

20  
YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE

# CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

MAY 2023

From The Director's Desk

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The Change...

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Quit Corrections Work

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Volume:20

Issue:5



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

# FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

This year May 7-13 is National Correctional Officers and Employees Week, the week in which we celebrate and honor those who work in U.S. prisons, jails, probation, parole, and other types of community corrections.

But do we celebrate? And do we do it enough? What about the rest of the year? And who is the “we” that celebrates and honors Correctional Officers and other correctional employees?

Does the average person on the street know what corrections work entails, what it was intended to be, why it is important, and what ingredients are required in order for staff to truly be able to change lives?

I still remember hearing (while visiting Norway last year) that the majority of people there take pride in their Prison System, have a positive view of Correctional Officers and other correctional employees, considering their work to be essential for a healthy society. The celebration of Correctional Officers there is a way of life, not a mere week out of the year.

Part of our responsibility to correctional personnel is to advocate for work conditions that make it possible for Correctional Officers in particular to do positively impacting rehabilitative work, and in doing so, not only help others, but also help themselves find meaning and purpose in their work. Simply preventing incarcerated people’s escapes or even violence are worthy goals, but are not sufficient for staff to derive a sense of usefulness and worth in the long run.

We dedicate this issue to all Correctional Officers and other correctional employees worldwide, and that is why all the articles are by correctional employees at various stages of their careers, including retirement. We want your voices to be heard!

Let us continue to aim towards elevating the profession, where it becomes truly a profession that is valued and esteemed for its effectiveness, as it was designed to be.

*Caterina Spinaris*

# 2023 Online Training Schedule

- **3<sup>rd</sup> Wed of the month, Mar-Dec** – The Supportive Correctional Supervisor™
- **May 2-5 & 8-10** – Improving the Well-being of Corrections Professionals: Understanding, Acknowledging, and Overcoming Traumatic Stress™
- **Jun 5-9** – Towards Corrections Fulfillment: For New Staff™
- **Jul 10-14** – Correctional Family Wellness™ (For Families™ & Staff™)
- **Sep 11-15 & 18-19** – From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™
- **Oct 23-27 & 30-31** – True Grit: Building Resilience in Corrections Professionals™
- **Nov 6-10** – Towards Corrections Fulfillment: For New Staff™
- **Nov 27-30 & Dec 1** – Correctional Family Wellness™ (For Families™ & Staff™)
- **Dec 5-8 & 11-13** – Improving the Well-being of Corrections Professionals: Understanding, Acknowledging, and Overcoming Traumatic Stress™

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# A TIME TO RECEIVE

BY SGT. CAROL DISHION

I was reading the [Staff Stories](#) on your website and thought that I would send in a short story from my career that took place around 8 years ago.

I was working my post as the Corridor Sergeant one day on swing shift, and once again we had to respond to the same inmate engaging in self-harm. I had already responded to this inmate so many times that I can't count them. That day was different – worse, as I had to use the cut-down tool to remove the material from her neck. Her face was blue, and she was unconscious. As I began to cut the material, she regained consciousness. She looked me directly in the face, and pleaded with me to save her. She apologized for what she had done, and told me that she didn't mean to go this far. This happened a couple of times while I was struggling to get the cut-down tool in between her neck and the material so that I could remove it.

I had worked for my department for around 12 years when this event occurred. I am the person in charge of our CISM/Peer Support Team, and I am always here to help everyone else. That day after this incident, I refused to attend a tactical debriefing, supposedly so that I could write my reports. When I was approached by a Captain and told to come back to the debriefing, I told him that I couldn't do that because I needed to write my reports. He told me that I could write my reports tomorrow. That is when I removed my badge and handed it to him. I told him that I had to write my reports today because I wasn't coming back tomorrow or any other day.

I am thankful that my Captain that day knew me very well, and he refused to take my badge from me. He let me finish my reports and then he walked to my car with me. He reminded me that we have a great group of people on our CISM/Peer Support Team, and told me that maybe I needed to talk to one of them. As I was getting into my car, he also told me to talk to my husband, and talk to someone on my team. He reminded me that just because I am the one to help others, that doesn't mean that I can't need that help myself. He called me the next day and asked how I was doing, and was happy to hear that I had spent many hours talking to my support system and that I would be at work that night.

I was very thankful that this Captain made me see that it was OK for me to ask for help after this incident, and that he stopped me from walking away from my career. Today I am just over 20 years with my department, and I have recently become an instructor for Corrections Fatigue To Fulfillment. I am looking forward to sharing the information in this class with my coworkers. Although I didn't know the name for it back then, I am now positive that Corrections Fatigue was a huge part of the problem for me back then.



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# THE CHANGE...

BY CO RON MASON (RETIRED)

**H**ave you ever taken a moment to reflect? Reflect on who you were when you applied to enter this world you now call your career, your future, this life?

You truly knew nothing of this world you were entering. What you saw in the media provided you with some information that caused you some trepidation, yet you saw an opportunity to secure your future and your family's future. To provide for my family comes before all. I can do this. It can't be worse than a manager yelling at me despite knowing the totality of the situation that led to the yelling.

I am confident and strong. I can quickly solve problems in front of me. I can treat others with respect.

I attend the academy and learn the tools and rules taught to me. I embrace what I learn. I have a family that is relying on me. I am learning about a new world, so foreign to me. I will succeed.

First day at the prison smacks me in the face. I am expected to know how to handle so many problems that I was never taught how to handle. I am in a housing unit with 186 inmates and each and every one of them is living their life. They have their own problems that they look to me to help resolve.

I came into this life looking to solve my and my family's challenges. Now I have taken on 186 life problems. Yeah, it begins to wear on me.

Looking back, I was so different when I began this path. Now, I am worn. I am tired. My self-confidence has gone down a few notches, as I have made mistakes during this path I am on. I have learned a lot about myself, and learned to take measure of who I am. Yet, as I grew stronger in the prison world, I lost so much of myself.

Now I am left to reconcile where this path has taken me and what I will allow and tolerate my life to be.

Once I recognize this, I have a choice: either be strong and regain who I once was, or freefall down a rabbit hole into the dark world of those that I supervise. This weighs on my mental health.

The choice and path I choose are mine to make.

It is okay to ask another officer if you have a question about where you are. Ask the question without fear; you will be embraced.

# SEVEN REASONS NOT TO QUIT CORRECTIONS WORK

BY GLEN SHERIDAN, COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS

## Reason 1: Workforce Culture - Coworkers

Harmony is an art, not a science. And it does not happen automatically. The harmonious relationships between coworkers require constant grooming and nurturing. We may not have the same opinions on every subject, nor have the same values off the job, but here we are able to share our opinions because we do so in the spirit of contributing to the betterment of the agency as a whole. At work, we can set aside those differences to function together as a team to accomplish the tasks set before us.

I find that for the most part our differences are expressed in positive ways. Yes, there probably are those that want to interject criticism for the purpose of bringing down people or the agency, but that is recognized and is quickly dismissed.

The demands of earning enough money to make ends meet somewhere in the middle is the primary impediment to job satisfaction. Thankfully, we are in an environment where we can talk amongst ourselves to deal with workplace concerns, issues and challenges.

## Reason 2: Workforce Culture - Communication

Being very small, our agency culture allows communication at every level and direction, which in turn provides feedback to all.

When someone is constantly doing something annoying, it is beneficial for someone to bring it to their attention. The annoying person may not even realize the negative effect and could possibly take steps to change or modify their behavior. Everyone at some point has offended someone in some way. We should do the best we can to keep it to a minimum, and clear the air as soon as possible when we realize we stepped on someone's toes unnecessarily. Communication is the first step to resolving conflict. Some things are discussed because alternate viewpoints create the dialogue for resolving problems. The communication between workers at my workplace has definitely improved lately.

Different work schedules of individual employees are the prime impediment to timely communications. That is why we need to document even the most trivial incidents, whether it is in the log book, IRs, or NOIs. I may object occasionally that there isn't enough time to always document client behavior, but I do agree that if we can collectively do more of that then we can provide the necessary information for making decisions on level advancement, and when necessary sanctions against clients as required.

## Reason 3: Workforce Culture - Good and Caring Supervisors

Here is one of the primary reasons why it is good here. We do work for people that are available (vs. always absent), they are not self-absorbed, and I personally DO have trust in my supervisors.

## Reason 4: Employee Engagement

I see a number of people here actively taking on more work. Doing just the minimum assigned tasks to get through the work day is adequate for earning the paycheck, but going above and beyond contributes to the overall success of everyone. I see individual employees jumping in there to help others in time of need, and this helps to keep stress levels down. And if I haven't thanked those that have done that for me, here is my chance. Thank you!

## Reason 5: Recognition

There are only so many levels within this agency. It's not the status symbol of a title that is really important, rather it's how our contributions are recognized. Granted, we all want more money. But in the absence of a large paycheck, recognition of individual and collective efforts goes a long way. We could all use more positive feedback. Yes, we need the supervisors to let us know when we slip up, that is their job. On the flat line of the Line Staff position we do our work because we believe in that what we do is important and rewarding. But it helps in the long run if someone else reinforces us, and let's us know we are valued. One of the ways that management does this at our agency is by requiring the mandatory attendance at the monthly staffing meeting. All of our input is encouraged and appreciated.

## Reason 6: The Freedom to Take Initiative

We have a culture that allows us to give and receive feedback on just about any subject. At my agency, our efforts to be creative in making the job easier and more productive are appreciated. It can be small things such as putting up shelves, installing a new door buzzer, creating labels. It could be revising the manner in which we report test results to our customers. It may be a revised employee evaluation form. The point is, we all are allowed to provide input to making the job better and easier. That does not only improve our operations, it also is a sign of being valued and recognized, not only by management, but by our peers as well. And to all of you that contribute, I say, thanks! It is appreciated.

## Reason 7: The Excitement!

I actually look forward to going to work. It's interesting and dynamic. And the 10-hour shifts allow time for other activities. We are definitely not in a boring job!



# A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CORRECTIONAL CAPTAIN

BY ANONYMOUS

I'm going to try to put my thoughts into words. So most of you know what my job is and entails. For some that don't, I will try to explain.

My particular job is not very physical, it's mostly decision-making and paper-pushing, though I'm not afraid to get down and dirty with my subordinates like I did back in the day and did just a few weeks ago. Yeah, I had poo on my white shirt from that dirtbag, yeah it was gross but someone has to do it.

So back on topic. Sometimes I have to make the unpopular decisions for a greater interest other than my own. Sometimes I hate the decisions I have to make because I have no choice and it makes me seem like the bad guy. I get second-guessed constantly. That in itself takes a toll on me personally.

I know I have the backing of my supervisors for the most part. Some of them have been in my shoes before. I try to prove to all the naysayers and second-guessers that, with my experience and common sense and my no-nonsense approach, my decisions are the best at that time for the situation.

But here I lay in bed wide awake after a few hours of sleep wondering who is second guessing me today while I'm not there? Who's talking trash? Who is telling my supervisor how they could have done it better?

Sad to think these are my coworkers. We have 1600 inmates that don't care to disrupt the process at any given moment, and sometimes I, as Shift Commander, have to make a decision, sometimes multiple decisions, to help keep custody and control of the place, and keep staff from getting in trouble or a lawsuit. These decisions have to be sound and justified.

I also have to make decisions I don't like because some staff just can't manage to get along for 8 hours. This is the worst, because no matter the decision, someone is going to be mad. I know how it is, I've been there, heck, there are some I can barely stand to look at, but inside that place all we have is each other, and when we let petty differences come between us it makes it 10 times worse.

Then you throw in the unexpected. Recently we had a completed suicide. Yeah, I'm not good with dead people. But then I read what he did, and well, now it doesn't bother me as bad. He was a sick individual. But it's still a tragic event that takes its toll on me, and I can only imagine what's happening to my subordinates that had to try and save him by performing CPR.

Yeah, there is assistance available for them/us, and I recommend anyone that needs it to use it.

So, is my job hard? Not in the physical aspect, but mentally, it's torture. I wish I would have known this before I took it.

It's hard to turn that off, and, sadly, it runs over into my personal life sometimes and I hate it for the ones I love. Fortunately for me they understand for the most part, but I know it takes a toll on them too.

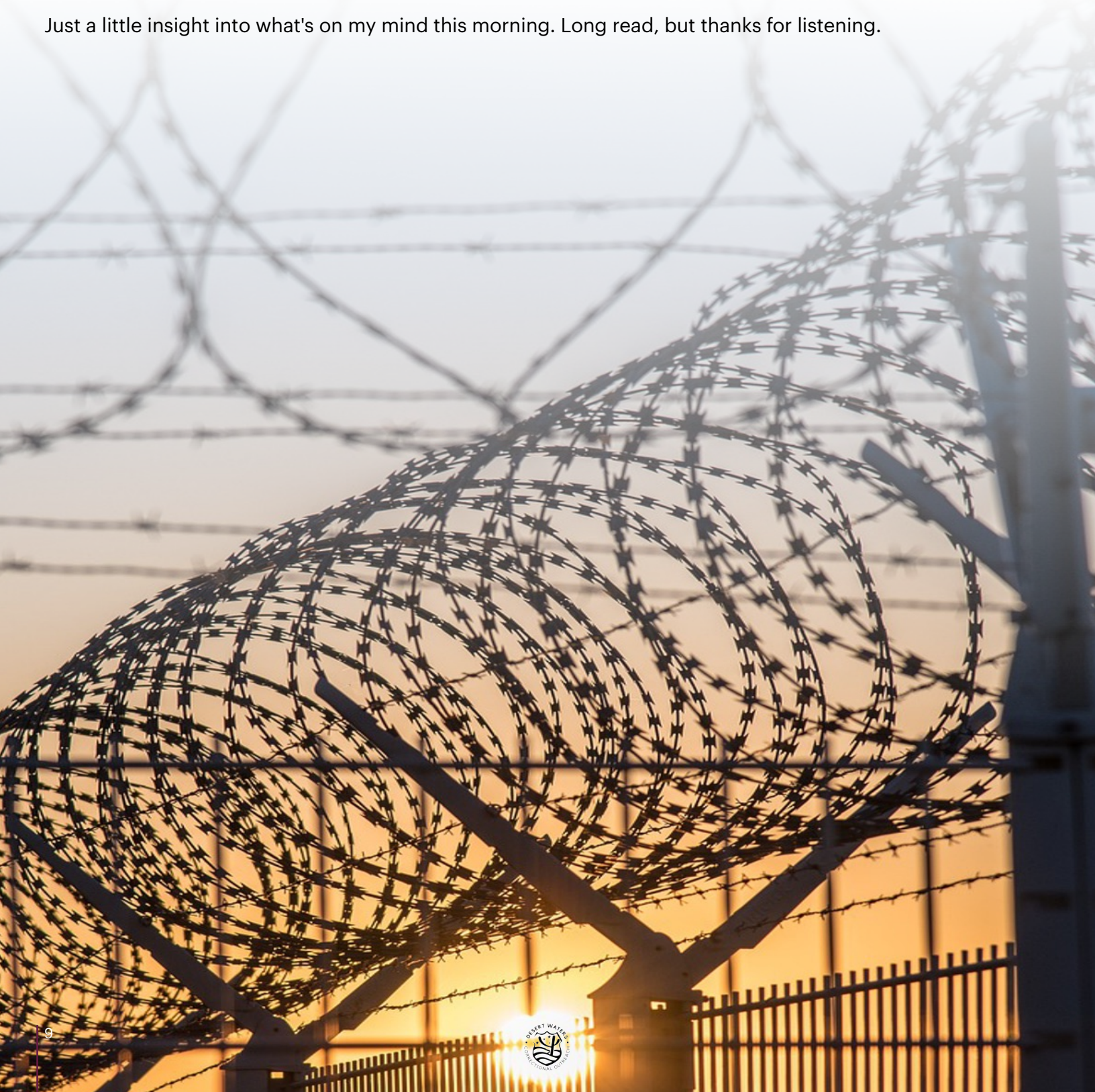
It is not normal to walk in to work every day and be locked in, surrounded by razor wire and a lethal fence. I can't take a cell phone to work and call a friend when I'm having a bad day. I have to deal with it till I leave, and hopefully it's on time.

My priorities will always be the safety of the public, staff, and lastly the offenders and in that particular order.

So, if you're reading this and you are my coworkers or want to be someday, just know that I'm only human too, and I'm prone to mistakes, but I'm doing the best I can based on my past experience and the teachings of some past Lieutenants and Captains that I really respected.

Now don't get me wrong, I like my job for the most part, what I don't like is the person I have become because of it. I fight every day to be a better person.

Just a little insight into what's on my mind this morning. Long read, but thanks for listening.



# IT'S WEIRD BEING RETIRED

BY STEVE BORST, CORRECTIONAL OFFICER (RETIRED)

I retired at Christmas time, and so a celebration of sorts needed to be delayed. It is so weird to wake up in the morning and not have to go to work. It is so weird to not have to be in bed by a certain time each night so I can get the rest that I need. It is so weird when sometimes I will think that I can't do something as I have to work the next day, or that I need to get home from a meeting or function as I have to get in bed. The joy that this brings is tremendous.

Since I retired, I have found that I do keep largely the same schedule as when I was working. In the Correctional environment we live and eat on structure, right? The last couple years for some reason, I started getting up between 4:30 am and 5:00 am, sometimes as early as 4:00 am, even though my shift did not start until 8:00 am. I have largely kept those same hours, though this morning I stayed in bed until 5:15 am which is rare, even on the weekend. My dear wife, who is a later sleeper, has been very kind with that schedule. I try not to make too much noise and disturb her.

Having spent almost 31 years working for our great Department of Corrections, I quickly found the last month or so in my career, that most of the things that bothered me didn't seem to matter any longer. I was very blessed to have a very great last couple weeks in our Institution. I was able to say goodbye to so many of some of the finest people I have had the honor to know in my working life.

My last day was pretty incredible as the Institution was so very kind to me. It truly was one of the best days of my career. I had finally crossed the finish line and a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders after working in the most stressful, but most important, most rewarding job in my life. This day absolutely exceeded my dreams.

In the last year and a half, I had read several books on retirement, and I believe that I was as prepared as I could possibly be. One of the books talked about how when we look in the future at retiring that we get so focused on the financial aspect of it, trying to make sure we have enough money put away. Though that is very important, it is only a

piece of the puzzle. One aspect that people fail to adequately look at according to this book is how we will deal with not working anymore, and what our day will look like. This was a huge aha moment for me, and from that day on I thought a lot about that. It even suggested making a daily schedule, which I did, and that was very interesting in that it made me look realistically at what I would do.

I had been working since I was about eight years old and with the exception of a couple of years in high school, I had worked in some job for some 55 years. My dear wife had quit her part-time job when Covid hit to help with our two grandsons' education while mom and dad, who are teachers, worked. After Covid lifted, she began substituting in our local school district part-time. Now suddenly, I was home a lot. Talk about an adjustment for her. We have been married for over forty years and love each other very much, but this time we're in is like the adjustment we had to make when we were first married.

When trying to look at the future since we tend to have short retirements in this business, my goal and still is to do things I have always wanted to do, and volunteer my time to worthy causes, and do those right away as we don't know how much time we have. I have seen too many people that retired and thought that they had all the time in the world. And then they came down with a disease of some kind, or their mind went south. I did not, do not want to become one of those statistics. I was older than average when I retired, so I might have less time. LOL

I've stayed in contact with a few people, even went to a retiree lunch just the other day. It was great to see some former coworkers. There really are people that I miss interacting with, but life moves on and waits for no one. I go to the gym and work out and am doing some volunteer work. To use an expression I have heard many times, "When did I have time to work?" I'm incredibly blessed. Now, if I could only get my knees to feel like when I was in my forties!



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# A

### Content Considerations: CF2F Specifics

- Provide information
- Encourage application
- Champion transformation

# B

### Strategic Planning: Sustainability Matters

- Solicit shareholder collaboration
- Determine direct delivery vs. instructor-led delivery
- Provide appropriate resources
- Track attendance and evaluations
- Plan for refresher trainings
- Plan for instructor support

# C

### Implementation Methods: Practical Approaches

- Plan the logistics
- Class numbers and composition
- Locations, dates, physical conditions
- Instructor selection and training process
- Deliver content with fidelity
- Prepare to respond to participants' emotional needs
- Protect participants' psychological safety

"In my 17 years in corrections, never has something impacted me the way this training has. I feel cleansed from the madness corrections brings into our lives. From this day forward, I will make changes within myself and make a difference in someone else's life. Thank you!" ~ J.V., CO



# THE RESEARCH BENCH – POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH, RELATIONAL CAPITAL, AND WORK MEANING

BY GREG MORTON, MS

*As we continue to examine the possibility that intrinsically motivational tasks can be designed into the work of a correctional professional, one possibility is to consider concepts that have been shown through research to build intrinsic motivation into other jobs. Realizing that the specialized correctional environment might require new solutions, and also create a new set of unique issues to deal with, we will explore some aspects of those very complex issues.*

This article is once again on Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), presenting research<sup>1</sup> conducted in China in 2020 on the relationship between PTG and two psychosocial dimensions – interactions with coworkers and the meaning one finds in one's work.

The sample pool was 760 front line hospital workers (think objectively about both the personal and professional stresses on that group for a second or so!).

We'll start with the study conclusions quoted in the research abstract: *"Data analysis verifies that trust, reciprocity, and identification can promote post-traumatic growth by enhancing the individual's psychological security. A high level of work meaning can enhance the role of trust, reciprocity and identification in promoting psychological security"* (p. 1).

In other words, Work Meaning >>> Trust/Reciprocity/Identification (TRI) >>> Psychological Security >>> PTG.

This seems to coincide with the characteristic behavioral domains found in PTG: directly to improved relationships with others, and indirectly to a recognition of new possibilities and a greater appreciation of life. But what is interesting is that this research indicates that recognition and appreciation, here represented as increased Work Meaning, comes first; that increased Relational Capital, represented by the TRI factors, leads to increased Psychological Security which contributes to PTG. But first and foremost, the meaning we find in the work we do is the initiating element to all of it.

*"When the individual perceives a higher level of work meaning, the promoting effect of trust, reciprocity and identification on psychological security is enhanced"* (p. 9).

Granted, work meaning isn't the only aspect of a person's reality that can add to appreciation of life or the undertaking of new pathways. And many fatigued correctional employees might argue that their work life is the very last place they would look for appreciation and progress. But that is exactly the point.

The circular Corrections Fatigue Process Model (where staff's symptoms of Fatigue become additional stressors and causes of more Corrections Fatigue for the sufferer and also for fellow employees around them) very clearly shows the reciprocal nature of professional stress to personal decline. This results in an overall lack of fulfillment connected to our chosen profession.

What this research shows is that to break this cycle, *the very first step could be to purposefully and publicly value the importance of what we do.* At least with each other. While we are in the middle of doing it.

SO WHAT: In my 30 plus years of correctional employment, I never remember a single normal work day where my colleagues and I took a moment to acknowledge the importance of what we do. Not one time. Not for a single moment. Sure, we had annual ceremonies and academy graduations where high ranking officials praised us for our contributions to public safety; sometimes even acknowledging true life and death heroism.

But in course of the day-to-day of the job, this praise gets forgotten. We do the job. We sarcastically say, "another day in paradise" and in doing so demean our own professional meaning while we are right in the middle of doing the work.

I wish I could have done that differently. I wish I could have paid attention to good work when it was done right in front of me and said something to my colleague to honor his or her effort and skill. I wish I could have stopped in the middle of a meal line, or a yard line, or anything routine and regular that was going off without a hitch, taken a deep breath, looked around at our entire environment, and said out loud to whomever was standing nearby, "What we are doing here is pretty amazing. Think about it. Think about this population. Think about the numbers. Think about what society would be like without us. Think about how good we are at this. This is not simple. But we make it look that way. Wow. Nice job."

And then we would refocus, remembering the need to stay on our toes even when things are going well, and hopefully pat each other on the back in recognition and appreciation.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Ting Nie, Mi Tian, & Hengrui Liang. (2021). Relational Capital and Post-Traumatic Growth: The Role of Work Meaning. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18, 7362. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18147362>

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 Master Instructor in 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.



# QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“How strange that we should ordinarily feel compelled to hide our wounds when we are all wounded! Community requires the ability to expose our wounds and weaknesses to our fellow creatures. It also requires the ability to be affected by the wounds of others... But even more important is the love that arises among us when we share, both ways, our woundedness.”

M. Scott Peck



# MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



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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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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.

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