

Understanding Occupational Fatigue

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Warning

This paper contains content from the lived experience of ex Correction Officers. Given the emotional aspect of this there is a possibility reading this paper could trigger trauma memories for current or past officers. Should this occur please feel free to email or text me and I will contact you to discuss referral points that might be of assistance.

CORRECTION OFFICER STORIES - THE HIDDEN VOICES

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INTRODUCTION.

As a counsellor I have been very fortunate to have sat with people from all walks of life, and heard their stories and the challenges they have faced.

It was 15 years ago that I first walked into a prison, in Melbourne, Australia, to facilitate a critical incident debriefing session with five corrections officers who'd discovered a prisoner who had committed suicide. Since then, I've had many conversations with correction officers and prison staff about their experiences of working inside a gaol. As my narrative training dictates, I listen intently to their descriptions of their vocational lives. And I have learned a great deal about the psychological impact of this challenging work, and have witnessed firsthand the catastrophic impact these jobs can have on correction officers, and on those who love them.

The aim of my paper is to provide a glimpse of the experiences of being a correction officer, and to bring home what their exceptional trials are. If we want to drive change; if we want to provide better mental health services for such first responders, we first need to understand their role, and secondly, must have compassion for what it requires of them.

THE NARRATIVE OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

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- **Michael White Co-founder of Narrative Therapy**
- **Individual is expert on their own life**
- **Listening to their stories of life is critical to the therapeutic process**
- **These stories contain great wisdom about life and can be the key to unlocking the way forward**

As a part of my Family Therapy training, I was very fortunate to attend a two-day workshop with Michael White, the co-founder of Narrative Therapy. At that time, in my counselling career, I was searching for a way - or a model, of working with families more effectively than my social work education had equipped me to do.

I had not heard of Michael nor of Narrative Therapy until that workshop way back in 1989. I knew immediately on encountering him, however, that in Michael, I'd found what I was looking and it activated three trips to Adelaide in the 1990's, culminating in my completing a Graduate Diploma in Narrative Therapy. (Sadly, Michael died suddenly in 2008 but he us an international legacy in this field of therapy).

Michael White believed that life was rich with stories or narratives of lived experience that wove their way through our existences, and that these stories continuously form who we are. Michael felt strongly that the individual is the 'expert' on their own life because only they can give meaning to the multiple stories that have shaped their lives.

Narrative Therapy as Michael described it, is a practice where the counsellor embarks on a process of discovery with the client in order to explore their life stories which can, in turn, reveal hidden knowledges that often lie within these narratives and that of themselves can 'open up doors' for the client to utilize as their own hidden strengths.

Like all therapeutic approaches, Narrative Therapy has complexity, and time does not permit a fuller description here. However, what I learned from Michael was to *hear* the story, to fully understand and appreciate what the person is sharing with you, and through therapeutic conversation to fully explore the impact of these stories on that person's life. Central to this process is that what the counsellor 'thinks about the stories' is irrelevant. What the client thinks about the stories 'is everything!'

As I was preparing for this paper, I remembered a book 'Beyond the Prison-Gathering Dreams of Freedom' which was edited by David Denborough from the Dulwich Foundation. Narrative ideas really grew from Michael's work with people he saw as being marginalized by society and prisoners are certainly in the middle of that group. Underneath I have always found it somewhat ironic that my passion for the correction officer story just evolved and grew over time. Yet correction officers are often seen, publicly, as the perpetrators of abuse within the prison system and rarely seen as being

compassionate and committed individuals. For me it is a testament to Narrative ideas that if you listen to the story, no matter who is telling it to you, you will hear a different story. It also brought home to me those narrative ideas, as developed by Michael White, could play a huge practical and theoretical role in working with prisoners in pursuit of a 'better life'. As fate would have it, I landed in a prison and worked with officers and not the prisoners!

What I've aimed to do in this presentation is to bring together the narrative approach as it is evident in all my work, and to show the importance of listening to and understanding the descriptions of lived experience that I hear which is now more influential in policy formation. What I've learned is that accounts of the experience of confronting tough situations first hand often contain great wisdom and great creativity, and indeed, the seeds of what needs to be done to improve or remedy the situation.

The six stories in this paper not only highlight the complexity and risks associated with being a correction officer but offer 'beacons of light' on the way forward, and what prison authorities need to do so that they can more fully understand and respond more appropriately to supporting correction officers.

THE STORIES:

In this paper I present a summary of six interviews I conducted with officers Mia, Justin, Anthony, Susan, Maggie and Hammond. These are moving front-line stories which are sometimes quite shocking. I've included the officer's descriptions of trauma events and am aware that hearing such narratives could be 'triggering' for some of you. But I believe we need to embrace the actuality – the factuality - of corrections work because by doing so, it just could be life changing for the profession.

MIA'S EXPERIENCE OF BEING A ROOKIE OFFICER.

Mia worked for seven years as a nurse in a veterinary practice. Looking for a change and a new career, Mia decided to become a correction officer. And it wasn't long into this career that she witnessed a serious self-harming incident with a prisoner. It had a major impact on her, especially when exacerbated with the lack of support she received from colleagues. She was so affected that she needed to take three months off work. In spite of her family not wanting her to return to the place of such a horrible encounter, Mia felt she 'needed to prove to herself' that she had what it took to work in the field. And so, she returned to it for a further two and a half years.

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'I think it was a mixture of witnessing my first slash up, which was very traumatic, but also knowing that I didn't have the support of my colleagues, and being bullied in the way I was. I just couldn't cope. I remember one officer looked at me and clearly seeing the shock on my face, said to me, 'Come on, it wasn't that bad'. I had this overwhelming feeling that I just couldn't do it. I fell in a heap and I couldn't get out of bed. From then on, I was in a really bad place.'

Mia's Reflection: 1

'You do a prisoner count at the start of the day to make sure they're all alive and that ultimately, all prisoners are accounted for. I got to the fourth cell, and looked in and there was a guy there and he had his pants down and he had a, I don't know what it was, but some sort of sharp object. He was

just slashing his legs and there was blood coming all down his legs. I just froze. I've never seen anything like that in my life before!

'It felt like my heart stopped and then I sort of switched into what I needed to do. So I yelled out to my senior who came down and had a look in the window. I asked him, 'Do I call the code?' He said, 'Yes'. So I called the code over the radio. Everyone came running and he (the senior) just turned to me and said, 'You can you continue with the prisoner count'. So then I was, like, absolutely shocked and thought, 'Okay, well, I've got to continue counting these prisoners'. So, I continued my job of count, going through all the cells and all that was going through my head was the vision of that prisoner cutting himself and the blood flowing everywhere. I simply couldn't count properly.

I had no idea of numbers ... like my mind couldn't compute it. The senior asked me how many, prisoners? I said, 'I'm sorry, I don't know'. And he's like, 'You just did the count'. And I'm...I'm sorry. I just don't know. And he rolled his eyes and said, 'Don't worry about it'. Then he got someone else to do it.

I was just so shocked but I had to keep working. The code was still unfolding around me; getting help for the prisoner, etcetera. However, no one asked me if I was okay or anything like that? The general view amongst the officers was 'it wasn't *that* bad! There was an assumption everyone was okay. But I wasn't, and I knew it.

The inference I took from it was that there was much worse than this (to come) and if I couldn't cope with this, well, I needed to (quickly) learn to 'suck it up'. With this incident being seen as nothing by those around me, and my own awareness that I was not coping, I started to believe 'I'm weak'. And this was the beginning of major inner turmoil and I started to turn it on myself more and more.

It was these negative voices in my head saying things like, 'Why am I so weak? Why can't I handle this? Like, this is your job and everyone else deals with it why can't you? Why are you so emotional about it?' The voices at times tormented me.

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'I came to realize many of the prisoners simply don't care who they hurt. I started having regular dreams that I would be killed by these prisoners which brought home to me that I did not feel safe and there is a real possibility that I will get injured or hurt eventually. I think I was always on edge. It was always there, the sheer unpredictability of prisoner behaviour and their instantaneous capacity to be violent.'

Mia's Reflection: 2

'I was working in a specific area of the jail, where the new prisoners come in to be processed. This prisoner started playing up and another officer took him to the ground. I was scared in that incident because the prisoner was really 'firing up'. I was fearful of what these prisoners can do when elevated and I freaked out. I pressed my duress button, which is a natural reaction and what we are trained to do.

I just pressed it and the officer that had taken the prisoner to the ground turned around and yelled, 'Who pressed the duress?' I froze because it was me. He was so angry that I'd pressed my duress. The reason he was angry was because when you hit the duress, it triggers a code, a siren sounds, everyone runs to the area where the code has been called and the cameras are turned on. I know that if you don't own your stuff in this black culture, then you're going to be targeted even more. So, I just turned around and said, 'I pressed it'. And he screamed at me and basically told me 'We cut

our own fucking snakes down here. Don't you ever do that again'. From there I was targeted by that group of officers who work down there (in processing). They hated me after that. And it just showed me that when I get scared, I can't call a code as that shows you're weak. So from then on, I just felt like I had to take the responsibility of dealing with situations instead of reaching for help, as reaching out via a code was just not worth being ostracized by everybody else.

I learned later that they didn't want the cameras on because they wanted to be able to manage the prisoner in their own way. I think that prisoner had pushed the officer and then the officer had taken him to the ground to show his authority. He didn't want the cameras on because if I hadn't called a code, none of the footage would have been reviewed and he could have done sort of what he wanted with the prisoner? In a way, I couldn't win because in a case where an officer or prisoner was injured, I would have been challenged as to why I *hadn't* called a code?

Bruce Perham's View.

I thought about what Mia had told me for some time. My sense was that the phrase 'cutting our own snakes' was really saying to her that 'We operate by our rules and not the prescribed way of managing prisoners'. While a great deal of managerial energy is put into trying to monitor how officers manage prisoners, the vast majority of correction officers feel the current prisoner-management protocols expose them to a far greater risk of physical and/or psychological injury at the hands of errant prisoners. While some might argue that Mia's example is one of a corrections officers taking it out on the prisoner, I think it is equally relevant to say it may well have been driven by a need to minimize risk of injury to the officers involved with an awareness that such tactics would be heavily scrutinized by management. Whatever your view, this disparity is an area that really needs significant discussion. As Mia stated, the fear of being significantly hurt by prisoners runs deep in the majority of officers and it would be naïve not to think it doesn't have an impact on how officers behave.

JUSTIN AND ANTHONY'S EXPERIENCE IN YOUTH DETENTION

Justin

Justin contacted me to express support for the counselling I'd been doing concerning the psychological impact of prison work. Justin had listened to my podcast interview with Anthony Milbourne on the subject of *Trauma from the Frontline*. Anthony was Justin's colleague at the youth detention centre where they'd both worked. And Justin had found the interview we undertook quite difficult to listen to as his mate Anthony had talked about how he'd been affected by an assault he'd experienced. Anthony found it agonising, both personally and on his prison workmates. I asked Justin if he'd share his own story via this conference paper? He immediately agreed!

Justin had been working in an acute youth mental health facility, and when he saw the position seeking youth detainee officers advertised, he felt that maybe this was an avenue by which to further his career in youth work. He remembers the training as being primarily focussed on changing the lives of youths in detention, but thinks it really didn't address or prepare him and his colleagues for the levels of violence that would regularly be directed at them.

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'The level of violence; the level of the assaults; the constant verbal abuse that comes at you on a daily basis is really underplayed. I hadn't realized the intensity of the environment and the risks of injury we faced. Every day. I was severely assaulted in 2019. They (the detainees) saw me as the target that day. I am not really sure why, as I was the

officer that connected with them more? But for whatever reason I was the officer 'they were going to get'.

Justin's Reflection: 1

'I did take note of the level of aggression and language that kept coming right through that shift. Yet I still managed to get out and do activities with the detainees. Right towards the end of my shift, I was basically targeted. There was a couple of young people in the unit and it was getting towards lockdown, so you're getting to that pointy end of the day when we start to shut things down and when young people start coming into the unit. I started thinking I needed to get out. It was a sense of danger as the yard was restless. This was the time of day when I think everyone thought they'd made it (through) that day: that we're getting really close to end of shift and to being safe.

A young person appears in the window to let them in, and it's just what you do 100 times a day. You're in charge of unlocking and locking the door. So, I let him in. And another youth comes in behind him - armed with a cricket bat.

So, I need to step in here and I told the youth, 'You can't do that. You can't bring a cricket bat in. You know that'. I wasn't aggressive, just firm. Within a minute the bat is cocked and he starts cracking it at me, swinging and hitting me in the head a couple of times. My colleague screamed the code into the radio. It's one of the things that people heard that day and they commented to me later that they never want to hear it again. It was terrifying. At that point, I knew I was in a lot of trouble. This guy was basically swinging a cricket bat at me. He was close to me and just kept cracking me with the bat.

So I've got my hands up defending myself as I'm being hit with the bat. At that point, three more youths joined in, knocking me off my feet. And this is where it escalates into a gang assault. There are three guys stomping on me. I did lose consciousness for a bit as I hit the deck, but I still have my hands sort of up to my face. And then I started getting kicks. I believe that the unit had spilled into a full riot at that point because I was just getting endless kicks.

One of the young people was 160kg or so, and he was stomping on my head. I thought I was going to die. I had that moment where I (mentally) said to my wife, my kids - and my unborn baby, 'I don't think I am coming home tonight'.

I thought, well, I think I'm done for here. By then I thought it was six or so youths kicking me. So, yeah, that was pretty bad. I guess the ferocity of the attack surprised me, and it wasn't about just getting me down. It was actually designed to do significant damage to me - with an intent 'to finish him off'.

I'm on the ground, getting kicked repeatedly. The youths are continuously stomping on me. My back's broken when I get kicked. I felt my back break and it was a brutal kick and it sent massive pressure that went through my whole body. At that point, a female colleague lay on top of me and said, 'Don't move, don't move, don't move', because she knew that if I got up, they'll probably finish me off.

So I just lay there for what seemed an eternity, and just kept copping kicks with my hands covering my head. The response comes and there are officers spilling from other units, and so you have response teams come in from all over the centre.

There's also dedicated teams that respond within minutes. It felt like longer than that? So I'm lying on the ground and I can barely see at this point. I can just see people going everywhere and then

screaming and yelling; operations managers directing, trying to remove these youths and to stop others getting involved.

I do not have much memory after that. I had a broken back and I had to get out and walk out so response was basically a couple of nurses who are on site permanently but who largely provide health care to the young people.

It was a weird experience. I remember an ambulance member saying 'My god! There is fluid in his ear. I hope this isn't from the brain'. Yet I was saying to myself, 'It is not *that* bad'. I just kept telling myself, 'I will be okay; I will get back to work'. As the days wore on it became more of a relief: I was alive and had a deep sense of gratitude to my colleagues who saved my life.'

Bruce Perham's View.

There is no escaping the brutality of the assault on Justin and the traumatic experience it must have been. Justin told me that he now has an acquired brain injury (ABI), Post Traumatic Stress and a slowly recovering back (four vertebrae were fractured in the assault). The cruel irony of his situation is that the severity of his injuries now prevents him from ever returning to work as a youth justice officer

Anthony.

Anthony Milbourne has multiple years of experience in youth compliance and enforcement. Anthony is very passionate about youth justice and recorded his experiences of working at a youth detention centre in his book, *'Psych Warden - An officer's psychological account of the inside'*. Anthony's book displays his compassion for youth work in custody and yet, concurrently picked up on the issue that they can be extreme and very dangerous places to work. Also, that there are certain things custodial workers need to be aware of in order to be safe - or as safe as possible. Here Anthony shares his feelings on the brutal assault on his colleague and now friend Justin:

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'We were taught to "negate the threat" as being the answer to de-escalating tension. In many ways Justin and I tried to do that, as none of the detainees were injured. It is Justin and myself who will carry the scars from that (brutal) day. It's just another thing in terms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And a big takeaway for me is basically that you own it; you work on it; you accept it. It's the big one and move positively forward. But it's basically a scar and it's part of you now. Yet don't be defined by it. Learn from it.'

Anthony's Reflection: 1

I just had that feeling... It's got to be a worker here that's in a lot of trouble. It was my unit so I rushed in there. When I get there, I see one of the detainees laughing and then I see this huge detainee, he's like 150 kilos, and no one's grabbing him! Now you're taught that when you do your training, don't go in there by yourself. You should always be two workers to restrain a detainee. I had no choice but to do it myself, and there was very little room to get to him. But I got there, grabbed this youth who was, at that time, repeatedly stomping on my friend's Justin's head. There were four youths punching and kicking him - all over his body. The youth I grabbed was down where his Justin's head was, and was really going for it, doing whatever he could to hurt Justin. One of my female colleagues was laying on top of Justin to protect him and, you know, I still get chills retelling this. I grabbed this youth

from behind with all my might, and I tried to throw him against the wall - essentially to get him off Justin as soon as possible.

I knew every second counted. I throw him aside and he looks at me. I put my arms down because I know the cameras are everywhere. I don't want to be seen to be throwing the first punch. Next thing I know is this haymaker punch lands on my face. I thought I was blind as it shattered my glasses. It was the scariest thing ever! Then this youth pulls my jacket over my head and continues to punch me with everything he has. I just thought I was blind, completely blind. I could not fight back. But I knew I had to get into defensive mode, immediately!

At that point he full-on punches me; breaks my nose, which sounds quite horrific. It's actually not, believe it or not. That didn't hurt as much as the continual punches I was absorbing. He did not succeed in getting me to the ground.

My goal was, 'Do not go on the ground' because what was happening to Justin would happen to me. 'Do not go to the ground' was my main priority and 'just protect the vitals'. This youth had punched me just below the ribs, in the back of the neck, wherever he could land a punch. By daylight I was covered in bruises. Oh, my God it was the worst pain ever. So I could handle a punch in the face - any day of the week. But on the neck? I'm still having issues with my neck to this day. It seemed like an eternity but the whole thing went for a few minutes. A lot of damage can occur in a very short space of time.

It's more the mental side of it, and seeing how my wife, children and the rest of the family were reacting was very difficult for me. People have said to me how terrifying it was for them to look at me 'so beaten up'. I was not so aware of how I looked. Yes, my family knew it was a dangerous workplace. But it is not until it actually happens to you that the reality bites you in terms of just how dangerous it is.'

SUSAN JONES' ON THE ATTACK THAT PROFOUNDLY CHANGED HER.

Dr Susan Jones. PhD. Colorado USA.

Susan has had an extensive career within the justice system, starting as a community corrections counsellor and rising through the ranks to become a warden of a maximum-security prison. Susan retired from her position as Warden in 2012. Susan has a Bachelor Degree in Behavioural Science, a Master's in Criminal Justice Administration, and a Doctorate from the University of Colorado. On Susan's 34th birthday, she was viscously assaulted by a prisoner and was almost killed. In this interview she shares the life changing impact this assault had on both her and her family

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'There's a lot of places in this country and probably in Australia, where we're still not there; still not willing to call it trauma. Right? We're not willing to label it because when you call it, when you admit something's traumatic to you, that means you are vulnerable. That means the inmates got through your outer defences.'

Dr Jones' Reflection: 1

Every agency has, (written) in their policy somewhere, that our job is to role model positive behaviour to inmates. No matter how you word something like that, you cannot begin to heal or help other people heal; or see it a different way if you are wounded yourself. If you can't keep your eyes open, if you can't keep focused, if you're worried about being physically assaulted, if you're worried about getting faeces thrown on you... if you're worried about everything - all the things that

are normalized in our business, that are seen as no big deal and dismissed by many, as we are paid to do these things, there really is no clear way out of this conundrum.

One of the things that happened in my career and that shaped who I am, occurred on my 34th birthday. I was at the level of major and was assaulted by an inmate. Beaten half to death. That kind of really opened my eyes to a few things! I was the communicator. I could talk my way out of anything - I thought? I had thought that officers who used force on inmates were the ones that got assaulted, as they just weren't doing it right. Well, now I'm being assaulted. And I'll never forget, as I'm getting my head beaten into the wall, thinking, 'Can't we talk about this?' Then realizing I didn't even get a chance to use my communication skills. It was such a stupid thing to think. But that really kind of changed my focus. Sometimes we're just in the wrong place at the wrong time, or you say the wrong thing in the wrong circumstances. As a result of that assault, there are still physical things I cannot do in my life. So I lost pieces of who I was.

It was a very difficult time coming back to work. Personally, I never thought that going back to work was really a choice. It was something I was always going to do. I remember when I got out of the hospital and I was home, and I was lying in bed talking to a relative of mine who lives on a Kansas farm. He tells me, 'You know what you have to do, right?' And I knew what he was going to say. I said, 'Yes, I have to get back on the horse.' You know if a horse throws you off - I don't care if your legs are broken, the first thing you do is you get back on that horse because you want that horse to know who's boss.

So, I went back to work kind of on autopilot because I had to get on that horse. (At the time) I was still trying to process it: Not only with myself as an individual, but with my corrections officer husband, who has really specific feelings about what happened. I did continue to work for another 20 years after that, which is a substantial amount of time. Getting through all that was just something I did and as it goes, I wasn't really special.

Most of us, when we deal with trauma, we're not dealing with it just on one level. You know, there's all these different layers that have to be dealt with, and you still have to pay the bills and get the groceries and get the kids to school. And most of us deal with trauma like that. We still have all these layers and still have to be dealt with. But we also have to keep living.

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'I certainly took that experience into the world with me. I know my husband and I both took that into the world with us. But it also made going to work so much more difficult. I was no longer the kind communicating, compassionate corrections employee that I was before. Maybe that part of me got shelved somewhere? When you're getting your head slammed into a concrete wall, you don't have a lot of time to think, unfortunately. And maybe that part of me just never got back into Susan. I was never quite the same after that. And maybe I was not as compassionate.'

Dr Jones' Reflection: 2

The reality that I could be seriously injured in this job and that it could have been worse, that's a really tough question. Firstly, it was a long time ago. But I don't think I ever let go of the realization about how dangerous the work can be. I was attacked out of nowhere, with no warning. So dangerous, right?

This wasn't use of force where I went in expecting trouble. I was not prepared for it. One ramification of experiencing such an unprovoked attack was that it made me a much more protective of the

people I loved and cared for. And I use the word protective in a positive way. My daughters, who are adults now, would probably tell you that I really clamped down on their freedom because if this can happen to me in a controlled environment, then what can happen to them?

Maybe I couldn't open myself up as much again as I had previously. We did a CISM (Critical Incident Debriefing) with everybody that was involved with the incident, and I'll never forget one of the people started telling me the story about how a person found this snake on the road and it was a pretty neat looking snake. So he put in a box and took it home and made it his pet. Well, eventually the snake bit him and he couldn't believe it. The person had been so attentive to the needs of the snake and he just could not believe this pet snake bit him! His friend said, 'But that's what snakes do, right? What did you expect?'

I immediately internalized that story and connected the snake to the inmate and I bet that any inmate I ever had an interaction with after that, the interaction was different. Because I understood that's what inmates do - given a chance. Now, obviously, that isn't the direction we want our corrections staff to head in.

We don't want our corrections staff to categorise all inmates as capable of such unprovoked violence at any time. But to think they aren't, means that we're kind of fooling ourselves. I wasn't prepared for the situation where it occurred. And now, I don't think I am as open with inmates. Certainly, after that, though, it increased my compassion for staff dramatically - especially when I became associate warden.

I was constantly checking in on my injured staff. So the incident really increased my awareness of what would be going on in their life. So that's a huge positive from the assault because I understood this wasn't just getting something thrown on you... This wasn't just about the incident, there are feelings that go along with it and they need to be attended to. So, I was probably much more attentive to any staff issue after that. In the end, the absolute worst part of that incident was the look on my husband's face when he arrived at the emergency department. It was a combination of anger and terror. I will never forget that as long as I live. So I don't know how you deal with it, except that you put one foot in front of the other.

MAGGIE FALLING INTO THE EMOTIONAL VOID

Maggie went into correction work in her early 20s and worked as a correction officer for more than 10 years. Maggie felt the constant exposure to trauma and the lack of emotional support progressively wore her down to the point that she needed to leave. Maggie now works in the hospital emergency environment where she feels significantly better supported.

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'Emotional well-being was rarely spoken about. There was nothing on our emotions and nothing about emotionally supporting each other, or recognizing signs of burnout, fatigue, critical incident stress in ourselves or in our colleagues. There was nothing in my whole time there. You would have a critical incident, but you would look around and everyone just got on with it. In the early days I would ask myself, 'How do I feel?' But generally, nothing would happen. No one would ask you how you felt, so you learned just to get on with it. Like everybody else did. Emotional reactions to incidents were seen as "inconvenient", something that slowed us down.'

Maggie's Reflection: 1

It was only six months into the job when I attended my first prisoner suicide. I still remember the prisoner's face and I still remember how I felt at that moment. You, never forget the faces you see hanging from a noose. I remember having to hold the prisoner while another officer tried to get the noose off his neck. I had to hoist the prisoner higher to get the noose off, and it was like being in a surreal comedy and you wonder if this is really happening? I remember the coldness of the body and I felt that coldness for the entire day. It was not until I took my shirt off at the end of the day that I felt warm again.

I remember the face and I remember the feeling, and I often think if officers were honest with themselves, we all do remember. Yet I could not share this when I went home. How do you process what has just happened to the prisoner and to you? You say to yourself, 'It is just part of it'. It is a process of 'pulling back on the emotion'. Yet you know it has messed you up and you know you are not quite right. Then you say to yourself that you have an early start tomorrow, so you go again. But you don't talk to anyone. There was no night phone call... and this kind of went on for my whole career.

On another occasion, when I was similarly not okay, a senior flew past me down the corridor and asked if I was, okay? I was going to say 'No' but he was so far down the corridor it would have awkward for him to stop. So I said 'Yeah, no worries'.

You have an incident and you're all in it and it's this amazing team and you kind of look around and you know who is there and you feel supported. And then you go back to throwing sand in each other's faces. Everyone who wasn't there has an idea of what you did wrong, of what you should have done and so on.

You constantly question yourself. So much so that you become void of emotion. By the time I left nothing shocked me anymore. Nothing at all. When I read your book *Code Blue - Prison Officer in Danger*, I know who Neil is as I worked with him for years. I had no idea of the impact and the toll this work took on him and of what he went through. Neil was going through the same things as me but not once did we ever speak about that. It made me think, 'Why did we never speak about what this work was doing to us?'

So much time is spent in prison talking about the toxic shit that we get distracted from talking about what is important, our emotional response to the work we do. The pervasive sense you have is of the importance of leaving it behind. Yet you are still hearing it and seeing it but there is no room, no time to *feel* it.

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'A general manager of a prison I worked at said to me once, 'Being an officer is, you know, it's a pendulum; sort of welfare and sort of security, and that was kind of it. Sometimes you swing a bit one way and sometimes you swing a bit more the other way' As time went on, I really came to appreciate the wisdom in that comment.'

Maggie's Reflection: 2

I realized I had to make a change so I decided to transfer to prisoner management in our city court. I thought going up there would be less traumatic. It was, very early on. In my time there, this prisoner used a ligature to attempt suicide. The prisoner had stopped breathing but, fortunately, they had a defib. It was the first time I had used one but I had got her back and she survived. When she regained consciousness, I remember this prisoner just put her arms around me and just went, 'Thank you'. She was crying and crying and crying and I'm like, 'It's okay. Like, it's all good. Like you're safe.'

It's okay'. It really was just this human moment. And it's pretty special because okay, you've got that trust, that respect in each other as people. Correction officer to prisoner? It doesn't matter. And my manager was, like, 'How dare you let a prisoner put their arms around you like that!'

There's that moment: the pendulum swing of security and welfare. But my pendulum needed to be more at the welfare end. I was very comfortable with that. But my manager called me into his office to grill me over a prisoner hugging me because I saved her life!

(I'm thinking) 'Let's talk about everything else that led up to that incident where the code was called. Where I dealt with a situation I had not dealt with before.' Where I'm directing staff and I'm calling the ambulance, and I'm cutting the ligature off, and I'm doing CPR ... let's talk about those steps!

No, he was going to talk about what I had done wrong. I had allowed a prisoner to hug me which had 'crossed a boundary'. I think that actually captures the spirit (or the intent) of making a difference and changing prisoners' lives. It was a genuine connection between two people. It was not me being manipulated, or being conned by a prisoner. I'd been thinking of resigning and that clinched it!

Bruce Perham's View:

It's very hard to hear these recollections and not feel frustrated, even angry at how the senior dealt with this matter. However, I have to look beyond the obvious. It may well be that this senior is coming from his own place of lived experience, and that at some point - or several points in his career - he had gotten emotionally too close to a prisoner and been hurt by it, and had subsequently formed the view it is 'too risky' to have these moments with prisoners.

What would have been really helpful in this interchange with Maggie would have been to share where he was coming from. To be able to articulate the thought processes behind what he was saying to his officer. What this senior did, and what most seniors do, is that he slipped into 'rank' mode and overran Maggie with his authority in order to state his point of view which left no space for discussion.

When Maggie talked about seniors not having the skills to have such conversations, I think, what is central to this issue is that they too have never had a context to explore or share their own emotional reactions to their work, and so rarely talk about their own experiences. The minute you slip into 'authority mode', the opportunity to talk or discuss with your officers of what is happening to them is lost.

Rather than having rich and nurturing conversations with your officers, a feeling of resentment and bitterness is created. For Maggie, like many officers before her, these moments become a catalyst and heighten the need to exit the industry. I have no doubt that if what Maggie did in this interchange with the prisoner been recognized for what it was: 'an act of caring for another human being', she would not at that point have decided to walk.

HAMMOND ON THE INEVITABILITY OF BURNOUT.

Hammond has been a correction officer for more than 30 years. He is currently off work due to the severity of his post-traumatic stress reactions. Hammond contacted me to discuss his experiences.

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'My wife had been saying for years that I was changing. You just become so hypervigilant. When we go out to dinner my wife says 'can you stop looking at everyone? And don't always sit at the furthest point from the restaurant door.'

Hammond's Reflection: 1

The prisoner had a tourniquet around his arm. He removed it and blood started spraying everywhere. He was armed with a razor blade and we had to wait until he dropped to the ground before we could go in. It was full on, but you knew you had to deal with it and get on with it. There was no debrief, the cleaner came in and cleaned the cell. The prisoner was back two days later and did it again. It was very daunting and there were days I didn't want to come to work. But you forced yourself to come. Even walking across the oval, the inmates were at you: 'You know what happens when you don't do what we want!' The inmates played mind games all the time, but when they decided to go you, they went for it. They could be really violent. I saw fellow officers cop many a beating. As well, I being assaulted myself on countless occasions. I have lost count of the number of days and incidents where you are absolutely shit scared. You know you are going to get hurt. If you don't perform, the negativity of others will descend on you.

My wife has been saying for years this work has changed me. You become so hypervigilant. And you never knowingly put yourself at risk. Whenever we go out to dinner my wife says stop looking at everyone and don't go to the furthest point of the restaurant. I can't help it. I always need an escape route in case something happens.

My wife would say to me, 'You are so negative about your work - about life, about everything. You no longer see the good in people, you only see the bad'. My wife has said to me on many occasions that she can't wait to see me laugh at something. I know she is right, and I regularly have dreams, horrible dreams. For years I have dreamt about being assaulted, being abused and so on and generally wake up at 3.00am or so and can't get back to sleep. You just analyse everything all the time. It never ends.

Prison is not an environment that is easy to understand and it is hard to describe to my wife or others. There is a very toxic culture amongst staff and if you speak up about something, you will be portrayed as having mental health issues. When there is an incident, everyone works together as a team and we back each other. It is just like we flick a switch and do what we need to do and get the job done. As soon as the incident is finished, everyone goes back to putting everyone and each other down. When you add that to the endless trauma you experience it is easy to understand why you burn out.

BRYAN, LEFT HAUNTED AND TRAUMATISED.

As an in-prison social worker I was doing some work for a prison that contacted me urgently because a prisoner had committed suicide. It left a chaotic scene as there are many processes that need to be followed after the death of a prisoner. I saw a couple of officers who were very distressed as it had been so traumatic for them.

The officers and managers were very concerned about Bryan, who had been involved in trying to save this prisoner's life. Bryan had gone home, but his operations manager was keen for me to see him. So next morning, Bryan came to see me - reluctantly and with great pushing from his operations manager. Bryan was a very reserved officer in his mid-40s, and acknowledged that he found situations of 'talking' very difficult. As we eased into a conversation, Bryan told me the prisoner had first come into the unit about five weeks previously and was initially reclusive but had started to open up a little about his eight year old daughter and how much he was missing her.

The prisoner had told Bryan about how he 'wanted to make it good for his daughter' as her mother was a drug addict. Bryan gave the prisoner lots of encouragement and shared how 'he felt quite connected to this prisoner'. It was something that didn't happen often. When the code for prisoner

at risk went off, Bryan realised it was his unit. He sprinted to the scene and found this prisoner hanging from the window, terribly disfigured but still alive. Bryan, his colleagues and the paramedics fought valiantly to save this prisoner's life but were not able to do so.

I asked Bryan what had that been like for him? He replied, 'I was in shock, I felt sick. There was blood everywhere as the repeated attempts to revive him had broken his sternum. I just smelled death. And there was a short period when it was just me with the body. I was frozen, I couldn't think.'

Bryan went on to tell me that what he saw was 'haunting' and he could not stop thinking about the 'smell of death' and the crushed body of the prisoner. He expressed the sadness that he felt for that little girl who now did not have a father. He felt anxious that he would not be able to get back to work and was pushing his operations manager to allow him back to the same unit as soon as possible.

As he was leaving, I asked Bryan to come back and see me again. But I could tell from his facial expression that he was not going to do that. It had already been so hard for him. Talking about trauma always is. Bryan said 'maybe' and with that he was gone.

I reflected over this interview for some time and Bryan moved me greatly, which is something that can happen in the counselling process. I was moved by the intensity of his experience and I could not get the vision of him being alone with the body of this prisoner out of my mind. I couldn't imagine how hard it would have been for him to fight to save the prisoner's life, a prisoner he had connected to, and it ends with him sitting with a lifeless, bloodied body.

I wondered whether I could have done more to engage him in the counselling process and what impact this experience would have on Bryan in the longer term? I pondered whether people would wrap their arms around him ... whether the next time Bryan was in a traumatic situation whether anyone would remember this particularly traumatic experience?

I wondered whether we, as a society really understand the psychological complexity of what we're asking correction officers to do in forming relationships with prisoners and I wondered if like many of his colleagues, Bryan was to end up with PTSD who would be there for him, and who would understand what he'd been through? I wondered if Bryan would become collateral damage for the greater good and whether anyone would shed a tear for him. Who would hear his cries and truly recognize the price Bryan was paying for doing his job?

Bruce Perham's Conclusion:

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I cannot disconnect the level of violence and abuse directed at correction officers, by prisoners, particularly in maximum security prisons, and their behaviour in response to it. The worst thing we can do to correction officers is to look at their behaviour and mental health issues in isolation from the environment they work in. It is a two-way relationship, which is psychologically quite complex with two quite variable and at times incompatible stories of lived experience.

Recently, an officer contacted me and talked about an horrendous assault he'd experienced in his early days of working in the prison system. An incident that was still having dramatic effect. He mentioned that while colleagues have been very supportive, he actually had 'no one to talk to' about the emotional pain he was experiencing years after this assault. As we discoursed, I became intently aware that the more I discussed with him the emotional pain and turmoil that correction officer

work was causing him, the more I was opening up the discussion to the counselling conundrum that I did not have an answer to how 'to make this right' and that deep down, I wasn't sure we could 'ever make it right'.

The penny dropped for me at this point: And that is that all of the stories I've given in this presentation reveal how the officer's emotional reactions to events seem to be at war with but connected to the prevailing prison culture.

I realised why 'getting back on the horse' is so accepted as the way to go, because dealing with emotional reactions to this work has the capacity to take you on a roller coaster ride of inner turmoil.

For many officers, the challenge is to survive the work, and history has dictated this is best done by **denying the psychological impact of correction work**. However, we are now at a crossroads because we do have greater understanding that continual exposure to traumatic experiences can be incredibly harmful, and yet, we have not squared up to how to prevent those life-scarring outcomes.

Denial may be a short-term strategy. It is not the long term answer.

Bruce Perham
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A big thankyou to Mia, Anthony, Justin, Susan, Maggie and Hammond for having the courage to share their stories. It is through this sharing of their lived experience we can learn about the challenges of being a correction officer and to chart a way forward. My aim in 2024 is to pull together the full interviews, as there was a great deal of rich material I could not include in this presentation.