

## WHEN THE GRIEVER WORKS IN CORRECTIONS

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Third in a Series of Three Articles

It is well known and documented that working in corrections is very stressful. Therefore, when correctional staff experience grief in their own lives, they may be at a higher risk for a difficult bereavement.

Correctional officers (COs) have described the strain they experience when they need to balance their work responsibilities at the same time that someone they love is dying or has died.

Working with inmates who are grieving at the same time they are experiencing their own personal grief can be taxing.

Anniversaries and holidays often become triggers even years after the death. If their loved one died as a result of violence or drugs and they are providing security to inmates who have committed these types of crimes, their grief can be exacerbated by anger. Deaths of fellow officers as a result of suicide, heart attacks and strokes are especially hard since job related stress may be one of the causative factors.

Many COs have reported feeling anxious concern, and very uncomfortable when they are assigned to accompany an inmate to a viewing. Allowing a chaplain, counselor or other clinical staff person meet the inmate at the funeral home provides the support needed by the inmate and relieves the strain felt by the COs. When an inmate returns to his/her housing unit after learning of the death of a loved one, or after returning from a viewing, it is the CO who often has to deal with the emotional fall out. COs have described the strain and internal conflict they often feel when they need to maintain responsibility for those on the wing or housing unit at the same

time that an inmate is acutely grieving. COs either don't have the time to give to the bereaved person, or know how to be supportive. Having someone to refer the inmate to, i.e. chaplain, social worker or behavioral health staff, relieves the correctional officers from feeling that they have to handle the intense emotions alone. When an inmate dies, the officers often express feelings of sadness if they had gotten to know the person over a period of time. When the inmate death is as a result of suicide or inmate to inmate violence, feelings of guilt over not having prevented the death can be overwhelming. Educational programs for correctional staff to address these issues and learn how to be more effective in these situations is one important strategy for decreasing correctional staff stress.

With increasing awareness of these potentially stressful situations, it is important to have of strategies in place to support correctional staff. Having materials on hand from the National Cancer Institute, Alzheimer's Association and other disease specific groups can empower the staff person to learn more about the illness and provide information about community resources that can assist them. When the staff person is experiencing anticipatory grief, helping him/her find community support groups can lessen the stress. Listening to the areas of concern and problem solving with the staff person can also be useful. For example, a CO shared with us that his Dad was dying of prostatic cancer and was in terrible pain. He had trouble concentrating at work because he heard the cries of his father in his head.

Helping the father get good pain control by contacting the Pain Team at the hospital where he was being seen made all the difference. The CO later reported that finally stopped feeling appropriately frantic because of the hard dying his father was experiencing.

After a family member dies, being able to provide a grief pamphlet to staff is also helpful along with the names of Bereavement Support Groups in the area. There is also good material on Coping With the Holidays and support groups specific to suicide and murder that are excellent resources.

When an officer dies, being able to provide individual counseling to a staff person as well as to those in his/her unit can be extremely helpful. Addressing staff at Roll Call and providing materials from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention are important interventions.

When a correctional staff person has had personal losses due to murder, drugs, rape or other forms of violence and now finds himself/herself having to provide security, social work or health care to someone with the same charge or conviction, emotions can make following through with one's job difficult. In this type of situation, a supervisor can be an important resource for the staff member in identifying how the system can be supportive and providing referrals for outside counseling if needed.

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violence, tension between the inmates and COs can escalate. Providing opportunities for the staff and inmates to talk about it, can diffuse a highly charged emotional situation. Whatever the cause of an inmate's death, memorial services with inmates

and staff is a way for both groups to acknowledge the loss within a context of community.

Whether one is a Correctional Officer, Chaplain or Health Care Provider, we all need to pay attention to our own grief while providing security and care to those entrusted to us in the pris-

ons and jails where we work. Becoming educated about the multiple dimensions of grief, knowing resources in the community, and looking to each other to provide support while at work, can help make a hard time in a harsh environment a little bit easier.

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