

DEVELOPING INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS WORKPLACE STRESS, BURNOUT & TRAUMA IN CORRECTIONS

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Everyone who has worked in the corrections field is aware of the unique challenges and pressures encountered by corrections professionals. Those who have been around for any length of time also know the serious personal toll the work can take. Unfortunately, in common with many other professions, corrections culture has traditionally failed to address the issue of workers' stress burnout and trauma.

However, social attitudes toward workplace stress and its effects are changing, and the problem has recently emerged as a major concern. As people in the western world begin to recognize the pervasive effects of stress on their lives and institutions, employers are also examining the costs and consequences of workers' stress. As it turns out, those costs are massive, and continue to escalate¹. The direct cost of distressed and demoralized employees has been estimated at over \$150 billion per year to the U.S. economy², and one-third of workers consider job stress the single greatest stressor in their lives, ranking ahead of divorce and death³. It is also clear that job stress is strongly linked to increased use of the health-care system and the resulting financial demands on that system⁴. In terms of corrections, there has certainly been a ground swell of concern, culminating most recently in an extensive report on correctional officer stress by the U.S. Department of Justice⁵. This report substantiates the serious consequences of workplace stress in corrections and calls for a committed effort to intervene.

THE UNIQUE PROFILE OF WORKPLACE STRESS IN CORRECTIONS

Those working in the corrections field are subjected to two very different types of workplace stress - systemic workplace stress and traumatic workplace stress. In common with other occupational groups employed in organization settings, corrections professionals experience the full range of systemic stresses inherent to most work environments. These include job stress factors such as scarce resources, pay issues, conditions of work, role stress, interpersonal conflict, dysfunctional management styles, etc. Exposure to discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace are also considered sources of systemic workplace stress. However, corrections professionals are also exposed to significant levels of traumatic stress resulting from contact with the corrections population. Two types of traumatic stress are involved: (1) primary traumatic stress which refers to the direct experience of trauma (e.g., assault, threats of violence, and intimidation), and; (2) secondary traumatic stress, which refers to the effects of dealing with traumatic material at second hand (e.g., hearing about traumatic, violent and distressing events, or witnessing others being subjected to a traumatic experiences). While most people are now familiar with primary trauma and its effects, the impact of secondary trauma has only recently been recognized as placing workers at risk for a wide range of serious traumatic stress effects⁶.

THE EFFECTS OF SYSTEMIC & TRAUMATIC WORKPLACE STRESS IN CORRECTIONS

We know that the negative outcomes of systemic and traumatic workplace stress affect individuals, their families, the institution, and the employer^{6, 7}. We also know that the problem is increasing and that both personal and financial costs are escalating.

Consequences to the individual may include a wide range of physiological, psychological, cognitive, behavioral and interpersonal consequences. At the most severe end of the continuum, physical health outcomes include cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal problems, increased risk for cancer, and immune system problems. Clinical depression, increased suicide risk, anxiety disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and addictions are also among the clinical outcomes of long-term high-level workplace stress. Unfortunately, long-term stress symptoms such as poor communication, withdrawal, aggression, mistrust and defensiveness often contribute to family breakdown and loss of the individual's support network.

In terms of the organization, effects include decreased productivity, poor morale, increased staff conflict, absenteeism, increased overwork and overtime. Stressed individuals are also more likely to demonstrate poor judgment and are at risk to "cut corners" and engage in more hazardous practices.

Direct budget-related costs to the employer are also significant in terms of increased sick leave, increased long-term disability, higher rates of staff turnover, and increased costs of recruitment, training and orientation.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

The problem of workplace stress in corrections is complex and multiply determined. It follows that effective interventions need to address three critical elements: the organizational culture, management skills and attitudes, and properties of a workplace wellness program and its implementation strategy.

Historically, corrections culture has not recognized the pervasive problem of workplace stress and trauma. Although increasing attention has been directed toward the need for critical incident stress (CIS) protocols, the issues of chronic long-term stress and secondary trauma remain largely neglected. A corrections culture that is able to support an effective intervention strategy needs to:

- Recognize and accept the problem of workplace systemic and traumatic stress
- Develop a serious commitment to address the issue
- Normalize staff attitudes toward systemic and traumatic stress effects, such that there is a general understanding that stress effects are common and that they affect all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, management level, etc

Management skills and attitudes are crucial to this problem. In large part, managers and supervisors determine both the macro- and micro-level workplace experiences of their staff.

Unfortunately, most managers lack knowledge and skills in this area, and are unaware of the impact of their own stress levels on their attitudes, decisions and behaviors. Thus, effective interventions would seek to train managers to:

- Become knowledgeable about workplace systemic and traumatic stress - the risk factors, mechanisms and effects
- Understand the role of leadership style and strategies in either promoting workplace wellness or in increasing workplace stress
- The type of workplace wellness intervention strategy is also important. Under optimal conditions, a comprehensive program can be implemented with the following considerations:
 - The program needs to be accessible to all staff regardless of job description, seniority or rank
 - The program should provide individuals with relevant background knowledge about the sources of stress and trauma, their mechanisms of action, and an opportunity to understand their own unique situation
 - The program should provide the tools necessary to develop an effective personal wellness plan and should support a personal responsibility model of workplace wellness

Because workplace stress is a pervasive long-term problem, effective programs should be sustainable and durably embedded in the workplace.

Effective programs and interventions need to be integrated with existing resources and services (e.g., CIS protocols, EAP plans, extended medical plans, etc.).

With these principles in mind, the author, in collaboration with the Corrections and Community Justice Division of the Justice Institute of British Columbia, has developed a comprehensive Workplace Stress, Burnout and Trauma in Corrections Program that includes both an employee wellness program as well as manager and supervisor training program.

THE EMPLOYEE WELLNESS PROGRAM

The employee wellness program is based on the workbook, *The Road Back to Wellness: Stress, Burnout and Trauma in Corrections*. Drawing from the latest research and best clinical practices, the book is designed to meet the needs of individual staff members by providing a three-part program featuring a personal responsibility model:

Section 1 introduces the issues of workplace systemic and traumatic stress, and their effects on the individual's personal and professional life.

Section 2 provides a battery of 17 self-assessment tools that help individuals to determine: their current levels of risk for systemic and traumatic workplace stress factors, their levels of self-care, and their current symptomatic profile.

Section 3 provides practical and effective tools to help individuals develop their own personalized wellness plans.

THE MANAGER AND SUPERVISORY TRAINING PROGRAM

Manager and supervisor training is based on the reference book, *The Manager's Guide to Stress Burnout and Trauma in Corrections*. The training program provides managers with a solid theory base regarding the mechanisms and effects of workplace systemic and traumatic stress in corrections. The theory and principles of management strategy are also covered with particular attention to their impact on worker stress. Managers are provided with assessment tools that help them to:

- Determine their own management style and its effect on subordinates
- Define the risk factor profile specific to their work group
- Assess for levels of workplace stress/wellness within their work group
- Determine the impact of workplace stress on unit functioning

The final section provides tools and templates to assist managers to develop practical management plans for their teams.

Program delivery has been specifically designed to increase accessibility. Thus, both the employee wellness and the managers training programs are available as:

- Stand-alone programs for individual members or managers
- On-line web-based courses through the Corrections and Community Justice Division of the Justice Institute of BC
- Facilitated on-site 2-day group programs. The employee wellness program can also be provided through a train-the-trainers model

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, corrections professionals are exposed to a unique set of systemic and traumatic workplace stresses. There is now ample evidence that failure to deal with this issue leads to serious consequences for individual employees, their families, the workplace environment and the employer. We cannot ignore the problem - it will not go away. In fact, we can anticipate amplified consequences over the next decade as the demographic bulge of "baby boomers" moves out of the work force. Our challenge will lie in coping with both increased stress vulnerability specific to an aging work force, as well as anticipated shortages in skilled and

desirable replacement staff. The demographics are changing rapidly - and the need to recruit and maintain a healthy workforce, with minimal attrition, will become critical.

Taking the longer view, this is actually the "good news". These pressures on the system, in conjunction with predicted turnover at all levels of management, will inevitably result in changes to the correctional culture and attitudes toward personnel management. Contemporary management policies and decisions can certainly help to guide this transition in a positive direction.

Building on recent research and changing attitudes within the field, we are now in a position to effectively address workplace stress and trauma in corrections - whether through our workplace wellness program or through other initiatives. Effective intervention requires both shifts in attitudes toward the problem as well as a commitment of effort and funding. However, we need to remember that failure to attend to this issue will only lead to further escalations in the personal and financial costs to corrections professionals and their organizations.

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