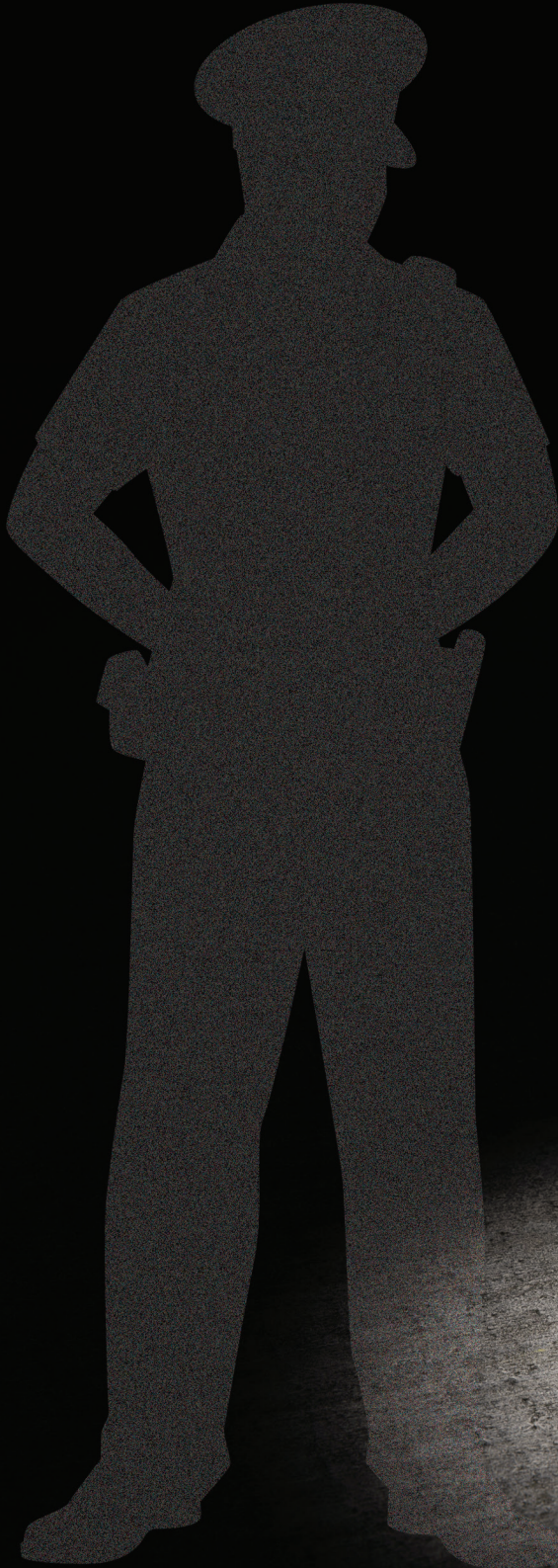


Confronting chronic career stress

BY JOHN A. SHUFORD



Our criminal justice system is in crisis, with staff shortages as high as 40% and unacceptably high rates of heart attack, stroke, diabetes, depression, anxiety, divorce and suicide for those working within the system. This is old news, but the new news is we are not alone. In the September 2023 issue of *The Prison Service Journal* from the UK, which focused on staff wellbeing, they said their correctional staff is suffering the same consequences and staff shortages as in the U.S., and it is also true for many other countries. Their attempts to correct the existing issues are having the same ineffective systemic results as most of our efforts (Clements, 2023, p. 19). The journal describes three types of interventions:

1. Primary strategies that address the source of stress.
2. Secondary interventions that enhance people's skills to manage potentially hazardous experiences.
3. Tertiary approaches aimed at those already experiencing difficulties in response to work-related hazards. (p. 22)

“While there is evidence that secondary interventions such as cognitive behavioral strategies and relaxation techniques that can help manage stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion [in individuals], these are not likely to work in isolation” (p. 23) Primary interventions addressing the source of stress, i.e., attitudes and the work culture, are also necessary for systemic change. Unfortunately, there is a lack of attention paid to primary interventions. “There is a clear need for interventions at the public policy and organizational level” (p. 24) and these must focus on improving the work culture and the feeling of isolation staff experience.

A major consequence of a toxic work culture is staff feeling disconnected from their own emotions and isolated from each other, from the community and often from their own families. This feeling of isolation is literally a major factor in developing most if not all the negative health conditions resulting from working in corrections, and is one of the main reasons staff leave the profession. The importance of staff feeling personally isolated cannot be overemphasized, and this includes the profession itself feeling isolated from the community at large. This is not unique to U.S. corrections; it is a common experience of many corrections agencies in other countries as well.

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An epidemic of isolation

This feeling of personal isolation is also very common in the U.S. in general. The 2023 U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” (Murthy, 2023) states that about half of adults in America reported experiencing loneliness, and that was before COVID-19. It likely is much worse now. It is a major factor in the polarization we are experiencing and if we fail to build more connection, we will “continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country” (p.4). Social isolation increases the risk of premature death [from all causes] by 29%, heart disease by 29%, stroke by 32%, anxiety, depression, dementia and susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illness. It is also the “strongest and most reliable predictor of suicidal ideation, attempts, and lethal suicidal behavior among samples varying in age, nationality, and clinical severity” (p.29). On the other hand, social connection increases the odds of survival by 50%, (p.24) and may protect against suicide, especially for men (p.29).

“Adults across the globe rate their social relationships, particularly with family and close friends, as the most important source of meaning, purpose, and motivation in their lives (p.33). “Supportive and inclusive relationships at work are associated with employee job satisfaction, creativity, competence, and better job performance. Quality social support, social integration, and regular communication among co-workers of all levels are key

to preventing chronic work stress and workplace burnout (p.35). The report goes on to state what workplaces can do (p.61):

- Make social connection a strategic priority in the workplace at all levels (administration, management, and employees)
- Train, resource and empower leaders and managers to implement programs that foster connection.
- Leverage existing leadership and employee training, orientation, and wellness resources to educate the workforce about the importance of social connection for workplace wellbeing, health, productivity, performance, retention, and other markers of success.
- Create practices and a workplace culture that allow people to connect to one another as whole people, not just as skill sets, and that fosters inclusion and belonging.

Social isolation is bad enough in our country, but it is even worse in corrections and law enforcement, where our officers and staff are trained to isolate even more, and the work culture promotes it even further.

Isolation in corrections

There is a direct connection between isolation and PTSD and depression, both of which have received much attention in recent years. But of equal and likely more importance are the deleterious effects of Chronic Career Stress, which have similar consequences as PTSD; but on all staff, not just custody. Neuroscience research has increased our understanding of this. We know when individuals experience acute stress, it is what happens next that is most important, and that is why the work culture is so significant. We also saw this in real life after the Vietnam war. Our veterans returned to a very unwelcoming country whereas the Viet Cong returned to their villages as heroes. Our vets developed PTSD, and many headed to the hills to live in isolation, but the Viet Cong did not develop any PTSD.

When an acute stress event is not processed in community, it becomes traumatic stress and eventually evolves into PTSD and/or depression. Hypervigilance develops and the brain is always on alert as though something negative is going to happen. There is a constant over production of the stress hormone cortisol in the brain,

which is only meant to be produced for short periods of time until a danger has passed. The result is the brain is physically damaged and that negatively impacts most if not all other organs in the body. This hypervigilance is what chronic stress is. Not all staff will experience a traumatic event, but all are exposed to the chronic stress from working in corrections. One example of hypervigilance is officers off duty sitting at the back of a restaurant in order to see who comes into the room and always scanning for any potential problem no matter where they are.

Psychologically, the individual loses their sense of safety and empowerment. The most effective and efficient way to confront this is through staff training, both orientation and inservice for all staff, both custody and non-custody. There are three approaches to this that I am aware of. Information Based Training, Skill Based Training and Immersive Experiential Training. Information-based training is good for communicating policy changes and increasing the knowledge base of staff about changes they may be experiencing from working in corrections. This is very valuable and Desert Waters Correctional Outreach has been a leader in this type of training. The second approach is Skill-Based training which is good for teaching specific tasks and interpersonal communication skills. This type of training is widespread throughout corrections. The third approach is what the Prison Service Journal calls “Primary strategies that address the source of stress.” That is Immersive Experiential training, which directly impacts staff attitudes and therefore, the work culture.

Immersive experiential training

There are three parts to this type of training; Attitude Skills, Interpersonal Skills and Community Building Skills. What is different about this type of training is the inclusion of Attitude Skills and Community Building Skills, which dramatically improves staff feelings of safety and empowerment. Attitude Skills include self-awareness, empathy, personal responsibility [initiative, integrity and interconnectedness with others] and emotional management. Community Building Skills include trust, respect and inclusiveness. It is clear the focus of these skills is to counter the feeling of social isolation. Of the thousands of staff that have experienced this type of training, 100% evaluate it positively [90% excellent,



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27% very good and 3% good] and they are excited about the positive changes they have experienced both on and off the job, and they are not temporary. Six months after the training, staff are continuing to use the skills learned on the job (82%) and off the job (85%). This is because the training is experiential and directly impacts the limbic system or subconscious part of the brain where emotions, motivation and attitudes are located. The changes in Attitude Skills actually occur during the training itself and are immediate. Staff see themselves and others in a different light; in a more connected way, and this is how to counter their feelings of isolation.

Incorporating this two or three-day element into training does not require changing any of the existing training. It can be a stand-alone inservice and inserted near the beginning of orientation of new staff. Having it as a part of regular inservice training is important because that is where the culture change will occur. It is critically important to have all ranks and departments in a training to have the most impact for culture change. This training could be referred to as personal resilience training. It is actually emotional intelligence training, but staff are likely to dismiss a training by that name. Whatever the content, it needs to utilize the 4 Es principle: engage, energize, empower and enjoy.

Engage them: the trainer must get the attention of the participants. This is done through creating a container of

safety and gaining the respect of the participants. This is accomplished through positive conditions of affirmation, respect, and caring, rather than through negative reinforcement. The trainer must also show they know the subject matter well, are enthusiastic about it and motivated to help the participants learn it. The subject matter must be both important and relevant in the eyes of the participants.

Energize and Excite them: the training gives participants the sense of hope that personal and institutional change is possible. Part of this sense of energy comes from increased self-awareness, which increases their connection to and

understanding of their own emotions, and a feeling of being connected to other staff, especially staff of different rank and from different departments. This sense of hope, which comes from this feeling of connection and learning the skills taught in the training, counters the hopelessness and disconnection staff feel when experiencing burnout, depression, PTSD, anxiety, lack of trust and suicidal ideation. This results in participants being open to the rest of the training, and is clearly important for when they return to their post.

Let me say a bit more about disconnection from one's self, because self-awareness is the foundation for emotional intelligence. Correctional staff training, just like military training, disconnects trainees from their emotions so the job can get done, and this is reinforced by the work culture, especially the code of silence. The price staff pay in physical and emotional issues is a price they neither signed up for, nor should have been made to pay, in order to work in a field that could make such a positive contribution to our community.

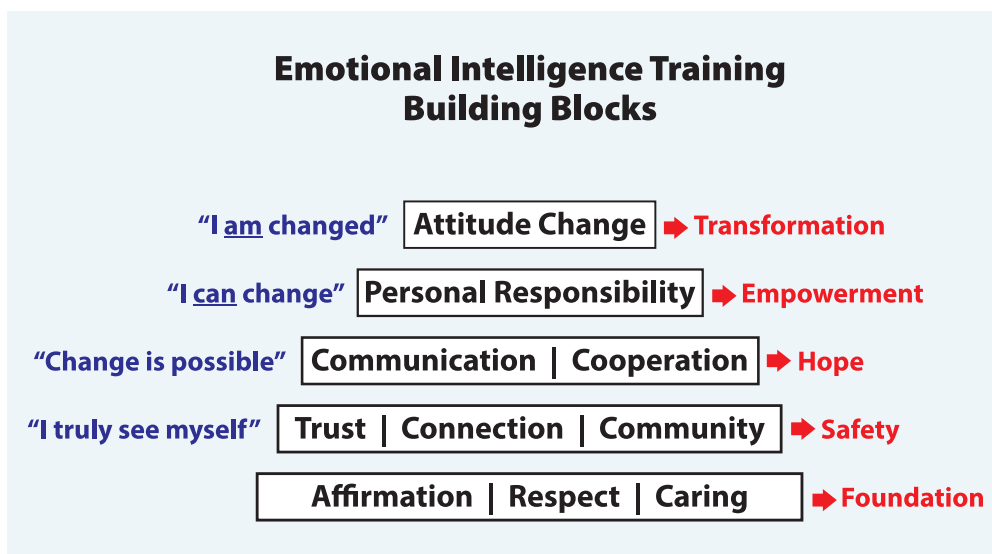
Empower: teaching emotional intelligence tools and the experience of positive attitude change are foundational for making desired work culture changes. With these new attitudes and skills, there develops a sense of personal responsibility to be part of the culture change itself, which reinforces the effort with other staff, and counters the feeling of helplessness that things have been and will

always be as they are. Staff now see a way forward with culture transformation, especially when administration supports change.

Enjoy: when participants feel safe, relaxed and are enjoying themselves, they are more open and accepting of new ideas and information that challenge old thought patterns. This occurs organically because in this environment of safety, the amygdala [our self-defense organ in the brain] quiets and the hippocampus [learning and positive emotions] opens up to accept new information. When we are stressed, the amygdala stops information getting to the hippocampus, and thus learning is diminished or stopped altogether. This is why new training strategies include games like Jeopardy in their sessions.

The training model

The Immersive Experiential training model uses the principle of 4 E's with its emotional intelligence training. The building blocks for this training are:



The foundation of affirmation, respect and caring creates trust and safety within which participants become more open and connection with self and others develops. Participants are able to see themselves and their behavior truthfully. From here, skills of communication and cooperation are taught developing a sense of hope that change is possible. Participants now have the attitude and skills to

change themselves which gives them a sense of personal responsibility to make change. The end result of experiencing the Immersive Experiential training is that they, in fact, are changed in the process and they see themselves and others in a new light. When participants see themselves more clearly, they see everything else, including other people, more clearly.

Immersive Experiential training is not about content, it is more about experience. Trying to change behavior and relationships by providing information is like teaching someone how to drive a car by having them read a book. It is not very effective. The person needs the hands-on experience of being behind the wheel. This is what immersive experiential training provides. It is 80% experiential and 20% lecture. Many of the experiences convey content in a better way than simply talking about it.

The first session of the training is critical. In this session, the trainer gets the attention of the participants by establishing a container of safety, gaining their respect and showing the importance and relevance of the training to the participants. Review of the agenda for the session as this is important for some people's learning styles. Then establish ground rules for how participants will interact during the training. It is important for these to come from the participants themselves, because this begins to create a safe container where they are full participants and they see that the training is going to be different and not a lecture.

One thing that is important is all participants are seen as equal, so rank and titles have no place in the training. Emotional intelligence skills are people skills and often, not always, rank and title get in the way of people skills and creating safety. In the training, equality is achieved by everyone taking on an adjective name using a positive adjective coupled with their first name and no uniforms are worn. This signifies that things will be different in this training. There is often

some hesitancy in using adjective names, but quickly participants get used to it and fully enjoy it. Some examples are: Just John, Professional Paula, Charismatic Chris and Creative Cathy. These names are used throughout the training. Referring to Capt. Thompson as Brave Bill totally changes the energy and participants begin relating to each other as people and not rank. Adjective names are obviously not used after the training is completed.

Two possible exercises for establishing safety focus on self-awareness and connection with others. One is Concentric Circles where participants talk in pairs for a couple of minutes on different topics, such as a positive childhood experience and someone I really respect and why. An example of a set of questions that can be effective is:

- A positive childhood memory of mine is
- Someone I really respect and why [what was it they did, say or represent that I respect]
- How my family handled conflict when I was growing up
- Something I've done that I'm proud of
- How I handle my anger and deal with conflict now
- Something I've learned from my life experience that is important to me now

After both have shared, a new topic is presented, and participants switch to a new partner. It is important at this early stage of the training to avoid topics relating to work. This is intended to be a person-to-person exchange. After Concentric Circles the energy in the group relaxes and people feel safe, in large part because everyone has shared regardless of their rank or department. This exercise also increases self-awareness, depending on the topics selected. Another exercise that increases self-awareness is one where participants share in pairs what they like about themselves and what they are good at. This can be very challenging for some participants, but the benefit is substantial for building trust. Some participants get into this exercise more than others, but all benefit from it. It may be the first time they have thought about the things they like about themselves. Since self-awareness is the foundation for emotional intelligence, these two exercises, or similar exercises are critical to the training process.

During every morning and afternoon session, especially the first, a ten to fifteen minute physically active fun game relaxes participants and keeps the energy up.

The fun and laughter experienced builds trust and literally keeps participants' minds open to new learning. One learns much better when relaxed than when stressed. An example of a fun exercise is a variation of Duck Duck Go, where there is one less chair in a circle than participants and one participant stands in the middle and gives a characteristic or experience. Everyone for whom the characteristic or experience applies must move to another seat and someone else is left standing in the middle. Topics might be everyone wearing blue, everyone who has gone swimming in the ocean and so on.

The end result of experiencing the Immersive Experiential training is that they, in fact, are changed in the process and they see themselves and others in a new light.

An overview of communications is given, emphasizing the importance of nonverbal communication; that body language and tone of voice convey much more than the words themselves. At the foundation of nonverbal communication is attitude, which is the most important factor in effective communication. The elements of a teambuilding attitude are discussed in the second session along with the related personal conflict management styles of participants. The specific communication skills of listening [beyond the words], assertiveness [use of I messages] and problem solving are taught by describing, demonstrating and then practicing the skills. These skills are presented in the second and third sessions and help the participants behave in a way consistent with and supportive of a teambuilding attitude.

A significant amount of time in the third session is devoted to stress; what it is, its consequences [participants personal experience of it] and approaches and activities, both on and off the job, that can reduce it. Similarly, the fourth session is devoted to anger; what it is, its purpose, its consequences and destructive and productive



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responses to it. Also, how to de-escalate someone else's anger. Finally, the last part of the fourth session is a trust exercise to demonstrate the trust that has been established within the group, personal contracts on what each participant will do differently [these are not shared with others], and the training evaluation [anonymous], which is always shared with administration.

The impact of this type of training in staff's words

Engage:

- “When I left class the first day, my stress was removed and I was very relaxed and calm.”
- “I've shared more in the past 2 days with co-workers than I have in the past 16 years.”
- “Everyone was comfortable being themselves.”

Energize:

- “I enjoyed the unity of the class and the energy to want to do better and work as a team.”
- “This training has inspired my thinking at home and work in a very positive way from day one. My attitude and coping skills have very much improved.”

- “I felt like a dead battery for the last 10 of my 18 years, but this training changed all that. It charged up my morale and my attitude.”

Empower:

- “I now have a whole new set of tools and it made me think how I can change the prison.”
- “It will make my journey as an officer safer. Outstanding class.”
- “A whole new outlook on things on the job as well as at home, my life has already changed.”
- “Made me a better supervisor. Put my staff first instead of last.”
- “The training academy told us what our job was and you taught us how to do it.”

Enjoy:

- “This training was life altering. Best I have ever had in my 25 years with the state.”
- “This class was one of the most enjoyable, most beneficial classes I have ever attended.”
- “The most informative and enjoyable, attention keeping class I have attended.”
- “I was not looking forward to this, but I so loved this training. I am so glad I was forced to attend.”
- “I will never forget this training.”

Comments from supervisors and administrators:

“Staff have stated over and over that it was some of the best training to which the state has offered. It has helped to rebuild this facility after the tragic event of 2017.” [4 staff murdered by inmates]. — *Warden*

“Prior to the training, the receiving room day shift had 5 or 6 uses of force per month. After the training, there were 5 uses of force in the last 2 years.” — *Deputy Commissioner*

“Our staff are also advocates for how much the training has helped them as a team and how much they love passing the training on to the trainees.” — *Academy Director*

“It is generally thought to be the best training program that staff has participated in. The

labor unions are strong supporters of the training. Employee grievances have dropped to an all-time low. Thank you for helping us change our work culture. It is the best investment of resources that we have ever made.” — *Warden*

“I personally have seen a major difference in the way they perceive themselves, the way they interact with one another and the way they interact with support staff, whether they be social service or maintenance. Also, the rate of sick abuse or not coming to work has dropped and the overall attitude of the workplace has improved.” — *Captain*

Conclusion

This Immersive Experiential training is low-tech, not using PowerPoint, but utilizes an easel and markers with handouts. The connection between trainer and participants needs to be direct and not through a computer. When possible, it is good if the trainer participates directly in the early exercises as a participant to establish that she/he is one of them. Having more than one trainer makes this easier. This training incorporates the 4 E’s in its design and is consistent with current adult learning principles [Andragogy Theory], which are:

- Adults prefer to learn from doing/experience
- They’re interested in learning something that has immediate relevance to them
- They prefer a hands-on approach to learning
- They prefer to solve actual problems

Correctional trainers need to consider the points made in this paper, especially if their agency’s staff is experiencing chronic stress. This issue must be addressed if the staff turnover crisis is to be resolved and it cannot be accomplished by approaching it with traditional training methods. As Einstein said, “We cannot solve a problem with the same level of thinking that created it.” We must adopt a new approach because staffing issues are not getting better and the strain on existing staff is getting greater and greater as more staff leave for other jobs. We cannot ignore this issue any longer. Simply put, our current approach is unsustainable.

Increasing pay and benefits will have a positive short-term benefit, but is not an effective long-term strategy. This is because of a psychological process called ‘hedonic

adaptation’, where a person adjusts to a new situation so that it feels normal and not new. Like putting a ring on your finger, after a short period of time, you no longer notice it. For major positive material changes, like increased income, the adjustment process is about three months. This means the emotional boost will last about three months and after that it loses its benefit. Maybe this is a factor in so many staff leaving within the first year of employment. Also, providing information about staff morbidity rates [heart attacks, PTSD, depression, etc.] and mortality rates, without the means to make the changes in the work culture causing them, may lead to more frustration. These factors may be the ‘canary in the mine’ giving us notice of an explosive situation.

We need to make our training more humane and at the same time, more effective. Staff must feel and experience emotional intelligence in order for transformation to occur. Like the example given earlier, you cannot learn to drive a car [or a golf ball] from a book. Those agencies that have incorporated the Immersive Experiential model for training emotional intelligence skills have seen huge benefits as a result. More agencies need to include effective emotional intelligence experiential trainings, whether this model or another. An emotionally intelligent agency is one where staff feel emotionally safe, supported, empowered, connected, respected and valued. It’s time to stop talking or lecturing about emotional intelligence and begin incorporating it within our trainings and therefore, within our agencies.

For more information about Immersive Experiential training, go to www.TeamCRS.org.

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