



STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE FIRE SERVICE

The Safety Director hopes every fire service leader has looked at FireRescue1's [2023 What Firefighters Want survey](#). The survey sought to understand better the current stress levels among responders and what departments are doing to help their members manage their stress. Two things were readily apparent from the responses:

1. Fire agencies are providing more emotional health resources than ever before.
2. Firefighters are reporting their stress levels are rising. About 2/3 of firefighters reported their stress level as 7 or above on a scale of 1 to 10.

The responses to a third question might help explain the results. When asked what work-related activities they have used to manage stress in the past three years, 41% reported, 'none of the above'. One interpretation of these results is while the fire service organizations are aware of the emotional wellness problem and provide more resources to their members, those members are not making good use of the resources to maintain a healthy level of stress.

The question then becomes, what can fire agencies do to increase the use and effectiveness of their emotional wellness programs? Let's discuss some programs mentioned in the What Firefighters Want survey.

Exercise and Physical Fitness

Most fire agencies have in-station exercise equipment and allow on-duty time for its use. The challenge for leaders is how to encourage more use by more members more effectively? What would encourage the kind of persons who become firefighters to become better physically fit? I offer three motivators:

1. Competition – among each other and against other groups, such as law enforcement or EMS. This can take many forms: weight loss, most push-ups, or more frequent baseball/softball/ basketball games.
2. Winning – nothing is more motivating than to continue to win; find ways for all agencies to win.
3. Helping the community – can leaders find a way to use exercise time to help the community, such as fundraising? We all recognize that firefighters put others ahead of themselves. While they might not work out for their own welfare, they might if it raised money for a needy community member or group.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefings

More than half of respondents reported their agency provides access to critical incident stress debriefing or CISD programs. Formal CISD is intended to provide education and emotional support in a group setting following exposure to or involvement in a traumatic event. When appropriately used, CISD can help firefighters process these events, thereby reducing some of their stress. Stigma is often cited as why firefighters do not avail themselves of this tool. So, the question for leaders is how to remove the stigma of asking for assistance. One means is for the agency to provide CISD to all responders after specific incidents such as the death of a child or similar emotionally charged event. Departmental policies can define events and specify quickly available CISD teams.

However, not all incidents are considered traumatic or critical, so department leaders need to ensure that firefighters are processing other operational stress in healthy and effective ways.

After-Action Reviews

While CISD is used to help firefighters process significant traumatic incidents, an after-action review (AAR) can be conducted immediately if needed. AARs allow responders to discuss the details of an incident from all angles and

allow firefighters to hear about what was happening outside of their purview. AARs effectively reduce stress because, as researchers have found, “talking it out” helps responders.

AARs can be formal or informal, and there are various formats available. If an agency is not satisfied with the results of their AARs, the Safety Director encourages them to investigate alternative forms or provide training to those who lead an AAR.

Peer Support

Firefighters love to talk to each other. Organizational leaders can use this to create programs, formal or informal, for their members to talk with a purpose. CISD and AARs are used after specific work-related incidents. Peer Support can recognize both work and non-work-related stresses. Also, talking with a brother or sister firefighter is often easier than talking with a therapist, fire officer, or in a group setting. This provides unique advantages.

Fire agency leaders can strengthen peer support abilities by educating their firefighters to

1. Listen better. Listening with empathy and support is a skill that can be learned and honed.
2. Give support when needed. Sometimes, listening is enough; sometimes, saying the right thing is needed.
3. Recognize the warning signs when help beyond their capabilities is needed or of suicidal thoughts.

Groups are available to educate the internal peer support skills among the organization’s members.

Please read the survey. It reveals more than what is discussed in this Bulletin, which concentrated on strengthening a select few tools to reduce the horrible suicide rate among career and volunteer firefighters.