

FIREFIGHTER RISK FACTORS FOR STRESS AND SUICIDE

Stressors Unique to Firefighters

- ◆ Uncertainty - performance, peer acceptance, employment/shifts, injury/illness, risk
- ◆ Physical response to alarm - natural stress response & heightened alert/physical triggers
- ◆ Interpersonal tension - relationship with management, peers, family, spouse, shift-work
- ◆ Exposure to human tragedy - car crash call can have equal stress to large disaster
- ◆ Fear - heightened alert state - risk to health and physical safety

Other Stress Factors

- ◆ Increased involvement in medical emergency calls (non-fire_ in addition to fire calls)
- ◆ Health issues related to prolonged/cumulative stress or injury from job
- ◆ Alcohol use/misuse that may be part of the culture or peer group “norm”
- ◆ Sleep deprivation and fatigue from workload and/or shift-work
- ◆ Work second job or family business - accumulating work stress rather than stress-relief activities

Risk Factors for Post-Traumatic Stress

- ◆ Person with high level of hostility or easily agitated - increased susceptibility
- ◆ Low level of self-efficacy (belief in one’s ability to complete tasks/reach goals) predicted PTSD levels
- ◆ A high level of reported work strain was associated with increased PTSD
- ◆ Engaging in negative self-appraisals (how we view/judge ourselves) increased risk of PTSD

Protective Factors against stress and trauma effects

- ◆ Higher levels of family and at-work social support were associated with lower odds ratios for PTSD
- ◆ A positive work support climate (superiors sensitive, open and supportive post incident) reduced post-traumatic distress after critical incident involvement
- ◆ Employee control climate (sense of having control or influence on environmental or activities) reduced anxiety and stress caused by post-traumatic distress
- ◆ Belief that they have coping skills and tools to handle stress and trauma

High levels of occupational stress and traumatic stress can contribute to increased suicide risk

3 I’s of Suicide

1. physical or emotional pain that is experienced as Intolerable, unbearably distressing;
2. A life situation perceived as Interminable, that is seen as continuing unchanged;
3. A life situation that is perceived as Inescapable, such that no coping action already tried or conceived will make a significant difference.

3 Social Risk Factors

- ◆ Thwarted belongingness—believe one is alone; prevented from being part of peer/work group or family
- ◆ Perceived burdensomeness - believe you are a burden to others
- ◆ Capability for suicide - ability to overcome human aversion to pain and death (from life experience and personality traits)

Additional Firefighter Suicide Risk Factors

- ◆ Responding/attending to suicides - attempts or suicide death with post-trauma reactions/memories
- ◆ Acceptance of death as potential consequence; come to terms with mortality
- ◆ Many have acute trauma stress, cumulative stress, or PTSD
- ◆ May use/abuse alcohol for coping
- ◆ Access to weapons (particularly in the US) or other ‘means’

Cumulative Stress: The signs and symptoms tend to progress through several phases.

Phase	Sign/Symptoms	Action
<p>Phase 1 - Warning Early warning signs are often more emotional than physical and may take a year or more before they are noticeable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of vague anxiety • Depression • Boredom • Apathy • Emotional fatigue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking about feelings • Taking a vacation • Making a change from regular activities • Taking time for yourself
<p>Phase 2 - Mild Symptoms Warning signs have progressed and intensified. Over a period of 6 to 18 months, physical signs may also be evident.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep disturbances • More frequent headaches/colds • Muscle aches • Intensified physical and emotional fatigue • Withdrawal from contact with others • Irritability • Intensified depression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More aggressive lifestyle changes may be needed • Short-term counselling
<p>Phase 3– Entrenched Cumulative Stress This phase occurs when the above phases continue to be ignored. Stress starts to create a deeper impact on career, family life and personal well-being.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased use of alcohol, smoking, non-prescription drugs • Depression • Physical and emotional fatigue • Loss of sex drive • Ulcers • Marital discord • Crying spells • Intense anxiety • Rigid thinking • Withdrawal • restlessness • Sleeplessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The help of medical and psychological professionals is highly recommended.
<p>Phase 4 - Severe/Debilitating Cumulative Stress Reaction This phase is often considered “self-destructive” and tends to occur after 5 to 10 years of continued stress</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careers end prematurely • Asthma • Heart conditions • Severe depression • Lowered self-esteem/self-confidence • Inability to perform one’s job • Inability of manage personal life • Withdrawal • Uncontrolled anger, grief, rage • Suicidal or homicidal thinking • Muscle tremors • Extreme chronic fatigue • Over-reaction to minor events • Agitation • Carelessness, forgetfulness • Paranoia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant intervention from professionals recommended

(From: Anschuetz, B.L. “The High Cost of Caring: Coping with Workplace Stress”)