

# Stressed Out



# Stressed Out

*Strategies for Living and Working in Corrections*

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*Third Edition*

**Gary F. Cornelius**



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Durham, North Carolina

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*This book is dedicated to all the men and women working in corrections, both sworn and non-sworn. They enter buildings every workday and deal with people with many problems; some are violent, some are mentally ill, and most do not want to be there. Whether they are working with incarcerated inmates, juveniles, or probationers and parolees, corrections professionals have a tough job.*

*This book is also dedicated to the loved ones of corrections professionals. They care about us, love us, and try to comfort us when we walk through the door after a tough day.*

*Finally, this book is dedicated to my late wife, Nancy, who supported me throughout my career, Deborah, who supports me in retirement, and my children, Gary Jr. and Amber Beth. Thanks for always being there for me.*



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community in the Centurion Stress Management System Program, shared his experiences helping law enforcement officers. William Orris from the Williamsburg, Virginia, Merrimac Juvenile Detention Center gave insight into the stress in juvenile corrections.

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Gary F. Cornelius

# Foreword

*Michael Pittaro\**

I have had the pleasure of knowing Gary Cornelius for many years and have always deeply admired and respected his unwavering commitment to advancing our nation's correctional system, including the men and women who serve in corrections, through evidence-based research and firsthand experience, and this book, *Stressed Out: Strategies for Living and Working in Corrections*, which is now its third edition, is a genuine testament to his dedicated service to the men and women who valiantly serve within our nation's prisons and jails. The United States is home to 5% of the world's population, yet we incarcerate 25% of the world's prisoners. We also incarcerate more mentally ill individuals than can be found in our nation's psychiatric facilities, making corrections the nation's largest provider of mental health services.

Working in corrections comes at a grave cost to so many of us. How do I know? I spent 16 years working in corrections before leaving the profession for a career in higher education as a university professor whose background and education are in criminal justice. There are obvious physical dangers associated with working in a closed environment surrounded by hundreds of convicted criminal offenders who want to harm you. Additionally, we cannot discount the dangers of contracting one of many communicable diseases such as hepatitis, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and now COVID-19 simply through our daily interactions

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\* Michael Pittaro, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at the American Military University and is the author of *Pursuing and Navigating a Career in Criminal Justice*.

in a closed environment where social distancing is far more challenging than in the outside world.

Then, of course, there are the hidden dangers, which have not yet risen to the same level of national attention as that given to our extensive training in offensive and defensive tactics, and that is the dangers of facing our demons, the demons that exist within each one of us. For some, it is a persistent battle in which depression, anxiety, isolation, and loneliness are prevalent, and each emotional state feeds off the other. We know our brothers and sisters in corrections will defend us against physical altercations.

Still, many correctional officers live under the misguided perception that they must fight this internal battle alone and, often, in silence. It stems from untreated, unresolved stress, which can seem relentless and unforgiving. Sleepless nights, nightmares, and distorted thinking can further strengthen the powerful grip of stress-related disorders. Let's face it, corrections is a profession that has real-world implications for our physical and mental health. Many of us spend hours in the gym, always trying to stay one step ahead of the prisoners whose speed, strength, and endurance may exceed that of our own, but strangely enough, we largely neglect the profound importance and significance of our mental wellbeing, which is, at the very least, equal to, if not more important to, our survival—literally and figuratively.

The third edition of *Stressed Out: Strategies for Living and Working in Corrections* is, therefore, graciously welcomed by a scholar-practitioner like myself, and I believe that Gary should be applauded for his efforts in bringing national attention and awareness to this often-neglected topic, the infamous elephant in the room that no one wants to acknowledge fully. To be quite blunt, we are more likely to die by our hands than in the line of duty. Suicide is a silent killer because those in corrections and law enforcement suffer in silence, self-medicate through alcohol and other negative coping strategies, and rarely share our innermost thoughts, even with those we trust and love the most. Therefore, this book will undoubtedly appeal to a wide, diverse readership, including but not limited to those considering a career in corrections, college/university students studying criminal justice, and most importantly, those already serving as corrections officers or as auxiliary administrative correctional staff.



Granted, nearly everyone has experienced varying degrees of burnout and stress at some point in their lives, so it's also safe to assume that most, if not all of us, can vividly recall a time, or more likely dozens of times, when we were stressed from an incident that occurred at work or home that negatively affected our demeanor and disposition. Corrections is no different in that respect, but what separates corrections and law enforcement from other professions is that we have traditionally been told by leadership to "man up," "suck it up," and "if you can't handle it, find another job." We work in a profession where we are expected to handle the stressors that stem from that profession. Any complaining or whining is perceived to be a sign of weakness and vulnerability in which you may likely be deemed unsuitable, unfit, and incompetent to serve in this profession, or at least that is the perception we strongly internalize.

I read Gary's book in its entirety during my semester break, and I can honestly say that it is truly an exceptional, must-have book packed with the most up-to-date research and advice from some of the nation's leading authorities on stress and corrections. Corrections is undoubtedly a challenging profession, but if you remain proactive and acutely aware of the symptoms and signs of burnout, stress, depression, anxiety, and PTSD, you will be many steps ahead of those who do not in addressing those concerns right from the onset before the situation worsens. It is much easier and more effective to treat physical and mental disorders in the early stages than allowing them to fester and manifest into something much larger and more difficult to treat and control effectively.

Gary did an exceptional job of focusing on the importance of our physical and mental wellbeing. Physically working out and eating well can help prevent cardiovascular disease, one of the leading contributors to early death among corrections officers, many of whom the research suggests may not see their 59th birthday. As someone who spent nearly two decades working in corrections and is now 55 years old, that is a significant wake-up call to start taking considerable control of our minds and bodies.

I highly recommend *Stressed Out: Strategies for Living and Working in Corrections* as an integral part of your ongoing training and preparedness so that you may have a fulfilling, rewarding career in corrections.

