

19
YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE!

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

SEPTEMBER 2022

From The Director's Desk

Yes, Suicide Can Be Averted

The Research Bench

If One More Light Goes Out ...

Just Keep Going

Quote Of The Month




Volume:19

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A non-profit for the health of correctional agencies, staff and families

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK



Once again, in this September 2022 issue of the Correctional Oasis we revisit the subject of suicide in the corrections ranks.

What makes this issue unique is that in it we present solid information that shows what it takes to roll back the tide and STOP suicidal acts from taking place among law enforcement professionals.

This evidence comes from programming interventions adopted by the Toronto Police Services in the 1990s, which stemmed the suicidal hemorrhaging among their Officers for at least seven years.

What is remarkable to me about these efforts is the degree of collaboration among the various stakeholders (stakeholders who may typically not see eye to eye), and the willingness to do whatever it took to meet their Officers' needs at their darkest moments and also before they got to that point.

Read this issue, reflect on the contents, think of what YOU can do to help yourself and your coworkers, and forward this issue to your colleagues and friends.

Caterina Spinaris



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YES, SUICIDE CAN BE AVERTED

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

Correctional Officer suicide has been the blight afflicting the profession for many decades.

And yet, one organization's intervention in the 1990s shows with undeniable evidence that when top-down, system-wide efforts are embraced vigorously, leaving no stone unturned, Officer suicide can indeed be defeated in a law enforcement setting.

From 1975 to 1992, the Toronto Police Service (TPS) had experienced a total of twenty-two (22) Officer suicides.

After beginning their system-wide series of staff wellness programs and practices in June of 1992, they did not have any more Officer suicides for seven years (when the paper that quotes these statistics was written).

What were the ingredients of the recipe that brought about such an astonishing and rare victory over the seduction of suicide's seemingly relentless pull toward self-destruction?

If I could put it in a sentence, this would be, valuing staff to the point where true caring led to creative and committed investment of resources, including funds, time and energy, to protect their lives. This allowed TPS to weave and maintain a safety net that caught their officers before they fell to their deaths. In addition to the programs instituted, the Police Chief's personal touch and actions showed that sincere involvement started from the top, and was backed by the key decision makers. This proved to the staff that they were indeed seen as an invaluable resource to their employer, which undoubtedly boosted staff's buy-in of the new wellness initiatives.

This caring manifested itself in unity, tripartite ownership and coordination of initiatives by the three main systemic stakeholders: Command officers, the Police Association and the Senior Officers Organization. These stakeholders agreed to build an Employee and Family Assistance Program with a high standard of confidentiality and

credibility, and which was supervised by a neutral, community mental health professional who acted as an external advisor. Confidentiality was backed by policies and procedures supported by the chief of police, the president of the Toronto Police Association and the president of the Senior Officers Organization.

The services of the EFAP were made available to all members, pensioners, dependents, auxiliary, lifeguards, employees of the Police Association and school crossing guards.

The Employee Assistance Program was renamed Employee and Family Assistance Program to make it explicit that Officers' families were indisputably recognized and included as recipients of the services. This resulted in a 51% increase in families of uniformed members using the program.

Here are some key aspects of the TPS initiative.

A confidential Assessment/Referral Center was set up to offer services 24/7/365 **off-site**, thus making it possible for staff to access these services discreetly. Trained staff at this Center assessed staff's needs and made referrals related to a variety of issues, such as Critical Incident Stress Management, substance misuse, and family/spouse bereavement.

Psychological treatment was offered by screened community mental health professionals.

Notably, **funding was available to cover therapy costs beyond the Officers benefit coverage**. That is, if the Officers' ran out of insurance benefits for treatment, TPS provided the additional funding needed.

This was coupled with **unlimited coverage for trauma therapy** – which is an investment unheard of in law enforcement.

Critical incident stress management involved a systematic approach and included a trained debriefing team, and ongoing educational initiatives.

TPS engaged in **proactive educational initiatives** that covered a variety of relevant topics, such as promotion of the EFAP program, stress management within specialized units such as for Officers involved in drug squads and undercover police work, supervisory education in managing struggling staff members, maintaining balance in life and critical incident stress management.

The promotion of the EFAP services was systematic and ongoing through weekly or monthly activities and publications brochures, articles and information packages, and extensive program awareness presented at the workplace.

The effectiveness of all aspects of the EFAP program and its use was evaluated annually by external evaluators through feedback from all sectors of the police service, family members and EFAP committee members. Findings were presented in an annual report distributed to all stakeholders, referral agents, unit commanders, union leaders, and community mental health professionals.

Fitness for duty assessments were conducted by medical staff, who determined the officer's status was either "fit for duty," "fit for restricted duty," or "sick." (Very interestingly, these are the three designations listed as outcomes of a fitness for duty assessment. No termination - "firing" the Officer - is listed as an option.) Other initiatives to support staff wellness were extensive psychological testing, screening and background checks of recruits, and hiring a police chaplain to coordinate a Toronto Police Chaplaincy Program and to construct a chapel in headquarters.

Additionally, the chief of police personally supported the staff wellness efforts by: highlighting in his goals and objectives his priority of developing and implementing a sustainable self-care and family wellness program; autographing copies of the book "To Love a Cop" by psychologist Ellen Kirschman and personally giving a copy to all recruits and newly promoted sergeants; and addressing the graduating class of police officers, where he emphasized the critical importance of maintaining a balanced family life and a personal self-care program.

P.S. If you search the internet, you'll find that since 2012 there have been at least 12 TPS Officer suicides. We do not know if the efforts described above were rolled back after 1999, when the above report of the TPS wellness program was written. If that is the case, it would only tragically reinforce the message that anything less than aggressive programming to support Officers eventually leads to loss of life.

And what is the value of a human life? An Officer's life? It is indeed invaluable; we cannot put a price tag on it.

Reference

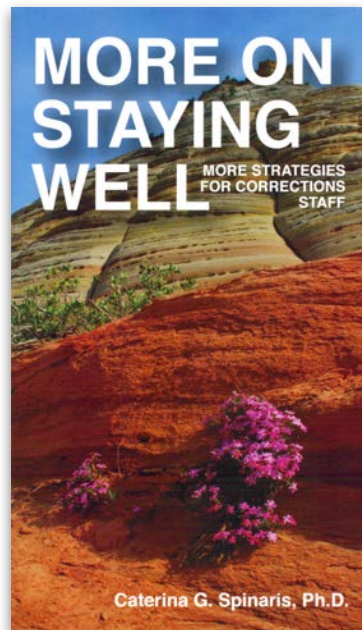
Suicide Prevention in Law Enforcement: The Toronto Police Service Experience (From Suicide and Law Enforcement, P 151-157, 2001, Donald C. Sheehan and Janet I. Warren, eds. -- See NCJ-193528) | Office of Justice Programs

<https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/suicide-prevention-law-enforcement-toronto-police-service>

Desert Waters' booklet, **"More on Staying Well: More Strategies for Corrections Staff,"** by Caterina Spinaris, is the sequel to the book, **"Staying Well: Strategies for Corrections Staff,"** also by Caterina Spinaris.

The goal of **"More on Staying Well"** is to present additional, more advanced and more detailed information on positive strategies that promote resilience and fulfillment, both for individuals and for the workforce culture.

Get It Here



"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

THE RESEARCH BENCH – SUICIDE AND (UNDIAGNOSED) MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

BY GREGORY MORTON, MSc

Gregory Morton started his career at the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) as an academic counselor in the mid-1970s, and then served as OSP's Staff Training Coordinator for eleven years. He was the department's Staff Training/Professional Development Administrator, and Labor Relations Administrator until retirement in 2009. He has been a contributor to Desert Waters' efforts and a Master Instructor of Desert Waters courses since 2013. He holds a Master's degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, concentrating on the consequences of work-related trauma and chronic stress, and the rapidly expanding field of human neuroscience. Concern for the health and skills of the corrections workforce has been his motivation throughout.

The Correctional Oasis has directly addressed correctional employee suicide on many occasions ([January 2022](#) and [May 2022](#), among others). And this month's Research Bench is going to consider it again. That said, we do so while respecting the memory of those colleagues we knew who have passed in this way. It is not our intent to label and certainly not to judge the life-ending decisions those folks made, but rather to inspire the rest of us to consider our own personal circumstances and choose to act in ways that best sustain health and resilience in ourselves and our partners. We deserve it.

The research to be addressed here was published in the June 2022 edition of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. It compares the suicide rates of men with mental health diagnoses and those without. The article is only three and a half pages long, and is a pretty easy read. In the most recent year for which data were available, males are responsible for approximately 80% of suicide deaths. It is the 8th leading cause of death for males 10 years of age and above.

We would logically conclude, it seems to me, that a pool of men with identified mental health issues would show evidence of deaths by suicide at a greater rate than a pool of men without identified mental health issues. Since suicide can easily be construed to be the final stage in a series of overwhelming emotional challenges, one would naturally presume that people with known and chronic mental health conditions would be more prone to suicidal action than those without.

According to this research, that presumption is false. In the three years studied here (2016-2018), 60% of male suicide victims had no known mental health conditions. Rather, this research identifies male suicide as an impulsive reaction to

acute, situational circumstances, including relationship challenges and intimate partner problems, made worse by alcohol use and access to instruments with high lethality. “Acute stressors more often precipitated suicides of males without known mental health conditions, and they more often involved firearms” (Abstract, p. 1). “Males without known mental health concerns significantly more often died by firearm suicide across age groups” (p. 2).

The majority of male suicides are more likely to be responses to immediate stressors than outcomes from mental health diagnoses. As we consider the frequency of suicide among correctional employees, we need to address the circumstantial stressors that impact our workforce – from lack of sufficient sleep to bringing home trauma, from last minute schedule changes to disrespectful offender interactions. And add to all that the “us against them” belief systems wherever we find them.

Once we start living according to an “us against them” perspective, relationship difficulties of all kinds will become a natural outcome. “Arguments were common across age groups and were significantly more prevalent among young and middle-aged adults without known mental health concerns, particularly suicides that occurred during the argument itself” (p. 2).

When we are caught up in an “us against them” belief system we stop looking for supportive connections with others. Because there is yet one more layer to this research we should consider – the concept of False Resilience, that of looking strong on the outside, but falling apart on the inside.

Choosing my words as carefully as I can, to what extent are these impulsive suicide results an outcome of men failing to access preventive and supportive community services prior to their time of immediate need? In other words, how many of the pool with the higher suicide percentage declined to seek assistance prior to their overwhelming last-straw event?

Using a medical analogy, I ask, which is riskier: having a known heart condition and therefore receiving professional attention, or not knowing about the health of one’s heart and therefore bypassing the care that could have made a life and death difference?

SO WHAT: If you have ever asked yourself whether or not you should see a professional counselor or spiritual advisor to discuss some of the challenges you have in life, the answer is always a resounding YES!

We all have challenges. Even those of us who are (finally) happily married have to admit to having relationship complications on occasion.

Personally, I have forgotten how many professional counselors I have seen in my life. Two divorces will do that to you. I remember a crap day at work one time and calling my therapist for an emergency session. She was in her car, heading away from town to a conference and could not fit me in. But she said, “Use your skills.” And those words have stayed with me ever since. If she and I had not had a professional relationship, I would not have known what those skills were, and she would not have been able to advise me in that way. I would have been left on my own with an empty, unhealthy toolbox.

Those in the corrections profession with **identified** mental health concerns are, in a strange way, a couple of steps ahead of the rest of us. Those staff know that the corrections profession can contribute to a life of circumstantial stressors. **Those staff have shown the courage to exhibit true, rather than false, resilience. Those staff know to attend to their mental health. And most importantly, those staff have taken steps to save their very lives.** It would be wise that every one of us follows suit.

Reference

Fowler, K. A., Kaplan, M. S., Stone, D. M., Zhou, H., Stevens, M. R., & Simon, T. R. (2022). Suicide Among Males Across the Lifespan: An Analysis of Differences by Known Mental Health Status. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2022.02.021> [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(22\)00153-2/fulltext](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(22)00153-2/fulltext)

IF ONE MORE LIGHT GOES OUT ...

BY CORRECTIONS OFFICER RON MASON (RETIRED)

Who cares if one more light goes out?
Well, I do. **I** do.

My brothers and sisters put their lives on the line every day at a great cost to their personal and emotional well-being to ensure that the public and their families will have another bright day. Safe and secure.

"If one more light, who cares if one more light goes out, well I do!" (Borrowed from *Linkin Park*.)

I care when I see my brothers and sisters hit a breaking point in their mind, when what they chose to do for a living takes a toll on their minds and they feel isolated. They - we - feel that we are left to cope alone with the environment we subject ourselves to, to provide for our family.

When I lose a partner, a friend, when another light goes out, I CARE.

I question if I am that next light that will be extinguished.

No one begins a new career informed that your new job may cause you to want to kill yourself due to the events you may witness. No one tells you that you are going into an environment more toxic than a war zone and will be getting PTSD as a anniversary present for your first year on the job. Suck it up, buttercup, you have 29 plus years ahead of you.

You WILL change. You will change physically and mentally. You will change in how you interact with your significant other, your children, your parents and the public. You will change in how you view yourself.

You WILL change.

You will hear of a coworker dying by suicide. It will hurt, bad. Yes, it hurts so bad.

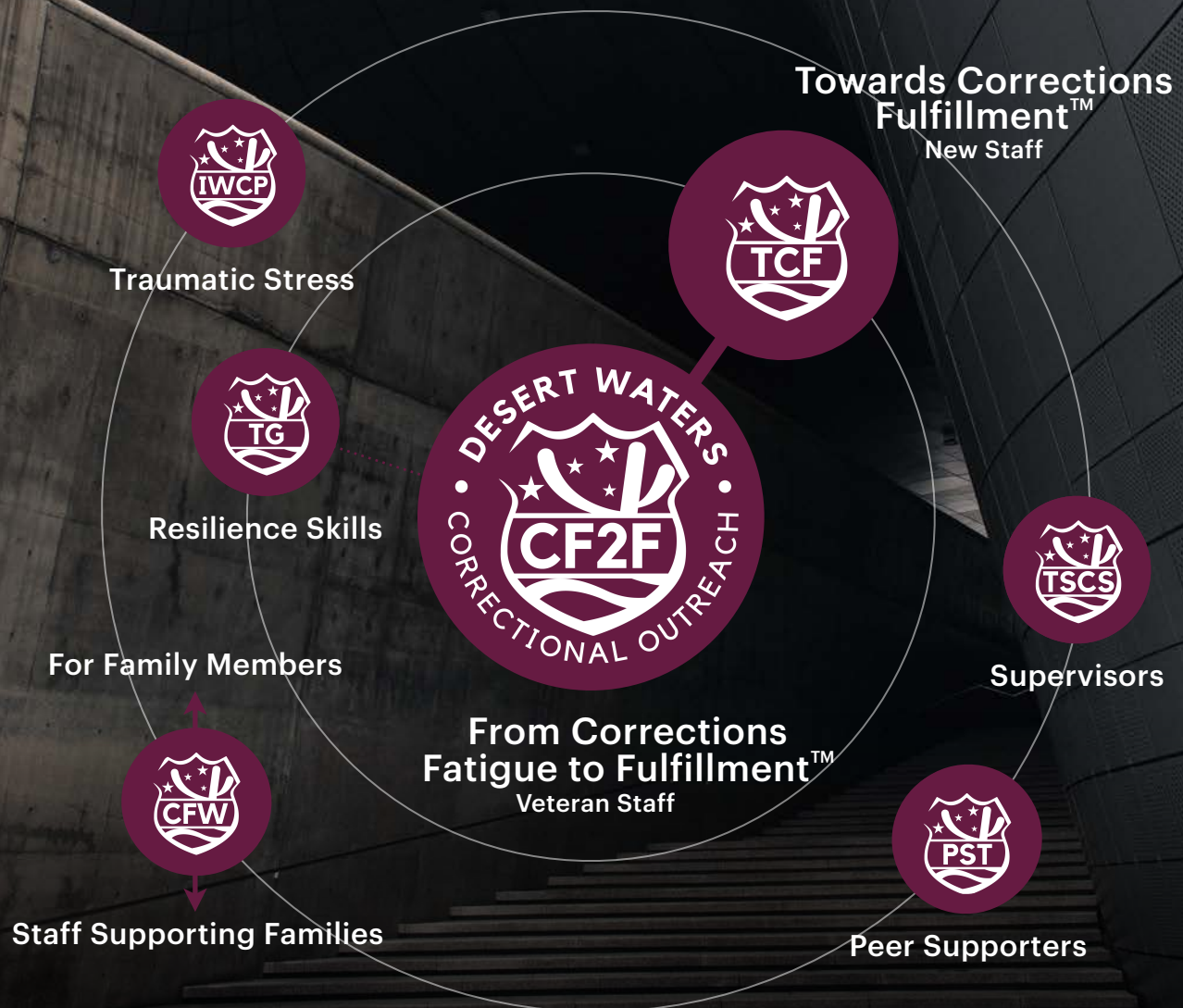
You mentally superimpose your life on theirs, and wonder. You wonder, *How different was their life from mine? What did they see/endure on the job that took them there, and how unlike was it from what I saw and endured? How was it any different?*

How am I doing with what lurks below, in my thoughts? Do I even talk about my thoughts? Do I keep my thoughts to myself to not impose on the people who care the most about me, or out of fear of showing weakness when I try to portray strength to those that know and love me?

I care if one more light goes out.

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Click a course below to learn more or [contact](#) us to schedule a training.



JUST KEEP GOING

BY LIEUTENANT BRYAN HUGHES

Yes. I'm back talking about the same issue I'm always talking about. Sometimes even I feel like I'm being redundant and sounding like a broken record. But that's only because I'm passionate about this issue.

So let me reiterate my soapbox topic. We must destroy the stigma that mental health and asking for help is a weakness.

Through my passion for this topic, my work and my writing, I have met others around this country that are passionate about the same issue. It has truly opened my eyes to this being a nationwide and worldwide issue, not just the state I am from. It rips my heart out every time I hear of another correctional family loss due to suicide.

This hurts my heart even when the person is from a different state, and I didn't even know them.

“If you're going through hell, keep going.”

Winston Churchill

Most deaths are a tragedy in some way, but suicide is on a level by itself. SUICIDE IS PREVENTABLE. When it comes to deaths from accidents or natural causes, there may not be much you can do to prevent them. Hence the terms “accidental” or “natural.” But suicide isn't an accident, and it is not a natural way to pass.

Suicide may take you out of your pain, but the pain doesn't go away. It is transferred to your spouse, kids, grandkids, and extended family and friends.

Am I saying you need to suffer in silence for the rest of your life fighting these demons alone, just so no one else feels your pain? No way! Not at all! But what I do want is for you to reach way down inside, to find just enough courage to reach out for help.

I want you to fight the hardest, so you can beat those demons and live many more years, making memories with your circle of people. I know not every story has a

happy ending, but we don't have to lose so many brothers and sisters to these demons.

Next to writing these articles and working on my book, riding my Harley is the best therapy I have found. Besides a real therapist, of course.

I know it's cliché, but behind the handlebars of my Harley, cruising the open roads with the wind in my face, is true freedom for me. That is when I truly feel free, and in those moments of riding, all is right in my world. I let the wind blow the stress and BS off me and just enjoy my time riding. My dream job is for someone to pay me just to ride. I can't wait to travel this country on my motorcycle.

Here's an analogy I like to use. Whether you ride motorcycles or not, you've all seen it. You're driving down the highway or some back road and it starts to

storm. It might be thundering and lightning, or just raining hard. Either way, a rainstorm on a motorcycle is painful and dangerous. We have all seen motorcycles grouped up on highways under the overpasses. Or grouped up at gas stations under the canopies. I'm sure we have all seen vehicles pulled to the side of the road due to it raining so hard, your windshield wipers can't keep up.

Maybe I'm foolish, ignorant, living dangerously, or just being stupid. But when I get caught in a storm, I don't stop. I keep going. I want nothing more than to get through the storm, get away from the pain of the rain and hail hitting me and just get to the warm comfort of my home. Strip off the wet clothes, put on something dry and comfortable, kick back in my chair and be thankful I made it home safely.

Like I said, maybe I'm foolish, ignorant, or just being unsafe. But when I'm riding in a storm, I don't want to be

in it any longer than necessary. It hurts, and it's miserable.

I feel the exact same way when I'm going through storms in my life. In the last three years, like a lot of us, I have been through several life-changing events. When I am going through a painful life storm, the last thing I want to do is pull over in the middle of it and wait, just sitting idly by, doing nothing.

No. I want to get through that storm as fast, but as safely, as possible. I don't want to stop and dwell in the pain and misery any longer than necessary. My advice to people going through the storm is this: **Keep going.**

To keep going may require professional help. Get it! Your family loves you more than you realize. Do it for you. Do it for them. **Just keep going.**

No matter how bad it feels, how much it hurts or how hard it gets, **keep going.** When something is bad or hurts, the last thing you want to do is linger in the pain. Instead, we need to **keep going, dealing with pain head on, confronting it, finding solutions that really work.**

When you are going through personal issues and things are bad, **keep going.** When you're at a place in life full of nothing but pain, **keep going.** When you are living in a very dark place and things feel hopeless, **please keep going.**

I have found the best and quickest way through any storm, whether in life or on my bike, is to **keep going.** You don't want to stop in the middle of a storm and be stuck there longer than necessary.

Keep going. Your storm may even get worse before it gets better, but if you keep going and face it, putting in the necessary work, you will get through it quicker than if you just pulled over, stopped in the middle, and waited.

Keep going. Life is already shorter than it should be. Don't let the darkness rob you and your family from creating memories that will last a lifetime for everyone.

JUST KEEP GOING, my friends.

As always, be safe, be vigilant, and look out for each other.

IN MEMORIAM

**Alan Hershberger,
Correctional Officer**

Oklahoma Department of Corrections

CO Hershberger was murdered after being attacked from behind by an incarcerated individual at Davis Correctional Facility on the 31st of July 2022.

Quote of the Month

"... true love? It's hard work. It's gritty. It carries the load. It believes in you when you don't believe in yourself. It hopes goodness and mercy for you when you can't hope for it yourself. It acknowledges the loss and holds space for grief and joy to commingle. It endures the hard days and celebrates the good."

Brittany Salmon

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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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