CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

VOLUME: 23



A Desert Waters Publication

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NOVEMBER 2026

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Greetings,

As we enter this season of Thanksgiving, I find myself reflecting on the many people who have joined me along my journey in corrections. I am especially grateful for those who have influenced, encouraged, and inspired me along the way.

In this issue, several of those individuals have generously shared their thoughts, experiences, and wisdom. What makes their contributions even more meaningful is that many have continued pouring into correctional staff wellness long after their well-deserved retirements. As you read their articles, I think you'll recognize what I have been blessed to witness firsthand: **this work is more than a career to them. It is a passion.** Knowing that people like them continue investing in the men and women of corrections gives me tremendous hope for the future of our profession.

On a special note, one of our own longtime Master Instructors, **Brent Parker**, has decided to retire "for real" this time and embark on some new adventures with his lovely wife, Lisa.

Training alongside Brent at Hawaii DCR was truly one of the highlights of my career, and not just because we were working in paradise!



FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

You see, back in 2019, while Brent was training my wellness team in Illinois, we sat down over a burger at a local restaurant. I remember telling him that my dream was to someday do what he did: travel to correctional agencies across the country, helping staff discover how they could move from fatigue to fulfillment. There is something incredibly special about watching that light bulb go off when someone realizes that fulfillment in this profession really is possible.

Little did I know how much that lunch conversation would shape my own journey. And discovering that Brent and I had grown up in the same county, despite later living on opposite sides of the country, now seems almost ordained.

Brent, thank you for the example you've set, the wisdom you've shared, and the countless lives you've touched throughout your career. I wish you and Lisa nothing but happiness, wonderful travels, and new adventures in this next chapter.

This Thanksgiving, I am especially thankful for the people who remind us that while career may end, our ability to make a difference never has to.



Executive Director

When a Wellness Program Isn't Enough

By Stephanie Rawlings, MSc

One of the challenges we continue to see organizations face is the belief that "a program" can address employee wellness in a vacuum.

I have lost count of how many corrections administrators have shared with me the list of programs, trainings, resources, and initiatives they have purchased or implemented—often with significant investments of time, money, and energy—only to say, **"We're still not seeing the change we hoped for."**

The culture hasn't changed. Staff interactions haven't meaningfully improved. Morale remains low. People are still exhausted, disconnected, or leaving. That does not necessarily mean the program failed. Sometimes, it means we are asking a program to solve problems it was never designed—or capable—of solving by itself.

In an upcoming white paper, we take a closer look at this challenge and discuss ways organizations can create an environment in which the wellness tools they implement actually have an opportunity to take root and thrive.

In that white paper, Dr. Caterina Spinaris will offer a profound perspective that I believe should be considered whenever we evaluate the success of employee wellness efforts:

We may need to ask a different question: How much of the employee's total burden was the intervention actually designed to address?

If most of an organization's wellness investment is directed toward changing individual employees while many of the strongest sources of strain are located in their work environment, modest or poor results should not be surprising.

That distinction matters.

And perhaps more importantly, we should not interpret the absence of dramatic change as evidence that "wellness doesn't work."

Employee wellness is not something we simply provide to staff. It is something we build into the environment in which staff work. If we want healthier employees, stronger teams, better retention, and healthier correctional cultures, the question cannot only be, "What wellness program should we implement?"

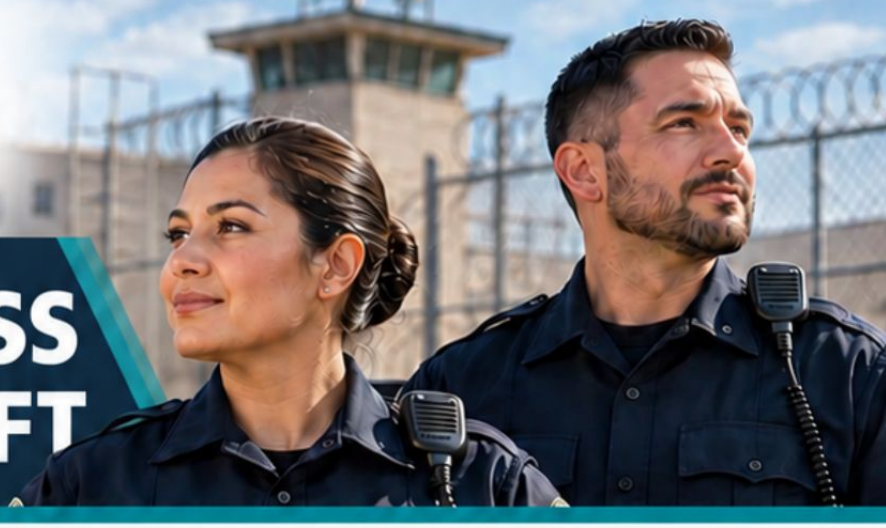
We also have to ask: **"What kind of environment are we asking that program to grow in?"**

Because ultimately, sustainable employee well-being requires more than planting the seed.

We have to tend the soil.



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Generative Corrections: What the Heck is That? Part 1

By Gregory R. Morton, MSc

My day-to-day, full-time corrections career started in 1975 at a Maximum-Security prison. I was old school. For that matter, we all were back then. I retired at the very beginning of 2010. Except I didn't really retire.

First, I facilitated an inmate Parenting class for several years at that same penitentiary, followed by a community-based social skills class for high-risk parolees. After which I received certification as a staff wellness instructor from Desert Waters Correctional Outreach and delivered that material to working staff at locations throughout the country. And to staff from four other countries as well.

Then, I took a break from instructor work and completed an on-line master's degree in industrial and organizational psychology, concentrating on the expanding field of human neuroscience as it applies to professions with inherent stress and trauma.

Those experiences taught me something revelatory about both staff and incarcerated individual populations.

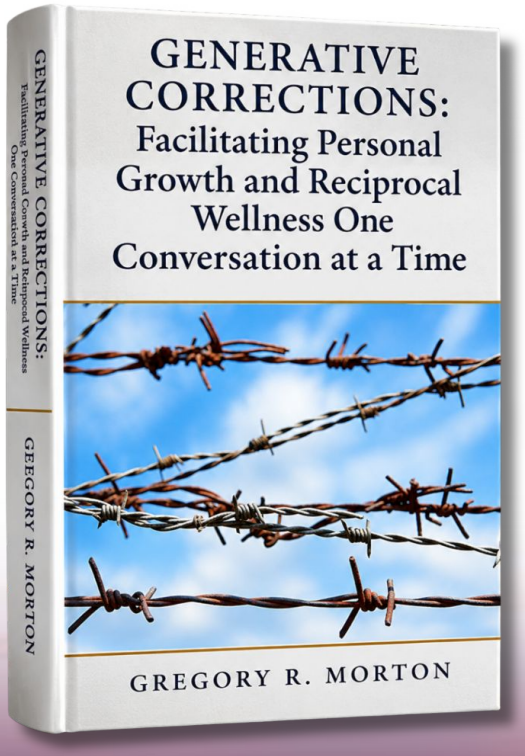
1. *Incarcerated individuals need support to heal and change.*
2. *Correctional staff face a serious occupational health crisis.*

BACK TO TOP

For starters, the incarcerated individual population is full of individuals who recognize the harm they have caused and want to live life differently in the future, but are concealed in a system not yet designed to unpack the adverse trauma, guilt, shame, and social isolation they have lived through. The system is also not currently designed to help them repack their emotions and behaviors with the prosocial practices they aspire to without ever recognizing that they want to make changes.

Secondly, because of the way we do the work we do, correctional staff are one of the most mentally and physically damaged occupational groups in the world. International research is absolutely consistent and reveals what might as well be called an international occupational health tragedy. Studies from Australia (Trounson & Pfeifer, 2017), Italy (Viotti, 2016), Israel (Suliman & Einat, 2018), China (Jin et al., 2018), Brazil/France/Canada (Bezarra et al., 2016), and the United States (Spinaris & Brocato, 2019) consistently show that damaging elements are inherent to the profession as it is currently designed.

Presented with such compelling data, I wrote a book called:



GENERATIVE CORRECTIONS:
Facilitating Personal Growth and Reciprocal Wellness One Conversation at a Time

Let's start with the beginning of the book title.

What is "Generativity" and what does it have to do with corrections?

The term was first used in the writings of developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, in 1950. He considered it to be one of the stages of adult life, when older adults pass on life lessons to younger adults so as to positively influence their futures and thereby contribute to the greater society, while simultaneously creating a positive legacy for themselves. As the term became more widely used, its definition broadened so that it also came to mean mentoring, training, and coaching in the work world, regardless of the age or life stage of the individuals. So that generative interactions at work inspire a sense of commitment to one's profession by making contributions that extend beyond the self and that foster the development and health of individuals and social systems. And it is this expanded definition of the term that my book uses.

Generative Corrections is designed to stimulate emotional and psychological growth in the incarcerated individuals we supervise. (I know what you're thinking here: He wants us all to be Social Workers. Hold that thought. We're not there yet.)

I first came upon it in my research in a chapter titled "Generativity behind bars: Some 'redemptive truth' about prison society" (Maruna et al., 2004), in a book called The generative society: Caring for future generations (de St. Aubin et al., 2004). This chapter states its purpose as:

> *We believe there is emerging evidence that generativity works. As such, we believe that the development, encouragement, and facilitation of generativity should be at the center of the correctional enterprise. . .. We contend that if the world of corrections were to become more of a generative society, that is, an environment in which generative commitments were modeled and nurtured, and opportunities for generative activities were promoted and rewarded—it would simply be more effective at reducing repeat offending. (Maruna et al., 2004, p. 133).*

And then I found this article: "In search of generativity in prison officer work: Balancing care and control in custodial settings" (Halsey & Deegan, 2016), in which the authors say: "Through their tone and demeanor, efficiency and fairness in responding to situations, willingness to show and cultivate respect, and, most pertinently, capacity to impede or facilitate efforts toward 'rehabilitation,' officers are uniquely placed to influence prisoners' lives" (p. 53).

This statement was supported by an earlier article by one of these authors that provided some cultural optimism:

> *Harder but equally important is to improve the ability of staff and prisoners to speak with each other on equal terms about their concerns – even about their views on crime and its causes, imprisonment, and the process and challenges of desistance. This is a two-sided endeavour that requires change in attitude by both groups in order that constructive, professional and supportive relationships become the norm rather than the exception. (Halsey & Harris, 2011, p. 89.)*

Then, two more dominoes fell into place. First, during an interview with the Deputy Director of a state DOC she said, **"We want our staff to be Coaches more than Referees."** That sent me to an article by a Community Corrections Administrator where he applied this wording to the jobs of parole and probation officers (Lovins et al., 2018). As such, it certainly applies to institutional case managers and counselors. And from there, teachers and vocational instructors. And work crew supervisors. So, why not COs with their unit or pod orderlies, or yard crews?

When we Referee, we supervise and direct.
When we Coach, we support and encourage.

We Referee because we set limits, we watch for and cite rule violations, we prevent abuses, we adjudicate fairly, and we separate emotionally charged individuals if the action threatens to get out of hand. We Referee to focus on personal responsibility and to assure accountability. We Coach by guiding responsible decision making and problem solving, and inviting emotional growth. We Coach through supplying professional understanding when needed and the demonstration of dependability, respectful communications, admitting our mistakes, and our own paths toward self-awareness. With this text I am going to argue that all corrections employees with direct incarcerated individual contact can apply these blended skills. In fact, as you examine your career, I bet you can find examples of both in your own personal history.

Typically, however, our cultures only allow us to tell colleagues how good we are as Referees, keeping our Coaching events in the background. Don't want to seem to get too close to "them", you know. So, before we get too far out on a limb, I want to emphasize that Refereeing and Coaching are blended skills, not balanced ones. If we balanced the two, that would mean that when you did one, you had to do the other an equal number of times. In a blended environment, with some populations on some days, you do more of one than the other, but both are used when they are needed. And this does not mean we all become Social Workers, because I want to clearly emphasize that Coaches and Social Workers are not the same.

When the cultural movement towards Dynamic Security started receiving widespread publicity, summarized as:

> *There is an increasing interest within correctional settings to encourage meaningful interactions between officers and incarcerated individuals as a method to reduce conflict and promote security. Often referred to as 'dynamic security', this process relies on relationship-building and open communication along with prioritizing rehabilitative goals." . . .*
>
> *"[d]emonstrating genuine concern for the well-being of those incarcerated is instrumental in developing a rapport with them, gaining their trust, and diffusing potential conflicts (Kilmer et al., 2023, p. 521, 522),*

we began to establish a cultural context in which the logic for generativity as a foundational correctional concept was established.

But by now you might be wondering whatever happened to my concern for the health and well-being of staff? Almost all of the above is concerned with incarcerated individual success. Do staff get overlooked again, within this generativity idea?

I will answer that question with a single one liner: Would your family rather have you come home with a newer, generativity skill set, or continue with the more common, old school coercive skill set? Actually, before we go any further, why don't you ask them.

Two more things. It is not my intent to imply that we should abandon our necessary traditional security practices. We still need to conduct counts, maintain tool control, write reports, and control contraband. We will always need safe and well-ordered institutions. That's why Refereeing skills are still necessary.

And, if your reaction to reduced coercion and increased “relationship-building and open communication” is a worry that we are opening ourselves up to increased violence, just remember that not changing the design of our profession means that our international occupational health tragedy continues too. Should the potential for violence be apparent, as it sometimes is in our jobs, we have moved beyond generativity tools into Refereeing territory. This book does not ask you to increase your risk. That would quite clearly contradict our desire to improve your health and well-being.

Editor’s Note: *Part II of Greg Morton’s article is scheduled to be published in the December 2026 issue of the Correctional Oasis. Citations for all references will be provided in Part II. And Greg is scheduled to be our webinar guest in early 2027. We hope to see you there!*





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Farewell, My Friends!

By Brent Parker, BSc

After over 30 years in corrections, I can't imagine a better way to have continued serving than with Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. It has been an honor to serve as a DW trainer for the last 10 years, and now I have made the decision to fully retire.

Just a few parting thoughts...

The staff wellness programs developed by Dr. Caterina Spinaris are among the best I've seen in over 40 years of corrections work, and I wish every correctional professional could get access to these programs. The Desert Waters programs make a huge difference for participants and their families. The content and classroom conversations save lives, restore relationships and inform staff toward better health and happiness. The classes create real opportunities for people to heal in every way from the stress and rigors of everyday corrections work.

Personally, it has been a wonderful experience to deliver the Desert Waters training programs to so many dedicated correctional professionals, at so many agencies across America. Everywhere we have been invited to train, we have found people in various stages of distress. Really good people looking to understand and heal. It was such a blessing to be a small part of these programs, and **I am truly humbled.**

To those who we have trained, please stay safe, take care of yourself and your families and, of course, be there for each other. Thank you for your participation in class; for laughing at jokes only corrections people understand, and for more fond memories than I could ever count.



Every class allowed me to learn, grow and heal myself, and I believe I got as much from you, as you did from me. "Thank You" for all you do in the field of corrections and law enforcement. **You are the Best of the Best.**

A very "Special Thanks" to my dear friend, **Caterina**, for the opportunity to train for Desert Waters. It has always felt like a special calling and it is so hard to say good-bye to this great team. And to **Judy**, **Corrin** and **Ted** for the endless support, guidance and love. There are really no words to express my gratitude.

And finally, to some of the best trainers in the world; what a privilege and a joy it has been to train alongside such passionate, skilled trainers: **Caterina**, **Greg**, **Jeff**, **Susan**, **John**, **Steve**, **Daria**, **Cecile**, **Stephanie**, **Chris**, **Justin**, **Liz**, **Howie** and **Lydia**. I am so honored to have been on this team and I will always cherish our time together, "Thank You". Desert Waters is in really good hands moving forward, and I already miss you all so much. Keep up the great training!

Lisa and I look forward to enjoying retirement with our adult kids and grandkids, hopefully some travel and, of course, some golf. I go with a feeling of accomplishment, a grateful heart, and continued prayers for all my fellow trainers and correctional professionals. **May God bless you and keep you safe.**

Love,
Brent Parker



The Skill of Validation: What It Is & What It Is Not–Part 1

By Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC

At Desert Waters Correctional Outreach (DWCO), we teach about the importance of using the interpersonal skill of **validation** in several of our courses. We emphasize its value in strengthening relationships, reducing interpersonal friction, de-escalating conflict, and fostering cooperation and trust. Validation is particularly important in correctional environments, where employees routinely encounter individuals experiencing intense emotions, such as distress or frustration, and interpersonal disagreements.

Yet validation is a skill that is sometimes misunderstood. Some people assume that validating another person means agreeing with that person, approving of their choices, or condoning their behavior. Others worry that validation amounts to making excuses for misconduct, thereby weakening expectations for accountability or undermining the consequences of inappropriate actions.

Neither assumption is correct.

In fact, validation can be practiced while maintaining firm boundaries, communicating disagreement, requiring behavioral changes, and holding people fully accountable for their choices and actions.

Understanding these distinctions is essential to using validation effectively, especially in supervisory and leadership roles.



What Is Validation?

Who among us does not appreciate being treated with respect? Who does not want their feelings and concerns to be taken seriously? And who does not wish to be understood, particularly when experiencing distress, frustration, disappointment, or conflict?

Most of us want others to recognize that our thoughts, emotional reactions, choices, and behaviors did not arise in a vacuum. They developed within a particular context, influenced by our experiences, circumstances, beliefs, expectations, temperament, and personal history.

Validation is the interpersonal skill of communicating to others that we can understand how they came to think, feel, choose, or act as they did, given their circumstances and personal characteristics.

In other words, validation conveys the message: “When I consider what you have experienced, what matters to you, how you understand the situation, and what you were dealing with at the time, **I can see how you arrived at your perspective or responded as you did.”**

This does not necessarily mean that we would have responded in the same way. It does not mean that we agree with the person's interpretation of events. Nor does it mean that we consider their choices appropriate.

It simply means that **we recognize that there may be understandable reasons for their reactions and behavior, even when we disagree with their conclusions or disapprove of their actions.**



Empathy and Validation: Closely Related, but Distinct

Empathy involves attempting to understand another person's internal experience—to “put ourselves in their shoes” and view a situation through their perspective.

Validation takes that understanding one step further.

Empathy is the effort to understand another person's experience; validation is the communication of that understanding.

For example, a correctional supervisor may recognize that an employee who has worked multiple mandatory overtime shifts is exhausted, frustrated, and resentful about another unexpected schedule change. That understanding reflects empathy.

The supervisor practices validation by communicating it: "I can understand why you're frustrated. You've already worked several extra shifts this week, and you and your family were counting on having tomorrow off."

That statement does not promise the employee that the schedule will change. It does not establish that every complaint about staffing is justified. It simply acknowledges an understandable reaction to difficult circumstances.

And that acknowledgment may make an important difference in how the subsequent conversation unfolds.



In each instance, validation focuses on communicating understanding of the person's internal experience and the circumstances that contributed to it.

Understanding how a behavior came about is different from determining whether that behavior was acceptable.

This distinction is especially important when another person's conduct violates our personal values, professional standards, or organizational expectations. We do not abandon or violate those standards if we acknowledge that the person's reaction has an understandable history or context.

Validation Does Not Require Taking Sides

In conflict situations, people sometimes hesitate to validate someone because they fear that doing so means conceding an argument or admitting that the other person is right. But validation is not a contest over whose perspective prevails.

Imagine two correctional employees who disagree about how a work assignment was handled. Each believes the other acted unfairly. A supervisor might tell one employee: "Given what you understood about the assignment and what happened during the previous shift, I can see why you interpreted your coworker's actions as inappropriate."

The supervisor might also tell the other employee: "I can understand why you believed you were simply following the established procedure and felt unfairly criticized." Both perspectives can be validated without concluding that both interpretations are factually correct.



Validation recognizes the understandable elements of a person's subjective experience without necessarily affirming the objective accuracy of that perceptions or interpretations.

This distinction helps supervisors remain fair and attentive to different perspectives without prematurely determining who is right, who is wrong, or what action should follow.

What Validation Is Not: Excusing Misconduct or Bypassing Accountability

An equally important distinction is that **validation does not excuse harmful, inappropriate, unethical, or unlawful behavior. Nor does it remove the need for accountability or appropriate consequences.**

Understanding why a person behaved in a particular way does not mean that the behavior should be tolerated or excused.

People are influenced by numerous factors, including past experiences, temperament, accumulated stress, perceived threats, workplace conditions, and emotional distress. These factors may help explain their reactions and choices. But **explanations are not necessarily justifications**. Understanding a behavior does not mean justifying it.

For example, an employee who has been working excessive overtime may become increasingly irritable, overwhelmed, and prone to angry outbursts. A supervisor can genuinely understand how fatigue and frustration contributed to those reactions. Nevertheless, the employee remains responsible for maintaining professional conduct.



A validating supervisor might say: "I can understand how exhausted and frustrated you've become with the repeated overtime assignments. You've been under considerable pressure, and I can see how that contributed to your anger. **And speaking abusively to your coworkers is not acceptable. We need to address what happened, and you are expected to communicate professionally, even when you're frustrated."**

Notice that the supervisor does not dismiss the employee's circumstances or minimize the conduct. Both realities are acknowledged. The employee's frustration is understandable. The abusive behavior remains unacceptable. One does not cancel out the other.

Validation and Discipline Can Coexist

Some leaders may worry that validating an employee before imposing discipline sends a mixed message or weakens the seriousness of the consequences. However, effective validation can strengthen the way accountability is communicated.

Consider an employee who responds to a supervisor's instructions with insulting language and refuses to follow a lawful, appropriate directive.

The supervisor might say: "I understand that you believed the assignment was unfair and that you were already frustrated by several events earlier in the shift. Given those circumstances, I can see how your frustration intensified. **And refusing a lawful directive and speaking disrespectfully are serious matters. We will address the conduct in accordance with agency policy."**



The validating statement does not diminish the seriousness of the behavior. The employee may still receive corrective action or formal discipline, as warranted by the facts, agency policy, and applicable procedures.

In fact, validation may help the employee hear the corrective message more clearly because the employee is less likely to conclude that the supervisor has ignored or dismissed the circumstances surrounding the incident.

Accountability addresses what a person did and what consequences are appropriate. Validation acknowledges how the person came to that point.

Both can be necessary for effective supervision.

Importantly, understanding the context of misconduct should also inform a fair review of relevant circumstances without predetermining the outcome. It may identify organizational conditions that require attention, such as excessive workloads, inadequate training, conflicting instructions, or deficient supervision.

Addressing those conditions does not eliminate individual accountability. Likewise, holding an individual accountable does not eliminate the organization's responsibility to examine its own contribution to a problem.



Why the Word “And” Matters

One practical way to combine validation with expectations, boundaries, or corrective feedback is to use the word **"and"** rather than **"but."**

Consider the difference between these statements:

1. *I understand that you're exhausted from working so much overtime, **but** you still have to follow the rules.*
2. *I understand that you're exhausted from working so much overtime, **and** you are still expected to follow the rules.*

The first statement may be heard as dismissing the acknowledgment that preceded it. The second presents two realities that can coexist. The employee is exhausted. The employee remains responsible for following policy.

Using “and” does not guarantee that the listener will respond positively. Nor is it a substitute for sincerity, fairness, or sound judgment.

However, it offers a useful way to communicate that understanding and accountability are not mutually exclusive.

This approach also applies when requesting behavioral change: *"Given what you've experienced in previous assignments, I can understand why you became apprehensive when you were reassigned to that unit. And going forward, I expect you to address such concerns professionally, without raising your voice or making insulting remarks."*

Validation demonstrates understanding. Accountability makes expectations clear.

Editor’s Note: *Part II of this article is scheduled to be published in the December 2026 issue of the Correctional Oasis.*



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Quote OF THE MONTH

The cup that is full of sweet water cannot spill bitter-tasting drops, however sharply it is knocked.

—Amy Carmichael

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IN MEMORIAM

Never Forgotten

Haig Zakaryan
Correctional Officer
California Department
of Corrections and Rehabilitation

Isaiah Robinson-Graze
Correctional Officer
California Department
of Corrections and Rehabilitation



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