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## PARTICIPANTS' PAPERS

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### STRESS MANAGEMENT OF CORRECTIONAL PERSONNEL — THE HONG KONG EXPERIENCE

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#### I. INTRODUCTION

Stress is commonplace in everyday life. On top of family, environment and other changes in life, work is one of the major sources of stress. Chronic stress can affect the immunity system and lead to serious illness. (Stranks Jeremy, 2005).

Correctional work is a challenging job which requires high consumption of energy and mental resources. Excessive strain impairs work performance and the body and also increases the risk of various health problems. Persistent exhaustion induces irritability and low mood, which affects correctional officers' social and family relationships. In severe cases, symptoms of mood disorders may also arise. It is important for the staff members to unwind from work stress and give themselves a boost from time to time. By doing so, they can cope with job challenges in their fittest state.

#### II. SOURCES OF WORK STRESS FOR CORRECTIONAL STAFF

As a member of a disciplined force, discipline, conduct and integrity are of vital importance. However, repression of emotions will cause mental stress and many emotional, mental and behavioural problems. There are some common stress-inducing problems faced by correctional officers in Hong Kong:

##### A. Remote Workplace and Shift Work Pattern

Some staff working in remote areas may spend more time travelling. They have to adjust their life pattern to compensate for the travelling time. Besides, working shifts will upset the biological clock, and adaptation is required. Change of shift also requires frequent physical and mental adjustment. Rotating shifts may also reduce the ability of staff to perform their work conscientiously because of fatigue and irritability.

On the other hand, since days off usually fall on weekdays, which is different from those of their family members and friends, special arrangements are required for making a gathering possible. In the long run, frequent absence from family and social gatherings will result in a distant relationship with other family members and friends.

##### B. Threats Created from Inmates and the Public Expectation

The threat of inmate violence against staff is definitely a source of stress for correctional officers. Actual violence, including assaults, hostage taking, riots, inmates attacking each other and suicides of inmates can be some other sources of stress for staff not only during the happening of the incidents but also afterwards. Staff are required to stay extremely alert during the working hours and take prompt and accurate reaction to emergencies.

Also, some staff also find continuous unreasonable demands and attempts of manipulation by inmates to be stressful. The increase of transparency of correctional services to the public and the ever-upgrading of public expectations towards the quality of correctional services also gives extra stress to staff. Some staff members are afraid of being complained about by the inmates or the public and, therefore, facing disciplinary action or even legal prosecution.

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**C. Poor Working Relationships with Supervisors and Colleagues**

Some staff feel stress while working with their supervisors and colleagues within the correctional regime. They find it difficult to get support from supervisors and colleagues during challenging situations like confrontations with inmates. Some of them may have the perception that colleagues and supervisors do not appreciate their work performance and therefore are worried about their chances for being promoted.

**D. Financial Management Stress**

Some staff may fall into the trap of overspending; they always come up with a lot of excuses to justify their over-spending behaviour. As a result, their incomes often fail to meet the expenses. Buying on credit habitually, they may end up in a world of debt and fail in their responsibility as a breadwinner. Family members also suffer when they have to settle the debt of staff. Being indebted for a long period of time can result in divorce or loss of job. It definitely impairs emotional and physical health.

Gambling is another source of poor financial management. Countless cases reveal that gambling would eventually cost one’s valuable assets such as friendships, family, money, career or, ultimately, life. When staff are obsessed with gambling, they will feel unease when not gambling. Their work and family will come second to gambling and most importantly, they will do anything for gambling or paying debts, including illegal acts.

**III. MEASURES FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT**

**A. Promotion of Healthy and Balanced Lifestyles**

People’s lives can be broadly divided into two parts: firstly, their responsibilities / pressure, such as the responsibilities towards their family, work, studies or friends and, secondly, their enjoyment / contentment, such as the joy of being with their family and friends, their achievements, the physical and mental well-being maintained as well as spiritual fulfillment. Failing to strike a balance between these two, that is the responsibilities outweigh the enjoyment or vice versa, will easily trigger a series of physical and mental problems. In view of the above, the Hong Kong Correctional Services Department encourages its staff to enjoy a healthy and balanced lifestyle with the following means:

1. Sports and Recreation Activities

The Correctional Services Department Sports Association arranges sports and recreation activities for staff members of the Department. The Association’s work is an essential part of our drive to promote a healthy and balanced lifestyle among staff and cultivate their *esprit de corps*. During 2012, among the many events organized were the Annual Sports Meet, Swimming Gala, 10K Distance Run, Family Outing on Hei Ling and other inter-institutional competitions.

2. Charity and Fund-raising Events

The Department always encourages its staff to participate actively in charity and fund-raising events including the Community Chest of Hong Kong’s Corporate and Employee Contribution Programme and Walk for Millions. In recognition of our participation, we have been presented by the Community Chest of Hong Kong since 2008 the Highest Donation of Civil Service Category, Highest Participation Rate of Civil Service Category, Outstanding Award and Silver Award in 2010/2011. The Department also won the Outstanding Walking Team Award in the 2010/2011 Walks for Millions.

3. Volunteer Services

The Oi Kwan Volunteer Group Limited seeks to extend our spirit of care to the community through benevolent activities. During 2011, over 14,000 service hours of voluntary work were provided by our 1,900 volunteers in various social services including HSBC Pok Oi Cycle for Millions and Oxfam Trailwalker. In 2011, our volunteer group was awarded the Fourth Hong Kong Volunteer Award by the Agency for Volunteer Service in recognition of our volunteers’ contribution for the benefit of others in the community.

**B. Enhancement of Staff Relations and Welfare**

The Staff Relations and Welfare Unit coordinates all matters relating to staff welfare and offers

154TH INTERNATIONAL TRAINING COURSE  
PARTICIPANTS' PAPERS

immediate assistance to staff and their families in times of need. Loans and grants for certain serving and retired personnel and family members are issued through the Correctional Services Department Welfare Fund. The Unit also administers the Correctional Services Department Central Fund to provide insurance coverage to staff on a voluntary basis.

The Correctional Services Children's Education Trust provides financial assistance to children of Assistant Officers and equivalent grades in the Department to help them pursue higher education. Disabled children undertaking full-time education or training also received financial assistance from the Trust. In 2011, a total of HK\$702,227 was granted to 141 recipients.

With the continual, sustainable and total commitment in caring for the well-being of the staff and their families as well as the community, the Department has been awarded the "5 Years Plus Caring Organisation Logo" under the Caring Company Scheme organized by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service.

### **C. Comprehensive Staff Psychological Services**

Psychological well-being is crucial in helping staff members to lead a happy life and get contentment in work. Research shows that accumulated pressure can lead to emotional problems and addictive behaviours which will affect a staff member's family life, work or social life. The Staff Psychological Services was set up to provide services for those colleagues in need, and colleagues are welcome to call them for an appointment.

Currently, the Staff Psychological Services have two offices at Stanley and Lai Chi Kok staffed by two Clinical Psychologists (Staff Services) with the support of an Officer, Assistant Officer II and a Project Assistant. The objectives of their services are to strengthen the ability of colleagues to face adversity and work pressure so as to maintain the provision of highly efficient custodial services and to enhance the psychological well-being of colleagues so as to create a harmonious and inclusive working environment and help them develop balanced and healthy lifestyles.

Apart from providing staff and their families with psychotherapy, the Staff Psychological Services also introduces psycho-education materials as well as relaxation facilities. Videos and leaflets on related topics were produced to help staff in making work adjustment as well as understanding and maintaining psychological well-being. A website on psychological services for healthy and balanced lifestyles was launched in May 2011 where staff members have access to updated psycho-educational messages, columns on specific issues and interactive games. Talks and seminars on healthy and balanced lifestyles are given to new recruits, serving staff and their families at various venues. Ad hoc intervention and debriefing work for staff and their families who are actively facing critical events are also provided.

### **D. Building an Ethical Culture**

Since its establishment in 2007, the Departmental Ethics Committee has made an all-out effort to maintain a high level of staff integrity and to promote an ethical culture within the Department. In June 2011, the Department launched a brand new Integrity Ambassadors Programme by appointing 73 Integrity Ambassadors to assist in the promotion of integrity management and good citizenship at the institutional level. Meanwhile, seminars on corruption prevention were continuously organized for Officers and Assistant Officers as a sustained effort to enhance integrity and ethical culture. In September 2011, a comprehensive model on integrity management, namely the Total Ethics Assurance Management (TEAM) — SPIRIT Model was promulgated which helps to promote integrity management within the Department through a more comprehensive and structured manner.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

Most staff members need a certain level of stress to perform well in their work. Unfortunately, this motivation can turn to negative stress due to work overload, threats and workplace conflicts. In order to maintain healthy lives, staff members need to be more aware of stress, their personal stress responses and measures for handling stress.

Stress among correctional personnel is widespread according to research studies. Different kinds of stress sources can impair the health of staff, cause them to burn out and even ruin their family lives. Developing effective means to prevent and handle stress of staff has become a top concern for correctional administrators around the world. However, it is not easy to develop and maintain a successful stress management programme. It requires the wholehearted participation from top management to frontline staff. Supervisors and colleagues are also required to be trained for spotting and referring staff who may be experiencing stress. As a whole, the organizational culture also needs to be changed to enhance stress management within correctional institutions.

**Reference**

Stranks, Jeremy (2005) *Stress at Work — Management and Prevention* 41-42. Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.