



# Helpletter

An Initiative of the National Volunteer Fire Council



Courtesy of Paul Combs

### In This Issue:

**3 PAGE** **NEED HELP?**  
 Firefighters and EMS personnel face many unique challenges that can have a significant impact on their behavioral health.

|                                                                       |        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| Q&A with Cynthia Cash                                                 | pg. 4  |
| The Organizational Impacts of Bullying                                | pg. 6  |
| PTSD and the Rural Volunteer Fire Department: What Is Your Game Plan? | pg. 8  |
| Retirement Planning: Preparing for Life After the Fire Service        | pg. 10 |

|                                                                                 |        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| Healthy Body, Healthy Mind: Improve your Mental Health through Physical Fitness | pg. 12 |
| Having Your Back: Saving our Own                                                | pg. 14 |
| Self-care Techniques for Firefighters                                           | pg. 15 |
| Can You Make a Change?                                                          | pg. 16 |
| How Fire Service Culture Can Drive Good Behavioral Health                       | pg. 18 |

ABOUT THE

# HELPLETTER

Firefighters, EMTs, and emergency personnel are at risk for many types of behavioral health issues, such as PTSD, stress, anxiety, and depression, to name a few. To proactively address behavioral health in the fire and emergency services, the National Volunteer Fire Council launched the Share the Load™ program. This campaign features a web site with resources and training at [www.nvfc.org/help](http://www.nvfc.org/help), as well as the Fire/EMS Helpline, a free, confidential hotline provided by American Addiction Centers that firefighters, EMTs, and their families can call to receive immediate help with any behavioral health issue.

The Helpletter is the newsletter of the Share the Load program and features articles to help departments and individuals understand and address critical behavioral health issues. Share it with your department and your family. Keep a copy at the station as a resource to include as part of your department's behavioral health program. A poster is included that you can hang up at the station to remind all personnel that help is available if they need it.

Find more resources, including previous issues of the Helpletter, at [www.nvfc.org/help](http://www.nvfc.org/help).

.....

ABOUT THE

# NVFC

The NVFC is the leading nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. The NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer in the national arena and provides resources, programs, education, and advocacy for first responders across the nation. Many of the NVFC's programs and initiatives apply to all members of the fire and emergency services, whether volunteer or career. Membership in the NVFC is low-cost and provides a wide array of benefits; find information at [www.nvfc.org/BeYourBest](http://www.nvfc.org/BeYourBest). Learn more about the NVFC and access resources at [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org).

.....

### Disclaimer

The information and resources presented in this document are for informational purposes only. They are not intended to offer a diagnosis or treatment of any behavioral health issue. Consult a healthcare professional if you feel you may be experiencing a behavioral health issue or for any questions you may have. This document does not provide a comprehensive listing of resources that are available.



# Need Help? Call the Fire/EMS Helpline 1-888-731-FIRE (3473)

Firefighters and EMS personnel face many unique challenges that can have a significant impact on their behavioral health. To ensure these individuals and their families have access to the help they need, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) teamed up with American Addiction Centers (AAC) to create a free, confidential helpline available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The key difference of the Fire/EMS Helpline is that it was created for first responders by members of the fire service.

This program is specifically designed to meet the unique needs of firefighters, EMTs, rescue personnel, and their families. The Fire/EMS Helpline can serve as an individual resource, or departments can offer it as an Employee Assistance Program for their members.

## Why Call

First responders and their families can call the Fire/EMS Helpline any time day or night to seek help for a variety of behavioral health issues. These may include alcohol or drug addiction, depression, suicide prevention, stress or anxiety, critical incidents, PTSD, stress caused by financial management issues or legal problems, relationship issues, work-related concerns, or psychological issues.

When you call, you will receive compassionate, non-judgmental support you can trust. Depending on

your individual needs, you can speak with a trained fire service member who understands what you are going through, you can be referred to local resources to help with your specific problem, or you can be admitted to a treatment facility

where there are licensed counselors trained in the fire service culture. If a treatment center is needed, the Fire/EMS Helpline will work with your insurance to make sure there is no cost to you.

## What to Expect When You Call

1. The first step in getting help is to make the call to 1-888-731-FIRE (3473). Calls are free and confidential.
2. A skilled, trained Intake Counselor will answer your call. Make sure you identify yourself as a firefighter, EMT, or family member of the fire service.
3. The Intake Counselor will listen to your problems and concerns and identify local resources in your area, or when appropriate, locate national treatment options that work within your needs and insurance capabilities. Trained assistance professionals who are members of the fire service are available to talk, and the licensed counselors at AAC treatment facilities have undergone intensive training specifically on the culture and needs of the fire service.



## ABOUT THE FOUNDERS

The Fire/EMS Helpline was developed by fire service veterans Mike Blackburn and Mike Healy. Based on their own professional and personal experiences, both recognized the need for firefighters to be able to reach out to other firefighters when they need help. The Fire/EMS Helpline allows firefighters, EMTs, and their families to talk to trained professionals that understand what they are going through and who can relate to the special needs of the fire and emergency services.

**Mike Blackburn**, CEAP, LADC-1, SAP, is a retired Rhode Island Fire Department battalion chief. He currently serves as AAC's senior vice president of business development and is a nationally certified employee assistance professional, a licensed alcohol and drug counselor, and a substance abuse professional. He has extensive training in providing critical incident management and spent six weeks at Ground Zero providing stress/critical incident leadership to firefighters.

**Mike Healy**, CEAP, LAP-C, SAP, has over 40 years in the volunteer fire service and is a current and past chief. He is a member of the Rockland County, NY, critical incident stress team, is the coordinator of fire education at the Rockland County Fire Training Center, and is a New York State fire instructor. He is a certified employee assistance professional, a labor assistance professional-certified, and a substance abuse professional. He retired as clinical director of the NYCTA-TWU Assistance Program and now serves as a treatment consultant for American Addiction Centers.

# Q&A with Cynthia Cash

Being a volunteer firefighter or emergency responder impacts the entire family, as Cynthia Cash well knows. Cynthia's husband, Jeff, is the Fire Chief in Cherryville, NC, and is very active in the fire service at the state and national level, including serving on the National Volunteer Fire Council's board and Executive Committee. Their two sons, Chad and Quentin, also followed in Jeff's footsteps to join the fire service. We talked with Cynthia Cash about what it means to her to have her husband and sons in the fire service, the affect this has had on their family, and advice she has for overcoming the potential challenges the firefighter lifestyle creates.

**Q. How long have you been married?**

**A:** 37 years

**Q. How long has your husband been in the fire service?**

**A:** 38 years

**Q. Did you know your husband was going to join the fire service when you met?**

**A:** As a small boy, Jeff's Uncle Wayne Eaker would take him to fire calls with him, and that is how Jeff got involved and knew he wanted to be a firefighter. When we started dating in high school, I knew that was what he wanted to do. Jeff actually got hired as a full-time firefighter in Rock Hill, SC when I was a senior in high school; therefore, I too have been involved in the fire service all of our married life.

**Q. Were you familiar with the fire service before your husband joined, or know anyone that was a firefighter?**

**A:** No, I wasn't familiar at all with the fire service, nor did I know anyone that was a firefighter.

**Q. What were the most significant adjustments you had to make when your husband joined the fire service?**

**A:** We married shortly after he became a firefighter so I had to adjust to being by myself every third day/night. Also, I never realized how much training and certifications that a firefighter had to maintain and the hours involved in all of that training.

**Q. What were the impacts of the fire service that you did not expect beforehand?**

**A:** I really didn't know what to expect, but I didn't think about the fire service being a 7 day/24 hours a day job. I had never been exposed to that. I was always used to a job being a 5 day/8 hours a day and off on weekends, so that was different. I also was surprised to see how the fire service is one big family. Firefighters will do anything to help another brother or sister in need.

**Q. What was your reaction when both of your sons decided to join the fire service?**

**A:** I was happy that both of our sons wanted to join the fire service. It is

such an honorable profession. I have always tried to be supportive in whatever they want to do. One of them is a full-time career firefighter, and one of them is a volunteer firefighter.

**Q. What has been the best part or an unexpected benefit of having your family in the fire service?**

**A:** To see that the fire service is one big family and everyone is accepted. Not only are my husband and two sons in the fire department, but I have two brothers-in-law and three nephews who are either career or volunteer firefighters. As you can see, the fire service is one big family. This is true not only in the City of Cherryville, but nationwide.

**Q. What advice would you provide to another firefighter spouse or parent whose loved one has decided to join the fire service?**

**A:** Tell them to be thankful that their loved one wants to join the fire service and to help others in need. That shows what type of caring individual that they have raised. I would tell them that their spouse is not going to get rich materially in this profession, but they will get rich in so many other ways! It is just such an honorable profession. I would also let them know how the fire service is a brotherhood/sisterhood and tell them how they can be involved too by serving as a volunteer or joining the auxiliary in their department.

**Q.** As the wife and mother of firefighters, what do you feel your role is in supporting your loved ones in this path?

**A:** *I feel that my role is to be supportive. The fire service is not only a profession, but it is a "calling." As a wife and a mother of firefighters, I pray for them. I pray for their safety and that God would use them where they are, no matter what situation they are put in.*

**Q.** Having firefighters in the family means your loved one has to be away from home at inconvenient times. How has this impacted your family and what have you done to lessen the strain this could potentially create?

**A:** *When you have a firefighter in your family, you go into it knowing and understanding that people are always in need and that anything can happen at any time in a 24-hour period, and that nothing happens at a convenient time. As our sons got a little older, Jeff always took them with him on fire calls and I think that made them feel a part of the fire service and what he does, and that ultimately led them to want to serve as firefighters.*

**Q.** What have you done to incorporate yourself into the fire service family?

**A:** *Currently I serve as President of the Ladies Auxiliary. I help out whenever we have quarterly meetings by serving food and cleaning up. I pick up food when they are having a live training burn in the community. When they were in the process of hiring a new administrative assistant, I helped with paperwork and things they needed done.*



The Cash Family

**Q.** What tips can you provide for adjusting to the firefighter lifestyle and keeping the family relationship strong despite the challenges?

**A:** *I would tell them to get involved by being a part of the auxiliary or by becoming a volunteer firefighter. I would tell them to always pray for the spouse and for the other members of the department.*

**Q.** Anything else you'd like to add?

**A:** *The fire service has been so good to Jeff and myself because of Jeff's involvement and his "calling" and his "passion" for the fire service. We have been places and done things that we would never have been able to do. I never even imagined*

*that Jeff would be involved at the state and national level like he has been. He has truly made a difference for the fire service and I am so proud of him. It has truly been a blessing for us and our family.*

*You have to remember that anything worth having, you have to work hard for! Jeff's favorite Bible verse is Colossians 3:23, which says, "Work as unto the Lord, not for men." I think this sums up that we are all really working for the Lord, not for the world. The fire service is a better organization because of all those who have dedicated their lives. I am thankful to be a part of the fire service and to have a husband who truly loves his job and is making a difference for the firefighters not only in North Carolina, but nationwide.*



The NVFC resource *What to Expect: A Guide for Family Members of Volunteer Firefighters* is available to help families adjust to the fire service lifestyle and keep family relationships strong. [www.nvfc.org/share-the-load-resources](http://www.nvfc.org/share-the-load-resources)

# The Organizational Impacts of Bullying

---

*By Jerry L. Streich*

In 2008, after years of preparing myself, I was sworn in as the Fire Chief of a progressive suburban fire district. For years, I focused on operational readiness and trained hard to assure I was not put into a position I could not react to. Shortly after accepting the job, however, problems were presented to me that I was not prepared to handle. In fact, the issue pushed my personal limits and even threatened my health as a long-term employee bullied me from the bottom up. Not only did he threaten the peace of my family, he disrupted the daily operations of the organization for many years. I had to stop it, and did.





Workplace bullying is defined by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) as, “repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators. It is abusive conduct that is: threatening, humiliating, or intimidating, or work interference — sabotage — which prevents work from getting done, or verbal abuse.” I define this type of person as a “Difficult Person” who negatively changes the mood of the organization on a regular basis. For whatever reason, these people want to take control of you and look down at you by using fear and intimidation to win power over another.

If you become the target of a bully, the stress is likely to add anxiety, mood swings, worry, and decreased engagement in your duties along with other negative health effects to your life.

Until my experience with a bully, I thought bullying only affected children in schools. Today I know firsthand that these people live within our fire stations as well. The impacts of a bully in the workplace can

decrease the overall engagement of your team, causing animosity and a lack of trust in the leadership of the organization. After all, it is leadership’s role to assure our workplace is free from this type of behavior and build a place people want to come and serve.

In order to ensure your organization is not affected by the negative impacts of a bully, here are a few recommendations you can use to be proactive.

### 1. SET THE WAY FORWARD.

- Educate your team on the subject and let them know this type of behavior will not be tolerated at the workplace. Add this to your annual training schedule. This needs to come from the top and be supported throughout the ranks.
- Develop a mission, vision, and core values that support a respectful workplace.

### 2. REVIEW AND DEVELOP POLICIES.

- Ensure you have a respectful workplace policy that outlines the expectations you have of all employees. Also include what should be done if someone witnesses disrespect and/or becomes a target.

### 3. DEVELOP A REPORTING PROCESS.

- Employees need a confidential way to talk about organizational issues. Determine how this can be done within your organization and a process

for employees to follow. Remember to document your discussions and follow-up on the issue with the employee concerned.

### 4. TAKE A STAND.

- When you say you will not tolerate it, this means you will take action if the problem is in front of you. If you want to lose credibility, do nothing. If you want to end up in court, do nothing. If you want to build a winning team, do SOMETHING to show you care.

### 5. CONTINUE TO SPEAK THE MESSAGE.

- A respectful work place can begin right now. All your department needs is a champion to take it on and speak the message from the first day someone starts their job to the day they retire. There is no end to this message.

The fire service has changed so much over the past decade. Although we have traditions that have been with us for hundreds of years, our culture within the fire service needs to change. We are an elite team who has become the Swiss Army Knife of the community. No one can do what we do! Because of that, we cannot tolerate people who disrupt the mood of our organization. It creates risk and makes good people leave. Stand together with us and support a respectful workplace where we can all succeed in one of the most important jobs in the world.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jerry L. Streich** is the fire chief/emergency management director in Andover, MN, director of the largest fire training academy in Minnesota, and founder of the most successful fire investigation team in the Midwest. He is an international trainer working across the U.S., Liberia, and Kenya focusing on fire service and workplace issues. Since 2010 he has been collecting data on fire service bullying through a survey supported by the IAFC and the NVFC ([www.surveymonkey.com/fireservicebully](http://www.surveymonkey.com/fireservicebully)). Chief Streich holds a bachelor of science degree in human resources with emphasis on organizational leadership, an associate of applied science degree in fire science, and numerous certifications. He can be reached at [jstreich@capstonepss.com](mailto:jstreich@capstonepss.com) or on Twitter [@fireofficercorp](https://twitter.com/fireofficercorp).

# PTSD and the Rural Volunteer Fire Department: What Is Your Game Plan?

Courtesy of Lauralee Veitch

By Hersch Wilson

If this hasn't happened to you as a volunteer fire department officer, it probably will.

It goes something like this. First, there is a high-speed, head-on collision with fatalities. All the dead are teenagers. There is the dedicated and hard work of extrication of the injured, then the waiting for the Medical Investigators to show up before the deceased can be removed and placed in body bags. You are fiercely proud of your department.

But then, one of the younger guys stops what he is doing and says, "Hey, I think I know these kids . . . I gotta call my girlfriend."

He walks off.

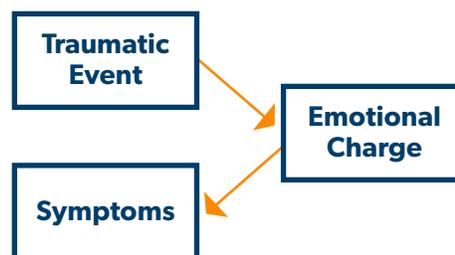
Another, who said he just couldn't help with the bodies, is staring off into space.

A few months later, one of the department veterans says to you, "I keep having dreams. . . are we sure they were dead? They just looked like they were sleeping . . ."

My question to you, the volunteer officer, is what do you do? What is your game plan?

This article is about Post Traumatic Stress and the small volunteer fire department. The question is: How as volunteer officers can we help the individuals on our departments cope with the stress of traumatic calls and manage PTSD?

## PTSD



Simply put, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a collection of symptoms that can occur after experiencing or witnessing trauma. As firefighters, we often say

that we see things that no one should see. But we do see them and there are consequences. Typical symptoms include **intrusive thoughts** like flashbacks and nightmares; **avoidance behaviors**, for example, avoiding discussions of the incident or avoiding the location; and **alteration in general mood**, with more negative emotions, like anger, lack of trust, and apathy. Severe cases can result in significant depression, alcohol and substance abuse, and suicide.

Clinically, symptoms must last a month or more to be PTSD. (That is cold comfort for the firefighter who is "messed up" after a bad call.)

There is not a lot of data about the impact of PTSD on the volunteer firefighter community. However, according to Mike Healy, the co-founder of the Fire/EMS Helpline, over 80 percent of the calls they receive are PTSD related.

## The Rural Volunteer and PTSD

After a particularly bad mutual-aid call, a friend of mine who is a career paramedic said that the conversation at the station that evening was, "How do volunteers cope with these calls?"

Her point was that a career crew went back to their station together and they talked about the call. The city department had infrastructure for these situations, they had a wellness officer, insurance, health benefits, and the union.

But what does the average, rural volunteer department have?

Probably very little.

And yet, volunteers are in many ways more at risk for PTSD. When you're a career firefighter, you show up for your shift and you mentally "get in the game." There is some psychological protection there. But for volunteers, especially the small departments who are "on" 24/7, you never know when the pager is going to tone out and what you're going to find. We often go from "civilian" to dealing with mass casualties in the space of a few minutes.

Finally, the essence of being a volunteer is that we work in our community – we are there for our friends and neighbors. The cardiac arrest call at 1:00am could well be your neighbors. The DUI crash fatality might be the best friend of your son.

## The Game Plan

Volunteer fire officers need to have a game plan for how to handle traumatic incidents and PTSD for our firefighters. This plan should include the following components.

### 1. Educate, educate!

The most important action we can take is to educate our personnel. Just as we are trained on infectious diseases we also need to be trained in PTSD, what it is, what the symptoms are, and what help is available. PTSD training needs to be part of our annual curriculum. The NFVC has virtual courses on both behavioral health and suicide prevention that can be used and adapted for any fire department.

### 2. Serve as a model.

Our task as leaders is to "be the change we want to create." With PTSD, we need to be open about it, talk about it, and be clear that, like having the flu, there is no

stigma attached; it can happen to anyone, including you.

### 3. Know your people.

As leaders, we need to know our people. How do individuals normally respond in crisis? What does it look like when it's "not normal?" When Ellen, the steady, every-call firefighter-EMT stops showing up, do you know why? When Bill, the ebullient guy always with a joke, clams up, is it because he's just tired or is he playing the movie-in-his-mind about extricating the dead mom?

### 4. Sobriety and Sleep!

Believe it or not, one of the most simple and effective ways we can help is to make sure that firefighters involved in an incident are getting sleep and staying sober.

### 5. Know your resources.

There are several ways to help depending on the individuals, the severity of the trauma they've experienced, and the symptoms presenting. In my department, we often start with just talking about it among ourselves or talking to firefighters individually. These sessions are mostly about officers listening, rather than sharing war-stories.

If anyone on the department believes it is warranted, the next step is a voluntary critical incident stress debriefing. It is crucial that it's voluntary. For some individuals, sitting around and reliving the scene with a group will just make the symptoms worse.

Next, the NVFC has a 24/7 helpline for firefighters and families of firefighters [1-888-731-FIRE (3473)]. They can point you towards a variety of resources to help.

Finally, there are a variety of emerging therapies and clinicians who deal specifically with PTSD. We are not therapists! But it's a good idea to have a couple of phone numbers of specialists who can help in a crisis.

A wise ex-chief once lectured our department, "If you want to be 100% safe, turn off your pager." Being a firefighter, even in a small town, carries inherent risks, which we all accept as part of the vocation. On the other hand, as officers, our number one responsibility is to keep our people safe. We focus on physical safety every day; keeping a watchful eye whether our team is on the highway at midnight or at a wildfire in the midday sun. But we also have a moral imperative to keep our firefighters safe from the effects of emotional trauma. The last thing we want to hear about is one of our own who has quit or retired and is psychologically damaged, maybe using drugs or alcohol or thinking of suicide. I never want to have to ask myself, "Was there anything I could have done?"

It is not a simple thing to be a volunteer fire officer. But we must never let anything get in the way of our first duty, to keep our folks healthy, physically and mentally, and to make sure they get safely home after every call.

Know the science about PTSD. Have a game plan. Take care of yourself and your department. Be safe!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Hersch Wilson** is the medical captain with Hondo Volunteer Fire and Rescue in Santa Fe County, NM. He has been with the department since 1987. In his "other life" he is a writer and a soccer coach. Visit him at [Herschwilson.com](http://Herschwilson.com) or on Facebook at 'Hersch Wilson-Firefighter.'

# Retirement Planning: Preparing for Life After the Fire Service



By Jeff Dill

Imagine yourself lying in a hospital bed. As you wake, up your doctor and family has surrounded you with smiles and tears. The doctor advises you that you have been in a coma since a wall collapsed on you a week ago. Through the confusion your first words are, "Who am I and how did I get here?" You have lost your memory, your identity, and worst of all you have no idea what to do about it. As extreme as that may seem, this situation is eerily close to what retirement can feel like for firefighters who are not prepared. Retirees I have spoken to say they can't believe the years went by so quickly, and almost all have asked the question, "What am I supposed to do now?"

As founder of Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA), the organization that tracks and validates firefighter and EMS suicides, I began to see a disturbing trend in suicides of those who were retired. My team began to interview and hold surveys to find out some possible reasons on why these tragic events were occurring. Within this article we will look at the top three issues these retirees faced, how to combat them, and then some recommendations on how to prepare for retirement while still working.

in the graph to the right you can see that as of March 2017, FBHA has validated 749 active firefighter and EMS suicides. In addition, we have 170 members who were retired when they took their lives. Of those 170, 36 took their lives within the first week of retirement. Of those 36, nine were volunteer firefighters and EMS providers for their communities. Retirement is supposed to be the best times of our lives! Why then, are so many taking their lives?

## The Big Three

When FBHA decided to develop "Saying Goodbye: The Emotional Detachment," a workshop for understanding how retirement can effect firefighters and EMS providers, we decided to go right to the source: retirees. Through interviews and a survey, we found three common issues most faced after they hung up their helmets. They are:

- Loss of Identity
- Loss of Belonging
- Lack of Purpose

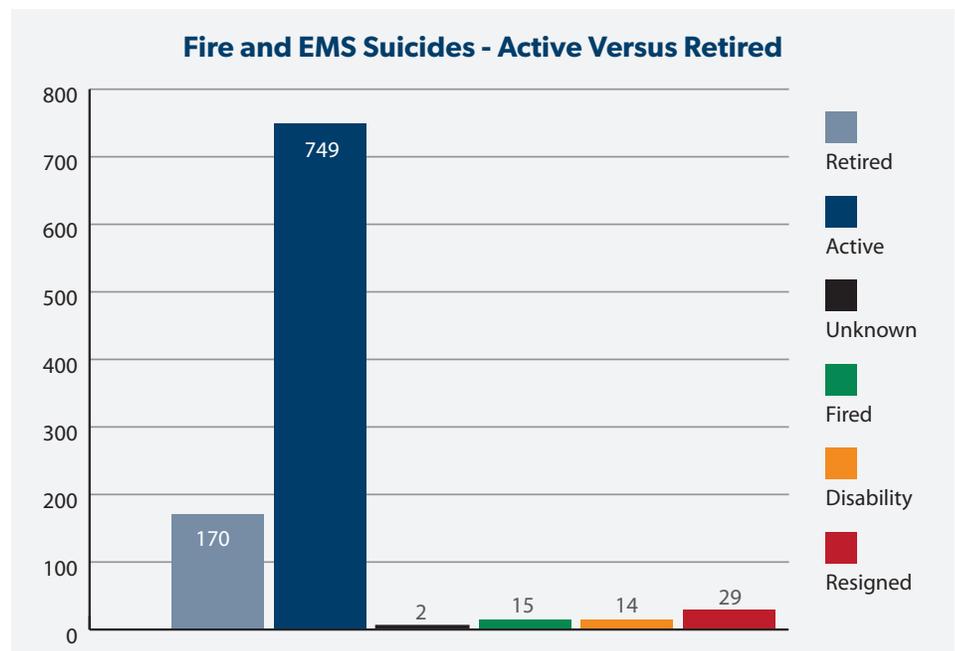
### Loss of Identity:

How do we lose ourselves as firefighters? Are the traditions and "cultural brainwashing" (FBHA term) so strong we forget who we are as individuals? Does the brotherhood and sisterhood theme become so strong that we live in it 24/7? Do we associate ourselves as firefighters, a team, that we forget our own beliefs,

values, as well as our strengths and weaknesses?

In our efforts to understand how or why we lose ourselves when we retire we found the responses somewhat disturbing. From the 125 retirees surveyed, the largest belief was they felt their life was "over with" when they retired. They felt they had nothing to look forward because they had only known the fire service. These are volunteers as well. They had given so much to their department and community. These were retirees who have 20 to 30 years left to live.

As organizations we need to prepare and help our members plan for retirement, and not just financially for career firefighters. No matter where I speak, I find out if there is a nearby fire service academy going on and if there is I ask for five minutes to talk to the recruits. My message is simple. "Never lose who you are! Be dedicated,



FBHA validated data as of March 2017

passionate, safe, educated, and be a part of the team, but always remember this is a job. Never fall prey to how you are supposed to act or feel. If it bothers you or it hurts emotionally, then be true to yourself and get some help because I am talking about your life.”

### Loss of Belonging:

“Hey, I am on Gold Shift or I work for Anytown FD. We wear our shirts with our department logo and are accepted into any firehouse or fire hall in the U.S. or Canada.” Sound familiar? Because we are firefighters, we belong to a culture many will never know or understand. For 20 or more years we “belong,” and then in a heartbeat it is gone.

“When we belong, we believe. When we separate, we doubt.”

– R. A. Delmonico

This quote can resonate with many firefighters who are retired. We are part of a team, relied upon, respected, and we use the experience that we gained over years of service. When we are alone at home, wondering where the time went and worried about what we are going to do to keep busy, we might begin to doubt ourselves and what we have to offer to the world. The time to plan for retirement is while we are still working.

### Lack of Purpose:

One of the most difficult challenges we struggle with as human beings, at some point in our lives, is wondering if we add value to other’s lives as well as to our own lives. As firefighters we make a huge difference in the communities we serve, but when we retire the combination of lack of planning, loss of identity and the sense of belonging, and no direction in our lives can spell trouble for many who might struggle with these emotions. Depression is one of the most prominent issues that retired firefighters struggled with when surveyed by FBHA. As young firefighters looking ahead, our biggest concerns were the financial aspect of retirement. Departments need to become aware that the emotional impact is just as, if not more, vital for a successful retirement.

### Summary

The life of a firefighter, both career and volunteer, can take a toll on our bodies and mind. The visual images we carry can change or scar us for the rest of our lives. Many live in physical pain, which will never go away. We look forward to retirement, but for many it becomes a turning point where they feel they lose who they were. For some, the lack of direction, purpose, or game plan has led to the feeling that it was better to take their lives. We can’t let this happen to our members. We need to provide the necessary support to help our firefighters and EMS providers successfully transition

to the next phase of their lives – a phase in which the fire service is not the primary focus.

Every organization’s goals should include preparing its members for retirement by offering guidance beginning at least one to two years prior to retirement. Every firefighter is accountable for their actions in their career. Now we must include being accountable for our years after we hang up our helmets. There needs to be a game plan.

We all deserve a stress-free retirement!



## Recommendations: Preparing for Retirement

FBHA makes these recommendations on how to prepare for retirement. We believe planning should begin two years prior to retiring.

- **Challenge Yourself.** Face facts – your fire service career is over but your life continues; you are limited by your own defenses.
- **Continue your Education.** “Stop learning, stop growing.” Go back to school or take classes in areas that interest you. You are never too old to become a counselor, chaplain, or wherever your interests lie.
- **Develop a business.** If you’ve ever wanted to start a business, now is the time. Prepare yourself by taking classes in related areas such as understanding tax laws, payroll, non-for profits versus for profits, marketing, etc.
- **Seek Counseling.** Consider your post fire service options by visiting a career guidance counselor. See a mental health counselor to gain a baseline on how you feel about your impending retirement.
- **Start Marriage Counseling.** Six months prior to retiring, if you are married or have a partner, go to a marriage counselor so you can both figure out what each other’s expectations are when you finally do retire.
- **It’s Not Retirement!** Think of this new stage as an opportunity to explore other avenues of interest that you have thought about or enjoyed. It is a big world out there. Enjoy it!
- **Stay Involved with the Department.** If you are unable to make a complete break with the department when you retire, look at ways you can remain involved. Become a support or auxiliary member and continue to help the department with tasks such as public education, CERT, peer support, fundraisers, or other areas your department needs assistance. Stay connected and find support by organizing a weekly retiree breakfast.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Dill is a member of the National Volunteer Fire Council’s Health and Safety Work Group, a retired fire captain, and founder of Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance. He holds a master’s degree in counseling.

# Healthy Body, Healthy Mind: Improve your Mental Health through Physical Fitness



Courtesy of Lauralee Veitch

By Dan Kerrigan & Jim Moss

When it comes to firefighter fitness and health, there are many facts that cannot be disputed:

- Sudden cardiac events continue to plague the fire service, accounting for approximately half of all annual line-of-duty deaths.<sup>1</sup>
- Firefighting is intensely strenuous. Studies have shown that a firefighter's heart rate can approach 200 beats per minute while performing their duties.<sup>2</sup>
- Risk factors with regard to heart disease are compounded

exponentially for firefighters. For example, firefighters that smoke face 8.6 times greater odds of sudden cardiac death during firefighting, while firefighters with hypertension face 12 times greater risk.<sup>3</sup>

- The average age of first heart attack for firefighters is 49, as compared to age 66 for the general population.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the physiological impact of firefighting, there is a mental toll as well. Whether career or volunteer, over time, firefighters witness things on the emergency scene that most people cannot and will not comprehend. We are

expected to deal with these traumatic events as "part of our job," but typically we have not been trained how to process these events in a healthy, productive manner. Unfortunately, we often choose to relieve our stress through potentially self-destructive behaviors (i.e. substance abuse, overeating, physical abuse, etc.) or by blocking out these memories altogether. This is why it comes as no surprise that the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance ([www.ffbha.org](http://www.ffbha.org)) has verified well over 100 firefighter and EMS responder suicides in 2016 alone.

"I wish my mind would forget what my eyes have seen."

- Dave Parnell

Firefighter, Detroit Fire Department  
Burn Documentary

Regular participation in a fitness program is proven to reduce the chance of suffering a sudden cardiac event, reduce the incidence of injury, and increase the opportunity for a long and healthy retirement. But can it have a positive effect on our mental health as well? The overwhelming answer is: YES!

As many benefits as there are to maintaining our physical fitness, the mental benefits of exercise can also dramatically reduce the stress and anxiety we accumulate during our careers. The



- **Cardiovascular** (Increased HR and BP, Decreased Stroke Volume)
- **Hematological** (Decreased Plasma Volume, Hemoconcentration)
- **Thermoregulatory** (Elevated Core Temperature, Dehydration)
- **Respiratory** (Increased Breathing Rate and Oxygen Consumption)
- **Metabolic** (High Oxygen Cost, Increased Lactate, Fatigue)
- **Immune/Endocrine** (Increased Leukocytes and Hormones)
- **Nervous** (Sympathetic Surge and Increased Adrenaline)
- **Muscular** (Increased Oxygen Use and Heat Production)

Courtesy of Denise Smith

Smith, D.L., Liebig, J.P., Steward, N.M., Fehling, P.C. (2010). Sudden Cardiac Events in the Fire Service: Understanding the Cause and Mitigating the Risk. First Responder Health and Safety Laboratory, Skidmore College.

tide is rising when it comes to firefighter health and fitness. Now more than ever before, an abundance of resources are available to help us take better care of ourselves – and improving our physical strength and resilience will prove beneficial to the mind as well.

We are not claiming that improved physical fitness will be the magic wand that solves all firefighter mental health and emotional issues. But we must realize that within our bodies, everything is connected and co-dependent: mentally, emotionally, and physically. An improvement in a single area will reap benefits in the other areas as well.

Extensive research has demonstrated that frequent exercise (150+ minutes/week) lessens or completely abates clinical depression and anxiety, as well as being an effective medium for suicide prevention. However, the biggest benefit of exercise will not be found in a scientific study. Quite simply, it makes you feel better from the inside out. Pushing yourself physically produces a sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction. So, get up off the couch, get outside, and go do something! Improve your mental health through physical fitness, starting today!

Here are four steps to fitness success:

- 1. Decide.** “Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try.” – *Gail Devers*
- 2. Commit.** Commit to the process of improving yourself physically and mentally. Motivation will get you started, discipline will keep you going.
- 3. Work Hard.** Firefighters are no strangers to hard work; it is simply part of our DNA. Let your passion for the job fuel your physical fitness efforts.
- 4. Succeed.** With each success (no matter how big or small), take a moment to celebrate your progress.

Remember: You are not in competition with anyone but yourself. There is no downside to exercising. Setting small goals, making positive changes in your lifestyle, and taking time for yourself away from the firehouse will have tremendous mental and physical benefits, and they will

positively impact everyone around you as well.

To learn more about our book *Firefighter Functional Fitness* and how you can improve your health, visit [FirefighterFunctionalFitness.com](http://FirefighterFunctionalFitness.com). If you want information on how to start

a behavioral health program for your department, check out the Share the Load Program at [www.nvfc.org/help](http://www.nvfc.org/help). For immediate behavioral health support, call the Fire/EMS Helpline at 1-888-731-FIRE (3473).



## 10 Mental Health Benefits of Exercise<sup>5</sup>

(Source: Breene, 2013)

- 1.** Exercise increases the concentration of norepinephrine, which improves your body’s response to stress.
- 2.** Exercise causes the body to release endorphins, which results in an overall feeling of happiness.
- 3.** Exercise gets you “out of the office” and removes you from the very stressors that may be causing anxiety and depression.
- 4.** Exercise improves your self-confidence. Setting small goals and achieving them is a great way to see personal improvement and maintain motivation.
- 5.** Exercise decreases anxiety.
- 6.** Exercise with others encourages more social interaction, which is shown to lessen depression.
- 7.** Exercise helps you get to sleep faster and then sleep better throughout the night. Quality sleep is vitally important to your mental, emotional, and physical health.
- 8.** Exercise is the perfect way to encourage others to take better care of themselves through your own example.
- 9.** Exercise keeps the brain active, sharpens memory, and combats the natural aging process.
- 10.** Exercise boosts creativity and productivity on the job.

<sup>1</sup> United States Fire Administration. Firefighter Fatality Data. Retrieved from [www.usfa.fema.gov/data/statistics/](http://www.usfa.fema.gov/data/statistics/)

<sup>2</sup> Smith, D. L., DeBlois, J. P., Haller, J. M., Lefferts, W. K., Fehling, P. C. (2015). Effects of Heat Stress and Dehydration on Cardiovascular Function. Saratoga Springs, NY: Skidmore College.

<sup>3</sup> International Association of Fire Fighters. (2013). Heart disease in the fire service. Retrieved from [www.iaff.org/hs/PDF/HeartDiseaseManual\\_2013.pdf](http://www.iaff.org/hs/PDF/HeartDiseaseManual_2013.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Azad, S. (2016). Heart attacks happen earlier in firefighters. Retrieved from [www.wfaa.com/news/health/heart-attacks-happen-earlier-in-firefighters/48048774](http://www.wfaa.com/news/health/heart-attacks-happen-earlier-in-firefighters/48048774)

<sup>5</sup> Breene, S. (2013). 13 mental health benefits of exercise. Retrieved from [www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/27/mental-health-benefits-exercise\\_n\\_2956099.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/27/mental-health-benefits-exercise_n_2956099.html)



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dan Kerrigan & Jim Moss** are the co-authors of *Firefighter Functional Fitness*. It is the essential guide to optimal firefighter performance and longevity. It provides all firefighters with the knowledge, tools, and mindset to maximize their fireground performance, reduce their risk of injury and line-of-duty death, and have long, healthy careers and retirements. Go to [FirefighterFunctionalFitness.com](http://FirefighterFunctionalFitness.com) to learn more. Twitter: @FirefighterFFit, Facebook: @FirefighterFFit, Instagram: @FirefighterFunctionalFitness.

# Having Your Back: Saving our Own



By Christian Kehl

In the fire service we make much of the bonds of our community and all that entails, but what happens when members of a department step outside of those bonds in order to effect change in the department that they think is necessary? I was collateral damage in such an event, and it very nearly cost me my life.

I started in the fire service in the late 1970s as a junior firefighter with a small volunteer department and was promoted to full member after I turned 18. I was part of a generation of firefighters that lived and breathed the “brotherhood,” a bond that brought us together in almost all that we did. It wasn’t just about the calls we ran or the training that we did, it was about supporting one another through thick and thin. If there was a problem we discussed it and came to a resolution – as brothers and sisters, not as adversaries. As a result, I have a deeply ingrained belief that we should support one another, have each others’ backs, and if we disagree, we work it out among ourselves.

After several years of active responding, I started to change. My department had a long stretch of rural highway that was prone to horrific crashes, and it began taking its toll on me. To combat the dreams and stress I turned to alcohol to calm my mind, and then to drugs. I was overloaded and felt that if I asked for help I would be perceived as weak or undependable. My addiction led me down a path that eventually resulted in my being released from the department due to criminal charges. There were many in the department that were hurt by my actions, but they all stood behind me with encouragement and support. I was one of them and they wanted to see me fixed. I, on the other hand, hadn’t reached my bottom yet. I kept drinking and using drugs to the point that my fire service family turned to ‘tough love’ and quit

supporting me until I got straight. Getting straight would take some time....a lot of time.

Once I got my life and legal troubles straightened out, I started to think about going back into the fire service. It was a passion, something that burns deeply within all of us that we can’t always explain. I had moved and settled down with a wonderful woman, so I took the plunge. I talked to the chief of the VFD where I was living and was offered the opportunity to prove myself. The next few years were full of the joys of the fire service family and doing the job that I loved.

Then because of a move, I joined another department, one that had some internal issues that the chief thought I could help with. This department had funding issues as well as issues with personnel that had hidden agendas and chose to play politics rather than serve the community. The chief believed in me and utilized my skills to help recruit and train new members as well as to upgrade apparatus and equipment. I also helped create a regional incident management team and worked hard on both the local and state level to ensure that not only our team, but teams across the state received support from the state on several issues. I was happy and content helping others and living a productive life.

This all came crashing down when members who wanted the chief gone used my background to unseat the chief.

It wasn’t done through conversation; rather these members went to the media and created a fire storm that ended with me in a park ready to take my life.

I was literally minutes away from ending my life when I was found by a brother firefighter, and friend, who stood at my truck window in stifling heat talking me down. It turns out that there was a whole network of firefighters working to save my life. From well respected fire chiefs in our area to members of the IMT, they left jobs and searched for me....all to save my life. These people epitomize what the fire service is all about, the whole “having your back” thing.

Coming back from the edge hasn’t been easy. I still have issues, but I know that I can make a call and get help from those that know and understand.

The greatest message I can give anyone from my experience is to think about your actions and how you treat others. The fire service is not about our individual desires or wants; it’s about serving a community and its people. Keep in mind that your actions affect others in ways you may never know, and a reasonable and open dialogue is better than self-serving actions. For those that see someone in need, know that stepping up to be there for your brother or sister can make all the difference. Last of all, if you are thinking about harming yourself or are having a hard time....call someone, Share the Load. Your brothers and sisters “have your back.”



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Christian Kehl** has served his community as both a firefighter and fire officer with a focus on safety and training, and was instrumental in the formation of his area’s Incident Management Team. He is currently working with a technology start-up to develop a firefighter tracking and accountability system.

# Self-care Techniques for Firefighters

By Jan Spence

There are over 800,000 volunteer firefighters in the United States. These women and men go through rigorous training and unpredictable time demands and selflessly put their lives on the line to help others – for little to no monetary compensation.

As a volunteer firefighter, you belong to a unique breed. While most people are running away from danger, you are running towards it. You've been trained to spot various fire hazards from combustibles being stored with insufficient protection to faulty wiring that can spark a blaze, but what you may not be aware of is a potential danger lurking within yourself. Lack of self-care. That's right, self-care. Many of you are inherently wired to put others before yourself. While that is a noble mindset, continually focusing on others while neglecting yourself can ultimately have dire consequences.

You may be asking, "How can I take time for myself when I'm working 50 hours a week, volunteering for 10 hours, teaching my son to play baseball, trying to spend quality time with my spouse, and trying to take care of everyday "life" things? There's just no time for me."

The simple, yet not so simple, answer is... you must make the time! Studies have found that lack of self-care can lead to burnout, which can result in physical ailments. According to expert Ann Miner, these ailments can include, "constant fatigue, insomnia, frustration, lingering colds, headaches, ulcers, hypertension, and gastrointestinal disturbances, but as self-care increased, burnout decreased. It appears that the variety of ways in which one engages in self-care is less important than is the frequency with which one does this. This suggests that finding forms of self-care that readily fit into one's daily life can be important in maintaining a realistic practice of self-care."<sup>1</sup>

As the old saying goes, you can't pour from an empty cup. In other words, you can't give back when you're running on empty. If you're not taking the steps to take care of yourself, there could be impacts to you, your family, your department, and your community. It's ok to take care of yourself first sometimes.

## Here are three tips for "stressing" the right things:

- 1. Learn to find quiet time to reflect, unwind, and decompress.** Be intentional about carving out time for activities that please YOU! Go fishing, read a book, build a model airplane, work on a puzzle. Find something that helps you relax. Constantly "going, going, going" is not good for us, mentally or physically.
- 2. Learn to say no and set BOUNDARIES!** Sometimes we have to say "no" to "good" in order to say "yes" to the "best." We can't be everywhere, all the time, doing everything for everyone. If you have trouble saying no, practice different techniques of politely declining a perceived obligation.
- 3. Take control and actively manage your TIME.** Delegate tasks that can be delegated. Have your children help more with household chores. Hire an accountant to do your taxes. Have the neighborhood teens mow your lawn.

According to GoodTherapy.org, a mental health and self-care advocacy group,

"Self-care is not a selfish act. Individuals who do not take care of their own emotional and physical needs before attempting to resolve those of others may begin to experience a decline in their own emotional or physical state. Those individuals who care for others, either professionally or in personal life, may find themselves especially drained if they do not devote enough time to self-care. Once they have met their own needs, they may often find themselves better able to assist others in meeting their needs."<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes staying too busy and taking care of everything and everyone else is really a pride issue. When you feel that if you don't do it, it won't get done (or done right), you are attempting to take on the weight of the world. You are acting as if you are a superhero. This syndrome, when over-emphasized, can be detrimental to your mental health. Remember that you are a human being who simply can't do it all. Those around you need to see you as such. You will never be good enough to do it all. Living on the hamster wheel of trying to constantly measure up will keep you striving for more, but going nowhere.

It comes down to this. If you are spread too thin, you can't finish the race strong. You can't shake off the soot as easily without regular self-care.



<sup>1</sup> Miner, Ann. (2010). "Burnout in Mental Health Professionals as Related to Self-Care."

<sup>2</sup> GoodTherapy.org. (n.d.). Self Care. Retrieved from [www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/self-care](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/self-care)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jan Horton Spence** is an international speaker, consultant, trainer, and business coach who uses her vast knowledge in sales, marketing, communications, finances, and business operations to help numerous clients. Jan is known as a unique individual who can lead, organize, and motivate to make a difference in the lives of those she influences. Presenting more than 40 speeches per year, Jan combines her business experience with her desire to see people live out their purpose through teaching goal-setting, sales, priorities, and financial freedom. [www.janspence.com](http://www.janspence.com)

# Can You Make a Change?



By Chief Chris Barron

Have you ever thought about whether what you are doing in your department or for yourself is making a difference in your life or others? Are you seeing results from your efforts, whether it is at work, in your community, or for yourself? If not, it's time to make a change.

Each year, about a hundred firefighters die due to cardiac arrests, trauma, etc. But did you know that one of the biggest killers of the fire and emergency medical services is suicide? The Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance received reports of over 132 firefighter and EMT suicides in 2016. That's more than the number of LODDs for the year! Why is that? We all see some BAD stuff, work weird hours, and go from totally sound asleep to driving Code 3 with lights flashing, sirens blaring, and our heart racing in a matter of seconds. In addition, the stresses of our jobs and balancing home life, job, and fire department life all can take a toll on our physical and mental health.

You might be thinking, "Wow, those statistics are alarming." Or perhaps you

are thinking, "We are all tough guys/gals in our department and we will never have this issue."

I can attest that when you think that you or members of your department are not vulnerable to the unthinkable, guess again. It CAN happen! I personally lost two former firefighters due to suicide and looking back, some of the signs/symptoms were evident but some were not. I never imagined the two that decided to take their own lives would have. I was utterly shocked when I received the calls.

So, as a firefighter, officer, or Chief, ask yourself, "Do I need help?" Or think about your brothers and sisters and see if you can identify someone that might need help. I think one of the greatest tools/resources that has come out of the National Volunteer Fire Council in recent years is the Share The Load™ program. This program provides emergency services personnel resources, tips, and tools to address behavioral health as well as a hotline in which a responder can call 24-hours-a-day and get connected with

another emergency services person to help with a potentially deadly situation.

There are several "Silent Killers" taking the lives of our firefighters, friends, and loved ones. I say "silent" because often we don't realize these threats have become a life threatening issue in ourselves or our colleagues until it is too late. These "Silent Killers" include suicide, heart disease, and cancer. Isn't it time we start doing something about it? The mental and physical stresses of the responder life are taking way too many of our friends, and we as a community need to do something to slow down (and hopefully stop) these trends. So what can we do?

## Recognize and Take Action

Whether we need to do things differently for our own self or for others, it takes:

- Initiative to do so
- Reaching out to get the tools, personnel, or equipment to make it happen
- Follow through to actually make what we envision a reality

# Take Steps NOW

| Recognize                                                                                                                                                                                     | Action                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Recognize the signs/symptoms of the behavioral health issues in yourself or your firefighters (ie, depression, PTSD, substance abuse, anxiety, stress, uncharacteristic changes in behavior). | <p><b>Get Help For FREE!</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://www.nvfc.org/help">www.nvfc.org/help</a></li> <li>• Fire/EMS Helpline – 1-888-731-FIRE (3473)</li> <li>• Utilize your work's Employee Assistance Program, if available</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Is your weight/health NOT optimum?                                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When was the last time you had a checkup?</li> <li>• Have you told your doctor you are a firefighter?</li> <li>• Have you had a heart scan?</li> <li>• Does your family have a history of heart problems?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| I want to be in better shape for my job as a responder and for my health.                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start walking/jogging.</li> <li>• Join a gym or fitness center.</li> <li>• Schedule a time with a personal trainer.</li> <li>• Get into a fitness routine.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| My firefighters need some help/guidance with their health.                                                                                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check with a local doctor's office or nutrition center to see if they would be willing to help your department.</li> <li>• Apply for grants to help fund wellness initiatives, such as FEMA's Fire Prevention and Safety grant.</li> <li>• Schedule short workouts to include the basics – pushups/sit-ups/short jogs – and always remember to stretch before the beginning of a training.</li> </ul> |
| Take steps to limit cancer risks.                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you doing an initial decontamination of firefighters while at the scene (ie, wash down, scrubbing gear)?</li> <li>• Are you issuing at least two hoods to every firefighter?</li> <li>• Put wipes on apparatus so that firefighters can wipe off their face, neck, and hands of soot/debris before leaving the scene.</li> </ul>                                                                  |

I encourage you to take action now to make yourself better and improve your service to your community. Often times we are held back by the negative forces of "I can't" or "It won't work." If we can get past this mind set, put our minds to it, and give it a try, then we CAN make a difference! We can start to feel better, we can start to improve our abilities as a responder, and we CAN put an end to the silent killers in our profession.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Chief Chris Barron** currently serves as the executive director of the State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association of Texas. Barron is also the chief of the Manchaca Fire/Rescue department located just south of Austin, TX. For over 26 years in emergency services, he has been successful in leading a changing department in a growing community from an all volunteer department to a fully career department. He has written numerous successful federal and state grants, has been awarded the International Association of Fire Chiefs John Buckman Leadership Award, and was named the 2014 IAFC Fire Chief of the Year. Barron holds numerous certifications in the fire service and also has a bachelor and master's degree in business administration.

# How Fire Service Culture Can Drive Good Behavioral Health



By David W. Ballard, PsyD

Service before self. This core value and others embedded in the fire service culture emphasize the sense of honor, duty, and sacrifice for the greater good that makes firefighters iconic heroes in our communities. Even the most desirable characteristics can have a downside, however, and the associated expectation to be tough, aggressive, selfless, and resilient in the face of danger can inadvertently create barriers to self-care that lead to health and safety risks and a reluctance to seek help when it comes to behavioral health issues.

Despite the talk in recent years about the need to change fire service culture, a

closer examination of the norms, values, and beliefs already in place suggests that the existing foundation can actually serve to promote the behaviors necessary to improve firefighter health and performance.

## Organizational Culture

An organization's culture is the set of norms, values, and beliefs that guides its members' behavior. A strong, long-established culture, like that of the fire service, isn't something you simply create or change. Culture is developed over the entire life of a group based on what it has experienced and learned. Culture can have a strong influence, and group members may not even be aware of how much it shapes their behavior.

According to Edgar Schein, Professor Emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management, culture functions at several levels, from highly visible symbols and imagery such as uniforms, patches, logos, mottos, equipment, and protocols to stated values and beliefs and the deeper underlying assumptions and unspoken rules that govern how people make decisions, behave, and interact with each other.

When addressing an identified problem, there are aspects of the culture that can help you solve the problem and other aspects that will get in the way. From this perspective, you can leverage cultural strengths to help you solve the problem and address any barriers in a way that still fits the existing culture.

## Behavioral Health as Part of Fire Service Culture

Underutilization of behavioral health resources is an area of concern. Focus groups funded by FEMA through Department of Homeland Security Fire Prevention and Safety Grants explored the current status of behavioral health programs in the fire service and identified barriers including lack of trust, education, communication, and leadership support, as well as fear of reprisal and stigma.

Support starts with access to good-quality mental health services, but doesn't stop there. Integrating behavioral health and emotional well-being into all of your department's health and wellness efforts is key, so it becomes a normal part of the discussion. Although some aspects of fire service culture may contribute to firefighters looking the other way when it comes to signs that their colleagues may be struggling, or feeling ashamed and going to great lengths to hide problems of their own, other elements of the culture can be sources of great strength.

- **Service mentality** – Firefighters have a strong sense of duty and service to others, even to the point of risking their lives to help a total stranger. Psychological well-being isn't just about your emotions and how you feel. It's also a driver of job performance. Taking care of your mental and emotional health helps keep you sharp and focused in the high-stress, high-risk work settings where first responders operate, so your department can provide the level of service your community deserves. When you tap into behavioral health services, you're not just doing it for yourself, you're also doing something that benefits the people who put their lives in your hands.
- **Loyalty** – Firefighters take care of their own. Having each other's backs doesn't start when your boots hit the fireground. Being there for your colleagues means paying attention to signs that someone is struggling, supporting them during challenging times, and having difficult conversations from time to time. By providing social support and encouraging your fellow firefighters to tap into available behavioral health

resources, you demonstrate the strength of your bond and willingness to step outside your comfort zone for the welfare of those you care about and the functioning of the team.

- **Seniority and experience** – Seasoned veterans in your department play an important role as authority figures in the fire service and flag bearers of its culture. Beyond helping rookies develop job skills and knowledge of the community, senior firefighters set the tone when it comes to expected behavior, pass down the department legends, and serve as role models for how to cope with challenges, both on and off the job. A veteran firefighter who openly shares their story or lessons about the importance of good behavioral health can encourage an environment where those topics are no longer taboo and department members feel safe to raise issues or concerns they may have.
- **Command and control leadership** – The hierarchical nature of fire departments presents an opportunity for leaders to directly address behavioral health and its link to a healthy, safe, high-performing department. By actively sharing information about available resources, such as counseling, and how to access them, and arranging training and education about mental health issues, department leaders can set an expectation that part of being an effective firefighter is maintaining good health, which includes emotional well-being. Leadership support doesn't stop with hanging posters and distributing helpline phone numbers. By serving as role models in normalizing discussion of mental health, helping firefighters access the resources they need, and providing emotional support, department leaders



Courtesy of Lauralee Veitch

play a key role in shaping a culture that supports behavioral health.

- **Assertiveness, courage, and risk taking** – As first responders to fires, automobile accidents, medical emergencies, and other hazardous situations, firefighters are regularly exposed to dangerous and potentially traumatic events. Despite bravery in the face of life-threatening events, admitting to a behavioral health problem can feel overwhelming to even the most seasoned firefighter, who is used to being a pillar of strength in service to others. True courage comes from actively seeking help when you need it and relying on each other to make it through the challenging times that we all face. Behavioral health treatment works and can help get you back up and functioning at your full capacity in a job that's critical to a safe, healthy, thriving community.

Although the topic of behavioral health is relatively new when it comes to firehouse conversations and may not seem like a natural fit, many of the norms and values that already exist in fire service culture can help support a focus on psychological well-being and make your department stronger and more effective together.

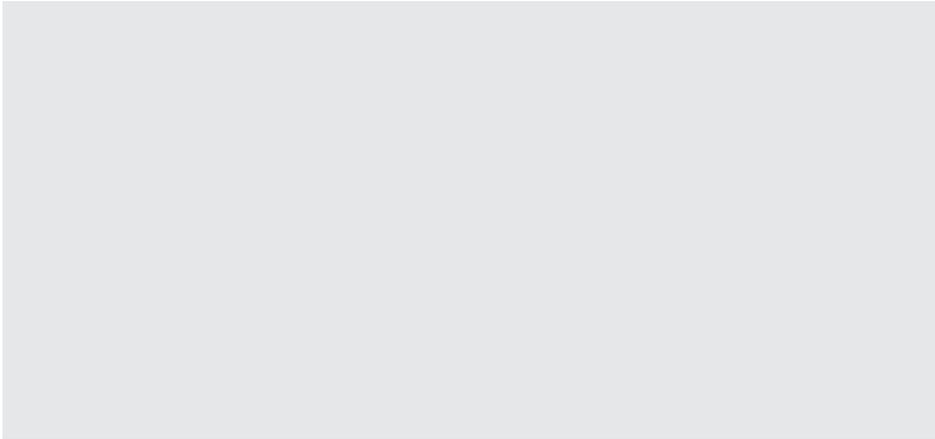
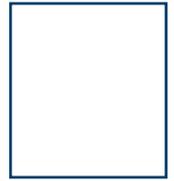


### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David W. Ballard**, PsyD, MBA is the assistant executive director for organizational excellence at the American Psychological Association (APA), where he is responsible for providing leadership, direction, evaluation, and management for all activities related to APA's Center for Organizational Excellence. The Center houses APA's Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program (PHWP), a public education initiative designed to promote programs and policies that enhance employee well-being and organizational performance.



National Volunteer Fire Council  
7852 Walker Drive, Suite 375  
Greenbelt, MD 20770



# Helpletter

An Initiative of the National Volunteer Fire Council

Free poster inside!  
Order more for  
your department  
at [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org).

