

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Greetings,

True system stability in corrections is built not only on policies, procedures, and operational standards, but on the attitude, morale, and mindset of the professionals who carry out the mission every day. The well-being and resilience of correctional staff (or lack thereof) directly influence safety, performance, decision-making, and organizational effectiveness. When employees are supported, engaged, and mentally prepared, they are better equipped to manage the complex demands of the profession and contribute to a secure, productive environment for both staff and those in custody.

In this issue, we examine a pivotal shift taking place across the corrections profession as agencies move beyond long-standing systemic barriers and outdated cultural norms to embrace a more comprehensive approach to wellness. Increasingly, correctional leaders recognize that staff wellness is not a peripheral concern—it is a mission-critical component of operational readiness and institutional success.

By recognizing the need to combine strong leadership advocacy with personal responsibility and accountability, agencies are beginning to break the cycle of **Corrections Fatigue**—a state of disengagement driven by chronic stress, repeated trauma exposure, and the relentless demands of the profession that has long challenged correctional staff and organizations alike.

This evolving culture acknowledges that wellness and tactical readiness are not competing priorities, but complementary forces that strengthen one another. As organizations invest in healthier workplaces and employees take ownership of their physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being, corrections is redefining what it means to be mission-ready—creating safer operations, stronger teams, and a more sustainable future for the profession

Caterina Spinaris



Corrections at a Crossroads: Moving from Mental Health Awareness to Action

By Kenzie Rauscher
[GUARDIAN RFID](#) Marketing Team Leader



True institutional stability begins with the mind. This article explores the critical shift in corrections as the industry moves beyond traditional systemic barriers to foster a culture of wellness. By uniting leadership advocacy with individual accountability, the industry is starting to dismantle the cycle of fatigue and redefine tactical readiness for a safer mission.

In the high-stakes world of corrections, "safety and security" have traditionally been defined by bars, locks, and perimeter checks. However, in 2026, the definition of institutional stability is undergoing a radical shift. There is a growing realization that the most critical infrastructure in any facility isn't the steel—it's the mental health of the people standing the line.

While the industry has made significant strides in acknowledging the psychological toll of the job, the transition from **awareness** to **action** remains the next great frontier.

Dr. Caterina Spinaris, the founder of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach and a 26-year veteran of mental health advocacy, notes that while the conversation has opened, the industry as a whole is still in the early stages of a long-term evolution.

"Some people may think they have arrived at a place of momentum, but we are truly just scratching the surface," Spinaris explains. "It is a marathon, not a sprint."

For decades, the prevailing culture in corrections was one of "toughing it out." Admitting to psychological distress was often viewed as a sign of weakness, leaving many to suffer in silence. Today, the industry is seeing the first cracks in that wall of stoicism.

While there is an increasing push to assist correctional officers in accessing mental health resources, a shadow of hypermasculinity still looms large. Despite new initiatives, many officers still feel that maintaining "control" means suppressing their own humanity.

"In this business, we live with the illusion of control," says correctional wellness advocate William Young. "We think we are in charge of our schedule, our unit, and our environment. But when that rug gets pulled out from under you, you realize how much the job has actually taken...We need to normalize being human in a profession that too often expects us to be machines."

Young is among those who have navigated the "slow burn" of the profession firsthand, witnessing its impact on both the body and mind. With 22 years of experience in the tiers, Young's perspective on mental health advocacy is uniquely shaped by both tactical reality and personal resilience. As the founder and host of the "Just Corrections" podcast and YouTube channel—and the prolific author of essential industry works such as *When Home Becomes a Housing Unit*, *The Nothing That Never Happened*, and *Trained to Change*—Young bridges the systemic challenges of the facility and the individual well-being of the officer.

Young, along with many other experts in the field, has witnessed the unfolding of a heartbreaking paradox. While the conversation surrounding mental health is more prevalent than ever, catastrophic staffing shortages are forcing corrections professionals to face psychological strain at rates that far outpace the general population.

Recent studies conducted by Desert Waters Correctional Outreach have found that nearly 34% of correctional officers suffer from PTSD—a figure comparable to military veterans and significantly higher than the 6-7% average among the general public.

Additionally:

- Around 41% of correctional officers have experienced at least one mental health disorder in their lifetime
- 25–30% report depression
- More than 50% report burnout or emotional exhaustion
- An estimated 40–60% of officers struggle with some form of mental health challenge

Furthermore, the constant state of hyper-vigilance required on the job contributes to a suicide risk that is estimated to be seven times higher than the national average.

Mandatory 60-hour workweeks often leave officers with no time to utilize the wellness programs being offered. Without targeted intervention, these statistics represent not just a wellness crisis, but a fundamental threat to institutional safety and operational stability.

This environment creates a friction point where the desire for wellness meets the reality of exhaustion. When staff are pushed to their physical limits, psychological defense mechanisms often override proactive health measures. This level of chronic exhaustion does more than just sideline wellness initiatives; it creates a dangerous environment where errors in judgment become almost inevitable.

"Think of a carpenter: you cannot expect them to build quality materials if they don't have the right equipment. Why should we expect anything different from other professions without the right tools?" says Spinaris. "What we are currently doing is simply not sustainable. We have too many staff members reporting that they are too overwhelmed by their work conditions to even find a way to stay afloat, let alone be successful. Staff well-being should be a mandatory requirement for a mission-driven agency."

Wellness programs are only as effective as an officer's ability to access them. When leadership treats mental health as a peripheral "soft" initiative rather than a core component of tactical readiness, the result is chronic burnout and turnover. Improving the landscape requires a shift in how the industry frames therapy and support. It isn't about "fixing" someone who is broken; it's about providing protective equipment for a dangerous environment.

Wellness programs are only as effective as an officer's ability to access them. When leadership treats mental health as a peripheral "soft" initiative rather than a core component of tactical readiness, the result is chronic burnout and turnover. Improving the landscape requires a shift in how the industry frames therapy and support. It isn't about "fixing" someone who is broken; it's about providing protective equipment for a dangerous environment.

"This isn't just a 'wellness' topic; it's a matter of life or death," Young emphasizes. "The turnover, the divorces, and the suicide rates are evidence of our current failure. We are nowhere near where we need to be, but the path forward is a two-way street: facilities must provide the help, and individuals must take ownership of receiving the help."

In practice, modern correctional mental health should be viewed as a preventative tool, much like a vest or a radio. By integrating these resources into the daily operational flow, agencies can move from reactive crisis management to proactive risk mitigation. Spinaris argues that agencies must view these resources as a fundamental operational cost, comparable to physical utilities.

"Investing in valuable, data-driven efforts will cost more on the front end, but it saves you so much more downstream," Spinaris says. "Mental wellness doesn't just pause; it's a permanent commitment. It is as essential to keep going as it is to have heat and water in the facility."

Young reinforces this perspective, emphasizing that long-term investment ultimately translates into practical, day-to-day coping strategies for front-line staff.

"Some people are so turned off at the idea of therapy because they are going to have to go back to the job anyway ... but you have tools to help minimize the damage that this job is going to do to you," Young notes. "I can't change the situation for you. I can't make jail any prettier. I can't stop these terrible things from happening. But I can at least help the process be a little easier along the way. It's like wearing a helmet when you're playing football, right? You're going to hit your head when you play this game: Here's a tool to make it hurt a little less."

For the landscape to truly transform, **two key pillars** must be reinforced:

First, the mandate must come from the top. Leadership must move beyond "poster campaigns" toward active advocacy. The facilities seeing the most significant improvement are those where leaders model the behavior they expect, shifting from reactive post-crisis support to proactive, daily wellness. While employee assistance programs (EAPs) are a vital first step, they must be offered as a preventative tool rather than a last resort after a tragedy unfolds.

"Leadership controls the messaging for making their staff aware that resources are available, but staff are cynical," Young says. "You can't just put up a poster or send an email; you have to show up consistently. People won't believe they are a priority until you make them feel like one. If you want a culture of wellness, you have to weave it into the very fabric of the facility. Don't just give an eight-hour class once a year; you have to model the behavior. Leadership, including the captains and the warden, should show their staff that they see them, they value them, and they're willing to stand in the gap with them."

The second pillar requires the individual to be ready to receive that support.

Transformation requires staff to recognize the need for help and, more importantly, the willingness to seek it. This involves the due diligence of researching available options and the personal accountability to show up and engage with the process. Even if it starts with utilizing a close friend to lean on, a YouTube channel, or a podcast that resonates, the key is simply to begin.

"There is still such a profound difficulty in accepting vulnerability in this field," Spinaris explains. "We are all human and pretty fragile, but in corrections, there is often a fear that being real will affect your job security or promotion. Leaders need to break the ice and give permission to acknowledge struggles. To help their staff immediately, supervisors must learn to listen better by asking open-ended questions without interrogation, and lead with integrity and justice for all."

Even if your initial training overlooked the emotional weight of this career, or if you've relied on dark humor just to make it through a shift, it is impossible to ignore the gaps in the day-to-day workplace that simply don't sit right. Corrections professionals must move beyond "band-aid" fixes and demand substantive resources that address the root of the problem.

To bridge the divide between systemic challenges and individual action, the focus must shift from merely acknowledging the crisis to actively navigating solutions. Staying aware of available resources is no longer just an HR checkbox; it is a vital component of tactical readiness.

"Wellness is risk management," Spinaris explains. "This is not an 'if' situation; it's a 'when' situation. Why wait for a five-million-dollar lawsuit to act when you could have invested in a preventative program?"

While Spinaris maintains that data-driven, long-term investment is critical for systemic wellness, she argues that the first step toward change doesn't require a budget; it requires a human connection. To her, the foundation of a healthy culture is simple: personal interaction with those who understand the weight of the job and make you feel respected.

"Supervisors can support their staff almost immediately by learning to listen without interrogation," Spinaris notes. "Ask open-ended questions. Lead with integrity and show a compassionate interest in your people that goes beyond just giving orders. Mental wellness is not a 'one-and-done' expense; it must be a permanent commitment, as essential to the facility as running water."

As the profession looks toward the future, the goal is clear: **stabilize the mind to stabilize the mission.** The conversation has started; now the systems that sustain it must be built. By championing these changes, you aren't just managing a facility – you are leading a culture shift that saves lives and protects your staff.

True leadership in corrections is no longer defined solely by command, but by the courage to be real. By dismantling the fear that vulnerability equates to weakness, supervisors can transform their units from high-stress environments into high-trust teams. Staff wellness can no longer be treated as an optional luxury; it is the foundation of correctional justice. When leaders lead with the heart as much as the badge, they don't just manage a shift.

They save a career.



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CorrEXtions: When Protecting the Home Front Became Second

By Stephanie Rawlings, MSc

There is a quiet crisis happening in corrections that rarely gets discussed openly. Behind the uniforms, overtime shifts, mandatory holdovers, and hypervigilance is a growing number of strained marriages, fractured families, emotional isolation, and broken trust. Correctional professionals are trained to maintain order inside the walls, but many are slowly losing order at home.

For many in corrections, protecting the home front gradually becomes secondary to surviving the job itself. The tragedy is that most officers never intended for that to happen.



The Data We Can't Ignore

Research consistently shows that correctional professionals—custody staff, in particular—experience significantly higher levels of stress, trauma exposure, PTSD symptoms, and substance misuse than the general public and even other first responders.

Additionally, some research and occupational **data suggest that correctional employees may experience marital strain and divorce at rates comparable to—and in some studies higher than—the general population.**

Findings across studies are mixed, and reported rates vary considerably by occupation, agency, gender, and methodology. Regardless of the exact rate, the available evidence highlights the significant impact that correctional work can have on personal relationships, family functioning, and overall well-being. While divorce statistics differ across studies, the broader reality is clear: the unique stresses of correctional work can place substantial strain on marriages, families, and other important personal relationships.

And affairs—emotional and physical—often emerge in the middle of that strain.

Why Affairs Become More Likely in Corrections

Affairs rarely begin with someone waking up and deciding to destroy their marriage. More often, they begin with exhaustion. Isolation. Unmet emotional needs. A sense that nobody outside the profession understands what the job does to you. Corrections creates a unique environment where emotional boundaries can slowly erode over time.

Some Reasons for Affairs in Corrections

1. The Schedule Disconnect
2. Shared Trauma Creates Fast Emotional Bonds
3. Fatigue Lowers Boundaries
4. Corrections Culture Can Normalize Boundary Violations

1. The Schedule Disconnect

Corrections operates on nights, weekends, holidays, doubles, mandates, and unpredictable overtime. Officers often spend more waking hours with coworkers than with spouses.

Families adapt at first:

- “We’ll make it work.”
- “It’s just a busy season.”
- “It’ll slow down eventually.”

But eventually the emotional distance grows. The spouse at home may feel abandoned, unsupported, or shut out. The officer may feel unappreciated and emotionally drained. Both people begin surviving separately instead of living together.

2. Shared Trauma Creates Fast Emotional Bonds

Few people outside corrections truly understand what officers witness and carry.

The dark humor.

The manipulation.

The violence.

The constant alertness.

The humanity seen at its worst.

Coworkers often become the only people who “get it.” That understanding can become dangerous when emotional intimacy with coworkers begins replacing emotional intimacy at home.

Many affairs in corrections begin emotionally long before they become physical. It starts with:

- Venting to the coworker instead of the spouse.
- Seeking comfort from someone on shift.
- Feeling emotionally safer with coworkers than with family.
- Sharing vulnerabilities at work that never get shared at home.

Over time, emotional dependence grows while the relationship at home weakens.

3. Fatigue Lowers Boundaries

Trauma and fatigue change people slowly.

Not suddenly.

Not dramatically.

Incrementally.

The dial turns so slowly that many officers eventually lose sight of who they have become. An officer who once swore they would never cross certain lines may gradually rationalize behavior they once condemned:

- “My spouse doesn’t understand me anymore.”
- “We’re basically roommates anyway.”
- “I deserve to feel appreciated.”
- “Nothing physical happened.”
- “This person is just helping me cope.”

These stories become dangerous because they soften boundaries before anyone realizes what is happening. Affairs often do not begin with lust. They begin with emotional starvation.

4. Corrections Culture Can Normalize Boundary Violations

In some environments, flirtation, emotional affairs, secrecy, and inappropriate relationships become normalized. When stress is high and morale is low, people seek comfort anywhere they can find it.

The problem is that temporary emotional relief often creates permanent damage:

- Broken trust
- Destroyed marriages
- Emotional trauma for children
- Financial collapse
- Shame and regret
- Professional consequences

And many officers later admit they never intended to become “that person.”

The Slow Alienation of Families

One of the greatest dangers in corrections is not a dramatic collapse. It is gradual emotional withdrawal. A spouse may watch their partner become colder, more detached, more cynical, less patient, less emotionally available. Meanwhile, the officer may not even realize it is happening.

Hypervigilance that protects survival at work often damages connection at home. Officers may begin treating family members like emotional threats rather than safe relationships.

Eventually:

- Communication decreases.
- Intimacy fades.
- Resentment grows.
- Home becomes another stressful environment instead of a refuge.

At that point, both people become vulnerable. Not because they are bad people. But because disconnected people search for connection.

The Solutions: Protecting the Home Front Intentionally

The answer is not shame. The answer is awareness, honesty, boundaries, and proactive protection of the relationship before crisis happens.

1. Share the Job—Appropriately

Many officers try to “protect” their spouse by sharing nothing about work. But complete emotional shutdown creates loneliness inside the marriage. Spouses do not need graphic details. But they do need emotional access.

Simple conversations matter:

- “Today was rough.”
- “I’m carrying stress.”
- “I need a hug right now.”
- “I don’t want this job changing who we are.”

A spouse cannot support struggles they never see.

2. Turn Toward Your Partner, Not Away

When stress increases, many officers emotionally turn toward coworkers because it feels easier. But the healthier path is intentionally turning toward the person you chose to build a life with.

That means:

- Confiding in your spouse before coworkers.
- Protecting emotional intimacy.
- Maintaining transparency.
- Addressing resentment early.
- Fighting for connection instead of escaping from discomfort.

Healthy marriages are not maintained accidentally in corrections. They must be defended intentionally.

3. Maintain Clear Boundaries

Officers often believe boundary violations happen suddenly. They do not. They happen through repeated small compromises:

- Private conversations
- Emotional dependency
- Secrecy
- Texting outside necessity
- Sharing relationship frustrations with coworkers
- Seeking validation from someone else

Strong boundaries protect everyone. A good question to ask is:

“Would I behave this way if my spouse were standing next to me?”

If the answer is no, the line may already be moving.

4. Find Joy Outside the Job

Corrections cannot become the entirety of someone’s identity. When work becomes life, emotional health collapses.

Officers need:

- Hobbies
- Faith or spiritual grounding
- Exercise
- Friendships outside corrections
- Date nights
- Family traditions
- Laughter unrelated to the job

The healthiest officers are often the ones who remember they are more than the uniform.

5. Agencies Must Support Families Too

Departments and administrations must recognize that family wellness is officer wellness. Marriage workshops, peer support, counseling access, family orientation programs, trauma education, and confidential mental health services should not be optional afterthoughts.

Strong families improve:

- Retention
- Mental health
- Decision-making
- Safety
- Morale
- Longevity in the profession

When we protect staff's families—the people waiting at home—we are also protecting the staff themselves and the careers they have worked hard to build.

Final Thoughts

Corrections changes people.

That reality cannot be ignored.

But becoming emotionally disconnected, cynical, unfaithful, or isolated does not have to be inevitable. Most broken relationships in corrections do not fail overnight. They erode quietly while nobody notices the distance growing.

The danger is not always the catastrophic moment. Sometimes it is simply the slow turning of the dial. Until one day an officer looks in the mirror and realizes they crossed boundaries they once swore they never would.

The solution begins with awareness.

Protect the marriage the same way you protect security. Guard the relationship the same way you guard the perimeter. Fight for the home front with the same commitment used to survive the institution.

Because no career success is worth coming home to an empty home and an empty life.

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Peer Support Perspectives

By Stephanie Rawlings, MS

Peer Support and Romantic Relationships: Where We Must Draw the Line

Q:

Is it okay for a peer support team member to engage in a romantic relationship with someone they met during a peer support session?

Short Answer: No.

The first thing to understand about peer support programs in corrections is this: trust is difficult to earn in our profession. Corrections staff are not naturally trusting people—and for good reason. We make people, programs, administrators, and basically everyone prove their trustworthiness before we accept them. In many agencies, we even expect rookies to “prove themselves” through involvement in a critical incident or enduring an assault before they are truly accepted by the team.

Peer support programs faced that same uphill battle when they began gaining momentum in corrections over the last decade. The reason is the same reason Employee Assistance Programs often go underutilized: trust. Staff worry that what they share will later be talked about, mocked, weaponized, or used against them in some way.

Peer support teams earn credibility slowly—through consistent respect for employees’ psychological safety and through maintaining extremely high standards of integrity and conduct. That is why romantic involvement between a peer support team member and someone they met through peer support is inappropriate.

Peer support recipients are often at their most vulnerable when they engage with the team. They may feel isolated, overwhelmed, or convinced nobody understands what they are experiencing—especially when the issue is work-related. Then, perhaps for the first time, they find someone who listens, understands, and supports them.

When we consider whether romantic involvement is appropriate in this setting, we must think through the potential ramifications for:

- The recipient
- The peer support team member
- The peer support team as a whole
- The agency itself.

The Peer Support Recipient

First and foremost, the recipient came to peer support because there was a problem. They reached out—or were referred—because they needed support. They may be emotionally overwhelmed, uncertain about the future, and not functioning as they normally would. Introducing romantic involvement into that vulnerable situation can create confusion and additional emotional harm.

Consider these questions:

1. When the crisis passes, how will the recipient feel about the peer supporter who “swooped in” during one of the most difficult periods of their life?
2. What happens if the relationship ends badly?
3. What if the recipient later questions whether the support was genuine or motivated by personal interest?

The first directive of peer support is simple: **do no harm.**

I would encourage peer supporters to take it one step further:

Do not create conditions where harm becomes possible.

The Peer Support Team Member

For the peer support team member, there is really one major issue to consider:

What do you think your reputation will become if you use your role as a peer supporter to begin a romantic relationship?

Perception matters in corrections. Even if intentions were genuine, the appearance of exploiting a vulnerable situation can permanently damage credibility.

A very wise supervisor in my first corrections wellness position reminded me daily: **“Protect the baby.”** The “baby” was our newly formed staff wellness program.

Staff wellness programs are becoming more common in corrections, but they are only as effective as the reputation they hold among staff. These programs still face challenges in funding, staffing, and administrative support. The reality is that wellness programs are far easier to eliminate than they are to sustain. The collective reputation of a peer support team is only as strong as the weakest link on the team. It requires every team member to operate with exceptional character and integrity.

The Team and the Program

One inappropriate relationship can damage years of trust-building. If staff begin to question the motives of peer supporters, participation drops.

Employees stop reaching out.

Confidentiality becomes suspect.

Rumors spread.

The entire program can lose legitimacy.

Peer support teams survive because staff believe the team exists solely to support them—not for personal gain, favoritism, or inappropriate relationships. Once that perception is damaged, it can be nearly impossible to repair.

Agency Liability

There is also a very real liability issue for the agency.

Consider this scenario:

An employee experiencing significant stress reaches out to peer support. Maybe they are on a corrective action plan. Maybe they are involved in an investigation. Maybe they are struggling personally or professionally. Through peer support contact, a romantic relationship develops.

Later, the employee faces discipline, termination, or another adverse administrative action. Or perhaps the relationship simply ends badly. Now imagine a sexual harassment allegation emerges.

At that point, the agency has very little defense if the relationship originated through peer support contact. Human Resources departments immediately recognize the risk here because the power imbalance and emotional vulnerability involved create significant liability exposure.

Worse yet:

- The peer support team may enter an irrecoverable downward spiral
- Staff confidence may collapse and
- Leadership may decide the program itself is no longer worth the risk

At minimum, justification has now been handed over to anyone who already questioned whether peer support programs should exist at all.

Suggestions to Avoid the Risk

There are practical ways peer support teams can reduce these risks and protect both staff and programs:

- Utilize both a male and female peer support team member during sessions whenever possible.
- Work in pairs.
- Regularly check your own vulnerabilities and self-awareness. If you recognize temptation or emotional attachment developing, remove yourself immediately from contact with that recipient.
- If anything occurs during a session that makes you uncomfortable, notify your peer support chain of command immediately and do not schedule additional sessions with that employee.
- Use caution when sharing personal phone numbers. Whenever possible, agencies should provide work phones for peer support team members.
- If you are going through a difficult personal season yourself, ask to step away from the team temporarily. This may not be the right time in your life to serve in this role.
- Acknowledge the reality that corrections has a documented history of workplace affairs and blurred professional boundaries.
- Protect your personal relationships and consistently remind yourself of your priorities.

Final Thoughts

Peer support is built on trust, integrity, and psychological safety. Every interaction either strengthens or weakens those foundations. As peer supporters, we are entrusted with people during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives. That responsibility requires boundaries that are clear, ethical, and unwavering. Not because we distrust peer supporters—but because we must protect the people we serve, the credibility of the team, and the future of peer support itself.

IN MEMORIAM

Never Forgotten

John Edwards

Correction Officer

Massachusetts Department of Correction

Quotes

OF THE MONTH

“

“Courage is not having the strength to go on; it is going on when you don’t have the strength.”

Theodore Roosevelt

“Do not judge me by my success; judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.”

Nelson Mandela

“Fall seven times, stand up eight.”

Japanese Proverb

”



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