



**VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER
ALLIANCE**

A 501(c)(3) Non-Profit Organization *****



Firefighter Mental Health Education Guide

Don't become a Statistic.

Introduction

If you are in the fire service, chances are you know a fire fighter who has died by suicide.

The Ruderman White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide of First Responder states that fire-fighters are more likely to die by suicide than from a line-of-duty death. Suicide is a result of mental illness, including depression and PTSD. While the rate of fire fighter suicide is unknown, we know fire fighters are dying by suicide every month.

What Is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after a person experiences or witnesses a traumatic, shocking or frightening event. For a fire fighter, this might involve running into a burning home, searching for/rescuing someone, or witnessing the injuries of a victim or victims. For some, PTSD begins soon after the disturbing event. For others, it develops months or even years later, often after a triggering incident. This might be something as innocent as seeing a candle burning, hearing children playfully screaming at a park, or running up a flight of stairs.

Risk Factors

A few studies have also looked at what factors might put firefighters at greater risk for the development of PTSD. A number of risk factors for PTSD among firefighters have been identified. These include:

- Being previously in treatment for another disorder
- Starting work as a firefighter at a younger age
- Being married
- Holding a supervisory rank in the fire service
- Proximity to death during a traumatic event
- Experiencing feelings of fear and horror during a traumatic event
- Experiencing another stressful event, such as the loss of a loved one, after a traumatic event
- Holding negative beliefs about oneself
- Feeling as though you have little control over your life
- Hostility



Common Symptoms

- **Intrusive memories:** It's common to relive the traumatic event in memories, which can manifest as flashbacks, nightmares and disturbing thoughts about the incident.
- **Avoidance behaviors:** In an attempt to prevent extreme distress, individuals with PTSD tend to avoid reminders and feelings associated with their trauma. This could involve certain places, activities and even people, potentially disrupting normal daily functioning.
- **Increased arousal and reactivity:** Symptoms of these may include irritability, anger, aggression, hypervigilance, insomnia and startling or becoming sensitive easily.
- **Negative changes in mood & thought:** Symptoms of these may include negative mood shifts, distorted beliefs about oneself, others and the world, feelings of detachment and guilt, or lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities.

All of these symptoms can be obstacles to a normal life at home and on the job, both inside and outside the firehouse. They can also be a hindrance to healthy relationships with co-workers, friends and family. As a result many firefighters seek unhealthy methods of self-medicating. Sadly, some even consider and attempt suicide.

Understanding Anger

At its core, anger is one of the most primal survival responses in human beings. As with any emotion, anger is complex. It manifests itself both physically and mentally. In many cases, anger manifests as behaviors that can affect your family life, work and relationships.

Post-traumatic anger may play a role in three different aspects of PTSD:

- 1) **Arousal:** This is the bodily manifestations of anger, including muscle tension, increased heart rate and increased blood circulation. Also referred to as hyperarousal, people with PTSD tend to find themselves in this heightened state on a near-constant basis, making them more likely to lash out and become angry over any perceived threat. To soothe and calm themselves many people seek out drugs and alcohol.
- 2) **Thoughts and Beliefs:** This refers to the internal mental manifestations of anger, including the belief that threats are everywhere, no one can be trusted and the environment is out of control. If you struggle with PTSD, you might not be aware of the ways that your inner experience has been shaped by your trauma.
- 3) **Behavior:** In the aftermath of a traumatic event, anger can help fuel irritability, aggression towards others and impulsive or self-destructive behavior.

Learning to Cope

It is possible to manage post-traumatic anger by recognizing it, understanding its roots and seeking professional help.

Post-traumatic anger can be all-consuming, dramatically altering the way you see yourself, the people you love and the world as a whole. If left unchecked, it can end careers, disrupt households and ruin lives. If you struggle with anger after a traumatic event, you might feel out of control and powerless to stop it. Fortunately, there are proven ways to control post-traumatic anger and related symptoms.

In the same way that all emotions communicate important information about both the outer world and inner experience, anger in the wake of trauma can be an important sign that healing needs to take place. With the help of professional care from a trusted therapist, you can begin to understand the roots of your anger and learn the skills needed to manage it. A better life is out there, and treatment for your PTSD could be the first step toward attaining it.

You might feel alone, but the truth is that countless men and women have been in your boots. With the help of professional care, you can find relief.



First Responder Crisis Support Helpline

1-844-550-HERO (4376)

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

This national helpline provides access to confidential support, resources and referrals any time day or night by phone for first responders and their families.

For more information or copies of this publication,
please contact:

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