



Firefighter Mental Health Awareness

By Trip Barrs, Deputy Chief, Dunedin Fire Rescue

We as firefighters or fire officers are not as strong and invincible as we sometimes think. The ability to ignore or hide our emotions has become a defining character trait in our profession.

If either of these statements makes you angry, then I have accomplished at least one of the goals for writing this article. Anger is an emotion, and your feelings of anger prove that you are capable of experiencing and expressing emotion. Like a broken bone, if your emotions are ignored after a traumatic event, the healing process can result in a lifetime of deformities that can affect your career, family, and

can even take your life. The key to preventing this type of lasting injury is to process your emotions in a healthy manner. Awareness that we are all human and subject to the same stresses as those we have chosen to serve is the first step to dealing with the difficult things we see on a daily basis. Unfortunately this process is often ignored in our profession.

Too often the Florida fire service is rocked by the news that a firefighter has taken their own life. In many of these cases, the cause of death is left out of the official notifications. Those outside the immediate circle of the deceased are left to speculate and make

assumptions about why and how this brother or sister died. It can be assumed that the reason for not announcing that a death by suicide has occurred is to "protect" the reputation of the deceased from the negative connotations of suicide. Often, this is a misguided tactic that rarely works, as the rumor mill and firehouse gossip often gets just enough of the picture right to make it seem even worse than the reality.

It is time to accept we are human beings and suffer from all the frailties that come with that designation. One of these is mental illness. Author and suicide prevention specialist Mary VanHaute considers suicide to be a result of undiagnosed and untreated mental illness. Her studies and research have focused on suicide prevention since before 1994 when her brother, a firefighter in Wisconsin, died by suicide. Note that the correct terminology is death by suicide, just like death by cancer, asphyxiation, or blunt force trauma. Discussing suicide this way will help to reinforce that there is not to be any negative connotation associated with this manner of death.

Too often a firefighter's death by suicide does not receive the same level of sympathy as one caused by job related cancer or an on the job accident. When viewed as the end result of stress and untreated mental illness, suicide is better seen as a medical condition, rather than some type of character flaw in the individual. The National Alliance for Mental Health (NAMH) estimates that 1 in 5 nationally is living with some type of mental illness. These illnesses can be relatively hard to detect and are often not even considered when evaluating one's mental health. Couple this with the experiences and stress that firefighters endure on a daily basis and we should not be surprised at the result if we do nothing to prevent it.

Both chronic stress and acute events can be the trigger that leads to a person's inability to cope. We as leaders need to stop applying a one size fits all approach to Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and get to know our people better. Just because an engine company ran a SIDS or infant drowning call does not necessarily mean that the whole crew needs immediate CISM. On the contrary, each member of that crew needs to be carefully evaluated to determine what prior life experiences and perceptions they brought to work with them that morning. Only by knowing our people is this possible. Leaders can expect a myriad of responses to the same event, since each person can be expected to react differently. Unfortunately there is no scale that responses can be ranked on because what may not bother one person may be devastating to another.

We as leaders need to stop allowing judgement to be placed and look at each person as they are and not just as firefighting machines. VanHaute advocates that we need to be doing the difficult work of tailoring our support and assistance to each individual's needs.

Many of the signs of untreated stress and mental illness can be subtle. We should all be aware of the common indicators and coping mechanisms including alcohol and drug abuse, anti-social behavior, and negative performance changes. What is more subtle are the changes seen in a distressed person that appear to be healthy changes. An example is the firefighter who has previously been a loner and non-team player who suddenly becomes active in department affairs and wants to work all the time. This can be a sign that they have been deeply affected by an incident and are trying to cope by fixing the problem the only way they know how. This firefighter may feel that he is having his normal response to an abnormal event and that there is no need to seek help. Recognizing this type of change and evaluating the need for intervention should be our responsibility.

The National Fallen Firefighters' Foundation (NFFF) has commissioned research into the prevalence of firefighter suicide under the auspices of life safety initiative #13. Unfortunately there is no statewide or national data that classifies suicide by profession and no single reporting system that collects data on suicides. According to VanHaute however, national data on suicide death reveals that white males ages 45-64 are the most likely demographic to die by suicide. Compare that with the makeup of many Florida fire departments and the similarities are readily apparent. Promotion, retirement, and even the act of leadership can be stressful events that often affect this age group in the fire service. Be an advocate not only for your firefighters but for your colleagues also.

Some of the resources available for help include your department's health plan and Employee Assistance Program, a fire department chaplain (yours or a neighboring department's), the NFFF, and the national suicide prevention hotline 1 (800) 273-8255. These two websites are good resources for helping for firefighters with managing stress, coping with depression, or addressing other behavioral health issues: <http://firestrong.org> , <https://www.safecallnow.org> . Florida's St. Petersburg College has developed brochures for both firefighters and supervisors that outline the signs to watch for, what to do in the event you suspect someone is considering suicide, and additional resources for further research. These are available on their website at <http://firefightersuicide.spcollege.edu/toolkit.html> . Please download them and place them in your fire stations.

The NFFF, VanHaute and others are taking the lead in bringing these facts out of the darkness and into the kitchen discussions at firehouses across the nation. Only by adopting a culture of open and frank discussion about suicide and its causes can we ever hope to eliminate it from our profession. These talks are just like the training required for a new fireground tactic. We know that unless it is taught and trained upon, there can be no expectation of implementing it successfully on scene. Company and chief officers need to take the initiative and start these discussions with their crews. Their mental health and possibly their lives depend on it.

Resources

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). (2015). Mental health statistics. Retrieved from: <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers> .

St. Petersburg College. (2011). The fire that burns within fire service suicide prevention. Retrieved from: <http://firefightersuicide.spcollege.edu/>.

VanHaute, M. (2015) Public safety suicide: the human dimension. Springfield, IL: Charles Thomas, Publisher, Ltd.

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Cedar Hammock

Cedar Hammock Fire Rescue took delivery of two Pierce® Impel Pumpers. The vehicles feature a Cummins ISL9 450 hp engine, 1000-gallon water tank, and Waterous 1500 GPM pump. Ten-8 and Pierce would like to thank Chief Jeffrey Hoyle for this order.



Miami

The City of Miami took delivery of three Pierce® Arrow XT CAFS Pumpers. The vehicles feature a Detroit Diesel DD13 450 hp engine, 500-gallon water tank, Waterous 1500 GPM pump, Pierce Husky 12 foam system, Hercules CAFS system, a 15 gallon Class A foam cell and a 60 gallon Class B foam cell. Ten-8 and Pierce would like to thank Chief Maurice Kemp for this order.



Fort Walton Beach

The City of Fort Walton Beach recently took delivery of a new Pierce® Saber FR Pumper. The vehicle features a Cummins ISL9 400 hp engine, 750-gallon water tank, and a Hale 1500 GPM pump. Ten-8 and Pierce would like to thank Chief Kenny Perkins for this order.



Ten-8 Fire Equipment, Inc.

Bradenton Office
2904 59th Ave. Dr. E.
Bradenton, FL 34203
800-228-8368

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2651 Wiles Road
Pompano Beach, FL 33073
954-272-1430



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1549 Highway 90 E.
DeFuniak Springs, FL 32433
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141 Maritime Dr.
Sanford, FL 32771
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