and affirms to them that their efforts are bearing good fruit, and that their lives are being well invested. As a result, their sense of engagement with our agency and commitment to it flourishes.

Desert Waters publishes and posts staff stories regarding the acknowledging and overcoming of struggles inherent to corrections work. Now we also invite you to share with us stories of personal growth and fulfillment as a result of constructive interactions with either other staff or offenders. Who were you able to assist? What happened when you handled a volatile situation with firmness yet also with fairness? What was the outcome of your controlling yourself and responding wisely instead of blindly reacting to a provocation? How did you influence an offender or a subordinate in a positive way?

Think about all these possibilities—and more—and send us your story at [desertwaters@desertwaters.com](mailto:desertwaters@desertwaters.com) so we can consider it for publication in the Correctional Oasis and on our Staff Stories page. If we accept your submission for publication, we'll do any necessary editing, and we'll print it either anonymously or with your name—however you request.

Share your positive experiences with us, so you can encourage and teach others in your line of work. As the Correctional Oasis is read in several countries across the globe, your words can have a worldwide influence for the better!

Many Thanks

Thank you for blessing the work of Desert Waters with your contributions!

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#### Quote of the Month

“The difference between greatness and mediocrity is often how an individual views a mistake.” – Nelson Boswell

#### IN MEMORIAM

Karen Kennedy, Baltimore Central Booking and Intake Center, Maryland

Barthphine Maduh, Correctional Officer, Baltimore Central Booking and Intake Center, Maryland

Wayne Rogers, Corrections Officer, Jackson Correctional Institution, Florida Dept. of Corrections

Pete Smith, Sheriff, Sumter County Sheriff’s Office, Georgia

Robert Charles Sunukjian, Correctional Officer, Hampton Roads Regional Jail, Virginia

Londell Woodbury, Correctional Officer, Reception and Medical Center, Florida Dept. of Corrections

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#### DWCO Mission

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

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Your gifts are tax-deductible.

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.