



## ROUTINES BUILD RESILIENCY PRE-SHIFT, DURING-SHIFT, & POST-SHIFT

[Routines](#) can be comforting. Routines can be stabilizing. Your crew probably parks in the same spot each shift. And sit in the same seats at the kitchen table or in the breakroom. When a person is organized and knows what to expect, it is easier to counteract the inevitable challenges that pop up. Having to constantly make a conscious decision, 'what's next' over a 16-hour day can lead to mental fatigue. While people who choose the emergency services enjoy the physical and mental challenge of the unexpected, constant decision-making takes a physiological toll on the responder. Responders and agency leaders should take advantage of the benefits of building routines before, during, and after shifts.

### Pre-Shift Routines

Reporting for a shift hydrated, rested, and fed gets the firefighter or EMT off to a good start. A pre-shift routine should include a bedtime that allows the responder to get up in time to shower, eat a healthy breakfast, and gather personal belongings. Research connects the psychological benefits of making your bed first thing after waking up. This simple act sets the tone for the day by immediately providing a sense of accomplishment.

Set out the uniform before going to bed. Everyone feels better when they look better. Set out any personal effects needed for the shift, such as car keys, driver's license, badge, food, or medicines.

Leave home with time to arrive at the station comfortably. Even if you make it to the station on time (just), even worrying about being late during the whole commute can be unsettling.

Focus on things that are under the responder's control. Worrying about who will be your partner or what agency officer will be present are beyond your control. Instead, make a plan for working with challenging partners or officers. Positive self-talk, "I can do it," is uplifting.

Limit social media. Checking email for news about your upcoming shift is okay and necessary. But do not get engrossed in the negativity of most social media. If you must check your phone, subscribe or follow one of the many positive or uplifting sites.

### During Shift Routines

The agency, its leaders, and each individual should incorporate routines into the shift to support the emotional resiliency of the crew.

- Community Meetings

Community Meetings are repetitive team-building efforts intended to build stronger team interactions and trust. Also referred to as [Stand-Up Meetings](#), they are brief (5 - 10 min.) and meaningful 'check-ins' that provide an opportunity for participants to share how they are feeling, align their plan for the day with the team's goals, and acknowledge the need for support from other team members to accomplish their goals.

- How are you feeling today?
- What are your plans for the shift/day?
- If you need assistance, who will you ask for it?

- [Physical Activity](#)

This includes exercise but also includes crew activities such as washing the apparatus, tool maintenance, and station beautification. What makes these [activities](#) different from chores is the crew and leaders' attitude toward the task. Make it a habit to look at and appreciate the result.

- Consider taking before and after pictures to appreciate the difference better.
- Leaders – be sure not just to say thank you but to show genuine appreciation by pointing out the benefit to the organization of their efforts.
- Consider posting the before and after pictures on a bulletin board.

Learning and skill-building reap emotional benefits for the firefighter or EMT, as well as performance benefits for the organization. Crew learning and drilling build a sense of belonging and success as a team.

- After-Action Reviews (AAR)

Every incident offers lessons to be learned. When done correctly, frequent AAR increases team performance and team accomplishment. Continual incremental improvements are the goal of AAR. Too often, AARs give a cursory review of what went well and spend a disproportionate amount of time discussing what went wrong. Often, even worse, those discussions of what went wrong include an element of blame – who did or didn't do something.

- Officers who lead the debriefings should ensure time is spent reviewing what went right and who performed a task or made a decision that led to a successful outcome.
- When discussing less-than-successful outcomes, remember that many, including leaders, contributed to the action or decision. Focus the review on the processes, not any one individual, that contributed to the undesirable outcome.
- The adage, “praise in public – correct in private,” should be the guiding principle in debriefings. Discuss individual contributions in private with the firefighter or EMT.

## Post-Shift Routines

The physical act of leaving the firehouse does not equate to your brain being off-duty. The brain may still be in live-and-death mode, which can cause challenges in “normal life” and with the people around us. Some days that mental switchover can take longer than others, depending on lack of sleep, emotionally draining calls, or challenges in the station.

Like a bedtime routine makes falling asleep easier, having a post-shift routine can make returning to everyday life easier and more predictable. Consider these three strategies:

1. Define ‘off duty’ – Firefighters and EMTs do not work a traditional 9-5 schedule. They must think through when they get back to their home life. Setting a clear work-life balance
2. Define what must be addressed after leaving the station and what can be picked up when back on duty. Talk it through with a trusted person who can add perspective. Make a plan to address the critical and then leave it.
3. Find an activity that starts normal life: exercise, walk the dog, take the kids to school, or pick them up.

The power of strong habits can do amazing things for firefighters and EMS, both personally and professionally. Well-established routines help individuals and organizations conquer the often high-stress and unpredictable days of emergency response.