

THE POWER OF FAMILY & CONNECTION

A LIFELINE FOR FIRE FIGHTER MENTAL HEALTH

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As fire fighters, you face a unique set of challenges every day—physically demanding work, exposure to traumatic events, and a responsibility that weighs heavily on your shoulders. While the nature of your job requires incredible strength and resilience, it's crucial to recognize that your mental health is just as vital as your physical health. One of the most powerful tools you have in maintaining that mental health is the connection with your family and loved ones. This article will address five common relationship pitfalls to avoid, along with strategies to strengthen the bonds that can be a lifeline in times of crisis.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTION IN MENTAL HEALTH

Human beings are inherently social creatures, and the connections we form with others play a critical role in our mental well-being. For fire fighters, maintaining these connections can be challenging but is absolutely essential for survival. Strong social ties provide a sense of belonging and purpose, both of which foster resilience in the face of adversity. Research consistently shows that individuals with strong, supportive relationships are a protective factor against suicidal thoughts and behaviorⁱ.

THE LINK BETWEEN SUICIDE AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

There are three important factors often linked to suicide risk, as outlined in Dr. Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicideⁱⁱ. These include thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, as well as acquired capability. Thwarted belongingness refers to the feeling of being disconnected or isolated from others, while perceived burdensomeness is the belief that one's existence is a burden to others. When fire fighters become isolated from their support networks, these feelings can intensify, leading to increased suicidal risk. However, strong social connections can mitigate these feelings, providing a buffer against acute stress.

THE FIRE FIGHTER EXPERIENCE: HOW STRESSORS IMPACT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The fire fighting profession comes with a unique set of stressors that can significantly impact personal relationships. It's not uncommon for fire fighters to bring work stress home, either by emotionally withdrawing or by unintentionally letting the tension spill over into family life. These stressors can create distance between you and your loved ones, leading to strained relationships and further isolation.

Moreover, the demands of the job often mean fewer opportunities for social engagement outside of work. The long hours and irregular schedules can shrink your social network, leading to maladaptive behaviors, such as isolating yourself from family and friends.

Given these challenges, it's essential to be proactive in maintaining healthy and supportive relationships. Your connections with loved ones can be a lifeline, help you navigate the ups and downs of your career. Open communication is key—don't be afraid to share your experiences and feelings with those you trust. Let's explore five pitfalls to avoid, along with practical strategies for fostering strong relationships.

FIVE PITFALLS TO AVOID

1. Don't Hold Things In.

Bottling up emotions is a dangerous habit that many fire fighters fall into. The job often requires a certain level of stoicism, but this can lead to emotional suppression, which can be harmful to your mental health in the long run. When you internalize stress, your loved ones may struggle to understand how to support you. Over time, they might begin to feel like they don't really know you, as your mindset and approach to life may adapt to your experiences at work.

Moreover, the more you bottle up challenging experiences, the more isolated you may feel, as though no one truly understands what you're going through. Successful couples share their external stressors with each other and lean on their partner as a sounding board. If this feels difficult due to communication challenges, there's no shame in seeking help to improve this together.

To help maintain this connection, consider setting aside a specific time each week to check in about stressors for both you and your spouse. Make sure this time is free from distractions—no TV, no kids, just the two of you. Use this opportunity to talk openly about what's been weighing on you, and encourage your spouse to do the same. It's also helpful to clarify what you want from these check-ins—whether you need your spouse to just listen and be a sounding board, or if you're looking for guidance or support. This clear communication can make these moments more meaningful and help strengthen your relationship.

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2. Don't Avoid Talking About Work at Home.

It can be tempting to compartmentalize your work life and keep it separate from your home life. While there's value in maintaining boundaries, shutting your loved ones out entirely can lead to misunderstandings and emotional distance.

Often, fire fighters do this to protect their loved ones from the stresses and traumas of the job. While the intention is noble—to shield them from the harsh realities of the work—not talking about any of it can lead to emotional distance, which can be harmful to your relationship in the long run.

Instead, find a balance by sharing your experiences in a way that's honest but considerate of your loved ones' feelings. Start with aspects of the job you're comfortable discussing, like the personalities that frustrate you at work, and then try to push beyond that. For example, you could talk about the most challenging part of your shift, even if you avoid specific details of traumatic events—simply sharing that you had a difficult call that didn't go well can be enough. Additionally, share your proudest moments from each shift, or talk about something you're currently focusing on in training, or an area you want to learn more about or improve.

By sharing your experiences, both good and bad, you can alleviate the emotional burden and stay connected to those who care about you. This openness also helps your family better understand your connection to your work and gives them more perspective on why you do what you do. Over time, this understanding can help them be more supportive of you, while also building emotional connection and even intimacy in your romantic relationships.

3. Don't Shrink Your Support to Only Fire Fighters.

It's natural to feel most comfortable around fellow fire fighters—they understand the unique challenges of the job in a way that few others can. However, it's crucial not to write off connections with your spouse, family, and other important people in your life just because you think “they don't get it.” While they may not fully grasp the intensity or specifics of your work, they bring valuable perspectives that are essential for your well-being.

Your spouse and family may not experience the same daily stressors you do, but they are your biggest supporters. Engaging in common hobbies and finding enjoyment together can strengthen these relationships and provide you with a well-rounded support system. These connections offer external perspectives on life and its challenges, helping you to maintain balance. The work you do is incredibly important and often involves life-or-death decisions, but it's vital to balance that intensity with activities that are more light-hearted, especially with those who love you. Spending time with your spouse and family—people who may not fully understand your job—can actually be refreshing. They might be more laid back or focused on different aspects of life, serving as a vital reminder that there is life beyond “the job”.

The truth is, your spouse and family don't need to understand every detail of your work to provide meaningful support. Their different experiences and viewpoints can offer new ways to look at your own life, helping you navigate both personal and professional challenges with a broader perspective. Don't underestimate the value of those who may not fully “get it”—their input and support could be exactly what you need to stay grounded and well-rounded, especially in the demanding world of fire fighting.

4. Don't Ignore Your Loved Ones When They Express Concern.

Your loved ones are often the first to notice changes in your behavior or mood. They know you better than anyone else—they understand your “baseline,” the way you typically think, feel, and act on a normal day of your life. Because they are so familiar with your normal state, they are often the first to detect subtle shifts that might indicate something is off. Whether it's a change in your temperament, sleep patterns, or even just a difference in how you interact with them, these small signs can be early indicators of stress, burnout, or other mental health concerns.

Ignoring their concerns can strain relationships and prevent you from getting the support you need. It's important to remember that when your spouse, family, or close friends express worry, they are doing so out of care and love for you. They might notice things that you're too close to see—like becoming more withdrawn, irritable, or emotionally distant. These are changes that might slip under your radar, especially when you're immersed in the high demands of your work.

Instead of brushing off their observations or shutting down, try to listen with an open mind. They may be picking up on something that requires attention, something that you've unintentionally overlooked. By acknowledging their concerns and addressing them together, you can strengthen your bond and create a more supportive environment. This proactive approach not only helps in catching potential issues early, but also reinforces the trust and connection in your relationships.

Remember, your loved ones are your allies in maintaining your mental health. Their ability to notice and respond to these small changes can be a powerful tool in staying mentally healthy. Working together to address any concerns can provide you with the support system you need to navigate the stresses of fire fighting, ensuring that you remain resilient both at work and at home.

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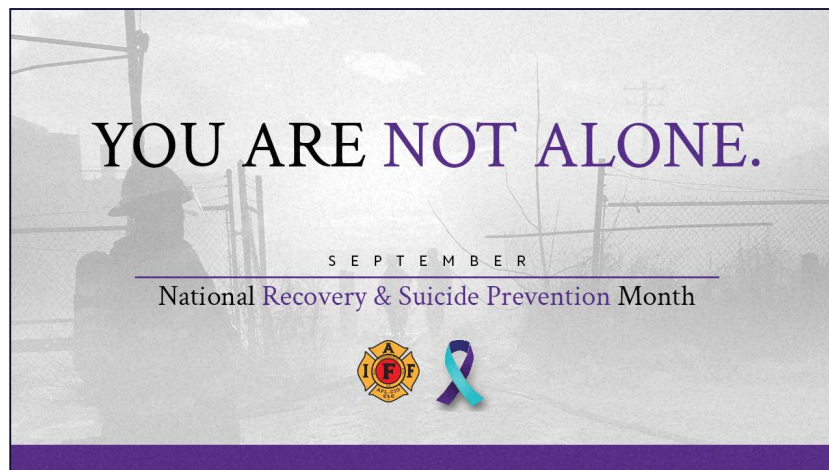
5. Don't Forget to Have a Hobby.

It's easy to let fire fighting become your entire identity, especially when the job demands so much of you—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Being a firefighter is a great identity to have, filled with purpose, honor, and a sense of duty. However, when it becomes the only identity you lean into, it can be a set up for burnout and a diminished sense of self. There are many aspects of fire fighting that you can't control—whether it's the unpredictability of the job, sudden injuries that could take you out of the profession, or policies that change the nature of your work. Therefore, having interests and hobbies outside of work is absolutely crucial.

Whether it's spending time with your family, pursuing a sport, engaging in a creative activity, or simply exploring new hobbies, these outlets can significantly reduce stress and provide a sense of fulfillment that complements your professional life. They serve as a reminder that there's more to you than the uniform you wear. For example, think about the type of dad or mom you want to be, the kind of sister or brother you aim to become, or the qualities that make you a great best friend, coach, surfer, or hiker. By exploring these additional parts of your identity, you create a more balanced and resilient sense of self. These roles are within your control and can offer stability, even when the fire fighting part of your life is unpredictable or challenging.

IN CONCLUSION

Your personal relationships outside of work are not just a nice-to-have; they are crucial for your mental health, resilience, and ultimately, survival. The connections you maintain with your loved ones can serve as a vital lifeline, helping you navigate the challenges of the job while preserving your well-being. Don't hesitate to lean on them. By avoiding the pitfalls mentioned above and actively investing in these relationships, you create a support network that sustains you through both the good times and the difficult ones.



**If you or someone you know needs help,
call the IAFF Center of Excellence at
(855) 999-9845**

iaff.org/behavioral-health

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