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**correctionAL officer MENTAL HEALTH:**  
**A Call for Change**  
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In the words of legendary motivational speaker Zig Ziglar, “You cannot solve a problem until you acknowledge that you have one….” That might seem obvious, but Ziglar takes it one step further. After we recognize a problem, he says, we should “take responsibility for solving it.” And make no mistake: We have a correctional officer mental health problem, and we all bear the responsibility for solving it.

So, what if we spoke out loud the truths many of us already know? Imagine a corrections academy somewhere in the United States. A class of 30 eager new recruits are seated at their desks, uniforms sharply pressed, shoes polished and shining. The academy director enters the room.

**The Welcome Briefing**

“Good morning, class,” he says, “and welcome to our first day of training. I know you’re all nervous and excited to get started and that’s okay. We here at the academy are just as excited for you. Today, you’re embarking on a noble profession and hopefully, a rewarding and challenging career. I’d like to go over a few things before I turn the time over to your instructors.”

The director shuffles some papers and slips on his reading glasses. “By the time you retire, [34% of you seated here today will have PTSD](https://www.correctionsone.com/corrections/articles/survey-twice-as-many-correctional-officers-suffer-from-ptsd-as-military-veterans-POZOwjMYmzeUAmim/). About one-third of you will [suffer from depression](https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/research/pdf/executive_summary_08142018.pdf) at some point in your careers. If you’re married now, or would like to be someday, you’re about [20% more likely to end up divorced](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/divorce-cops-corrections-gary-aumiller-ph-d-abpp/) than someone not working in corrections.”

The recruits exchange nervous glances. Is this some kind of joke?

But the director isn’t joking. And he’s not even close to being finished. “Welcome to the field of corrections, where you’re much more likely to [die from suicide](https://datastudio.google.com/u/0/reporting/45630efa-3ee8-4c8f-ab44-ccbe743f0b53/page/Kh2dC) than to be killed in the line of duty. Many you will become alcoholics, and if booze isn’t your thing, there are lots of other substances or behaviors to become addicted to.”

“But don’t worry, class,” the director continues. “We’re going to do everything in our power to train you up on things like de-escalation and defensive tactics because we don’t want to see anyone get physically injured. We’re going to teach you the laws of our fair state, instruct you on how to write reports and deal with inmates and safely conduct searches. Finally, we’re going to help you get physically fit — at least while you’re with us. Of course, inmates have all the time in the world to exercise, so keep that in mind.”

The class sits in stunned silence as reality sinks in.

“As for that ugly stuff about what this job can do to you and your relationships, well, sorry folks. You’ll just have to figure that out for yourselves. I mean, right now it probably doesn’t mean much to you, anyway. You’re here, you’ve gotten this far in the hiring process, and I know you’re raring to get started. Congratulations … we’re happy to have you with us!”

**Spotlight on Correctional Officer Mental Health**

If such an honest speech were ever actually given, how many recruits would show up for the next day of training — let alone the following weeks, months or years? How many would stick it out to see if the academy director was correct? Also, is he wrong?

Corrections is a tough calling. It takes both a physical and mental toll on those of us who are entrusted to deprive our fellow human beings of one of the most fundamental rights: liberty. Between shift work, the ever-present danger, being isolated from the rest of society, an “us versus them” mentality (staff versus inmates as well as staff versus administration) and the “never appear weak” mindset of correctional work, it’s no big surprise that emotional well-being, relationships, families and a sense of identity all suffer during the course of a correctional career. So, what do we do about it?

The sad answer, if history is any guide, is little to nothing. Certainly not enough.

As our imaginary academy director said, correctional officers are often left to cope with stressors on their own, supporting their own mental health in silence. Often, that means relying too heavily on each other, thus creating a highly dysfunctional support system that exacerbates the problem instead of solving it.

Ask any experienced correctional officer who they associate with outside of work and the response will likely be, “My fellow officers; I can’t trust people who don’t understand what I do.” While it’s great to have the support of your coworkers, relying on them for mental health support can be a bit like the blind leading the blind.

**Barriers to Improvement**

But what about supervisors and jail leadership? Can’t they help resolve some of these problems? They can certainly try, assuming they’re not part of the problem to begin with.

One of the greatest stressors in correctional work is the rule-oriented environment in which we operate. This tension can be greatly magnified by the perceived lack of support for line staff by supervisors and managers. Many officers have said something to the effect of, “When I’m at work, I’m doing the same time as the inmates. The difference is, they often get treated better than I do.” With that attitude, how likely is it that an officer would reach out to his or her chain of command when they’re suffering some type of mental health crisis?

Many agencies have implemented Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) or [peer support programs](https://www.correctionsone.com/officer-safety/articles/6-steps-to-building-a-peer-support-program-in-corrections-k8Aid1N04rmnLt7S/). Though well intended, these programs often address symptoms without recognizing the root causes of the problems. All too often, such programs go underused because correctional staff don’t believe that the help they’ll receive for work, life and family problems will be [provided confidentially](https://www.correctionsone.com/health/articles/counseling-confidentiality-what-you-need-to-know-KE2SPNFjB5UXQcZ3/). We all know how rampant the jail rumor mill can be. Many officers simply don’t trust the notion that their personal issues won’t become fodder for locker or briefing room discussions.

**Solutions for Mental Health**

So, what can be done? There are no easy answers, but a good start would be to truly [prepare each new correctional officer](https://www.cordico.com/2020/09/29/recording-dr-kevin-gilmartin-on-emotional-survival-for-law-enforcement-2/) for the realities of the psychological, emotional and physical challenges they will likely face on the job. Most academy curriculums include a cursory block of instruction on [stress or stress reduction](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/addressing-correctional-officer-stress-2/). But when compared to the number of training hours on subjects such as use of force, defensive tactics and the other high-liability aspects of correctional work, the amount of training and discussion on the topic of [emotional survival](https://www.correctionsone.com/american-military-university/articles/emotional-tools-to-build-correctional-officer-resiliency-QcFx5f83E41tsRbp/) is woefully inadequate.

The same can be said for annual in-service training hours. As noted above, correctional officers are at risk for anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress and suicidal ideation — 10% of correctional officers have [thought about killing themselves](https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/research/pdf/executive_summary_08142018.pdf), but 73% haven’t told anyone, meaning that many are suffering in silence. Yet, where do we put the most emphasis in training?

To truly move the needle on mental health, we need to change the culture of corrections. The “code of silence” and “never show weakness” mentalities are toxic cultural notions, and they’re pervasive in both formal and informal corrections training. The super-human, idealized correctional officer — who isn’t at all affected by they see and do on the job — simply doesn’t exist. We may pride ourselves on having thick skin, but that doesn’t mean on-the-job stressors won’t still impact our emotional and psychological well-being.

Let’s [stop expecting people to be super-human](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/why-we-need-a-new-approach-to-law-enforcement-officer-mental-health/). Let’s put an end to a culture that revels in others’ frailties and faults and makes *everything* everyone’s business. It’s time to do away with the quick-fix approach toward dealing with correctional officers’ humanity, to waiting for problems to come to a head rather than dealing with them as they emerge. I’ve personally known more correctional officers who have killed themselves than inmates who have taken their own lives; this is profoundly sad.

**Call to Action**

The key phrase from Zig Ziglar’s quote above is “take responsibility.” We all need to wake up to the problem of correctional officer mental health. We owe it to ourselves and our colleagues to support each other and to put in place meaningful and discreet ways for officers to seek help. When officers do reach out, let’s make sure their courage is revealed only to those who have a bona-fide need to know about it. Also, let’s make sure the people who are supposed to provide help understand what we do so they don’t have to be “schooled on the fly” by an officer/client in crisis.

But before all that, let’s be honest, like our fictional academy director, and admit to a [crisis in our profession](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/getting-mental-health-help-in-public-safety/).

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