

BUILDING COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT THROUGH THE CANCER JOURNEY



This factsheet was developed by the International Association of Fire Fighters and the Firefighter Cancer Support Network.

A strong support system is a crucial factor in cancer recovery. Fire fighters are used to being the helpers – the ones others call when things fall apart. Asking for help can feel unnatural. Yet evidence consistently shows that social connection improves treatment outcomes, reduces depression and anxiety, and fosters faster physical recovery.^{1,2}

DEFINING YOUR CIRCLE

Your “circle of support” can include family, friends, colleagues, health professionals, and others who share similar experiences. Each relationship can offer different strengths – emotional comfort, logistical help, or specialized knowledge. Support isn’t static; it may shift over time depending on treatment phase, fatigue, or life events.

HOW TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN SUPPORT

- **Be intentional.** Write down who helps you feel calm or capable, and who drains energy. It’s okay to limit time with those who unintentionally add stress.
- **Delegate clearly.** People often want to help but don’t know how. Assign specific tasks: rides to appointments, meal coordination, childcare, or house chores.
- **Stay connected to your crew.** Even if you’re off duty, maintaining communication with your station can preserve a sense of belonging. Ask a peer to provide updates so you don’t feel isolated from the department.
- **Engage professionals.** Culturally competent therapists or chaplains can help you navigate fear, survivor guilt, or identity changes that may arise.
- **Include your family’s needs.** Partners and children experience their own stress and may also need counseling or peer groups.



FIRE SERVICE CULTURE AND SUPPORT

Support in the firehouse can take many forms – from a meal drop-off or a check-in text to moments of humor that ease tension. Small gestures like these build connection and remind everyone that showing up for one another matters. Being open and supportive also sets a powerful example for members and families who may face health challenges in the future.

ACTION ITEMS/CHECKLIST

- Identify core supporters – family, peers, mentors, professionals, community groups, etc.
- Ask directly for practical help; avoid vague requests
- Maintain communication with your station to reduce isolation
- Encourage family to use American Cancer Society or Firefighter Support Network caregiver resources
- Recognize support as strength, not dependency

¹ Jahnke, S. A., Poston, W. S. C., Haddock, C. K., & Murphy, B. (2016). Firefighting and mental health: Experiences of repeated exposure to trauma. *WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*, 53(4), 737–744. <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-162255> (Original work published 2016)

² Holt-Lunstad J. Social connection as a critical factor for mental and physical health: evidence, trends, challenges, and future implications. *World Psychiatry*. 2024 Oct;23(3):312–332. doi: 10.1002/wps.21224. PMID: 39279411; PMCID: PMC11403199.