

Feature article

We interviewed Christine Beintema, probation and parole officer and vice-president of the Probation Officers Association of Ontario (POAO). She shared her personal experiences with mental health.



Tell us a little bit about yourself and your experience with mental health.

I am a mother to a 16-year-old boy, an aunt, friend, daughter, sister and volunteer. I have fierce empathy and am a natural worrier. I have been a probation and parole officer for almost 18 years, and landed in what I believe is one of the most rewarding, interesting, and challenging professions.

I work out of the Chatham office and am also the vice-president of the POAO. It is in my nature to be cheerful and supportive at work. I would also rarely reach out for help from others. Earlier in my career, at a time when I was struggling with workload pressure and a number of especially challenging and emotionally-draining clients, I reluctantly reached out for help. In return, I received advice from a well-intentioned manager who told me to “do the best you can.” I didn’t know at the time, but that was probably the least helpful advice in my career.

I have heard many variations of “you knew what the job was all about when you applied.” I truly enjoy my job, however, I did not realize how isolating it can feel to hear intimate details about someone’s life and not be able to share them with those to whom I’m closest. I did not realize how difficult it would be to sit across from a victim who had been brutally assaulted the day before and know for certain that despite her words, she would be returning to a relationship with my client. I did not realize how frightening it would be to be verbally assaulted by a client time and time again over the phone and then to have him physically and verbally assault me in a location where I should have been safe. I did not expect to be screamed at and spit at by a client with mental health issues and yet feel such compassion for him. I did not expect to find dark humour in situations that most would be disgusted with, and then question my morals as a result.

In my situation, my mom received a cancer diagnosis with a very grim timeline. As expected, I struggled emotionally. My world felt like a plate of pasta was exploding in front of me, with noodles flying everywhere. At first, I attributed all of this to my mom’s diagnosis. I met with my doctor and counsellor whom I had been to in the past to address a diagnosed anxiety disorder and other issues. During my first appointment with my counsellor, I rambled about what was happening with my mom, intermixed with work and life stress; she knows me fairly well but we had never focused on work before. Over a number of sessions, it was determined that the root of my struggles were anxiety and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of occupational stress. My mom’s diagnosis was just the meatball

causing the plate of pasta to explode. I reflected on my career and began to identify physiological and psychological symptoms that went unnoticed on a day-to-day basis.

In the beginning of this issue, we used a quote by NBA basketball player Kelly Oubre Jr., whose father always said “Don’t let anybody see you weak.” Do you think that message reflects the correctional culture?

Absolutely. I believe that a hidden message that we receive is: be strong at work, take care of yourself after hours. It is masked in a message of “self-care” being important, but only after work hours. We think there is no time to feel weak or tired, or we compare ourselves to others and their ability to “keep it together.” I think it’s important to receive the message and understand that we are individuals with different needs.

What impact did the corrections culture have on your own mental health experience? And did it impact if you sought help?

In corrections, we tend to fall between the “traditional” first responder definition and the expanded current understanding of a first responder. When I was experiencing occupational stress, I didn’t put that label on it; I attributed the anxiety and signs of PTSD to things in my personal life only, which is likely why it took so long to seek help.

Prior to being on leave, I worried about the need to return to work “fixed.” I worried about leaving my colleagues with additional workload. I worried about whether or not others believed that I was away from work for legitimate reasons, instead of just toughing it out and I questioned the same thing. I compared my trauma to that of others in related professions. It has become the norm that corrections work causes burnout and that the solution is finding a new profession, not addressing the cause.

What helped you deal with the corrections culture in terms of your own mental health problems?

There is a lot of work to be done to create a safe and healthy corrections culture. When on leave, I focused on my mental health, sought out a trauma-informed counsellor and prepared for a healthy return to work. I sought out other like-minded professionals in corrections and related first-responder fields that share the belief that occupational stress injuries must be treated. We continue to support each other. Also critical is remaining connected with friends and family outside of corrections.

I am well connected with colleagues across the province from my involvement with the POAO, which at times feels like the only positive outlet I have related to my profession. This enables me to actively work in the area of occupational stress and share my story with others.

While on leave, I attended a POAO professional development day focusing on topics related to occupational stress, a key issue for probation officers. There, I heard a quote that has remained with me and I think is an important message for all those in corrections, “You should not have to rip yourself into pieces to keep others whole.” (Anonymous).

No matter what we choose to do for ourselves as individuals, what still remains is the need to be fully supported within the profession. The corrections culture needs to support the message that addressing mental health and occupational stress is an ongoing process. It looks different for everyone and all struggles are legitimate and deserve support. While we recognize the lack of resources for our clients, we need to also address the lack of resources and support for ourselves.

Name three things that staff could do to deal with the impact of corrections culture and how they view their mental health.

1. Share your story, or at least parts of it, so that addressing occupational stress, whether there is a mental health diagnosis or not, becomes normalized.

2. Participate in wellness activities and take breaks with colleagues! This is where most of the supportive moments happen in my office.
3. This is in part a shameless plug, however, get involved with your professional organization! Share your ideas and help bring messages forward to government that can help shift the corrections culture mindset.

How does it feel to tell your story?

This was a strange and challenging process. Those who know me know that I'm fairly open, especially related to work, however, typically through verbal communication. Despite the amount of writing we do for work, I didn't expect how difficult it would be to put words to paper.

"Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls, the most massive characters are seared with scars." – Khalil Gibran

Thanks so much Christine.