

# Stress, the Correctional Officer's Silent Killer

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Whether it's acknowledged to be factual or not, stress is a silent killer among correctional officers and detention officers. This viewpoint is often challenged by correctional officers who resist the suggestion it can happen to them as they are stronger than the average person working inside a large jail or prison thus immune to such an invasion of the body, spirit or mind. Many remain in a state of denial and allow this infection to grow unnoticed until one day; it hits them like a brick and wakes them up.

This information provided by a criminal justice study done by the National Criminal Justice corrections program group that reveals stress contributes to physical and psychological changes in your body and mind that impact high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, diabetes, heart attacks, strokes PTSD and suicides.

Correctional officers are classified "first responders" in every sense of the definition. They witness mental and emotional trauma on the job and rarely realize the impact of such events until it is too late. They are also constantly subject to severe verbal abusive misconduct and physical assaults with intent to either kill them or wound them to facilitate or hide the commission of a crime or escape attempt while in their custody.

Unaware of this negative and harmful body invasion, they fail to regenerate the wellness of their minds, develop negative behavioral patterns and become emotionally unstable to different degrees. Thus is it reasonable to say that many suffer needlessly because of their unawareness to this phenomenon or syndrome.

Stress sets you up for critical events in your life and impacts your lifespan, nervous system, overall wellness of your metabolic system and many other diseases much too many to list them all but experienced throughout your lifetime with no reason to connect the dots and find out it was all linked to your job related stress.

Managing your stress will:

- Improve your performance through higher morale and positivity in the mindset while on duty or off-duty.
- Increased institutional safety through having fewer inexperienced officers on duty or shift and maintain and retain good skilled qualified officers such as yourself for a longer duration and successful retirement.
- Handle fewer distractions with work-related and personal stresses.
- Improved relations with other people by working together on a mutually beneficial program or team setting.
- Allow the presence of a demonstrated concern [due diligence] for you to cope with job duties and tasks.
- Manage an undeniably tough working environment and avoid anxiety and frustration episodes and emotional self-control that could impact your personal family relationships and workplace relationships.

Job-related stress is widespread and, in many cases, severe—and possibly increasing—among correctional officers. An inherent source of stress for correctional officers is supervising individuals who do not want to be confined and, as a result, try to manipulate staff to make their conditions of confinement as tolerable as possible.

The prison or jail organization, including understaffing, overtime, rotating shift work, and supervisor demands, creates stress for many officers. Work-related sources of stress for officers include the threat of inmate violence, actual inmate violence, inmate demands and manipulation, and problems with coworkers. External

stresses for some correctional officers include a poor public image or civic support and low pay. Stress can cause impaired health, burnout, early retirement, and impaired family life.

Thus it is fair to say that the organization is a major source of stress for many officers, notably understaffing, overtime, shift work, and supervisor demands. Correctional officers consistently report that stress is caused by rotating shifts create havoc with family life and reduce officers' ability to perform their work conscientiously because of fatigue and irritability.

Correctional supervisors say they can spot the impact of stress when the work habits gets sloppy, their searches become careless, their units are filthy, and they stop following the rules. Ironically, several studies indicate that supervisors are a major source of stress for many officers.

Correctional officers also fear supervisors for their role or need to impose discipline to officers in addition to having to ask stressed-out line officers to work overtime, attempt to follow unclear policies and procedures and frequent modifications to policies and procedures as top-level supervisors change their minds or are replaced.

More significantly, they are stressed after serious incidents and confined to sit down and complete all the required documentation and paperwork—yet still being on the line to supervise and be seen by line officers in other words, being at two places at once.

It is rare when an officer is involved in a traumatic event, he or she is debriefed by a counselor or CIRT person before the paperwork trail begins.

Other stress factors include:

- Weak leadership role models in the workplace related to decision making on staff deployment and collapsing of posts leaving officers feel vulnerable to personal attacks or security breaches
- The fear of the administration Monday morning quarterbacking your decisions
- Scrutinized decisions on life and death situations for officers working higher security level institutions or units with more stress than officers working medium or minimum security areas (still studying this factor as it is incomplete at this time)
- Officers who work in rural settings may be related to or personally know other staff—or inmates—which can lead to concerns about privacy.
- Inmates in jails may present different problems for correctional officers than prison inmates because so many jail detainees have just come into the facility right off the streets
- In addition, rapid turnover in jails creates its own set of stresses for those officers who endure the workplace conditions

Finally and still, stress is a silent killer because correctional officer are typically reluctant to share their feelings of uncertainty, helplessness, or inadequacy with anyone for fear of appearing weak, incompetent, or indecisive to do the job.

Source: Addressing Correctional Officer Stress - National Criminal Justice  
[www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183474.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183474.pdf) SimilarShare

*Editor's note: Carl ToersBijns (retired), worked in corrections for over 25 yrs He held positions of a Correctional Officer I, II, III [Captain] Chief of Security Mental Health Treatment Center – Program Director – Associate Warden - Deputy Warden of Administration & Operations. Car's prison philosophy is all about the safety of the public, staff and inmates, "I believe my strongest quality is that I create strategies that are practical, functional and cost effective."*