



## The Correctional Oasis

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### Contents:

1. How Do We Connect Our Work to Our Agency Values?
2. Words of Wisdom
3. Trapped? NOT! - Living Brave
4. About "More on Staying Well"
5. Humbled
6. New Faces at DWCO
7. In Memoriam
8. Quote of the Month
9. Many Thanks

### How Do We Connect Our Work to Our Agency Values?

By Gregory Morton, M.Sc.

Reprinted from the February 2018 issue of the Correctional Oasis ([https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Corr\\_Oasis\\_02.2018.pdf](https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Corr_Oasis_02.2018.pdf)).

I recently had an online conversation with a member of a military medical group. We were talking about how to connect agency mission, vision, and values to daily work practices. As many know, agency mission is all-encompassing in a military setting, but I wanted to dig more deeply than that. She mentioned that her medical group has nine "Trusted Care" vision principles. Among others, they include Zero harm, Duty to speak up, Commitment to resilience, Maximize value to the patient, and System thinking.

I asked her how those principles were communicated to the line, or if they were just ideas that sat on a shelf in a binder. She had several answers as to how the principles were communicated to line staff, including emails from her branch's Surgeon General and posting on local bulletin boards. But the one I thought most progressive, and most immediately relevant to corrections work, had to do with the weekly meetings of the chain of command.

Every month, one of the nine "Trusted Care" principles is the "Principle of the Month." When their teams hold their weekly meeting, they first review that principle so that everyone is reminded of its meaning and value. After that, when they do their report outs and problem solving, they make sure that that principle is included in the solutions.

Of course, all principles are considered during the problem solving, not just the one for the month, but by reviewing them in a sequential way month after month, the practice of considering their workplace application becomes routine. The "Trusted Care" vision principles leave that binder on the shelf and come to life in the real world of work.

So, I ask you all, does your agency have a listing of principles, maybe in the form of values statements? And if so, how often does your team review them with each other? How often do you ask your colleagues what they think the values statements mean, and how they may apply to the daily job? How often do you provide personal examples as to how you apply the values statements during a work day? How often do you recognize others for the same thing?

Let's say that one of your agency values has to do with integrity, and it is the value idea on the schedule for this month. And let's further say that the full definition includes terms or concepts such as honesty in the face of adversity, ownership of our actions, or matching our walk with our talk. What would a pre-shift briefing be like if you facilitated a short conversation twice a week about how those ideas play out during a shift? Or what would a weekly unit meeting be like if you did the same thing? What would your professional values culture be like over time as this practice became commonplace?

If you lead the briefings or carry an agenda item at the staff meeting already, you could simply add this idea to your task list and make it happen. If you would be new to the role, you might need chain of command permission first,

but wouldn't that be a great idea to be given credit for? Or what if you and a partner shared the responsibility? In other words, teamwork in action.

Of course, Corrections Fatigue being a counter-force of negativity, you would have to be genuine about your desire to make these conversations both real and positive in order to make them effective. And you would have to be motivated to doing them on a regular and publicly scheduled basis for them to become routine decision-making tools. Moreover, you would need to have the courage of self-disclosure to talk openly about their meaning to you personally. And you might even need the nerve to re-direct the conversation back to "How does this fit our team?" when someone wants to go on a tangent about how the previous shift never does their full share of the work, or how other units come up short.

But you work in corrections. You are genuine and motivated, and have courage and nerve every second of the day already. So, if you or you and your partners won't do it, who will? And if nobody does, then even the best ideas truly are just ideas that sit in a binder on a shelf.

Words of Wisdom

By an Anonymous C/O (Retired)

As a veteran C/O I have seen way too many families break up after a few years at this job. I have seen drugs and alcohol devastate marriages, friendships and careers. I have seen too many people kill themselves while employed or within a few days after termination from the department. I myself have spent a night with a Smith and Wesson 686 on my lap. I put it up, and got the help I needed.

Through the years I may have put a finger on two pieces of the puzzle: (1) people need success in their jobs, but in corrections you mostly see failure -- successful people don't come back to prison; and (2) the rest of the Officers in the criminal justice system have the tendency to view us as the B-team.

We as a group have to do more to increase our professional presence within the criminal justice system and with the public.

I was proud to protect and serve the people of the state of \_\_\_\_\_ for nearly 28 years. In fact, it was with mixed emotions that I took off my uniform and hung up my leather for the last time.

Now I'm doing the greatest thing you can do being retired - taking care of my grandchildren.

Trapped? NOT! - Living Brave

2020, 2021 © Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC

As we recently heard of more correctional staff suicides, we are reprinting this slightly revised article from the May 2020 issue of the Correctional Oasis (<https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Correctional-Oasis-05.2020.pdf>).

In order to try and prevent suicides, researchers and clinicians seek to identify and address possible indicators or conditions that increase the risk of suicidal behaviors.

One set of conditions that can worsen the odds of suicide occurring can be grouped under the heading of "feeling trapped" (Baumeister, 1990; Bryan & Rudd, 2018). "Feeling trapped" is when people believe that they do not have any acceptable or viable options to deal with the crisis they are facing other than by killing themselves.

The intense emotional anguish that typically accompanies the experience of a crisis can cause individuals to have "tunnel vision," that is, a restricted ability to see various aspects of the "big picture," to organize their thoughts rationally, and to brainstorm for effective solutions. These restrictions further fuel people's perception that they are trapped by their circumstances, leading to increasing despair, hopelessness and a sense of pervasive helplessness. As feelings of distress are magnified, in a snowball effect, "tunnel vision" and the perception of having no way out of one's situation—other than through death—are also magnified.

Deeply depressed individuals may feel trapped by their depression, and come to (falsely) believe that they will never be able to experience sustainable relief from their condition—other than by dying.

Persons caught in the throes of substance use disorders or other compulsive and high-risk behaviors (which can cause them and others grief, and perhaps even have legal consequences) may come to (falsely) believe that they could never escape the grip of their addiction and its repercussions—other than through death.

A person with PTSD may (falsely) think that they will never again be able to feel at peace, relax, enjoy life, and have normal interactions with others.

A person who has experienced the loss of a relationship may (falsely) conclude that the heartache associated with feeling rejected or abandoned will never get better, that no one else will love them ever again, and that, ultimately, they are unlovable.

Someone who is facing significant financial difficulties or public humiliation for whatever reason may (falsely) perceive themselves to be unable to escape their emotional torment, shame, and guilt—other than by suicide.

Individuals dealing with severe and/or chronic illnesses may conclude that they are trapped by their disease and come to (falsely) believe that they have no other way to alleviate their suffering or to no longer be a burden on their loved ones—other than through death.

And there is yet another category of beliefs that may increase the risk of suicide, the category of “macho” beliefs or what has also been called the “John Wayne syndrome.” This is very pertinent to discuss here, as men in general (Coleman, Kaplan, & Casey, 2011; Coleman, Feigelman, & Rosen, 2020), and military, first responders, law enforcement and corrections personnel in particular, may be prone to falling victim to this category of unfounded, incorrect beliefs.

The “John Wayne syndrome” has been part and parcel of the fiber of the workforce culture of “protectors” for a very, very long time. It dictates that the tough guys who operate as protectors are invulnerable Supermen, with endless reserves of courage and resilience, always ready and able to confront dangerous situations, save the day, and tend to others’ needs—while having no needs of their own, and while not suffering in any way from the impact of these extreme stressors.

In addition, men (usually/mostly, although sometimes this applies to women also) are often conditioned from childhood to not cry, to not show that they are affected by physical or emotional pain, and to solve their own problems without seeking help (Coleman et al., 2020; Schlichthorst et al., 2018). Instead of leaning on others for support, they are told to “man up,” “cowboy up,” “suck it up.” If they show vulnerability or weakness or seek help from others in any way (other than by looking to Jack Daniels to get them through life), they may risk their peers’ ridicule or rejection.

Such beliefs—that people should be self-sufficient and immune to emotional pain—are not only false (we are all human, after all!), they are also life threatening for people who have been conditioned to believe that only “John Wayne” types are acceptable and worthy of respect.

I can’t begin to count the times that I have heard such beliefs expressed—sometimes with a twisted sense of pride and bravado—during my 15 years of treating corrections personnel and 20 years of offering wellness trainings to them.

Looking back on the many memorial services I have attended for corrections staff who died by suicide, I wonder how many of those suicides could have been prevented if these beliefs had been dismantled in people’s minds.

What makes such beliefs dangerous is that when people who embrace them hit rock bottom emotionally and realize that they cannot handle a crisis alone, these beliefs place road blocks in front of them, making it shameful and unacceptable for them to seek the help they so desperately need.

As a result, correctional staff in crisis may find that their path to assistance, support and ultimately relief is blocked by these “macho” beliefs. They are essentially immobilized by their fear that they will lose respect if they let people know that they have been “broken” by their circumstances.

So, being caught between the rock of their “macho” beliefs and the hard place of their anguish and suffering, some staff may wrongly conclude that killing themselves is their only honorable way out. People in such situations feel trapped by their circumstances, when in fact the real trap is between their ears, based on the expectation that they should be the John Wayne of the movies.

That is why it is vital and possibly life-saving to reject these beliefs not only as individuals, but also as work teams and as workforce cultures. Peer pressure is not only a teenage issue. Peer pressure is alive and well among adults as well, including in the corrections ranks, and can stop someone from getting the help and comfort they so direly need.

The old “John Wayne” culture norms in corrections workplaces must be replaced with reality-based and compassion-based norms that recognize—without shame and without apologies—that you are human, and that being human means you are fallible and fragile, and in need of assistance at times. You—like the rest of us—make mistakes,

and you too have a breaking point, and you too need help from sources outside of yourself at times. This is as much part of reality as the fact that, like the rest of us, you need oxygen, water, food, and an appropriate range of temperature in order to survive.

As mentioned at the start of this article, when individuals perceive themselves to be trapped by their circumstances, they may conclude that suicide is the only possible or honorable choice they have to break free from whatever is keeping them trapped. That is so very NOT TRUE!

What follows is a list of beliefs we should be promoting on a regular basis to counter the “John Wayne syndrome,” reminding ourselves that reaching out for help is not only acceptable, but also brave and smart and commendable.

I am also listing some other anti-suicide beliefs\* that affirm the preciousness of life, and reminders that, when in crisis, we have choices and options other than death. These thoughts must become ingrained in our minds, “hardwired” in our brains, and made to be part of the very fiber of our being. This can be accomplished through regular review and repetition. And we should engage in such repetition especially when life is going smoothly and well. This is because it is difficult to “hear” and embrace positive messages if we encounter them for the first time in the midst of life’s storms.

Real men (and women) do cry at times. There’s no shame in that.

Real men (and women) do have limits. We all have a breaking point. That’s part of being human.

Real men (and women) do at times need support and love and encouragement and comfort.

Real courage is about facing what is, and trudging through it one step at a time, instead of running from it.

Real intelligence is seeking help when we cannot figure something out on our own.

Real maturity is about taking responsibility for my mistakes, learning from them, and doing the best I can to fix them, while continuing to do life one day at a time.

There ARE good answers to my problems, even if I can’t think of any right now.

I am NOT trapped. I have ways out other than death, ways that are infinitely BETTER.

With others’ help and through my own efforts, I CAN rise again. Even from the ashes.

I choose LIFE, with all its bumps, zits, warts, and bruises.

I don’t have to always have my way for me to be content and fulfilled in life.

No matter what I’m going through, LIFE IS STILL WORTH LIVING!

If you are experiencing a crisis that feels overwhelming, please reach out right away to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>) at 800-273-8255 or chat at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>; Serve and Protect (<https://serveprotect.org/>) at 615-373-8000; or Safe Call Now (<https://www.safecallnow.org/>) at 206-459-3020. Please also contact your agency’s EAP, a mental health provider in your area, your peer support team, and/or a chaplain or a spiritual leader. Desert Waters does not provide mental health or crisis services at this time, but if you want to vent, email us at [ventline@desertwaters.com](mailto:ventline@desertwaters.com).

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\*Desert Waters now offers two LIVING BRAVE [posters](#) with these anti-suicide messages.

#### About "More on Staying Well"

If you've read the booklet *Staying Well: Strategies for Corrections Staff* (<https://desertwaters.com/staying-well/>), by Caterina Spinaris, you're now ready to read its sequel, *More on Staying Well: More Strategies for Corrections Staff* (<https://desertwaters.com/more-staying-well/>).

This booklet is full of positive tips and wellness tools for corrections employees and also for their family members.

Book chapters include:

Two Sheets of Music (on the importance and use of work-home transition strategies)

Activating the Relaxation Response (on reducing the stress response and increasing the relaxation response to boost one's health and wellness)

Qualifying with Your Emotions (on regulating one's intense "negative" emotions)

Staying SANE (on ways to prevent reacting blindly in anger)

Nothing to Yawn At (on the impact of sleep on health and functioning)

Flying Against Gravity (on the importance of cultivating a positive mindset)

Post-traumatic Growth (on ways to grow as a person as a result of handling traumatic experiences positively)

When Healthy Connection = Life (on the vital importance of healthy relationships)

Exposing the Hook (on preventing professional boundary violations with offenders)

The Value of Validation (on the nature of validation and ways to practice it in correctional work environments with subordinates and coworkers)

The Dire Need for Empathy (on the powerful impact of empathy in professional interactions)

More Precious than Gold (on the value of earning others' trust in correctional environments)

Promoting Psychological Safety (on the critical importance of psychological safety, and ways to nurture it among corrections staff)

Weaving Positive Meaning (on how to find positive meaning and a constructive purpose in corrections work)

Thriving in Corrections (on ways to not just get through a corrections career, but to also flourish as a professional and as a person)

What others have said about More on Staying Well:

Serving a career in corrections, and avoiding all the bumps and bruises along the way, is extremely challenging. Adding to this the current crisis in staffing necessary posts for security and safety, you have extremely difficult day-to-day experiences. There are many temptations for staff to fall off the edge in the form of bad decisions with negative impact. Those that stay the course should have our utmost appreciation for their accomplishment. It is my opinion that such accomplishments do not simply happen by chance. Each corrections professional needs skills and thoughtful planning to get through. In this publication, Dr. Spinaris clearly defines those concepts and strategies. I invite every correctional professional to take seriously her recommendations for success. She provides the means in this writing for every corrections professional to complete their career with a smile and great memories of a job well done.

~ Eugene Atherton , Director of Prisons, Western Region, Colorado Department of Corrections (retired); Consultant

It is well known that stress is pervasive in corrections. If you have 25 minutes or 25 years in the mentally and emotionally challenging vocation of corrections, you know that this is true. The million-dollar question is: "How does one deal with it?" Dr. Spinaris answers this question in a rich variety of ways. I see great utility in how the great ideas are arranged: each section prompts the reader to apply the tactic to themselves. This is crucial reading for those who wish to thrive while in corrections. Those who are retired from corrections can also benefit from the wisdom. Pick it up, corrections colleagues. Your overall health is worth it.

~ Joe Bouchard, Author, trainer, corrections librarian (retired)

Those of us working in the criminal justice system carry a heavy burden of work stress that can cripple us if we don't take it seriously. The need to be ever-vigilant for physical and mental safety at work can spill over to home life. Dr. Spinaris provides a practical approach to balancing work and home life for correctional professionals. Take these action steps to maintain well-being across your career.

~Lorry Schoenly, PhD, RN, CCHP-RN, Correctional Healthcare Risk Consultant

Humbled

By CO Ron Mason

I have realized that because of the journey I am on in this career and the emotional roller coaster that this job brings, I must recognize that I have to find a way to remain grounded. To face a day in prison can bring perils and dangers. It can also bring the greatest joys in life as we recognize that the people around us, our partners, are all facing the same tribulations that we face. We endure this journey together.

When the news of a staff suicide is delivered ... I take pause.

Could I have found a way to listen better, could I have dropped my insulation and better listened to what was being shared? Could I have seen the signs or was I too busy looking inward?

I don't know.

I could spend all my time attempting to unravel a puzzle that is more complicated than how many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie-Pop or I could look at how I could be more available to my partners. Look past their foibles and perceived weaknesses and find ways to help build them back up to be the person that they were when they first entered this career.

Looking back, I guess that I put my blinders on from time to time and focus on navigating the world I choose to live in.

Then I get angry at myself when I feel that I am being selfish.

My partners need the strength that I have to offer, and I need the strength that they have to offer.

It humbles me.

New Faces at DWCO

We'd now like to introduce to you Steve and Daria Mayotte, the two latest additions to the DWCO Team. Steve and Daria have served as volunteers with DWCO since January 2020, while they still resided in South Africa and served

correctional officers there. They have now moved back to the United States, and have joined us as part of the DWCO Team in Florence, CO.

Steven Mayotte, B.Des., LEED AP, Chief Operating Officer

Perhaps it is surprising that Steve Mayotte's background and experience include architecture and construction project management, and that he holds a degree of Bachelor of Design in Architecture. He is also a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Accredited Professional. Steve's passion for correctional officers began in 2011 in Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town, South Africa, when he and his wife Daria initiated a weekly coffee shop opportunity specifically for South African correctional officers. The desire and need among this population became surprisingly and immediately evident through a variety of ongoing conversations. Steve was trained as a "From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment" (CF2F) instructor in Colorado in 2017. Fully convinced of the effectiveness of this program, he spent the next year navigating the process of receiving approval for it to be regularly offered to the correctional officers at Pollsmoor Prison. Once approval was granted, he and his wife experienced to an even greater degree the flood of deep need for this opportunity to be regularly offered as an avenue for assisting men and women to thrive in the correctional workforce. He now uses his building background and multi-cultural experience with correctional officers through the avenue of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach (DWCO) to build into the hearts and lives of the valiant men and women working behind bars.

Daria Mayotte, M.A., Deputy Director

Daria brings with her a rarely found wealth of multi-cultural corrections experience, combined with her teaching experience and mental health training. With a background and love for teaching, Daria Mayotte first developed a passion for those working in prison while teaching literacy to juvenile offenders at Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2001-2002. Nine years later she returned to South Africa with her family with the intent of further developing juvenile offenders. However, throughout her next eleven years there, she experienced the need and desire from South African correctional officials for further input and development in a variety of areas. She and her husband Steve came alongside them in a variety of ways, supporting, encouraging, and challenging them practically, relationally, and spiritually. Having been trained as a "From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment" (CF2F) instructor in 2019, teaching this course soon became a significant key for breakthrough in the lives of South African correctional officers. Daria's excitement for investing further in the lives of correctional officers through the avenue of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach (DWCO) quickly grew as a result, and she is eager to continue investigating these opportunities on a broader scale through DWCO.

Quote of the Month

"You can't wait till life isn't hard anymore before you decide to be happy."

~ Jane Marczewski, age 30, 3-time cancer survivor

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.

IN MEMORIAM

Wagner "Buzz" Baskett, Deputy, Breckinridge County Sheriff's Office, Kentucky

Gabriel Forrest, Correctional Officer, Washington Department of Corrections

Christopher Jones, Correctional Officer, Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction

Candice Ogiejko, Correction Officer, Suffolk County Sheriff's Office, New York

Ryan Pettigrew, Correctional Officer, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

Tyleisha Taylor, Correctional Officer, Florida Department 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

Contact us <https://desertwaters.com/admin-contact-page/>

Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC, Executive Director

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#### Many Thanks

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