

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

VOLUME: 22

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A NON-PROFIT FOR THE HEALTH OF CORRECTIONAL & OTHER PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES, STAFF AND FAMILIES

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

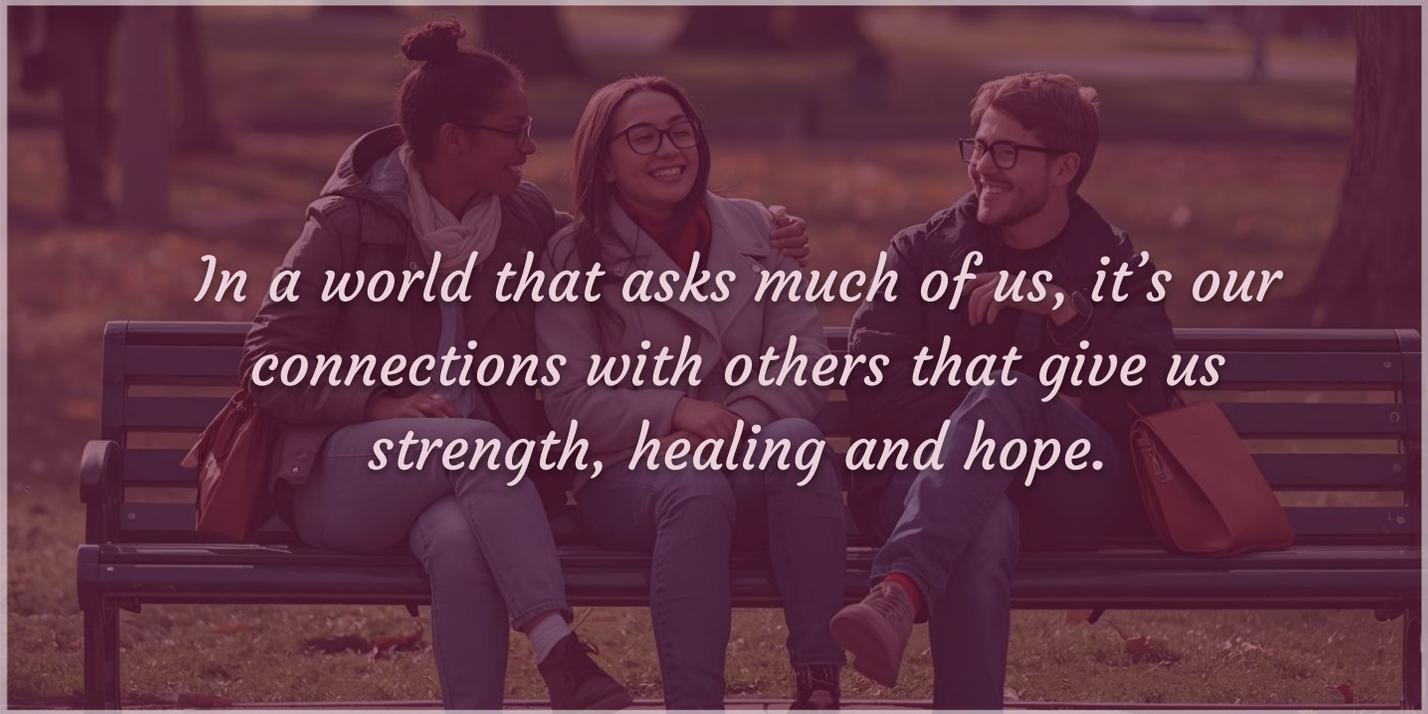
Greetings to you all!

As the Thanksgiving season approaches, we are especially grateful that increasing attention is being given to the wellness and overall well-being of correctional and other public safety personnel.

We are also encouraged to see growing recognition that staff well-being is closely linked to job satisfaction and retention—that a fulfilling career involves more than just earning a paycheck.

This month, we celebrate the benefits of positive interactions and relationships. As social beings, our connections with others are the foundation of our health, well-being, and even physical safety. In this issue, we explore the importance of nurturing and enjoying healthy relationships.

Caterina Spinaris



In a world that asks much of us, it's our connections with others that give us strength, healing and hope.

Two Words: Promoting Wellness, Teamwork, and Cooperation

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What if I told you that two simple words—expressed with the right attitude at work—can improve both your inner atmosphere (your emotions and thoughts) and your outer atmosphere (the quality of your interactions with coworkers and those you supervise)? The benefits don't stop there. They can even follow you home, enhancing your personal life as well.

These two powerful words are “Thank you.”

Research strongly supports what people have intuitively known for centuries: a thankful heart benefits both mind, body, and relationships. Here's a brief summary, with links at the end for further reading.

Expressing thankfulness activates our parasympathetic nervous system—our “rest and digest” response. This triggers a cascade of positive physiological effects: lower levels of stress hormones, slower heart rate, reduced blood pressure, increased heart rate variability (a good thing), muscle relaxation, improved digestion, reduced anxiety and hypervigilance, and improved mood.

The result? Greater calm, contentment, emotional balance, and psychological resilience. At the same time, thankfulness reduces activation of the **sympathetic nervous system**—our “fight, flight, or freeze” response that prepares us to face danger.

The benefits of expressing thanks don't stop with us. When we say “Thank you,” we're letting others know that we noticed their behavior and appreciated it. That acknowledgment helps them relax, enhances their sense of self-worth, and increases their feelings of **psychological safety** around us—an invaluable asset in correctional environments where respect and cooperation are essential.

Strategically expressed thankfulness can also calm or encourage someone who is agitated or demoralized. It can de-escalate tension, reduce hostility, and increase cooperation and goodwill.

And there's more. When others feel appreciated, they're more likely to **“pay it forward”**—to express thanks to someone else. In this way, thankfulness can become contagious, gradually transforming the workplace atmosphere for the better. All it takes is a willingness to notice moments worthy of appreciation and the commitment to express your “Thank you” sincerely, whether spoken or written.

Try this experiment:

For the next month, be intentional about spotting behaviors or situations for which you can genuinely say “Thank you.”

- *When saying it in person, look the person in the eye, pause for a moment, and express your thankfulness genuinely—with a smile.*
- *When writing it in an email, briefly mention what you're thankful for, and make sure to include the actual words “Thank you.”*

Aim to express at least **one “Thank you” per day**, and as you get better at noticing positives, increase that to three per day. For maximum benefit, keep a written record of your most meaningful “Thank you” each day. After a month, your brain will begin to rewire itself—automatically seeking out positives and opportunities for appreciation. Over time, this habit can become a way of life. May you choose to make it yours.

Want to learn more? Check out these resources:

- [The Neuroscience of Gratitude – PositivePsychology.com](#)
- [The Science of Gratitude – NIH](#)
- [Health Benefits of Gratitude – UCLA Health](#)
- [The Surprising Science of Gratitude, Stress, and Happiness – Rebecca Heiss](#)

Peer Support Perspectives

We're excited to introduce a new regular column in the Correctional Oasis—**Peer Support Perspectives!** This space is dedicated to addressing the real-world challenges, questions, and situations that arise within peer support programs across public safety organizations.

Each month, we'll offer practical guidance and insights to help strengthen your agency's peer support efforts and promote the well-being of those who serve.

We invite you to submit your questions or scenarios to admin@desertwaters.com. Every submission will remain completely anonymous, with all identifying details removed before publication.

Let's learn from one another's experiences and work together to build the strongest, most effective peer support teams possible!

Share
your
Story



Why Should Public Agencies Invest in Peer Support Programs?

Public safety professionals work in a career unlike any other—one that routinely exposes them to operational, organizational, and traumatic stressors. The weight of these experiences doesn't stay at the workplace; it can spill over into every part of a person's life—home, relationships, and individual well-being. Over time, the cumulative impact of what staff see, hear, and otherwise experience is likely to erode health, morale, and even performance. Peer support programs recognize these realities and offer a structured way to care for the people who care for everyone else.

One of the most **powerful aspects of peer support is relatability**. There's something deeply grounding about talking to someone who "gets it"—someone who works in the same high-stress environment, understands the unspoken culture, and has walked similar paths. That peer connection helps break through the traditional "code of silence" and the fear that often surrounds seeking mental health or other types of social support. When peers reach out to one another, it normalizes help-seeking and opens doors that might otherwise stay closed.

Beyond compassion, for public safety organizations there's also a moral and legal responsibility at play. We know the realities—elevated rates of divorce, substance misuse, suicide, and other adverse outcomes among those who serve in public safety roles. Providing peer support isn't just the ethical thing to do; it's also liability reduction and overall smart leadership.



Healthier staff perform better, engage more effectively, perform more professionally, and are better equipped to serve their communities.

In fact, research increasingly shows that peer support programs are evidence-informed tools that improve both individual and organizational outcomes. Investing in peer support means investing in the people who make the mission possible—and that's a return no agency can afford to overlook.

Correctional Family Wellness™ for Adult Family Members & for Staff



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Send your vetted staff to to get certified to teach these two courses to coworkers and to their adult family members!

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An interactive course for adult family members of new or seasoned correctional staff (jail, prison, probation, or parole). Learn how corrections work realities can impact family life, explore common family scenarios, and gain practical strategies for support and self-care.

Course Topics: Corrections Work Realities | When Work Comes Home | What Loved Ones May Face at Work | Help for the Family | Basics of Self-Care | Family Scenarios

For Staff (CFW-S) *6-hour course*

Designed for new and seasoned correctional employees, this course addresses how corrections work can affect family life and relationships. Participants learn strategies to manage work-to-home stress, support their families, and maintain emotional closeness.

Course Topics: When Family Members Enter Our Corrections World | Work-to-Home Stressors | Family Impact of Job Requirements | Help for Families | Understanding Staff Behavioral Changes | Family Care Practices



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Stone Cold Sober

By Justin Stevens

I grew up without alcohol in the house. My dad occasionally sipped a Cadillac Margareta and champagne at brunch once a year. As I hit my college years I found alcohol was a part of the culture. We drank when we were happy. Drank when we were down, and drank because the day ended in Y.

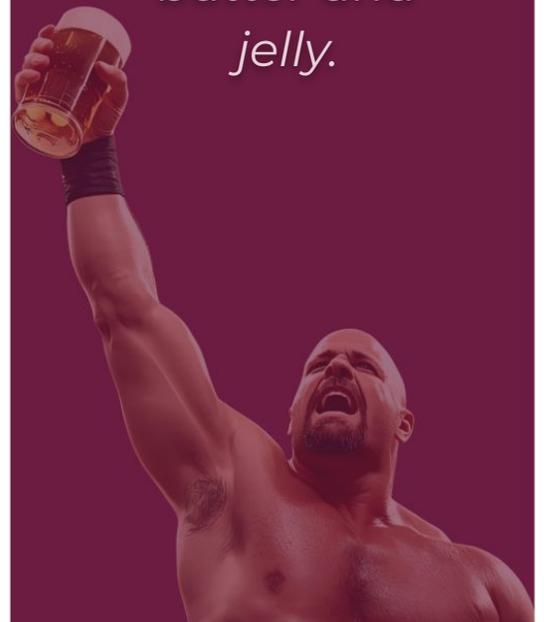
As I got into corrections I thought I was becoming a career professional. Little did I know my college drinking was preparing me for my new coping mechanism in my new job. I discovered rather quickly that alcohol and prison went together like peanut butter and jelly. Week one I was invited with the other third watch officers to the downtown bar for drinks after work. I of course said no because I had my life outside of work.

Fast forward a year, and I couldn't say no. My life now was corrections, and I lost sight of my outside life. Through the highs and lows my drinking was never an addiction; it was a celebration, a pick-me-up, a team-builder. I was the funny drunk that could lighten the mood, make everyone laugh.

Yet, I heard the stories of others. The drunken brawl which got multiple people fired for lying. The officers with multiple DUIs. The officers that showed up drunk to work.

As I hit my mid-thirties I didn't drink with the crew anymore, but I did drink. The kids would go to bed and the wine or the whiskey would pour while my wife and I watched my favorite TV show. It was a vicious cycle: Work 16 hours, drink two "Old Fashioned," wake up feeling crappy and tired, and do it again the next day.

Little did I know my college drinking was preparing me for my new coping mechanism in my new job. I discovered rather quickly that alcohol and prison went together like peanut butter and jelly.



At the time I would argue that I wasn't THAT unhealthy for doing it. I would even argue it wasn't a cycle, but a daily choice. Hindsight is 20/20.

Then 2021 rocked my world. Covid had hit, and being in California there wasn't much to do other than drink and try to find toilet paper at the store. In February I got the Covid vaccine and got an autoimmune disease that affected my liver. So, with my liver being damaged, I had to stop drinking altogether. Because I wasn't an alcoholic or dependent on alcohol, it was fairly easy to stop drinking. The problem came with social events.

Everything involved alcohol. Going to a kid's birthday party? There'd better be drinks. Graduation? Drinks. New Year's? Lots of drinks.

How was my new sobriety going to affect my social life? I was awkward at first, but no one noticed. When I didn't drink, I found that no one cared. I wasn't outcast or shunned. And I found a new love of sobriety.

Now I saw things clearer. When my friends would drink, I would sit with them. But now I wouldn't sit until 3 a.m. listening to the same drunken stories of the past. Instead I found a healthy medium. I would sit until I was done. Usually by midnight I would find the stories getting old and the awkward drunkenness of friends to be so annoying, I would go to bed. Woke up refreshed, no hangover, no forgetfulness, and no regrets.

Now I moved away from California and live in Tennessee. I have found going to parties now is easy. If there is booze, I don't partake. I grab a sweet tea and carry it around like Uncle Si on Duck Dynasty. I don't worry if people will think it's weird. I don't have alcohol at my kids' birthday party. Let's face it: If the party is for the kids, why would I or should I have alcohol there?

When I was told I was sick and couldn't drink anymore, I thought it was a curse put on me and I would never recover from it. In actuality I learned that not drinking is not only OK, but it's healthy. It has allowed me to grow in my feelings. It has allowed me to see more clearly. And it has allowed me to live my life on my terms.

I'm not saying never have a drink. But I do ask, have you evaluated why we drink? With society telling us through ads, social media, TV and everything else that we should drink, **why not be different** and realize that **we can be just as good if not better without it?**



Coming to Minneapolis!

FROM CORRECTIONS FATIGUE TO FULFILLMENT™

In-Person Instructor Training

Are you ready to bring meaningful, lasting change to your facility? We're gauging interest for an in-person Instructor Training course for Desert Waters' award-winning *From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™* (CF2F) in the Minneapolis region!

Why CF2F?

This powerful, evidence-informed course is designed to reduce staff's Corrections Fatigue, and, when properly taught in a climate that supports staff wellness top-down, boost morale, retention, and professionalism across your agency.

- **Includes** 3-year training license, all materials/media, 2 hours of individual follow-up virtual coaching, and agency consultation for implementation.
- **Send** your carefully vetted staff to become certified to train CF2F in-house for 3 years!

Cost: \$1,695 per Instructor Candidate + travel for 2-3 master trainers

Class Size: 12-36 participants

Dates: To Be Determined Based on interest

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Email us at admin@desertwaters.com to express your agency's interest! We'll assist you with the vetting process for instructor candidates.

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Staying Sane During the Holiday Season

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The holiday season is meant to be a time of **joy, love, and connection** with family and friends—and for some, a time of spiritual reflection. Yet, despite the festive cheer, this period can also bring stress, overindulgence, and exhaustion. This article explores common stressors of the season and offers practical strategies for reducing avoidable holiday strain.

The Challenges of the Season

From Thanksgiving through New Year's, many of us experience overstimulation and overdrive. We may be on the go non stop—overeating, overdrinking, overspending, and trying not to miss any fun. By the time the new year arrives, some face exhaustion, buyer's remorse, and mounting holiday debt.

Gift-giving can be a major source of stress. The pressure to find “perfect” gifts, compete with others, or give to everyone we know can leave us buying items we don't truly want or need, simply to check boxes off a list. Similarly, competition over holiday décor, parties, and appearances can intensify stress.

Social obligations—numerous events, hosting duties, and extended family gatherings—often push aside essential “me time.” Family gatherings can reignite old conflicts, trigger guilt or hurt feelings, or involve tense dynamics, especially when alcohol is involved. The result? The season meant for celebration can instead once again lead to overstimulation, exhaustion, overindulgence, and even the “holiday blues.”

Much of this stress stems from unrealistic expectations: the belief that the holiday season, with its perfect meals, gifts, and gatherings, will bring perfect happiness. When reality doesn't match the fantasy—or when the novelty wears off—disappointment and fatigue follow. Retailers' constant promotions and “holiday specials” further fuel the pressure to buy, buy, buy.



Practical Strategies for a Sane Holiday

Gift Giving

- 1** Set a **realistic budget** and stick to it; avoid going into debt. Consider saving throughout the year.
- 2** **Avoid** buying simply because something is on **sale**. Ask: do you or the recipient really need this?
- 3** **Give personal, meaningful gifts:** homemade treats, crafts, coupons for time together, or acts of service.
- 4** **Create your own family traditions:** for example, exchange small tokens during the holidays and save larger gifts for birthdays or other occasions.
- 5** **Shop** after the holidays for true **bargains** to use throughout the year.
- 6** Limit gift-giving in large families: draw names and set a **reasonable price limit** (e.g., \$25).
- 7** **Avoid competition** with ex-spouses or relatives over spending, gifts, or party attendance.
- 8** **Consider charitable giving** instead of frivolous gifts; it teaches children compassion and generosity.

Family Gatherings and Social Events

1 Maintain your **daily routines**, protecting personal downtime and exercise.

2 **Divide responsibilities** for meals and rotate hosting duties to avoid overload.

3 **Don't skip meals**; research shows that skipping lunch leads to overeating at holiday dinners.

4 If gatherings are toxic or high-conflict, consider **celebrating with a smaller circle** or traveling out of town.

5 Ensure you get **adequate sleep** and rest.

6 If working over the holidays, **plan celebrations** on days off.

7 Schedule **special get-togethers** during spring, summer, or fall to reduce holiday crowding.

Closing Thoughts

The holiday season can be joyful and meaningful if approached with realistic expectations, intentional planning, and self-care. Focus on connection, gratitude, and acts of love rather than competition or overindulgence.

Wishing you a safe and sane holiday season, filled with reflection, quality time with loved ones, outreach to those in need, and mindful appreciation of your blessings.

The Literal Life-Saving Effects of Social Ties

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Most people would say that what they want from life is to be happy. But what is the best recipe for happiness?

The Study of the Good Life

Thanks to the 85-year Harvard Study of Adult Development, we now have compelling evidence about the **source of happiness—and its powerful impact on health and longevity.**



Directed by Robert Waldinger, MD, and Marc Schulz, PhD, and described in their book *The Good Life: Lessons From the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, this study has followed three generations—over 2,000 people—for eight and a half decades.

While many assume happiness comes from money, success, or status, this long-term research found otherwise: **Happiness is rooted in social connectedness—in loving and caring relationships.**

Participants who invested in strong, supportive relationships were the happiest and the healthiest. 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.”¹

In short, happiness—and health and longevity—depend on cultivating and sustaining loving, supportive relationships. This means investing time and energy in others: spending meaningful time together, offering and receiving encouragement and respect, and expressing appreciation.

Challenges Corrections Staff Must Overcome to Maintain Supportive Social Connections

Correctional work poses serious obstacles to maintaining positive social connections. Over time, staff may develop a pessimistic worldview, expecting the worst from others and withdrawing socially. Shift work, overtime, and missed weekends isolate them further.

At work, employees cannot freely share personal information due to safety concerns, and many work separately from other staff. Training also reinforces emotional distance from incarcerated persons to avoid manipulation.

Regrettably, this emotional shutdown can carry over to home life. Trauma exposure can lead to emotional numbing, undermining the very relationships that sustain happiness. Several correctional officers have told me they realized something was wrong when they felt no compassion or tenderness toward loved ones in distress.

Rebuilding Connection and Happiness

Overcoming these barriers takes **intentional effort**—motivation, honesty, courage, and persistence. Strong relationships require skill: **managing conflict, regulating anger, prioritizing time** with loved ones, and **maintaining balance** despite job demands.

For some, preserving family relationships or personal health may even mean leaving the profession—and that choice, though difficult, can be an act of wisdom and courage.

Staff may also need to reconsider their stance toward incarcerated persons. Viewing them as both potentially dangerous and also as human beings helps prevent chronic hostility, which drains emotional energy and can spill into personal relationships.

The High Cost of Social Isolation

The evidence for connection is equally powerful in reverse. A meta-analysis² of 148 studies involving more than 308,000 participants found that people with strong social ties had a **50% greater likelihood** of survival.

When deeper measures of connectedness were used—such as involvement in family, friendship, or faith groups—the benefit rose to **91% increased likelihood** of survival. The health risks associated with social isolation were comparable to those of smoking 15 cigarettes a day or consuming six alcoholic drinks daily.

So, let's connect with one another as if our lives depended on it—because according to research, they do.

References

1. [Harvard School of Public Health – “The Good Life: A Discussion with Dr. Robert Waldinger”](#)
2. Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Med*, 7(7): e1000316. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>



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- **Explore** our blog filled with articles.
- **Reach out**—we'd love to hear from you!



If I Could Only Rewind the Tape

By an Anonymous Correctional Officer

As you read the following words, please understand that I am not seeking absolution or sympathy. I have asked my God for forgiveness and quite frankly I have to deal with my failure. My reason for writing this is the hope that you will not make the same mistake I made, and if you are walking down that path, that you can correct yourself before it is too late.

My wife and I went to our church on a Saturday morning to do some baking for an event that our church would be having the next day. When the desserts were in the oven, my wife went upstairs to practice on the piano. After taking the desserts out of the oven, I went upstairs and sat in the quiet, cool sanctuary and listened to her play. I really enjoyed listening to her play. Soon, my mind traveled back to where we were the week before at this time which was at a Celebration of Life Service for an old friend that had passed away.

Suddenly tears started trickling down my cheeks. She continued to play, and soon I was overtaken and the tears continued. She left the piano and walked toward me sitting in the back of the church. In a very rare moment, I placed my face in my hands and started sobbing. I cry very rarely. My wife reached out to comfort me, and, through my tears, I told her what a terrible friend I had been. Her hand on my shoulder, she told me that I had not been a terrible friend. My wife had conversations with my friend's wife recently, and during the course of one of those conversations she had stated exactly what my wife was telling me.

Besides my wife, he was my best friend for decades. He was dating this girl and she had this friend she thought I might like, and she was right. We have been happily married for decades. Also, he got me started in running in our teens, and years later, I began a decades-long love with the sport. I could tell you some great stories. We were even business partners for a time, but we were terrible at it and it closed, but we remained the best of friends in spite of that business failure. Our two children were even born in the same years. Now he was gone. He had passed away suddenly.

My friend and his wife lived 45 minutes away, and, in spite of the distance, we were pretty close. He came down with Multiple Sclerosis in the 90's, and his world and that of his family were suddenly turned upside down. A very physically active person before, he could no longer do any of those things.

After some years, we started drifting apart. We stopped calling each other as much and just started losing touch. After I had surgery some years ago he only visited me once while I was on the shelf. Over time, little things like this just ticked me off. I was very sympathetic and understanding of his illness, I thought, but you know that unless you have walked in the other person's shoes, you can't fully understand what they are going through or dealing with.

I missed countless opportunities to be a better friend. My wife would ask me on occasion if I had spoken to my friend recently, and I would say something like no, I hadn't, but I needed to, or I'm going to call him, but I would not. I became petty, not taking his condition into consideration, not thinking that he was probably suffering more than he let on. Such stupidity, right?

Working in Corrections and the things we are exposed to, the shift work, working on the holidays, and the stress of the job over time just take their toll. Few people understand what we deal with. I started pulling back on everything, including my best friend. In addition, I have fought anxiety for most of my life. But, you know, excuses are unacceptable.

*We just picked up our friendship like old times.
I can't tell you how great that felt.*

A few years ago, an old friend of ours passed away suddenly and we reconnected. It seemed like time hadn't passed at all, we just picked up our friendship like old times. I can't tell you how great that felt. Then, over time, it went back to where it was before. There was hardly a day that passed though that I didn't think of my friend or remember him in my prayers. He helped me appreciate so much the gift of running that I had been given, and I struggled with how life had been so unfair to him, but he made the best of it and even volunteered his time with a number of organizations.

One day my wife let me know that he was in the hospital. After a few days I wanted to go where he was, but could not because it was on lockdown due to COVID. I would have been happy to just sit in the waiting room, but no go. A number of times I asked my wife if I could go down, but the reply was the same. You won't be able to see him or even get into the hospital, she said. Then it looked like he was not going to make it. Still I was unable to visit him and have some final words with him. Then one day we received word that my old friend had passed. I was crushed.

A few weeks after my friend's passing, my wife and I visited with his wife. As we were leaving their home, she asked me if I would read his obituary at the Celebration of Life they were holding in a few weeks. I said that I would, and that I would be honored to do so.

In the weeks after his passing, many things we had done together started flooding my mind. Things I hadn't thought of in decades. Great stories. I wrote some of them down and sent them to his two children to let them know what a special person he was. I've been to a lot of funerals and memorial services in my life, but as my wife and I talked on the way home after my friend's Celebration of Life, we agreed that we had never been to a more perfect one.

Though our lives changed, I could have been a better friend. I should have been a better friend. Quite frankly, I don't know how I could have handled what he had to deal with, but he did really well. He was so much stronger than I would have been in that situation.

There were four of us who hung out together before jobs, college, and marriages began. I am the only one still alive. The passing of someone close can be pretty sobering. It reminds me of how fragile life really is.

You know, I have been really good at building walls around myself working in this business, but I went too far. I built too many, and that was a tremendous mistake.

Please, if you see yourself in my story, please correct yourself. I absolutely learned an important lesson the hard way, and I do not wish this on any of my brothers and sisters in this business. It just doesn't have to be this way.

If I could only rewind the tape, I promise you, the outcome would be different. I can't change the past, but I'm sure going to try and change the future. Time will only tell if I am successful or not.



QUOTES

of the month

When it comes to life the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude.

The way to love anything is to realize that it may be lost.

And when it rains on your parade, look up rather than down. Without the rain, there would be no rainbow.

Gilbert K. Chesterton



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Improving the wellbeing of corrections and other public safety professionals through training, consulting, and other essential resources to foster resilience, mental health, and overall wellness in these challenging professions.

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