

# Why Is Stress an Issue for Firefighters?

Firefighting is one of the most stressful jobs due to the work's physical dangers, psychological intensity, and constantly changing conditions.

Some stress can be beneficial to firefighters, as it can heighten their performance and alertness in dangerous situations. However, every stressful experience builds on the ones that came before. Over time, the accumulation of stress can lead to debilitating mental and physical health conditions. Figures from the U.S. Fire Administration show firefighters are at three times the average person's risk of dying from a stress-related event.

As a firefighter, you face constant pressure and exposure to traumatic experiences such as death and suffering. Just being on duty can add to the accumulation of stress. Firefighting is a 24-hour job, so getting a solid eight hours of sleep can be impossible while on duty. The precious few hours of sleep that you do get are often interrupted. This contributes to the stress that you experience on the job.



## Knowing the Signs

Common physical symptoms of stress include headaches, dizziness, chest pain, heart racing, muscle tension, stomach issues, and sleep problems, such as insomnia.

### **Mental symptoms include:**

- Difficulty concentrating
- Struggling to make decisions
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Constantly worrying
- Forgetfulness

Many behavioral changes may indicate that stress is an issue: being irritable or short-tempered, grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw, sexual problems (such as losing interest in sex), restlessness, withdrawing from people around you, drinking or smoking more than usual, and eating too much or too little, to name a few.

## RESOURCES

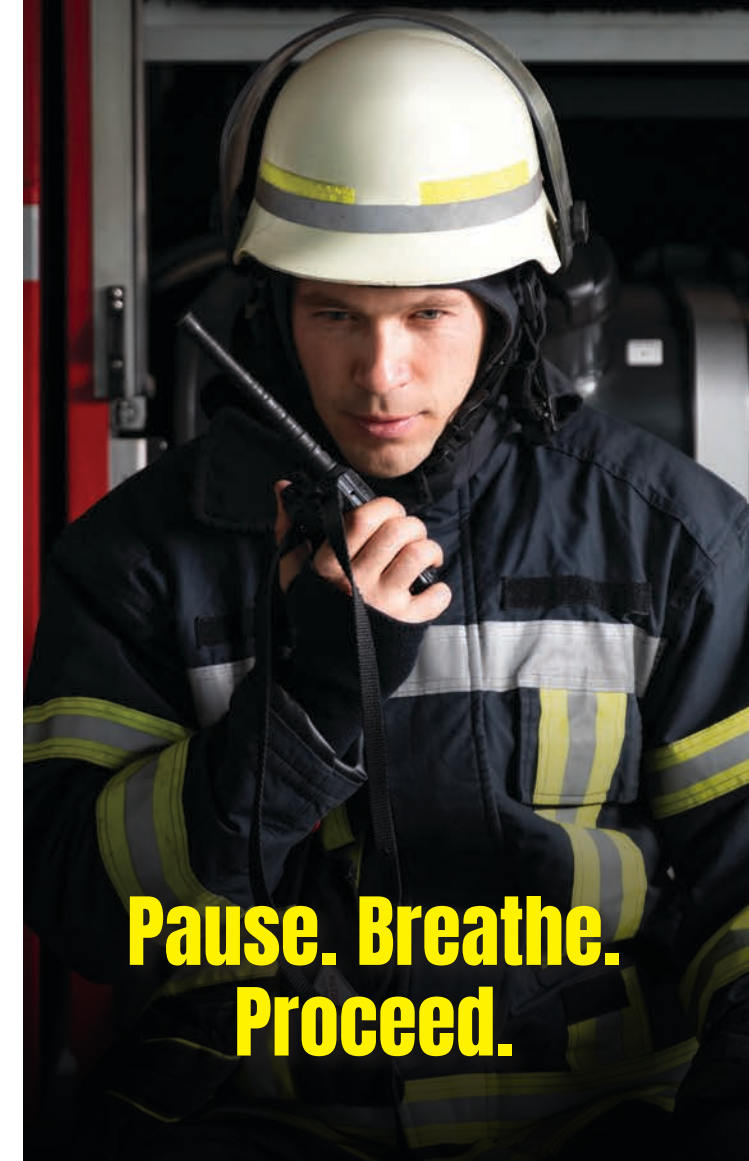
### **International Association of Fire Fighters**

[www.iaff.org/behavioral-health/](http://www.iaff.org/behavioral-health/)

### **Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance**

[www.ffbha.org/](http://www.ffbha.org/)

# STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR FIREFIGHTERS



**Pause. Breathe. Proceed.**

*in the know*



# How to Help Yourself

## Connect with Others

- Reach out to your community, family members, or friends.
- Make time for cultural, spiritual, or religious activities.
- Volunteer with organizations that interest you. Giving back to others can help you, too.
- Get outside with others, connect with nature, and explore green spaces.
- Seek out professional counseling that specializes in working with first responders.

## Take Care of Your Mind and Body

- Eat healthy.
- Regular physical exercise and a healthy lifestyle can release tension.
- Get enough sleep (seven or more hours per night).
- Move more and sit less. Start with small amounts of physical activity and build up to two-and-a-half hours a week.
- Limit alcohol intake. Choose not to drink, or do so in moderation.
- Avoid using illegal drugs or prescription drugs in ways other than prescribed.
- Avoid smoking, vaping, and the use of other nicotine products.
- Practice mindfulness and meditation techniques.
- Recognize the signs and don't hesitate to seek help when you are displaying them.



## Destress in 10 Minutes or Less

- Be active. Take a dance break! Lift weights. Do push-ups or sit-ups.
- Close your eyes, take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate.
- Write three things you are grateful for.
- Check in with yourself – take time to ask yourself how you are feeling.
- Laugh! Think of someone who makes you laugh, or the last time you laughed so hard you cried.
- Find an inspiring song or quote and write it down (or screenshot it) so you have it nearby.

## What's at Stake?

Prolonged periods of stress increase the risk of dangerous physical conditions such as hypertension (high blood pressure) and deadly events like heart attacks, strokes, and cancer. When it comes to mental health, long-term stress puts you at greater risk for developing anxiety and depression.

Beyond the physical and mental health benefits, stress management allows you to maintain better relationships. It makes you a better spouse/partner, parent, friend, and colleague. It makes it easier for you to communicate effectively so that others can understand what you are going through and provide support.

Managing stress reduces the likelihood that you will engage in behaviors that will strain or destroy existing relationships. It also reduces the stress levels of the people around you. If you are stressed, then others will also be stressed. If you are relaxed, then others will feel relaxed. Effective stress management not only helps you personally, it also helps professionally. Stress can limit your ability to get a promotion and it can lead to burnout.

