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## **A New World Behind Bars: The Experience of Dealing with Stressors on Correctional Officer**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Correctional officer (CO) is a profession that bears high-stress exposure. If this condition is unhandled properly, it will lead to corrections fatigue, indicated by negative personality changes, socially dysfunctional thinking, and a decrease in physical and mental health and function. Therefore, implementing appropriate coping strategies can maintain the mental health of CO. Therefore, it can support the achievement of indicators for the training program given by the correctional institutions (Lapas). This research is a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach. Data was obtained through phenomenological interviews on four participants and processed by thematic analysis. To increase the credibility of the data, researchers conducted some methods such as member checking, peer debriefing, and comparisons with related theories. The results show that there are six strategies in dealing with stressors. They are building interactions with inmates, seeking social support, seeing the positive side of stressors, obeying rules, prioritizing clarification in problem-solving, and doing activities that become participant's hobbies. Dealing with stress can be used as one of the mental health promotion efforts in the prison environment. Correction officers with good physical and mental health quality have a beneficial impact not only on prisoners but also on prison institutions.

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## BACKGROUND

Correctional officers are civil servants within the Ministry of Law and Human Rights who carry out their duties and functions in law enforcement (Kementerian Hukum dan HAM, 2016). In general, correctional officers are responsible for the supervision, safety, security, and services of inmates/detainees and some institutions such as the Correctional Institution (Lapas), courts, and other related institutions (Regehr et al., 2019). In other words, Correctional officers are law enforcement officials who maintain security and keep the order of inmates within the prisons/jail.

Correctional officer has specific characteristics compared to other law enforcement officers. Guarding prisoners can be an extremely stressful and risky job (Senol-Durak et al., 2021). They are constantly exposed to negative work experiences, including verbal and physical harassment, witnessing violence, and acting as first responders to potentially traumatic incidents (Trounson et al., 2019). Besides, Brower (2013) mentions four categories of stressors on correction officers. The stressors are prisoners/detainees, occupational stressors, organizational / administrative stressors, and psychosocial stressors (Jaegers et al., 2020). In Indonesia, one of the main factors causing stress for correction officers is the condition of overcrowding or overcapacity that occurs in almost all prisons and detention centers in Indonesia (Direktorat Jenderal Pemasyarakatan, 2021).

As of December 2021, the total number of inmates was 272,589, and the prison capacity was 132,107 people. Thus, the prison is in overcapacity of 281% (Direktorat Jenderal Pemasyarakatan, 2021). Overcapacity requires each officer to maintain a high level of sensory attention and sensitivity to maintain the internal environment of prisons/detention centers,

especially inmates'/detainees' housing blocks, to remain conducive and detect potential disturbances in order and security.

These two factors, the challenging job and overcapacity condition, can trigger psychological stress if not properly managed. The emergence of job stress in correctional officers happens because of lower job satisfaction, lower commitment to the organization, lower life satisfaction, lower job performance, higher job burnout, higher substance misuse, more physical and mental health problems, increased absenteeism, and increased mortality (Elechi et al., 2020). The worst condition that may occur is severe physical (Harvey, 2014) or mental illness (Stoyanova & Harizanova, 2016).

The psychological stress in the work environment, monotonous, isolated, requires high concentration, changes in shift work, and is full of stress, such as in prisons, has been widely studied. Stress itself is a non-specific response to a stressful situation on an individual. According to Selye, stressful situations of limited duration can be "good stress" or eustress and increase motivation for achievement and homeostasis. These situations can also produce a sense of mastery and accomplishment. It is regarded as positive and attractive. The more intense the stressful situation, the lower the work mastery and adaptability. Thus, the greater the stress response and the risk of persistent homeostatic dysregulation (Bennett, 2017).

Based on the literature study conducted by Bezerra et al. (2016), they found that the constructs studied in the correctional officers between 2000 – 2014 were Stress (n = 22), Burnout (n = 12), Psychological Distress (n = 8) (Bezerra et al., 2016). However, research on how correctional officers can manage stressors in their daily work is still relatively minimal. This condition causes the unavailability of adequate empirical data on how correction

officers perceive stressors and the dynamics at work, and how they deal with these stressors (coping strategies) appropriately.

Lazarus & Folkman define coping as a constant effort to change/adjust cognitive and behavior to manage internal and external demands that burden or exceed individual resources (Afini & Hanifah, 2021). The term 'manage' emphasizes that coping is not the same as work mastery but can be an effort to minimize, avoid, tolerate, and accept stressful conditions as best as possible and try their best to master the environment.

At the beginning of its development, Lazarus & Folkman divided coping strategies into two types, namely problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is an individual's actions aimed at solving problems. This strategy is usually carried out by individuals when they consider that they can solve the problems they face. They believe that they take advantage of any resources to do something constructive about the problem. While emotion-focused coping, namely actions taken by individuals aimed at managing or modifying emotions that arise because of the stressor, without trying to change the stressor directly. This strategy is usually carried out by individuals when they feel they cannot do anything about the problems they face and consider that their resources can not overcome the problem (Kristofferzon et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Carver et.al (1989) helped develop a coping theory based on Lazarus & Folkman's theory. Carver added one additional type of coping besides problem-focused and emotion-focused, namely less-useful coping or dysfunctional. In this case, their behavior focuses too much on the emerged emotions and solves them in inappropriate ways, such as giving up on situations without trying to overcome them. In other words, they 'escape' from stressful

situations by daydreaming, sleeping, and so on (Stanisławski, 2019).

Although theories about coping with stress, as stated above, already exist, the researcher wants to have more understanding of how the correctional officers experience dealing with stress. The aim is to have an understanding that is similar to the participants' direct experience. Therefore, we can minimize the influence of beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and biases. Thus, obtaining a detailed and structured description of the participant's conscious experience (subjective experience) is needed. Then the researcher tries to explain the experience as it is by using the terms or language expressed by the participants. Therefore, an understanding of the experience will be obtained as the participants experienced it, not as seen from the researcher's point of view (Howitt, 2019).

An understanding of how correctional officers deal with stressors is carried out to prevent the emergence of more serious physical or mental disorders. Besides, it can be a reference for institutions or other parties in developing mental health improvement programs in the correctional environment. In addition, optimal physical and mental health conditions will support the establishment of good relations between correctional officers and prisoners. In this way, it is hoped that a conducive situation can be created and minimize the potential for disturbances to security and order in prisons/detention centers.

Furthermore, optimal service from correctional officers can indirectly help prisoners face life in prison and contribute to their success when returning to community life (Boateng & Hsieh, 2019). The prisoners' good quality of life is one indicator of how successful the training program in prisons is (Yulianti et al., 2015). It shows that the health quality of correctional officers has a broad impact not only on inmates but also on

prison institutions in general. Therefore, considering the characteristics of the correctional officers' profession, which has a high stressor, and the need for a good mental condition in overcoming it, it is necessary to know how or what efforts are made by correction officers in dealing with these stressors.

## **METHODS RESEARCH**

### **Types of research**

This research is a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach. The research variable is the effort to deal with stress (coping stress) on correctional officers, namely all efforts made by correctional officers to minimize, avoid, tolerate, and accept stressors in work in the prison environment.

### **Research subject**

This research studies four correctional officers in prisons and detention centers in South Sumatra. The research subjects are two men and two women aged 23 through 25 and have worked for 2-3 years. At that time, tough work as correctional officers are suspected to be a difficult stressor. It requires certain processes so that stressors can be handled better.

### **Method of collecting data**

This research was conducted through virtual interviews using the Google Meet application and the voice note feature on the Whatsapp application. Thus, both researchers and research subjects were in separate places. Interviews were conducted once for each subject from December 15 to 17, 2020. Each participant was given information about the objectives, procedures, benefits, confidentiality guarantees, and rewards. After that, participants filled out a participant consent form before the interview.

Participants then filled in their identities, such as complete name, gender, date of birth, year of entry, place of duty, position, and job description. The researcher then asked questions based on the phenomenological interview guide compiled with the second author and followed the structure proposed by Bevan (2014) as listed in Table 1. The entire interview process was recorded with the consent of the participants.

### **Data analysis technique**

All participant answers were transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, the interview data were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique initiated by Braun & Clarke (2006). Researchers identify, analyze, and report on the main themes that represent the overall data from the interviews. The main theme was obtained based on the participants' subjective answers without being influenced by the researcher's point of view.

Data analysis begins with data familiarization, namely doing transcription or recording the data systematically, repeated reading along while memoing (making notes or marking important data on significant parts). Then the researcher determines the initial codes that can explain the data. After getting the codes, the researcher sorts them into broader themes that can cover them.

After obtaining several major themes, the researcher conducts a review to assess whether the specified theme is suitable to the data, whether there are overlapping themes, whether the themes are too broad and separate them into subthemes, etc. The researcher then identified the significance of each theme, grouped the themes into categories of coping strategies based on the coping theory framework according to Carver (1997), and determined the aspects of the data that compose them (Howitt, 2019). In this study, the theme refers to the

strategies used by participants in dealing with stress.

To ensure the feasibility of the study, the researcher did member checking through probing questions and repeating participant answers (paraphrasing) throughout the interview process. The aim is to gain a proper understanding of the participants' answers to be able to interpret them correctly. In addition, discussions with the second author and other researchers who comprehend psychology is needed to assess the accuracy of the coding process (peer debriefing) to increase the credibility of the research. In narrating the results of the study, the researcher included several verbatim responses from the participants' answers to support the authenticity and vividness of the emerging themes. The researcher also discusses the relationship between research results and other related theories or research to obtain an adequate level of congruence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Howitt, 2019).

## RESEARCH RESULT

This study involved four correctional officers consisting of two men and two women. Three of them started working in 2017, and another in 2018. Two of them work as Main Door Guards, and two other officers are residential block guards. In addition, two people work in the general population prison, one in the women's prison and the other in the detention center.

The participants' first impressions when they served as correctional officers were different. Some are positive and others negative. Things that make it comfortable or enjoyable when working as correctional officers are the work system (scheduling and payroll) and the presence of supportive co-workers who are of the same age. In addition, carrying out tasks in prison is a way of learning about life through interaction with inmates, learning to improve

communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills. Participants also expressed their gratitude for getting a permanent job and making it a hobby and a way of worship.

Not only things that make them feel comfortable, but the researchers also dig up information about things that make them uncomfortable while working. The uncomfortable things, in this case, mean something disturbing, pressing, threatening, or leading to stressful conditions. Based on the results of interviews, three factors that cause discomfort and become stressors for correction officers during work are as presented in Table 2.

The results of the interview show that six strategies describe how correction officers deal with these stressors in their work. The six strategies were identified in line with the coping stress theory according to Carver (1997). The details of the relationship between the research results and the theory are presented in table 3.

The six strategies analyzed were based on the participants' original answers as follows:

### **Strategy 1: Building interaction with prisoners**

To control prisoners, participants started by observing their routines and the way they interact with each other. Furthermore, participants adjust themselves by building harmonious interactions in daily communication. Participant 4 even increased his ability to manage prisoners after having intense interaction with prisoners under her guard. Examples of answers are as follows:

"Well, to manage them, we don't have guidelines. We don't have officers who can guide us because the senior security officers don't have experience either, Mbak (polite word used to address a woman) ... So, we focused more on supervising, at first, supervising, observing, drawing...

after some time, we get to know each prisoners' character, right, and you also know what their daily interaction in the room is like, right? We have also begun to understand their interactions with each other. Finally, we've learned about it, Mbak. After a while, we can make decisions. We can be a little firmer. We finally can, what do we call it, control them..." (P4, C9)"

"Yes, personally, in the beginning, I asked them what their hobbies were, Mbak. Some of them like to play guitar, and some others like to sing. I asked whatever their hobbies are. I'm lucky if they have the same hobby, or I know what their hobbies are, I can talk more with them..." (P1, D63)

"...it's just that we have to find the right time, we have to go to the inmates' rooms, for example, then invite them to have a chat..." (P2, C64)

### Strategy 2: Seeking social support

When they feel bored with work, participants seek support from other parties such as family or co-workers. Participants gain emotional benefits after interacting with the party. Then when they face difficulties in carrying out their duties as correctional officers, participants usually seek help from colleagues or seniors and even the prisoners themselves. Participants will get advice, suggestions, or solutions to support them at work. It is as illustrated in the following answers:

"When missing family, of course, I'll make a video call, and sometimes ask them to send food, Mbak..." (P1, D40)

"... I just often hang out with them. For example, when I have night shift like now, whenever we have some free time, we get together, we chat. We're, how to say it, joking like that, playing with each other. Then one more thing that makes it easy to get

along with each other is that we mock each other. Maybe that's all, there is nothing else." (P3, C10)

"... Because there's no place to ask anymore... So if you don't go to the commander in charge, you go to the prisoner directly, what do they usually do, what's their name, that's the order. The order is, what are you doing at this hour, what are the activities at this hour? After a while, you know what their routines are. It's assembly time, it's time to eat, it's time to open the door, things like that, right? Yes, after a long time we adjusted to it, Mbak... After a while, we get used to those schedules..." (P4, C8)

### Strategy 3: Seeing the positive side of the stressor

Related to boredom when carrying out monotonous tasks, participant 4 tries to be aware that trust and responsibility as correctional officers are so great that she will try to see the positive side of it. This positive thinking made participant 4 more enthusiastic in carrying out the task. It is as illustrated in the following answers:

"... But every time I feel bored, that's what I do in my mind. What I instilled was that I was accepted. I got paid. I was paid by the country. I have an obligation. I have an order to have a direct mandate, right, that the mandate is this, the task is like this. So that's what I remember, Mbak. Every time I'm bored, what I remember is that I was paid, I was paid that way..."

So, when I was just sitting doing nothing, I immediately started moving. Either go straight to the residential room, directly chat with the inmate, or sometimes think 'what else should I do?', what should be evaluated? Things like that." (P4, C17)

**Strategy 4: Stick to the rules**

To deal with stressors in facing various rules and mandatory regulations, participants 3 and 4 realized that these rules are part of their job and must be obeyed, so they have no other choice but to accept these rules. Examples of participant answers are as follows:

*"... Well, for the problem with the rules, it seems that, at that time, I just forced myself. Because at that time, I had chosen this path. I have taken the test as a correctional officer. Thank God I passed. So yeah, I thought, right, I've chosen this path, so like it or not, I must face the risks..." (P3, C9)*

*"...Then about working shift until late at 9 pm, to get used to this, Mbak, is to do it with a lot of patience. Even though I sometimes feel annoyed, I keep patience. But whether you want it or not, apart from realizing that it was an order from your superior, it's also our obligation as correctional officers, right, so it's accepted sincerely, even though it was hard, it was very difficult to adjust at first." (P4, C16)*

**Strategy 5: Prioritizing clarification in solving problems**

When a problem occurs, such as a fight or violation of the rules by the inmate. Participants did not solve the problem in a rush through a destructive and emotional way. However, participants try to solve the problem by finding out the cause, thinking about the most appropriate solution, and acting according to the need to solve the problem. It is done to avoid misunderstandings and resentment from prisoners. It is illustrated in the following answers:

*"... Then let's say now there are prisoners who fight, especially when I am guarding the block, I will call them first, Mbak. I called and asked them to go to the sentry post, the main post,*

*Mbak. I invite them there. I mediate them. I talk to them. I tried to get what the problem is, first. So, for example, the problem might be a bit serious, and in the end, it will be brought to the commander in chief, Mbak. So, the commanding officer solves the problem. I don't wanna make mistake either, right..." (P3, C11)*

*"... So, if we want to be angry, if we want to be firm if we want to punish them, try to keep with communication approach, Mbak. Stay with a good approach, so we communicate it well but still with such firmness." (P4, C12)*

**Strategy 6: Doing hobbies**

Another way to deal with burnout at work is to do personal things that you enjoy or are good at during your free time or on holidays. In Carver's conception, this activity can be referred to as self-distraction. The existence of activities like this can be a 'getaway' from difficulties at work and become an alternative to release the accumulated stress and tension (Trounson & Pfeifer, 2017). In addition, this effort is a form of controlling thoughts and emotions so that the problems (stressors) do not get worse (Hardianti et al., 2020). It is also illustrated by the following answers:

*"To have some fun, I'd love to do something like, because I also like making videos and doing my hobby, Mbak. Because it can boost our mood too..." (P1, D41)*

*"If it's outside... but I'm a kupu-kupu (a word usually used to refer to someone who does not like to go anywhere else after work and just stay at home) anyway, homework, Youtube, dramas, take a walk, that's all, mbak..." (P2, C47)*

*"...well, to cover up my boredom, that's why I did another business, Mbak. To make myself busy. So apart*

from being a side business, it can be an additional income for me, it is also a treatment to get rid of my boredom while working here, Mbak..." (P3, C13)  
 "...But when it's weekend, I go back to Palembang, it's time to refresh, Mbak. Because it's very important, Mbak. If you don't go to the mall or anywhere for a week, I feel stifled, stifled." (P4, C19).

## DISCUSSION

This study focuses on describing how the efforts made by correctional officers in dealing with stressors in their work. By understanding how the experience of dealing with stressors in correctional officers, it is hoped that it can prevent more serious physical and mental disorders and become the basis for designing programs related to mental health promotion in the correctional environment.

From the interview, we know that one of the stressors is the assigned task. Such factors as the amount of responsibility and the high workload can cause overburdened conditions that can cause stress. Overburden conditions can also make them fed up with the situation because it lessens the resting time and at the same time, they still have to do the main task, namely maintaining large numbers of prisoners (Jeong, 2013). Difficulties in controlling prisoners are also a stressor for participants because danger can occur anytime in the correctional environment, such as attacks, hostage-taking, and riots. This condition causes correctional officers to always work in crises and be under pressure (Jeong, 2013).

The participants' efforts to build interaction with inmates through sharing activities or exchanging ideas about various things, or through a planned, analytical process, and aimed at changing stressful conditions illustrates they have carried out

active coping. They did active coping by taking active and direct steps to gradually cope with stressors (Stanisławski, 2019). Active coping is classified as problem-focused coping. It is associated with decreasing levels of emotional exhaustion and increasing levels of personal achievement (Gould et al., 2013).

The availability of social support in the form of moral support, sympathy, and understanding from the closest people who can provide peace for participants is a way of getting rid of stressors using emotional support. While social support in the form of advice, information, suggestions, and solutions obtained from colleagues, seniors, or superiors is included in the category of using instrumental support. Social support can also be obtained from prisoners.

Instrumental support is one of the problem-focused coping strategies, and emotional support is included in the emotion-focused coping strategy. The two are distinguished because they have different theoretical foundations. Even so, these two forms of social support have a close relationship (Monzani et al., 2015). Lack of social support, especially supervisory support, management support, and co-worker support, has been reported to lead to an increased likelihood of burnout from work (Lambert et al., 2015; Useche et al., 2019). The search for instrumental support can also be a way to establish communication with other coworkers. Effective communication with coworkers can help reduce the negative impact of stressful occasions while on duty (Gould et al., 2013).

The 'mocking each other' (joking) activity helped participants adapt to their fellow prison guards. 'Joking' or what can be called humor can minimize the impact of bad experiences at work. Crawley (2004) even stated that humor functions as a positive coping mechanism in an environment with high adversity (Trounson & Pfeifer, 2017).



Participants who interpret stressful situations, such as boredom, into a more positive situation are intrinsically motivated to optimize their roles and performance as correctional officers. Positive reframing like this can protect individuals from burnout because it relates to decreasing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and increasing personal accomplishment (Gould et al., 2013).

Participants also stated that they committed to accepting and implementing the rules properly. It can be called acceptance. Gould et al., (2013) stated that acceptance of stressful situations is associated with increased emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Gould et al., 2013). However, participant 4 stated that this condition only occurred at the beginning. After obeying the rules, participant 4 began to get used to them.

Various mandatory rules make each correctional officer unable to directly address or eliminate stressors associated with their duties. It happens because these regulations come from the government, and must be obeyed. There will be consequences if they violate the rules. Therefore, acceptance is an important step to take, especially in an environment where the stressor is compulsory or must be accommodated, not something that can be changed easily (Stanisławski, 2019).

Their efforts to clarify the problem before deciding what to do in solving problems indicate an active response (active coping). However, they must still prioritize the principle of mutual respect for fellow human beings.

In Carver's conception of coping strategies, self-distraction is an updated concept of mental disengagement, and it belongs to dysfunctional or maladaptive coping. However, distraction can be conceptualized as task-oriented avoidance, which is when the individual avoids a stressful situation by engaging in substitute

activities (Stanisławski, 2019). Moreover, the participants found that doing hobbies could improve their mood and make them fresher and ready to do tasks the following day.

Based on the study, it was found that the research participants used various coping techniques. Participant 4 who is a woman is the one who has the most variations in coping techniques. It is in line with the findings of Gould et al. (2013) which states that women are more likely to adopt coping strategies, especially emotion-focused strategies and problem-focused strategies when facing stressful situations (Gould et al., 2013).

All participants stated that the coping strategies used were effective in dealing with stressful situations. Based on the types of coping strategies carried out and their effectiveness in managing stressors, it can be concluded that the participants have been coping adaptively. Three out of four participants did not have a specific preference regarding the coping technique they most preferred or often done because it was adjusted to personal needs and desires. However, participant 4 stated that she prefers, especially for dealing with problems with prisoners, building good interactions, and being assertive.

Given that the correctional environment is an environment with high adversity, and the work as the correctional officer has high stressful exposures. It is important to recognize the functionality of applying different coping strategies to individuals when facing different stressful situations (Gould et al., 2013). Theoretically, this information can add more knowledge about coping with stress or become a reference for research related to correctional officers. As for psychologists, this information can be a reference for making mental health promotion or

prevention activities in the prison guard population.

The limitation of this study is that there were only a few participants. Besides, they came from the same area. Therefore, the results of the study are still limited and cannot be generalized. Future research can involve more participants with more diverse backgrounds and then test whether variations in sociodemographic characteristics affect the preferences of the chosen coping strategy. In addition, it can also dig up information on how effective a particular coping strategy is for individuals in dealing with stressful situations while on duty. It can be the basis for formulating better policies for correctional officers, especially prison guards.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Factors perceived as stressors for correctional officers are assignment (overburden), boredom, and difficulty in controlling prisoners. Strategies to overcome these stressors are to build interaction with prisoners, seek social support, see the positive side of the stressor, obey the rules, prioritize clarification in solving problems, and do hobbies. This strategy is considered effective in dealing with stressors and is classified as an adaptive coping strategy for research participants.

For scientific development, further research can involve participants with more diverse sociodemographic characteristics and extract information about the effectiveness of a particular coping strategy. It is expected to make a positive contribution to the development of better policies for correctional officers.

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