

Corrections officer wellbeing: Training challenges and opportunities



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Associate Professor Jeffrey Pfeifer (Ph.D., M.Leg.St.) has been teaching and researching in the area of social psychology, policing, and correctional psychology for over 20 years. He has also conducted programme evaluations and training workshops for Corrections Victoria, G4S Australasia, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ontario Provincial Police, Western Australia Department of Corrections, Russian Ministry of Corrections, Namibian Correctional Service, Saskatchewan Ministry of Corrections, Anti-Corruption Commission of Zambia, Singapore Airport Security Service, Sharjah (UAE) Police Service, and the Durban (South Africa) Police Service. Most recently Professor Pfeifer has been conducting a programme of research on the use of technology and gaming as a platform for positively impacting the wellbeing and rehabilitation of offenders.

Editor's note

The research completed by Drs Trounson and Pfeifer was undertaken to inform practice within the Australian correctional context. Information on how the New Zealand Department of Corrections manages the issue of staff wellbeing was not available to them at the time. Corrections officer workplace wellbeing has been a strong focus for the Department for several years, with a number of initiatives implemented. These include: the Staff Safety Plan (which covered such projects as the deployment of on body cameras to staff in high risk environments, the introduction of a Physical Readiness Assessment to ensure all custodial staff are fit enough to respond quickly and effectively in an emergency), the Making Shifts Work programme (see p 29), the introduction of a smokefree policy in all our prisons, free health checks and influenza inoculations, and the employee assistance programme, including the employment of regional welfare co-ordinators.

Executive summary

The wellbeing of corrections officers is an important issue deserving attention from the scientific community and government departments responsible for the regulation of correctional systems. A review of the existing scientific literature clearly indicates that corrections officers are at a heightened risk of experiencing a range of negative physical and psychological conditions. Despite this, little research has explored how best to assist officers to maintain their sense of wellbeing through the provision of wellbeing training. Over the past decade there has been a notable surge in the development and implementation of proactive staff training initiatives aimed at

assisting employees to better manage their sense of wellbeing. Unfortunately, many of these programmes continue to lack a clear evidence-basis for their implementation or cannot claim to be prison officer-responsive as they have been adapted from other high-risk occupational settings. Few available programmes are evidence-informed and designed specifically to cater for the unique training needs of the contemporary corrections officer. This article discusses the challenges faced by the correctional industry in relation to officer wellbeing training and highlights the need for evidence-informed, industry-specific, prison officer-responsive wellbeing training programmes. Furthermore, this article highlights the inherent benefits of engaging in inter-disciplinary collaborations involving research, government and industry bodies to establish best-practice processes in regard to wellbeing training for correctional employees.

KEYWORDS: Prison; Stress; Adversity; Work; Occupation; Guard; Corrections; Officer; Wellbeing

Introduction

In comparison to the quantity of research examining the complex nature of prison life, there is a surprising lack of empirical investigation specifically relating to those who elect to pursue a career as a corrections officer (Leibling, Price, & Shefer, 2010). This lack of attention is especially poignant given the fact that corrections officers face a range of unique workplace challenges that may impact both their physical and psychological wellbeing (Dowden & Tellier, 2004).

As part of their job, officers can be exposed to numerous workplace stressors including verbal abuse, physical assault, and witnessing traumatic or violent events (see e.g., Konda, Reichard, & Tiesman, 2012; Spinaris, Denhof, & Kellaway, 2012). Considering the range and severity of the challenges faced by officers, it is no surprise that research indicates that corrections officers perceive a significantly higher level of adversity in their workplace than those in other occupations (Trounson, Pfeifer, & Critchley, 2016).

What is particularly concerning about these findings, however, is that recent research suggests that this heightened perception of adversity experienced by officers may be linked to increased levels of stress, lowered psychological wellbeing and a range of negative organisational outcomes such as increased absenteeism (i.e., not coming to work despite being physically and psychologically able), "presenteeism" (i.e., coming to work but not being mentally attentive or productive), and job dissatisfaction (Trounson, Pfeifer, Skues, & Ogloff, 2016).

The potential impact of the workplace experience is illustrated by the fact that, compared to those working in other fields, corrections officers experience one of the highest work-related injury and illness rates (see e.g., Ferguson, Prenzler, Sarre, & de Caires, 2011) and boast one of the highest rates of work-related mental stress claims (see e.g., SWA, 2013). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that officers are also susceptible to a variety of stress-related negative health outcomes (see e.g., Denhof & Spinaris, 2013; Spinaris, 2014) such as heightened psychological distress (Morse, Dusssetschleger, Warren, & Cherniack, 2011), depression (Denhof & Spinaris, 2013; Obidoa, Reeves, Warren, Reisine, & Cherniack, 2011; Sui et al., 2014), post-traumatic stress symptoms (Spinaris et al., 2012), substance abuse (see e.g. Svenson et al., 1995), and increased risk of other stress-related health conditions (Finney, Stergiopoulos, Hensel, Bonato, & Dewa, 2013; Johnson et al., 2009). Given the above, this article aims to outline some of the current research and practice challenges facing the correctional industry in relation to assisting officers to maintain their psychological and physical wellbeing. The article also describes several promising officer initiatives that have been developed and implemented in response to the issue of corrections officer wellbeing and discusses the future of officer-responsive wellbeing training.

Current research and practice challenges

Despite the lack of empirical research exploring correctional officer wellbeing, correctional organisations remain actively committed to addressing the health and wellbeing of corrections officers (Walmsley, 2015). In fact, correctional agencies around the world continue to search for more effective ways to assist their staff to manage work-related stress (Finn, 2000). This process has resulted in the implementation of a variety of employee services such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), reactive counselling services and critical incident de-briefing, some of which have now become standard employee services across national correctional services.

Although the above initiatives provide much needed support for officers, the implementation and evaluation of these programmes has revealed several new industry-based challenges that require attention if correctional services are to continue to progress their understanding of officer wellbeing and refine their ability to assist their employees (Finn, 1998). Specific challenges include: (1) altering the current trend toward implementing predominantly reactive responses to officer wellbeing with a more proactive approach to the issue, (2) broadening our perspective of service need to also include staff who are not currently experiencing complex or high-end needs, (3) ensuring that training programmes are occupationally responsive (i.e., designed specifically for the unique needs of corrections officers), and (4) encouraging research initiatives that specifically address these challenges and that establish the effectiveness of programmes designed specifically to address these issues.

From reactive responses to proactive initiatives

Although the occupational health literature indicates that proactive staff programmes are an effective approach to issues such as stress management (see e.g., Richardson & Rothstein, 2008), a review of the research examining correctional approaches to staffing indicates that the majority of initiatives are reactive in nature. Specifically, it appears that the bulk of the available research (and subsequent organisational practices) revolves around the provision of assistance to employees who have been identified as experiencing psychological distress or are impaired by psychological symptoms (Millie & Das, 2008).

Although this population is certainly an important one from an occupational health perspective, it is also clear that proactive initiatives aimed at those not currently experiencing clinical levels of psychological stress may also be an effective approach to assisting with occupational wellbeing (Trounson, Pfeifer, Skues, & Ogloff, 2016).

The above contention is supported by the fact that the high cost of workplace-related mental health problems has led to the recent recommendation that employers move from a reactive approach to addressing psychosocial conditions, to a more proactive approach designed to promote employee wellbeing (Joyce, 2013). Consequently, there has been a growing shift toward developing proactive or preventative organisational initiatives designed to assist employees to maintain their wellbeing (Reynolds, 1997). Based on the above findings, it may be argued that the field of corrections also needs to embrace this shift in focus and increase the attention placed on the development, implementation and evaluation of proactive programming designed to assist officers to maintain their wellbeing.

Inclusion of *the missing middle*

As indicated above, although correctional organisations have implemented a range of mental health services to assist staff experiencing significant psychological distress, there are comparatively few programmes aimed at assisting officers with proactively maintaining their wellbeing. This approach is one that is common among organisations and is reflective of a tendency to focus resources on the needs of high-end individuals while all but ignoring the lower-end needs of staff who are dealing with daily stressors and challenges. According to Pfeifer (2015), this approach leaves a substantial gap in the empirical literature relating to the wellbeing of what he terms *the missing middle* (i.e., staff who are not currently experiencing significant psychological impairment but who are dealing with daily challenges due to the adverse environment in which they operate). Specifically, this approach has resulted in a significant lack of empirical research into the needs of officers who are not currently experiencing a significant cognitive deficit or mental health issue, but may still be experiencing some level of psychological distress.

At present, very few studies have focused on the wellbeing needs of corrections officers from the missing middle (i.e., officers who are likely to experience fluctuating sub-clinical levels of distress but who are not currently accessing available reactive mental health services). This lack of research is worth highlighting given that, by definition, the missing middle represents the largest proportion of individuals within any organisation (Pfeifer, 2015). It may be argued that both researchers and organisational leaders be more cognisant of the need to identify the stressors affecting wellbeing among officers who are not experiencing severe mental illness and subsequently develop and implement interventions to assist them.

Developing occupationally responsive programmes for Corrections

A review of the occupational health literature indicates that important insights into staff wellbeing may be gained from the findings of research on other high-risk occupational fields. For example, studies indicate that police and emergency services personnel experience many of the organisational and health-related challenges that are also found in the correctional industry such as high rates of physical and psychological illness (Keinan & Malach-Pines, 2007; Kirkcaldy, Cooper, Shephard, & Brown, 1994; Regehr, Goldberg, & Hughes, 2002) and related organisational impacts (Basinska & Wiciak, 2012; Kohan & Mazmanian, 2003). Interestingly, however, although police, emergency services and the military have all developed occupationally responsive programmes aimed at the wellbeing of their members (see e.g., Biggam, Power, & Macdonald, 1997; Kaiseler, Queirós, Passos, & Sousa, 2014; Kirmeyer & Diamond, 1985), this trend is noticeably absent within the correctional world.

A review of correctional practice indicates that many of the wellbeing programmes currently implemented in corrections have been adapted from these related occupational fields rather than developed with an eye to the specific needs and challenges of correctional staff. It can be argued, however, that the inherent differences between the working environments of other high-risk professions when compared to corrections, requires a need to develop occupationally specific, corrections officer-responsive programmes that address the unique factors facing these individuals (Brower, 2013; Trounson & Pfeifer, 2016). Further evidence for this supposition may be found in research comparing corrections officers to police officers, which found that corrections officers report significantly more work-related stress and burnout and that there are significant differences between the workplace stressors that exist in each of these occupational contexts (Keinan & Malach-Pines, 2007; Summerlin, Oehme, Stern, & Valentine, 2010). It is therefore important that the correctional industry continues to work to develop programmes that are prison officer-responsive in order to ensure that training remains relevant and appropriately targeted.

Building an empirical foundation for officer wellbeing training

Although the last 10 years has seen a substantial increase in the inclusion of corrections officer training programmes aimed at promoting staff wellbeing and countering the negative impacts of workplace stress and adversity (see e.g., Bravo-Mehmedbasic et al., 2009; Finn, 2000; Leo, 2011; McCraty et al., 2009; Shochet et al., 2011), there continues to be a distinct lack of empirical research relating to the development, implementation and evaluation of these initiatives. For example, in a review of stress-related interventions implemented within corrections, Finn (1998) argued that there is a lack of evidence-informed initiatives and empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of programmes aimed at assisting officers to maintain their psychological wellbeing. This is also reflected within the wider literature relating to the management of work-related stress, which has been criticised as being built upon a weak theoretical base (Cox, Griffiths, & Rial-Gonzalez, 2000).

Correctional agencies, like other organisations, face continued pressures to implement programmes aimed at staff wellbeing and, like other agencies, they are also often faced with the fact that the empirical basis for these initiatives is often lacking due to a lack of academic research. This situation often culminates in programmes being implemented with less of an evidence-base than one might desire and can leave correctional organisations susceptible to diverting funds and resources toward programmes that may be ineffective or in some cases harmful (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Finckenauer, 2000). The empirical deficit identified by Finn (1998) needs to be addressed if such training programmes are to be executed widely as a standard aspect of officer training in corrections. It is therefore important to ensure that researchers are cognisant of the need to engage in studies aimed at providing an empirical foundation for such programming and that avenues for increased industry/academic collaborations are identified and promoted.

Corrections officer wellbeing programme

As stated above, despite significant empirical and organisational challenges, correctional agencies have implemented a number of wellbeing programmes aimed at positively impacting staff. Although no systematic reviews of corrections officer wellbeing programmes currently exist within the academic literature, and few existing programmes have undergone peer-reviewed systematic evaluation (see e.g., Brower, 2013; Finn, 2000),

it is important to provide a brief overview of some of the programmes currently being delivered.

Such an overview will assist in identifying both the positive aspects of implementation as well as some of the limitations that may be addressed through the development of a wellbeing programme aimed specifically at the needs of corrections officers, especially those deemed to be in the missing middle.

Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR) – R2MR is one such training programme that has made inroads in relation to assisting officers to better manage their psychological wellbeing within high-risk occupational settings. The R2MR programme is provided as a single 160 minute session that aims to; a) teach recruits basic mental health literacy, b) teach stress management skills, and c) change attitudes toward mental health problems and service use (Fikretoglu, Beatty, & Liu, 2014). The R2MR programme has demonstrated some encouraging results in relation to uptake and effectiveness within a military sample (Fikretoglu et al., 2014), however, little peer-reviewed research is currently available that can speak to the effectiveness of the programme in assisting corrections officers to maintain their psychological wellbeing.

It should be acknowledged, however, that the R2MR programme was not designed specifically for corrections officers and can therefore not be considered prison-officer responsive. Originally developed by Canada's Department of National Defence, the programme has now been implemented within the Canadian Police Services and is being implemented by Correctional Services Canada for use with corrections officers. Furthermore, although the brevity of the R2MR programme may be considered a positive feature by correctional organisations looking to implement training, affording minimal operational impact, there is evidence to suggest that more extensive programmes may provide increased benefit to participants, allowing them to engage more deeply with programme content. For example, there is evidence to suggest that the impact of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy-based programmes is moderated by the duration of treatment (i.e., number of sessions) with a higher dosage resulting in better outcomes (Christensen, Griffiths, Mackinnon, & Brittliffe, 2006; Glenn et al., 2014; Khoury et al., 2013; Landenberger & Lipsey, 2005). Power to Change Performance (PCP) – Heart Math's PCP initiative is another training programme that has established some evidence-basis in regard to its effectiveness with correctional officers (McCraty et al., 2009). The programme included five training modules and involved training in emotion self-regulation techniques and the use of biofeedback technology. Examining 75 correctional officers, McCraty et al. (2009) found no significant differences on any of the study measures between those participating in the training and those who did not (i.e., the control group). However, reductions in cholesterol, glucose, heart rate, blood pressure and reported psychological distress were identified within the experimental group between the pre and post-assessments. This was also true in relation to measures of productivity, motivation, goal clarity and positive outlook. Despite demonstrating promising findings, it should be acknowledged that implementation of the PCP programme involves the provision of biofeedback equipment and it has not been designed specifically for officers so cannot be classified as prison officer-responsive.

FOCUS – In a report to the National Institute of Justice, Lagasse and McGarthy (2001) evaluated the *FOCUS* staff training programme reporting positive results regarding programme content. The *FOCUS* programme involved a series of one-hour workshops which provided training in regard to managing stress and building effective communication skills. The programme was trialled with corrections officers across four US correctional facilities. Despite reporting positive findings, the report was not published within a peer-reviewed journal and therefore the findings should be interpreted with a degree of caution.

Opportunities and the future of wellbeing training

The psychological wellbeing of correctional officers is an important issue that warrants the attention of both the profession and researchers (Marzuki & Ishak, 2011; Trounson & Pfeifer, 2016). As such, the field of corrections needs to continue to adapt and evolve in relation to identifying and catering for corrections officer training needs (Mannering, 2012). Corrections officer wellbeing training programmes should be developed in a systematic manner that ensures the programme is evidence-informed and ultimately evidence-based. It is also important to acknowledge that preventative services such as wellbeing training should not be viewed as a singular solution to the issue of corrections officer wellbeing. Rather, wellbeing training should be provided to complement existing reactive interventions and services.

Despite the challenges outlined in this article, the development and implementation of proactive wellbeing training programmes can be viewed as a step in the right direction for the field of corrections. Furthermore, these identified challenges offer researchers and correctional organisations a set of accompanying opportunities to further our understanding of corrections officer wellbeing, develop more effective responses and refine our existing services to better meet the needs of the contemporary corrections officer.

The Advanced Mental Strength and Conditioning (*AMStrength*) programme (Trounson, Pfeifer, & Ogloff, 2016) is one example of new wave training opportunities that have arisen from addressing the challenges outlined in this article that are facing correctional organisations. This class-based, psycho-educational training programme is designed specifically for corrections officers to assist them to maintain their psychological wellbeing. The programme is seven sessions that aim to; a) increase officers' level of wellbeing literacy, b) assist officers to refine their cognitive skills and coping strategies for managing stress, distress and adversity, c) assist officers to more effectively identify wellbeing challenges, d) encourage officers to habitually assess and more effectively manage their personal wellbeing and e) encourage officers to take a new level of responsibility for the maintenance of their own wellbeing.

The AMStrength training programme aims to meet the industry challenges outlined in this article by providing a proactive training programme that uses an eclectic approach to the training and learning of psychological concepts and skills. It draws upon concepts and strategies from a range of evidence-based psychological perspectives integrating aspects of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), mindfulness, health psychology, positive psychology, psycho-education and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT). The programme can also be viewed as prison-officer responsive as it draws upon the findings within the scientific literature relating specifically to corrections officers and their experience of workplace adversity. The AMStrength training programme is currently under evaluation to determine its effectiveness in assisting corrections officers in maintaining their wellbeing.

In summary, several proactive wellbeing initiatives currently exist within the field of corrections. Although many of these are developed within respectable theoretical frameworks, not all have demonstrated their effectiveness through rigorous evaluation and even fewer can be classified as evidence-informed and prison officer-responsive. It is therefore argued that there is a need for further research exploring the effectiveness of such programmes to establish best-practice processes in regard to assisting correctional staff to maintain their psychological wellbeing. To achieve this goal, it is imperative that new inter-disciplinary research collaborations be forged involving research, government and industry bodies.

Fostering inter-disciplinary research initiatives that include research, industry and government stakeholders can provide numerous positive outcomes for all parties involved. For programme researchers it allows a unique opportunity to test and refine new and innovative programmes and interventions to ensure the provision of effective programming. For correctional organisations it offers the opportunity to direct research and research teams to examine specific issues of interest to practitioners. For regulatory bodies such collaborations can assist in the development of future best-practice policy.

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