



FIRE & EMS BULLETIN



RESILIENCY BUILT BY ROUTINE

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 break room. When a person is organized and knows what to expect, it is easier to counteract the inevitable challenges that pop up. Having to make a conscious decision constantly, 'what's next' over a shift, can lead to mental fatigue. While people who choose the emergency services enjoy the physical and mental challenge of the unexpected, constant decision-making can take a physiological toll on the responder. Responders and leaders should take advantage of the benefits of building routines before, during, and after shifts.

Pre-Shift Routines

A pre-shift routine should include a bedtime that lets the responder wake up in time to shower, eat a healthy breakfast, and gather personal belongings. A USFA/FEMA-published qualitative study found that firefighters who adopted consistent sleep hygiene routines, such as shutting off electronics by 8 p.m. and maintaining a consistent bedtime, reported falling back asleep more easily after nighttime calls and felt more resilient overall.

Lay out the uniform before bed. Everyone feels better when they look better. Set out any personal items you need for the shift, such as car keys, driver's license, badge, food, or medicines. Research connects to the psychological benefits of making your bed first thing after waking up. This simple act sets the tone for the day by giving you an immediate sense of accomplishment.

Focus on things that are under the responder's control. Worries about who will be your partner or what agency officer will be present are beyond your control. Instead, plan how you'll work with challenging partners or officers. Positive self-talk (I can do it) is uplifting.

During Shift Routines

Team Meetings - Morning crew meetings are repetitive team-building efforts designed to strengthen team interactions and trust. They are brief (5–10 min.) and meaningful 'check-ins' that provide an opportunity for participants to share how they are doing (mentally and physically) that shift, 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. Three questions are suggested:

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

Fire departments that build supportive team environments, including regular check-ins and peer support, directly strengthen the resilience pathway.

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

After-Action Reviews (AAR) - Every incident offers lessons to be learned. When done correctly, frequent AARs increase 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.

Group-based debriefing and peer support interventions, when structured to focus on process improvement rather than individual blame, are among the most effective approaches for building resilience in first responders.

Post-Shift Routines

The physical act of leaving the firehouse does not equate to your brain being off duty. Your brain may still be in life-and-death mode, which can create challenges in "normal life" and with the people around you. Some days that mental switchover can take longer than others, depending on lack of sleep, emotionally draining calls, or challenges in the station. Just as a bedtime routine makes falling asleep easier, a post-shift routine can make returning to everyday life easier and more predictable. Consider these three strategies:

Hold a Shift Close-Out - Behavioral scientists Francesca Gino and Bradley Staats performed an experiment (<https://www.eliteteamtactics.com/p/navy-seal-after-action-review-process>) that confirmed the significant benefit of AARs to team performance. In the experiment, one training group of USN SEALs spent the last 15 minutes of the day reflecting on their work, while the second group continued working until the end of the day. The reflective group performed 20% better on the skills test. Follow this 3-step structure:

1. What went well - It's human nature to focus on the negative. But this doesn't serve us well. Successful people focus on what is going right. Ask the group: "What learning did we gain from what went well that we can repeat again?"
2. What didn't go well - Leave blame at the door and focus on specific, tangible, new learnings everyone can incorporate for the future. Teach crew members to focus on actions, not the person who performed the action. 'This happened', not 'so-and-so did . . .'
3. What are we going to do differently next time? Focus on tangible changes you can make to your processes to systematically improve your output as a team.

Define 'off duty' – Firefighters and EMTs do not work a traditional 9-to-5 schedule. They must think through how to transition back to their home life. Set a clear work-life balance.

- Define what must be addressed – 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 issue and then leave it.
- Find an activity that starts normal life – Change out of your uniform before leaving the station. When you get home, exercise, walk the dog, take the kids to school, or prepare the family meal.

Conclusion

Strong habits can do amazing things for firefighters and EMS, both personally and professionally. Well-established routines help individuals and organizations manage, mitigate, and conquer the often high-stress and unpredictable days of emergency response. Fire and EMS leaders should build routines into daily organizational activities and educate their teams on personal best practices.