

Purposeful Professionals

Advancing employee resiliency through spiritual wellness

BY HARMONY GOORLEY, MA, LCPC, CCHP



Imagine an officer who wakes up feeling nervous, begins dwelling on negative thoughts about work before he/she ever clocks in, behaves irritably towards colleagues and is reactive towards inmates. At work, this officer is less productive and more prone to burnout than peers. At home, he/she is distant, quick-tempered and often plagued by physical and emotional pain. Now, imagine this officer's colleague, faced with the same work challenges but who wakes feeling energized, maintains a positive outlook, engages

peers cooperatively and is calmer, more responsive towards inmates and loved ones at home. Who would you want on your shift? Which employee displays the personal resilience needed for a long, successful career in corrections? Conceivably, one of these employees regularly contemplates such questions as: "What is really important to me?" "What is my purpose?" "What do I value most?" and "What do I aspire to?" The answers he/she silently discovers provide the professional durability and personal fulfillment to survive in a career in corrections.

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Given the stressors of the job and the ongoing struggles to recruit and retain quality employees, stress management and comprehensive wellness initiatives are spurring throughout the industry. With many dimensions to wellness, Fleet Maull, Ph.D., CMT-P, founder and training director of a mindfulness-based training program, describes spiritual resilience as the “bedrock” to employee well-being.¹ But what is spirituality? Why is it an important consideration in workplace wellness planning? And how does mindfulness relate? Dedicated to raising awareness and educating employees regarding all aspects of employee wellbeing, the ACA Staff Wellness Committee’s 2019 Wellness Expo spotlights the significance of spiritual health. Aligned with the committee’s mission, two national experts assembled to explore these wellness themes. Dr. Maull has spent his career researching the impacts of spiritual care and bringing innovative mindfulness trainings to correctional institutions around the nation.² Similarly, Nancy Kehoe, RSCJ, Ph.D., author, Roman Catholic nun and assistant clinical professor of psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, has pioneered clinical techniques that explore the role of spirituality in people’s lives and mental health.³ Merging their expertise, an introduction into the role of spirituality in job performance, job satisfaction and staff resilience is supplied.

Simply put, spirituality is about a felt sense of connectedness.

For some, the notion of discussing spirituality at work seems off-limits. Oftentimes, spirituality is equated with religion. Dr. Maull clarifies that while religiosity is a valid expression of the spiritual dimension, it is not the whole nor does it exclusively define



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spirituality. Elaborating on what makes us spiritual, Dr. Kehoe reflects on a quote by author L. Miller, “Beyond our natural, biological wiring for it, what makes us spiritual is our awareness that our lives, our relationships, and the natural world both seen, and unseen are filled with an ultimate presence. It is our awareness of transcendence, in us, around us, through us, and beyond us, that is spiritual.”⁴ Simply put, spirituality is about a felt sense of connectedness. Believing you are part of a larger whole, actively trying to define a personal philosophy or belief system, attempting to live a life according to your beliefs or valuing a connection to a higher being are all clues that spiritual wellness is an important aspect in your life. Spirituality, for example, can be achieved through faith, forgiveness or the awe of nature, says Dr. Maull, or through the arts, witnessing someone change for the better or random acts of kindness, says Dr. Kehoe.

In life, we are all faced with the pain of managing the differences between our present and desired situations. The discrepancies between these two states understandably bring about uncomfortable emotions (i.e. frustration, fear, anxiety, etc.). Especially when dark, loud or aggressive, correctional environments

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can feel far from ideal for the correctional professionals working inside. Resilient, mindful employees or those able to “rise above a cold environment,” find meaning and greater purpose during the most chaotic of shifts, explains Dr. Kehoe. Discussing spirituality’s impact on job satisfaction, Dr. Kehoe recalls a time she questioned a veteran leader about how he has kept his optimism throughout his decades of correctional service. Resonating with the spiritual motivations keeping many workers in the field, he answered that making a difference for just one inmate provides enough meaning to his work to keep him going.

Both experts agree that finding meaning and working with a purpose, especially during those thankless, intensely unpleasant periods, positions employees to better cope with stress and bounce back from work-related challenges. Dr. Maull adds that “nothing protects us more from feeling empty than having these meaningful experiences in which we know we are here for a reason and life is good.” He continues that with

discards positive experiences. All too easily, we forget the incident-free shifts, the random acts of kindness, the successful collaborations between departments resulting in patient stabilizations and the genuine moments of laughter at work and home.

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threat detection, an integral and incessant aspect of the job, correctional workers’ brains are conditioned to focus on negative experiences. Citing psychologist and author Dr. Rick Hanson, Dr. Maull explains that the brain acts like Velcro for negativity and unconsciously

Feeling empty, alienated, angry or helpless are often strong indicators that individuals are missing a larger sense of meaning and purpose (also known as spiritual distress) in their lives, and are highly associated with employee suicidality. Protecting officers against suicide is an ever-growing concern for the correctional industry given staff’s firsthand and/or vicarious exposure to traumatic events, says Dr. Maull. When employees are experiencing periods of pain and imbalance, they may struggle to handle distressing emotions wisely. Adopting a mindful perspective during these

periods, with something as simple as asking oneself, “Do I want to be a positive or negative force in my environment?” can affect greater control over what employees choose to do with their mouths and hands, explains Dr. Kehoe. The practice of mindfulness can

“retrain” the brain, asserts Dr. Maull, to “savor the good.” Resilient employees who learn to appreciate pleasant moments, no matter how fleeting, are primed for long, successful careers in corrections.

Journaling, gratitude lists or meditative practices performed at home or during workday breaks can help to strengthen mindfulness skills and nourish employees’ spiritual health. Deep, intentional breathing, which can be practiced throughout one’s shift, can trigger a relaxation response and keep employees in leadership positions with themselves, explains Dr. Maull. At an organizational level, Dr. Kehoe underlines the importance of the aesthetics of employee break spaces since “the absence of beauty effects our spirit.” Likewise, Dr. Maull encourages the creation of mindfulness rooms — respite spaces where employees can take a timeout, collect themselves and return to their posts calmer. Operating with a purpose and behaving from a state of composure are the

chief characteristics of resilient professionals. When spiritual health is incorporated into wellness planning, individuals and institutions alike reap the benefits of a happy, healthy and resilient workforce.

ENDNOTES

¹ SAMSHA identifies eight dimensions to an individual’s sense of wellness, including emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, occupational, physical, social and spiritual.

² The Center for Mindfulness in Public Safety is a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing mindfulness-based programs and solutions to law enforcement, corrections, probation and parole, the courts and other public safety professionals.

³ Authored, “Wrestling with Our Inner Angels: Faith, Mental Illness and the Journey to Wholeness.”

⁴ Miller, L. (2015). “The Spiritual Child.” New York: St. Martin’s Press.

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