

Understanding the Issue

Depression and anxiety are prominent mental health concerns that disproportionately affect firefighters compared with the general population. The demanding and high-stress nature of firefighting, coupled with repeated exposure to traumatic events, creates a perfect storm of risk factors for developing a mental illness. Understanding the prevalence, causes, impacts, and potential interventions for depression and anxiety among firefighters is crucial for supporting the mental health of these vital first responders.

Studies have shown that firefighters experience higher rates of depression and anxiety than the general public. Estimates vary, but research suggests that anywhere from 15-30% of firefighters may suffer from depression, while up to 20% may struggle with anxiety disorders. These rates are significantly higher than those of the overall population.



What Are the Risk Factors?

Firefighters are at a high risk of developing depression or anxiety due to a number of factors:

- **Trauma:** Firefighters are often exposed to traumatic events, such as devastating injuries and the loss of life and property.
- **Stressful work environment:** Firefighters experience high levels of job stress, which can be caused by long work hours, conflicts at home, and working under pressure.
- **Stigma:** There is a stigma associated with seeking help for mental illness, which some firefighters might perceive as a sign of weakness.
- **Exposure to chemicals:** Several components of fire smoke have been associated with mental health disorders. Exposure to neurotoxic chemicals such as mercury and lead, as well as other chemicals found in smoke, can lead to hormone imbalances and/or neuroendocrine dysfunction, leading to conditions such as depression and anxiety.
- **Physical health conditions:** Firefighters may develop physical health conditions such as chronic pain or cancer, which can negatively impact their mental health.

RESOURCES

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline 988

www.988lifeline.org/

Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance

www.ffbha.org/

International Association of Fire Fighters

www.iaff.org/behavioral-health/

in the know

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ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

A Resource for Firefighters



Impact

Depression and anxiety can have far-reaching consequences for firefighters, affecting both their personal and professional lives:

- **Job performance:** Mental health struggles can impair decision-making, reaction times, and overall effectiveness at work, potentially putting lives at risk.
- **Physical health:** Depression and anxiety are linked to various physical health problems, including cardiovascular issues, which are already a concern in the firefighting profession.
- **Relationships:** Mood disorders can strain personal relationships, leading to social isolation and further exacerbating mental health issues.



- **Substance misuse:** Firefighters with depression or anxiety may be more likely to develop substance use disorders as a form of self-medication.
- **Suicide risk:** Tragically, firefighters have a higher suicide rate than the general population does, with depression and anxiety being significant risk factors.
- **Career longevity:** Chronic mental health issues may lead some firefighters to leave the profession prematurely, resulting in a loss of experienced personnel.



How to Help Yourself and Others

Addressing depression and anxiety among firefighters requires a broad approach:

- **Mental health education:** Providing information about mental health, stress management, and coping strategies can help normalize these issues and encourage firefighters to seek help.
- **Peer support programs:** Training firefighters to recognize signs of distress in their colleagues and provide initial support can be an effective first line of defense.
- **Physical wellness:** Maintaining healthy levels of exercise, nutrition, and sleep can support both physical and mental health.
- **Professional counseling:** Helping firefighters get the support they need can play a key role in dealing with depression or anxiety.
 - **Stigma reduction:** Changing the culture around mental health in firefighting can encourage more open discussions and help-seeking behaviors.
 - **Family support:** Providing resources and support for firefighters' families can help strengthen personal relationships and improve overall well-being.
 - **Mindfulness and resilience training:** Learning stress-reduction techniques and building psychological resilience can help firefighters better cope with the demands of their profession.



Why it Matters

Depression and anxiety are significant challenges for the firefighting community. The unique stressors and demands of the profession create an environment where these mental health issues can thrive if left unaddressed. However, by recognizing the prevalence and impact of these conditions, fire departments, firefighters, and their friends or loved ones can work together to implement effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Supporting firefighters' mental health is crucial not only for their well-being, but also for the effectiveness and safety of fire services as a whole. By fostering a culture that prioritizes mental health alongside physical fitness and operational readiness, the firefighting profession can better protect those who dedicate their lives to protecting others.