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# CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

## NOVEMBER 2023

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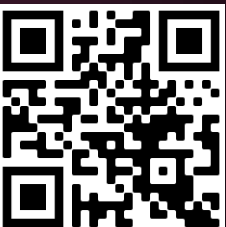
Our Life As Trees

Quote Of The Month

In Memoriam



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

# FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

**F**or me at least, it is almost hard to believe that it's November already, a month in which the themes of reflection and gratitude are often highlighted as we approach Thanksgiving. The speed at which our busy lives fly by prompts me to stop, get off the conveyor belt for a while, and reflect on what life is all about, and where we're headed. No matter where I look, I see evidence that loving exchanges and supportive relationships, including helping others in a wide variety of ways, are "where the action is" regarding the bottom line about what is worth pursuing in life, and what gives us the deepest sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. I believe that we are created for love, to be receptacles and conduits of love. In fact, that is what ultimately gives our lives meaning, making all the hassles and challenges of life worth plowing through. So, let's dive into the content of this issue, being thankful for good relationships while intentionally contemplating ways to sustain them and build new ones as well.

*Caterina Spinaris*

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# THE LITERAL LIFE-SAVING EFFECTS OF SOCIAL TIES

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

On a recent flight to Charleston, SC, on my way to present at the American Jail Association's Mental Health Summit, I met a bubbly interior designer. When I asked her if she enjoys what she does, she responded with an enthusiastic YES! She added: "It makes me happy to make other people happy because of the way I shape the space where they live; life's too short to not be happy."

Indeed, I venture to say that, at least in our western world, most people who are asked what they'd like in life would say something to the effect of wanting to be happy.

The big question is then, what's the best recipe for happiness?

## The Study of the Good Life

In the past we may have had many answers to this question. Now, however, thanks to an 85-year study, the Harvard Study of Adult Development, we have some uniquely convincing evidence about the source of happiness and its impact on health and longevity. This study was conducted by Robert Waldinger, MD, and Marc Schulz, PhD, and it is described in their book, *The Good Life: Lessons From the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*. What makes this study so significant is that this study has followed three generations of more than 2000 people—grandparents, parents, and children—for 85 years.

If asked, some people may say that happiness is about having a lot of money; others will say happiness is about fame or professional success; others will say that happiness is based on a good sex life, and others will answer that happiness is about having a good family.

What did this study show about what makes us happy? In a nutshell, the conclusion was that happiness is all about social connectedness, essentially, about love in some form. The study reported that, on average, the happiest people were those who invested in and nurtured loving social relationships. And in turn, these positive social interactions benefitted the study participants' health and longevity.

To summarize, **"The study found that the people who stayed healthiest and lived longest were the people who had the strongest connections to others.** The warmth of these connections had a direct positive impact on their health and well-being. Good relationships meant participants were less likely to develop heart disease, diabetes, or arthritis. Broader social networks and more social activity resulted in later onset and slower rates of cognitive decline. The study even found that **married people lived longer—an average of 5-12 years longer for women, and 7-17 years longer for men...** the study also found that **participants became happier as they aged.**"<sup>1</sup>

So, happiness (and its relationship to health and longevity) is associated with building and sustaining loving and supportive relationships. This boils down to investing in others in various ways, such as by spending

quality and quantity time together; giving and receiving support, help, encouragement, or respect as needed; and valuing and appreciating others.

### **Challenges Corrections Staff Must Overcome to Maintain Supportive Social Connections**

So how does this recipe for happiness translate regarding correctional employees?

When I read this study, my mind started to add up challenges correctional employees need to intentionally and strategically overcome in order to maximize their happiness levels and associated health benefits.

What are some of these challenges that must be overcome if correctional staff are to enjoy sustainable positive social connections?

It's a documented fact that working in correctional environments changes employees in negative ways.<sup>2</sup> Over time, staff tend to develop a negative worldview, expecting the worst from others and about the future. As a result, they mistrust others and shy away from social interactions. Moreover, even if they do not become pessimistic and mistrusting, their work-dictated weekends, shiftwork, and overtime, isolate them from others, even when they want to engage in social activities. At work, staff cannot chat openly with coworkers about their private lives, because they do not want individuals they supervise to learn personal details about them. Often, they work in isolation, without another coworker to interact with. Additionally, staff are trained, both at their initial training and by seasoned staff later on, to erect high psychological walls between them and the individuals they supervise. The purpose of that is to avoid being "conned," tricked, manipulated, exploited to keep from becoming emotionally close to or trusting of individuals they supervise. Consequently, they learn to shut themselves off around other humans to avoid being manipulated. Some seasoned correctional staff with 25+ years in the business told me that they have to turn their compassion switch off with justice-involved persons, to think of them as not human beings, for two reasons: (1) to avoid being manipulated, and (2) to protect themselves from grief when individuals they supervise self-destruct or are physically attacked by other justice-involved persons.

Such emotional shutting down and disconnecting can become habitual, difficult to shake off when interacting with loved ones at home. Additionally, one of the consequences of trauma is emotional numbing, which, of course, also takes its toll on staff's personal relationships, undermining the most important source of happiness, according to the study we described above. Several Correctional Officers have told me they realized that there was something wrong with them when they felt no compassion or tenderness towards loved ones in distress.

So what are correctional staff to do to nurture social connections, if they are to experience happiness and its associated health benefits at some level of consistency?

The bottom line is that overcoming the roadblocks to happiness in correctional staff's lives will take hard work—intentionality, motivation, self-honesty, courage, persistence, creativity, strategizing, planning, and follow-through—much follow-through. Nurturing positive relationships in the face of work-related demands does not happen automatically. Doing so requires good interpersonal skills (such as managing conflict), good self-regulation skills (such as managing our angry reactions), and, in our super-busy world, good time management and self-discipline regarding setting priorities. It is work. For some staff, it may even involve

leaving the career field of corrections in order to preserve or save precious family relationships or their own health. And if that is what it takes, kudos for them for identifying these realities and embracing them, instead of denying them to their own and their loved ones' detriment.

At some point, staff may also have to rethink their stance around justice-involved persons. To what degree will they choose to view them as potentially dangerous, but also as human beings with needs and feelings such as their own, as opposed to viewing them as less than human in some ways? A chronically hostile stance (as opposed to a wisely cautious stance) towards others not only burns up extra emotional energy and triggers the stress response in the body over and over, but also, as mentioned earlier, it can generalize to other relationships and negatively shape unrelated interactions, such as with loved ones.

### **Warning: The Harms of Loneliness**

In case we are not convinced about the value of social connectedness, here is some shocking information about the detrimental health impact of social disconnectedness and loneliness.

A meta-analysis<sup>3</sup> of 148 research studies (with samples totaling 308,849 persons), the majority of which adjusted for risk factors such as diet, exercise, and health behaviors, concluded that **persons with more social connectedness had a 50% increased likelihood of survival.** This association became even stronger when considering

Let's connect with one another as if our lives depended on it—because solid research suggests they do.

studies that used complex assessments of social connectedness along multiple dimensions (assessing beyond whether a person lived alone or with someone else, by assessing the complexity and strength of social connectedness with others, such as having large social support networks, like regular participation in gatherings with friends or family, Bible study groups, etc.). **These more complex social connections resulted in a stunning 91% increased likelihood of survival!**

The effects of social disconnection in predicting mortality rate due to all causes combined were found to be comparable in magnitude with that of smoking 15 cigarettes daily or drinking six alcoholic drinks daily.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/health-happiness/2023/02/27/the-good-life-a-discussion-with-dr-robert-waldinger/>
- <sup>2</sup> Einat, T., Suliman, N. (2021). Prison Changed Me—and I Just Work There: Personality Changes Among Prison Officers. *The Prison Journal*, 101, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885521991091>
- <sup>3</sup> Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Layton, B. Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Med.* 2010;7(7):e1000316. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316

# THE ARMORY

## ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

In this column, we briefly present “ready-to-practice” strategies and behaviors that help promote wellness and resilience.

Resilience—bouncing back, and at times even springing forward, after encountering adversity—requires courage, energy, and endurance. By definition, adversity saps our emotional strength, as it takes effort to wrestle with difficulties. Adversity can drain our energy tank through a negative mindset, when we selectively focus on difficult problems, on what is not going well.

Discouragement follows, as we come to believe that we are “stuck” in a hard place, and that our efforts or others’ efforts to help us won’t make a difference for the better. To be resilient we need to rebuild our strength and regain hope by countering negativity.

A powerful, “tried-and-true,” “money-back-guaranteed” way to do so, is the habit of being grateful. Gratitude has been shown to help improve health, and to elevate our mood and our perspective. Gratitude activates areas of the brain associated with relief from stress, and is associated with the release of “feel good” chemicals, such as dopamine and serotonin.

Gratitude (or simply “thankfulness”) has to do with our identifying something that is currently going well in our lives, and not because of our own efforts or abilities, but because of others’ kindness or goodwill, or because of what may appear to be a random blessing. The next step after this identification is giving thanks either directly to those we believe have helped us or in our hearts, or both.

In addition to helping us be filled with joy and other positive emotions, which do wonders for our resilience, health and well-being, a grateful mindset can help us learn to locate light even in the midst of darkness—spotting the proverbial silver lining in the clouds.

Like any habit, gratitude must be practiced regularly to help “rewire” our brains, so it is automatically available to us as a mindset (“wearing gratitude-colored glasses”), and also when adversity hits. (And it is a matter of when,



not if, adversity will hit.) The regular flexing of the muscle of gratitude builds up in us the capacity for hope, the ability to see down the road, past the tough spots of the present moment. It also establishes a “can-do” mindset, because it reminds us that we are not fighting challenges in this life all alone, that help and blessings can be just around the corner. The habit is easy to build. Get yourself a notebook, and daily jot down what you’re grateful for. For additional bang for your buck, post at least some of what you wrote down on social media. Your practice will likely reinforce your feelings of gratitude. It may also create a ripple effect, spurring others to start documenting what they’re grateful for. And make sure you keep the notebook once you run out of blank pages. Reading it during trying times can be medicine for your soul and a fresh fountain of hope for a better future.

*Gratitude has been repeatedly found in research studies to have beneficial effects on health and well-being. As we aim to keep The Armory column rather short, we do not provide references for the strategies and practices that are presented here. However, the content is data-driven, supported by scientific evidence.*

So, what are  
you grateful  
for today?

# WHY OFFER CF2F TO YOUR CORRECTIONS STAFF

In 2016, Desert Waters' course *From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™* (CF2F) was recognized with the Commercial Product Award of Excellence by the International Association of Correctional Training Personnel (IACTP). We were, and are, deeply grateful for this public honor and acknowledgment of the value of CF2F by IACTP. Seven years later, accounting for numerous updates and revisions, we can confidently say the course has only gotten better with age.

What is so unique about CF2F that it was graced with this award, and that staff who have attended this course have called it career-saving, relationship-saving, and even life-saving?

In a nutshell, CF2F is designed to do the following:

- Validate staff's negative experiences;
- Give staff "permission" to see the big picture of how corrections work has taken a significant toll on their lives, family, and workforce culture;
- Encourage taking personal initiative, focusing primarily on what each individual can do within their sphere of influence (rather than what they can't do);
- Provide practical principles and strategies to move in the direction of long-term, sustainable professional fulfillment.

In addition, through "real," transparent sharing during the course, a sense of community is established among participants. This carries over to staff interactions outside of the classroom, increasing a sense of psychological safety among staff and leading



to peer support at an informal level. And when custody and non-custody staff attend the training together (and also when the two instructors represent both these job roles), divisive prejudices and walls more easily come down between custody and non-custody staff, as class participants discover that they all are experiencing the negative impact of the job in practically indistinguishable ways.

The CF2F material is data-driven and corrections-specific, and it includes private individual questionnaires (all sharing in class is voluntary), small group activities, and large group discussions.

Currently, CF2F includes versions for staff working in adult institutions (jails and prisons), adult probation and parole, juvenile detention/institutions, juvenile community services (probation and parole), and administrators and supervisors. A related, parallel course, "Towards Corrections Fulfillment™" (TCF) is designed for new hires, to prepare them to some degree to face the challenges of the job in healthy and effective ways.

The CF2F course is not just another training; it is an intervention at the individual and workplace culture level. Some staff have even called it a revolution! One aspect of it that can be described as revolutionary is the open, courageous acknowledgment of the occupational stressors and the toll they can take on staff.

In the next issue of the *Correctional Oasis*, I plan to share best practices about how to offer CF2F to your staff.

For questions about CF2F and how you can provide it to your staff, or how you can take it yourself through our online Self-Paced CF2F version, please contact us at [admin@desertwaters.com](mailto:admin@desertwaters.com) or 719-784-4727.

## What Instructor Candidates Have Said about CF2F

**"This class should be a foundation for the structure of corrections."**

**"I was very impressed with this class. The tools I learned will help both me and my family. I'm looking forward to teaching this class to my fellow staff."**

**"This is a class that is long overdue for all staff in our Dept. of Corrections. I am grateful I was picked to attend this training. I hope I can emphasize how important the content of this class is for all staff. I can see how much fatigue has affected me and how I can use this to improve myself and the staff around me within my institution. Thank you for taking this mission to help the 'forgotten' staff in the law enforcement arena."**

**"Wonderful training and would recommend it to others as well as continue to attend more to further benefit myself and others. I feel changed and re-fueled myself over these past five days and I'm excited to implement positive growth and overcome the hurdle of fatigue to reach fulfillment... ultimately Fulfillment!"**

# REVIEW OF DESERT WATERS' BOOKS *STAYING WELL* AND *MORE ON STAYING WELL*

BY SUSAN JONES, PH.D

These two books—***Staying Well*** and ***More on Staying Well***—should be on the bookshelves of every corrections professional, and they should be read and re-read by anyone who is working at any level within the corrections systems.

The first volume of *Staying Well* includes many important areas of concern including: defining the process of corrections fatigue, professional boundaries, families of corrections employees, psychological trauma and depression, substance abuse, and staff suicide.

The toll of corrections work is known by many, but is seldom discussed in concrete terms. This lack of discussion and acknowledgement compounds the need to open the discussion into very specific terms and to move into the arena of strategies to counteract these effects. In *Staying Well*, this toll is addressed and then the concept of corrections fatigue is defined as the cumulative negative effects of occupational stressors on corrections staff. The challenges that are found in the corrections environment are described as they lead to potential personality changes and health conditions in our employees.

The families of our employees can also be negatively affected by the manner in which our employees are dealing with the challenges in this work. This book provides supportive suggestions for staff who may be struggling with finding the right type of balance regarding their work demeanor and their roles within their families. Strategies are also provided for staff regarding personal health, boundaries in their work, and improving psychological safety. The ABCD's (awareness, balance, connection and discipline) of self-care are presented in detail to provide a framework for action.

The hard topics of trauma, depression, substance abuse and suicide are addressed in a direct and non-judgmental manner. This book provides specific guidance to help co-workers or supervisors deal with these particularly difficult issues. This direct approach is particularly helpful and needed as the profession deals with a high number of suicide or self-harming behaviors of staff.

The second volume, *More on Staying Well*, expands upon the information provided in the first book by focusing on the attitudes, behaviors and actions that foster wellness, resilience, and job fulfillment. The issue of employees transitioning from "on-duty" to "off-duty" is of particular importance when trying to protect their families from the effects of this work. This issue of transition includes activating the relaxation response that is needed to achieve rest and disconnection from the corrections environment. Beyond relaxation, the concept of qualifying with emotions is presented as a way to connect with both the positive

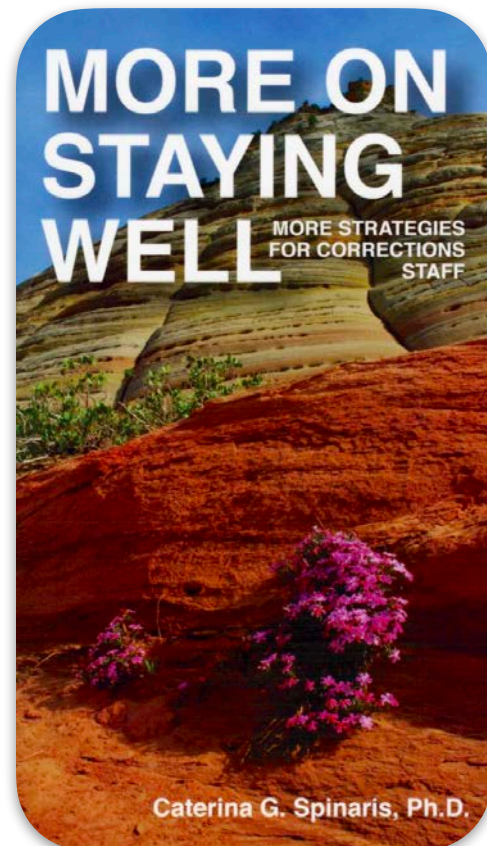
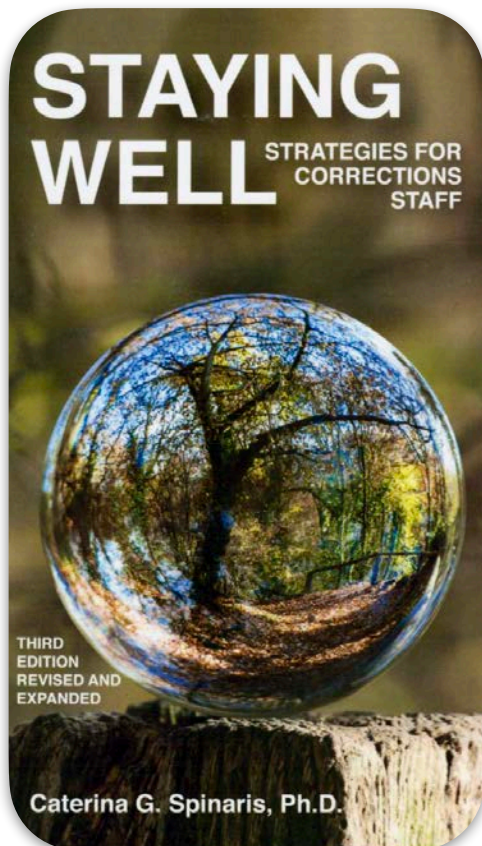
effects and the negative effects of our work. The processing of both positive and negative emotions is critical to be able to move toward a healthier outlook.

The need for a routine and regular sleep pattern is also directly addressed. The effects of sleep deprivation are relevant to corrections employees' health and job performance. What we know about lack of sleep in other industries has a direct connection to policy and practical implications as many corrections agencies are managing a workforce that is working a variety of double and even triple shifts.

This book presents the concept of post-traumatic growth and describes ways to move past the negative effects of this work to positive outcomes based how employees respond and the meaning they make of their work experiences. Additional strategies for staying well include the need for positive habit-building, and improving relationships both at work and outside of work. Improving social connections includes working to both validate and show compassion for each other. These types of connection-building strategies are based on empathy for others, and they can lead to increased trust among employees. These strategies in turn result in an increase in psychological safety in the workplace, and an improvement in the positive meaning that can be found in this type of profession.

The goal, of course, is to move from merely surviving this work toward moving to a position of thriving in this profession.

**As the holidays are approaching consider purchasing one or more of these books for your team or loved one.**



# OUR LIFE AS TREES

BY ANONYMOUS CORRECTIONAL PROFESSIONAL

*The author of this article beautifully describes the process of growing emotionally closer to his spouse over time, and the richness and strength that doing so brings to his life.*

As I drove home from work one day, I saw two magnificent blue spruce trees growing together, about 40 feet tall, on the side of the road. The two trees had been planted so close together that they had grown together, almost into one tree. Later, as I recalled the sight, I thought that they reminded me of our life together.

When we married, we were like those two young trees, planted in the ground very close to each other. At first, we struggled to establish our roots in the soil, gaining strength each day, but our branches tended to get in the way of each other. Especially when the storms of life blew, they would become bruised and even broken by their flailing.

But as time has gone by, we have grown stronger, and taller, bearing the scars of life. We have grown together, as these trees have. The two are growing separately but at the same time together to the point that we can't see where one stops and the other starts. The branches that once interfered with each other now have become so intertwined that they hold each other up. The storms that battered us before don't have the same effect because the blows are shared. We lean on each other.

And at some time, one of these trees will die, either to disease or accident, and the remaining tree will bear a scar down its entire side, where the other tree had stood. The scar will be so deep that others will be able to see all the way to the remaining tree's heart. The scar may never heal, always a visual reminder.

Thank you for being my blue spruce. I love you.



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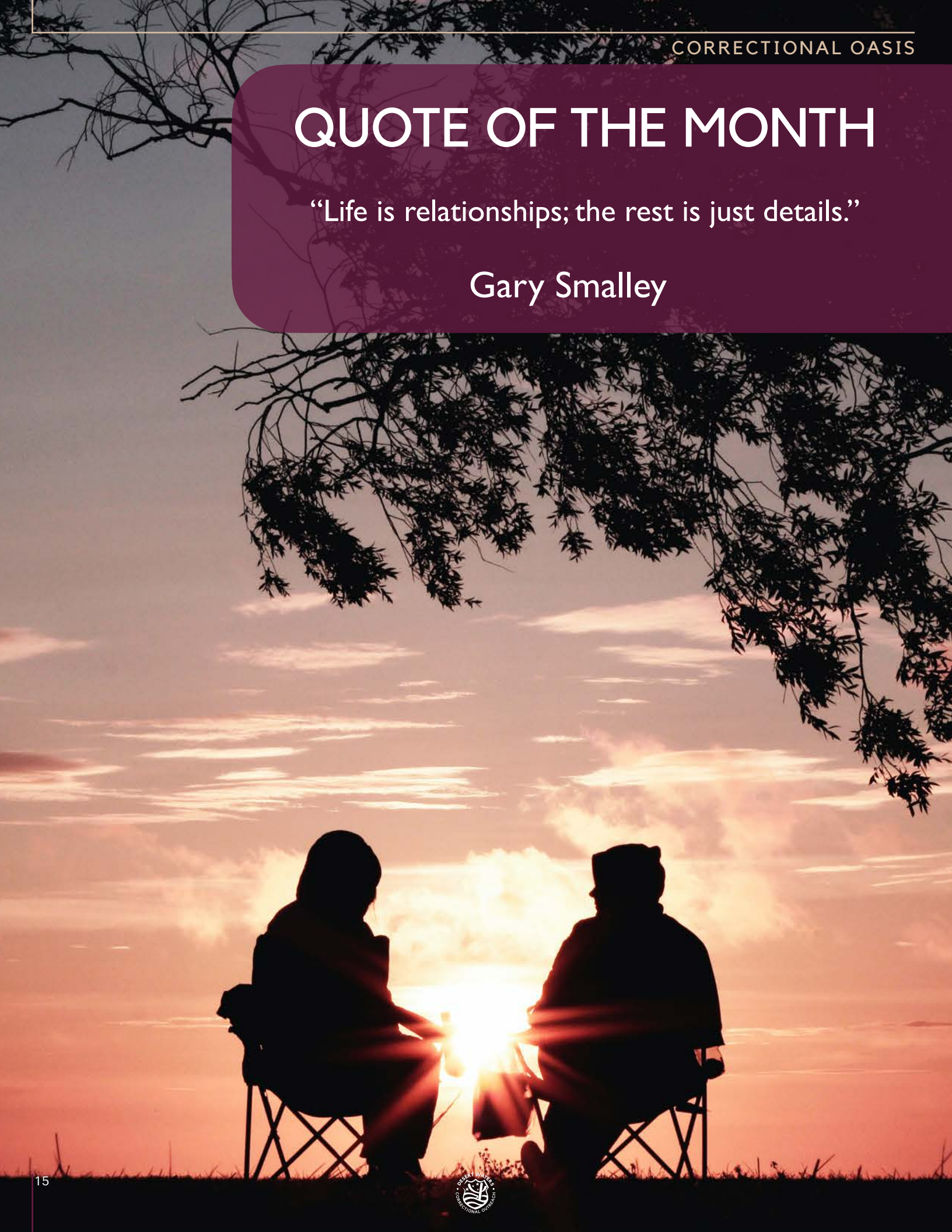
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# QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“Life is relationships; the rest is just details.”

Gary Smalley





# IN MEMORIAM

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**Christine Guerin Sandoval**

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## 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 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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