

Firefighter Stress Management

The job of wildland firefighting can often be stressful and sometimes traumatic. In the wildland fire environment, conditions can take a toll on mental health. It is vital to mental fitness to address feeling overwhelmed by stress and trauma before they become a mental health issue. Mental fitness is just as essential as physical fitness for duty.

MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM MODEL			
HEALTHY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
Normal fluctuations in mood Takes things in stride Good sense of humour Consistent performance Physically & socially active Confident in self & others Drinking in moderation	Nervousness, irritability Sadness, overwhelmed Displaced sarcasm Procrastination Forgetfulness Trouble sleeping Low energy Muscle tension, headaches Missing an occasional class or deadline Decreased social activity Drinking regularly or in binges to manage stress	Anxiety, anger Pervasive sadness, tearfulness, hopelessness, worthlessness Negative attitude Difficulty concentrating Trouble making decisions Decreased performance, regularly missing classes/deadlines, or over work Restless, disturbed sleep Avoidance, social withdrawal Increase used of alcohol-hard to control	Excessive anxiety Panic attacks Easily enraged, aggressive Depressed mood, numb Cannot concentrate Inability to make decisions Cannot fall asleep/stay asleep Constant fatigue, illness Absent from social events/classes Suicidal thoughts/intent Unusual sensory experiences (hearing or seeing things) Alcohol or other addiction
Nurture support systems.	Recognize limits, take breaks, identify problems early, seek support.	Tune into own signs of distress. Talk to someone, ask for help. Make self-care a priority. Don't withdraw.	Seek professional care. Follow recommendations.

Mental Health Continuum Model. (Click on image to enlarge.)

AWARENESS

Stress Injuries can be caused by:

- *A Life Threat*: Due to an experience of death-provoking terror, horror, or helplessness.
- *A Loss Injury*: A grief injury due to the loss of cherished people, things, or parts of oneself.
- *A Moral Injury*: Due to behaviors or the witnessing of behaviors that violate moral values.
- *Cumulative Stress*: Due to the accumulation of stress from all sources over time without sufficient rest and recovery.

RECOGNITION

Stress Size-up, monitor yourself and others for:

- Hazardous attitudes and stress reactions.
- Behavior changes (not talking, isolating, outbursts, increased use of substances, or making mistakes).
- Troubling feelings (fear, anger, anxiety, sadness, guilt, or shame).
- Thoughts of or mention self-harm or suicide.

MITIGATION

Stress First Aid:

- Shrink the stigma – talk about it!
- Provide opportunities to calm:
 - Take a tactical stress pause.
 - Refocus; identify what really matters.
 - Try tactical breathing or similar techniques.
 - Get additional time off if needed.
- Get help. Just like in a medical incident, a higher level of care may be necessary.
- Reach out to friends, peers, loved ones, etc., for support.



Burnout Vs. Stress

Stress is often caused by a feeling that life is out of control. Stress can be brought on by long work hours, conflicts at home, or working under pressure. Typically, once the situation resolves itself or changes, stress lessens, or may disappear entirely. If not resolved, stress can impact your physical and mental well-being. Having to choose between work, family, or other priorities can become a long-term stressor.

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It can take place over a long period. Burnout might occur if your work seems meaningless or if there is no end in sight under difficult work conditions. Burnout may happen due to a disconnect between work and life outside of

work. Long fire seasons away from family, shortage of resources, gaps in key leadership positions, and communities threatened or lost can all contribute to burnout of wildland fire personnel. Additional contributing factors to burnout can be a culture that is pressured to be as tough as possible, not show weakness, or to speak up when you need help.

ACTION:

Discuss what signs indicate stress in a person? How can you as an individual, or you as a crew, mitigate stress and prevent burnout?

References

- **For ideas to reduce stress and prevent burnout, watch this short video on Work-Life Balance**

Category: Firefighter Health & First Aid