



## The Correctional Oasis

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DWCO 18 Years—2003-2021

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### Correctional Agencies Supporting Their Staff

By Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC

In the May 2021 issue of the Correctional Oasis, both Dr. Susan Jones and I addressed the long-term fallout of COVID-19 in the correctional workplace and in essential staff's family life. ([https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Correctional-Oasis-05.2021.opt\\_.pdf](https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Correctional-Oasis-05.2021.opt_.pdf))

In this month's issue we present a brief description of what three Departments of Corrections have been doing in order to offer social support and wellness resources to their essential staff during the pandemic. This material has been sent to us by officials at these agencies, together with permission to reproduce it.

1. One Department of Corrections, which prefers to remain anonymous at this point, dispatches their peer support teams to make rounds at each institution during each of the three shifts. While doing so they thank staff for their work, offer them bottled water, coffee, and snacks, and ask them if they have any concerns or requests that they wish to pass on to their administration anonymously. These efforts were offered weekly for many months. As time went by, the rounds were changed to twice per month, and currently they are offered once per month.

2. During the height of the pandemic, the Illinois Department of Corrections mobilized members of its Staff Wellness Response Team to canvass their assigned institutions at least weekly to check in with staff and to conduct critical incident debriefs as needed. In turn, Staff Wellness Response Team members were debriefed regularly, as it was recognized that they were bearing a substantial emotional burden at their institutions.

The Illinois Department of Corrections also began to offer wellness-centered podcasts and social media engagement to address the impact of COVID-19, and used these as a means to offer wellness resources to staff. T

he agency recently conducted a staff survey about staff wellness needs in order to inform its future staff wellness strategies.

It is now beginning to once again schedule offerings of wellness-related programming to staff, including DWCO's courses From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment and True Grit.

The Illinois Department of Corrections is collaborating with the labor union about the staff wellness offerings, including having an MOU with the union that outlines the selection criteria for Staff Wellness Response Team members at every institution. Both the agency and the union sponsor wellness resources, and they promote each other's resources to staff.

More recently, the Illinois Department of Corrections has begun to collaborate with the state's Human Resources to educate staff on their physical wellness benefits.

3. Starting in April 2020, the Indiana Department of Correction set up weekly or bi-weekly Crisis Counseling videoconferencing sessions delivering Psychological First Aid services to staff in groups. It also made call lines available to staff who did not want to participate in groups or who could not be relieved from their posts to attend. These services were prioritized to sites that were hit hardest by the COVID infection. Later in the pandemic, some community mental health center staff came on site to provide Psychological First Aid services to correction employees in person.

The Indiana Department of Correction also promoted the new Be Well Crisis Hotline which provided 24-hour Psychological First Aid and helped route individuals to needed resources that were identified during the call. To make it “corrections-friendly,” hotline staff designed flyers and a brief video advertising their services specifically for the Indiana Department of Correction. These promotional materials included graphics of correctional staff and medical workers, which were distributed to all correctional facilities and parole districts, and were shared by email with all staff.

At the same time, the Indiana Department of Correction’s Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team provided support to four of its correctional facilities and all ten parole districts. To do so, they went on site, engaged with staff, and provided materials about signs and symptoms of stress, and information about caring for oneself physically and emotionally during an ongoing crisis. These CISM teams were supported by the state’s larger CISM network, who provided weekly supervision sessions by phone/video, and also provided debriefing sessions to help CISM team members maintain their stability and wellbeing after supporting so many others. Similarly, the Employee Assistance Program also sent counselors on-site to facilities that experienced critical incidents that affected staff.

Additionally, the Indiana Department of Correction offered weekly Infocasts which were broadcast and recorded for later viewing. Many Infocasts focused on issues related to the pandemic. A special Infocast was created about stress, trauma, and resources that were available to staff.

Lastly, the Indiana Department of Correction provided educational materials to staff about the COVID-19 vaccine, and each site had different activities to encourage staff to be vaccinated.

The examples of these three correctional agencies demonstrate how some correctional administrators have recognized that the unprecedented and extreme stressors placed upon their employees during the pandemic required that a variety of additional measures of social support be provided to them, on a regular basis and at no cost to them.

These examples are very encouraging to us. May many more—if not all—correctional agencies follow suit.

Storm Troopers

By Susan Jones, PhD & Gregory Morton, MSc

*This is an article on the complexities and importance of sound psychological boundaries that correctional staff must have when managing offenders.*

As somewhat reluctant fans of the Star Wars movies, we have seen plenty of Storm Troopers. These Troopers first came on to the movie screen attired in white, impenetrable-looking uniforms. In fact, in the first several movies we never saw a Storm Trooper without his uniform. It wasn’t until Darth Vader was “unmasked” that the spectators were given a clue of how the helmets separated from the rest of the uniform.

Years later, we know that the Storm Troopers have evolved, but we have often wondered about those Troopers from the first three movies (episodes 4, 5, and 6). Are they even human under the uniforms? What are they thinking or feeling? What happens when they get shot – do they feel pain? Do they bleed? Do they have families that care when they don’t come home? Are they capable of independent thought or are they just robots? Have you wondered any of these things about the Storm Troopers?

You see, when we wonder these things about the Storm Troopers, we begin to think about our friends and family in the corrections world. We see a lot of similarities between the Storm Troopers and Corrections Officers. As Corrections Officers we are trained to put on a façade each day before we enter the facility. This façade is meant to protect us from harm – both physical and emotional, just like the Storm Troopers. The façade helps us to get through the day without revealing our vulnerabilities and without engaging on a personal level with inmates or their families. Most importantly, the façade is there to hide the injuries that we may endure in this work. The last thing we want is for inmates to know that they hurt us – right?

Susan: “I remember this feeling of making sure the inmate didn’t know he hurt me when I was attacked at work. I was in pain and barely able to walk, but I made it into the facility to be there at the disciplinary hearing of my attacker. I got there early enough to hobble all the way to the hearing room, and I managed to prop myself up against a file cabinet. I did all of this prior to the inmate being in the area to make sure he didn’t see the injury I sustained. I was standing there, looking confident, when the inmate walked into the room. I have to admit that I loved the look on his face when he saw me standing there with no apparent injuries. Then, I waited long enough to make sure he was out of the area until I hobbled back to my car and back to my home, so that I could crawl back into my bed.”

However, even when corrections employees are in uniform, they are not able to hide their facial expressions or weaknesses behind that uniform – not totally. The masks that many staff have to wear now, due to the COVID-19 virus, may add another layer of anonymity or protection, but they are nothing like the masks of the Empire’s Storm Troopers. Unlike the Storm Troopers, corrections employees have to consciously remember to tuck away, in a safe spot, any potential vulnerability that might show a target for inmates to use against them. This conscious behavior is not limited to the one time they pass through the control area, but must be maintained for their entire shift. The focus that it takes to keep that layer of protection in place while working within facilities varies depending upon the job.

The officer that is assigned to a perimeter or tower post has an easier job of keeping their vulnerabilities hidden, particularly when compared to an employee assigned to a housing unit or a programs area. The employees that are tasked with one-to-one interaction with inmates for an entire shift must be even more diligent to protect themselves from exposing their weakspots. This includes counselors, health services staff, recreation staff, teachers, and work supervisors.

Another threat to these protective actions is found in policy. When agencies try to re-focus staff to bridge the divide between the inmates and the staff, such as the “normalization” focus that is being heralded in some states, the risk to staff increases unless a new, slightly different form of professionalism takes hold. But even then, the risk to an employee’s vulnerabilities remains in place, given the extended contact staff have with inmates. This can even be increased when one considers the manipulative nature of some offender types.

These types of policy shifts that involve normalization may hold some promise toward reducing recidivism (the data is not yet available), but the mental shift needed for employees to make this type of mandate work is significant. If or when more normalization occurs, staff may need to monitor their vulnerability protection to an even greater extent. Like medical professionals who treat us for our most personal of physical troubles, the correctional professional’s attention must remain on offender behaviors, and not allow the focus to revert to a discussion of their (the employee’s) personal life. This will require a shift in employee-offender training, emphasizing the inmate’s needs and issues, and minimizing any similarities with staff. While this is currently the norm in most training curricula, the balancing act required by the employee will have to be emphasized, especially regarding skills for redirecting conversations and maintaining solid interpersonal boundaries.

We wonder if, unless highly trained in this balancing act, not much will really change in the staff-inmate interactions because our staff are concerned that the risk is too high for them if they get any closer to the inmates emotionally. It seems to us that the staff know they need that “Storm Troopers uniform” in order to survive this work with their physical and mental health intact.

The need for a reverse version of this balancing act is true when staff get home, which is where the issue of over-protection against vulnerabilities becomes a complicated challenge. Does keeping yourself safe at work equal relationship safety at home? Or is the opposite the case? Is it even possible for you to take off your Storm Trooper uniform when you leave work? Or, more accurately stated, how much emotional effort and self-awareness does it take to remove that impenetrable uniform, so that your loved ones can interact with you without bumping into your workplace armor?

We are concerned about our Storm Troopers who have chosen to devote their careers to this work. We wonder if their layer of protection will last long enough for them to serve their agencies and retire in one piece, and while still enjoying family life. We wonder how often we don’t see them bleed, because bleeding does in fact occur underneath that uniform. It wasn’t until Darth Vader took off his helmet that we saw the humanity in him.

## Addiction to Chaos

By Anonymous Correctional Professional

Say what? Yes, chaos “addiction” is real. Is it an adrenalin addiction? Where did it come from? When did it first become apparent that it may be causing problems in your life? Was it before or after your job in corrections began that you had chaos addiction issues?

I may touch on subjects that anger you, but hear me out. Please.

Were you, like me, raised in a home where chaos was a typical day? Maybe there was substance abuse or domestic violence in your home. That brings a lot of chaos on. Maybe there were sibling rivalries. That can make chaos. Maybe there were absent parents. This can make chaos by either making you the parent yourself and/or your siblings. That extra stress, and pressures of responsibility, the fear of failing can lead to living in chaos. Another scenario could be that parents stay out drinking every night and they come home to violent arguments until they pass out. Hearing the constant yelling, crying, and slamming doors every night could make you comfortable in chaos because this becomes a typical day in your life.

Nine times out of ten you continued this lifestyle in your relationships because that was your “normal.” Well, you grew up, you survived, and now it’s time to pick your career and get a job.

Let’s see, what are you going to be when you grow up? Hmmm..... Car salesman? No, how boring to have to kiss someone’s butt for an hour or so to sell them a car you could not care less about. No, don’t think so.... Boring! Truck driver, be alone 24/7.... Boring!

Whoa, here’s something that I think will be perfect! Department of Corrections staff. Sounds interesting. You apply, you get hired, you fit like a hand in a glove. How can this be? You found your kryptonite.... CHAOS!!! The old familiar, blood pumping action, and even better than your childhood memories of your heart-pounding, adrenalin-pumping days gone by. It feeds your flame to the point of no return, or so it seems.

If you are at your max of chaos addiction or see yourself heading to that point, please get help! You do **not** have to suffer alone! Your employer has mental health contacts that can help you 365/24/7. Just call the number for Employee Assistance on the back of your insurance card. I am from Indiana, and we get eight free therapy sessions per year for mental health.

But wait, there’s more! We are going to use the coin analogy. You are on one side of the coin. Offenders are on the other side of the coin. What?! Where in the heck am I going with this, you ask.

Maybe you came from a chaotic home. You can pretty much bet that many offenders came from that same chaos to the n<sup>th</sup> degree. Their environment included abandonment, gangs, generational gang pressures, drugs, prostitution, violence, sexual abuse, etc. They break the law, end up in prison, and guess what? They fit like a hand in a glove. In prison they find all of the chaos they could ever want, and more. It’s a comfortable place.

Sounds familiar? The good news though is that both groups of people on the coin are capable of change. The first step is to recognize the chaos addiction and own it. Neither side of the coin realizes that they are feeding each other’s addictions.

Some require professional help to come up with a plan and to figure out how to work with it. Some will require medication and/or therapy during the process of recovering from an addiction to chaos. That does not show a sign of weakness. This shows you are human, and that you are serious about breaking the cycle of chaos that you are stuck in. This cycle may have been passed down for generations. “Normal” is more than just a setting on your dryer. When you are not used to it, it’s very uncomfortable and boring. Can you imagine day after day with NO amped up drama or stress? No more heart pounding out of your chest? No more yelling or slamming stuff around?

Once you face your chaos addiction, and you more or less come up on the other side (on a good day), the new you is calm as a cucumber, mellow, smiling, with an even tone of voice. But you’re still effective and professional, getting the same job done, only without drama. You keep yourself in check, and those around you will act accordingly. You may even get others on board with you, once they see the new you. I think others will want to know your “secret.”

In order to remove chaos from prisons, both sides of the coin would have to be dedicated to the change, and work toward resolution. It would be hard to get all on board, but if you make it a “mission statement” of the facility, it could be done. It would be a slow process, but I’ve heard in my life’s journeys that “slow and steady wins the race.”

Most important is to get yourself fixed. It is not your job to fix everyone else. Fix yourself, and pray for everyone else.

NOTE: I am not just referring to correctional officers. I am talking about all corrections staff. We all experience trauma while inside the fence. My office for two years was located on a dorm with 120 men and one officer, and yes, I am a female. I have worked with all sorts of offenders during my 28 years inside the fence. I feel that even those that grew up in the perfect storybook setting home can fall into the chaos trap. It fills a gap of what was lacking in their lives, and when they discover it, it can overtake them.

My personal experience with chaos addiction comes from a childhood of abandonment, alcohol being the cause. As I aged, I was attracted to people that dished out the same pattern. I found perfect relationships to fit my sick need, not realizing this until decades later in life. I latched onto partners that were not available. A few were married, the others not emotionally available because of the constant drug induced stupor that they lived in. Some didn't even want a relationship. This way I was always ready to be abandoned, and their constant drama kept my chaos addiction fed. I can't say that I am making wiser choices all the time now at home or at work. Both places keep me supplied in adrenalin. Life is good, right?! Wrong!! It's not healthy to live like that.

One time I was in a "non-chaotic" relationship. I think that's called "normal." Talk about dull, what a snorer! I don't know how those "normal" people do it. Did you ever watch paint dry? Well, it's like that. Same ho-hum—day in and day out. But somehow, we have to break the pattern that we are all in (most without even knowing it.)

So, in my estimation, staff and offenders have become chaos addicts, and most come from crappy childhoods. And they're passing the dysfunction on to their children, and their children pass it on to their children, etc.

Now what??? I wonder if there could be group therapy sessions offered at work for staff who are interested in learning more about chaos addiction. It would need to be offered to all shifts so that no one is left out. What about staff groups and also offender groups taking place? Then, after about six months, what about offering combined chaos addiction groups of both staff and offenders?

I believe that once we all realize what each other has gone through, we'd look at each other in a different light. I also feel that the mindset of prison staff would become more understanding towards both coworkers and offenders, and everyone would help each other get through the "withdrawals" from chaos addiction that will be experienced. I feel that the awareness factor alone on both sides of the coin would start positive change that is so desperately needed.

In this article I presented the problem as I see it. I presented some solutions. I don't know where to go with it from here.

In closing, for decades I have had this burning desire to write about chaos addiction. Hopefully, I will find some peace knowing that I finally shared it. I will have twenty-nine years in the corrections field in November 2021, if I don't retire before that. I am eligible for my full Social Security benefits August 25, 2021. Back when I had a lot of years to get to that date, it seemed like forever. And I couldn't wait for that day to arrive. Now that it's getting close, I find that I do not want to cut the cord.

What has changed to make me feel this way now? Is it that I don't want to cut off my adrenalin dealer? I don't want to give up my daily guaranteed fix? How sick is that? So, is chaos addiction actually an addiction to adrenalin? I refer to work as "the land of dysfunction." So why am I okay with being comfortable there? Because it is a sickness, and I need to continue working on getting well.

I wish I knew how many who read this article found that they are right there with me. You know there's comfort in numbers. LOL. Seriously, if you are right there with me, write to me through Desert Waters (<https://desertwaters.com/admin-contact-page/>) and put "ATTN: CHAOS ADDICTION." I will answer every email that is forwarded to me.

One more thing...or two (LOL), or three:

1. I am of the opinion that there needs to be a place outside of the fence for retired staff, and a separate place for released offenders, for deprogramming the shell-shock of prison life when leaving for good.
2. I am wondering and thinking that this article may also be fitting for police, fire, military, etc. Let's share.
3. I also, along with many co-workers and offenders, now suffer from PTSD. This is another topic in one way, but in another way, it goes hand-in-hand with chaos addiction. I believe that healing one (either PTSD or chaos addiction) will piggy-back into healing the other.

Articulate Joy  
By CO Ron Mason

Attempt to. I try to now. I know I attempt to experience and express joy every morning. I come up answerless. I used to believe that finding JOY would come with being the best correctional officer that I was capable of being.

Being first on the spot when sh\*t went down. Handling my business. Supporting my partners when needed and having their back. Them knowing without fail that I would be up in the mix. Side by side we would handle any ugly situation together. Be it de-escalating a situation, to the moment we were forced by the inmate to go hands on. A cell extraction, where do I sign up? I have loved the opportunity this job has offered to me every day to stand amongst warriors and attempt to be the first when called to battle.

A strange world that we walk in. 90% boredom, 10% pure terror. Waking for the day and having no clue what your workday may end up being like—a boring day or the worst and most horrific day of your life.

After working this field for so long, it no longer phases you. You spent another day at the office and at the end of day you return home not even realizing that you took on some new mental scars. Another day at the office, and you relish the adrenalin rush and your ability to set things right by the end of the shift. Medical treatment offered to inmates involved. Property inventoried. Escorts completed. Pass the information on to the next shift. And, oh yeah, you guys might have some fall out on your shift, but we think we got it all cleaned up.

When I started down this path, I was excited to start a new adventure in life and to strive to be the best I could be in life and look for every opportunity to have fun in life and exploit the income that I would earn to enjoy life. Now I look at my daily life as how to be the best correctional officer I can be, be the best partner that I can be, make sure my partners go home the same way we were when we walked through the gates. Go home and get ready to do it again. Outside life can begin after retirement.

Where did the last 23 years go? Full pockets, empty house. Emptiness on the outside and a full world on the inside.... Something went wrong somewhere.

Joy, I don't know how to articulate it or even remember how to experience it. That got lost in paragraph 2 and I didn't even notice it happen, but I think I have been a kick ass partner.

#### IN MEMORIAM

Alexey Aguilar, Correctional Officer, Miami-Dade Corrections and Rehabilitation Department

Melissa Clear, Community Parole Officer, Colorado Department of Corrections

James Herrera, Jail Deputy, Denver Sheriff Department, Colorado

#### Quote of the Month

"If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step we take just gets us to the wrong place faster."

~ Stephen Covey

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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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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